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Disgraced

A study of narrative identity in organizations that suffer crises of confidence

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Disgraced

*A study of narrative identity in organizations that
suffer crises of confidence*

Mathias Skrutkowski



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LICENTIATE DISSERTATION

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University, Sweden.

To be defended at Lund University, Rhenmanssalen the 7 June 2017 at 1 p.m.

*Faculty opponent
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Abstract This thesis investigates the interface between external impressions of an organization, often referred to as its brand and image, and internal expressions, its culture and the identity of its employees, in organizations that have suffered crises of confidence. More specifically, the thesis seeks to problematize the alignment ideal in the corporate branding perspective (de Chernatony, 2001; Harris and de Chernatony, 2001; Hatch and Schultz, 2001 and Balmer and Sonen, 1999), which suggests that organizations should actively seek to realign external and internal impressions, in cases where they have become misaligned. The feasibility of such an agenda is explored by empirically investigating two organizations where the brand-culture alignment has broken – whether and how easy it is to repair or realign. More specifically this is explored by analysing the narrative representations of managers and employees in disgraced organizations; how they articulate their identity in relation to the organization they work for, their own role in the events that caused allegations of misconduct in the press, as well as subsequent managerial efforts to realign internal and external impressions of the organization. Tentative findings suggest that managerial efforts to realign internal and external impressions are likely to meet considerable obstacles. A key proposition I advance is that the corporate branding perspective underestimates the cultural complexities involved in restoring the damage to a publicly disgraced organization's image. These complexities stem in large part from the pluralistic and fragmentary nature of contemporary Western discourses on morality and social legitimacy. It is increasingly difficult to arrive at a shared agreement on what moral standards should be employed when judging the probity of a specific organizational practice. Such discursive pluralism causes substantial difficulties in addressing allegations of misconduct and attempting to realign diverging impressions of the organization, without risking to offend the sensibilities of other stakeholders. It also implies a ready availability of alternative discursive resources for employee identification. Pluralism may be seen as a key feature of our time, whose implications for the notion of public disgrace has arguably been overlooked in the organizational doctrine related to the corporate branding perspective. Moreover, these findings suggest an understanding of identity as a more deeply felt human need to maintain a consistent and morally intelligible representation of self, as compared to the dramatist perspective of Goffman (1978), which underpins the corporate branding perspective and implies an understanding of selfhood as <i>front stage selves</i> , something that people ultimately don't take too seriously.	
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Introduction and research questions

There is a large body of research within organizational theory, which seeks to conceptualize certain aspects of organizational life typically captured by labels such as organizational culture and identity. There is also a school of thought (commonly referred to as the *corporate branding* perspective) which has recently attempted to explore the interfaces between such internal aspects and the organization's relationships to customers and other external stakeholders, captured by labels such as brand and image. An ideal type is often conjured up in this literature, of an organization with an authentic brand and image, where the perceptions of external stakeholders is fully aligned with internal (employee) views of the company and an all-pervading corporate mindset, which governs every aspect of work and organizational life (cf Hatch and Schultz, 1997). Such companies are argued to be more successful than those, where external perceptions of brand and image are misaligned with internal aspects of self-understanding, culture and identity (Harris and de Chernatony, 2001).

Misalignment (between brand/image and culture/identity) is then seen as an undesirable state of affairs, with various recipes proposed to remedy such unfortunate situations (de Chernatony, 2001; Harris and de Chernatony, 2001; Hatch and Schultz, 2001 and Balmer and Sonen, 1999). Going further, the proponents of this perspective suggest that misalignment, caused by a negative external image, resulting from e.g. bad publicity, has a significant negative impact on the identification of employees with the organization they work for, which in turn impacts their self-esteem, commitment to the firm and more broadly their well-being. Alignment between organizational and individual identity, resulting in employee identification, is by contrast linked to increased need satisfaction, cooperative behavior, performance and job satisfaction (Ashforth et al, 2008). Efforts by management to restore a

more positive image of the organization, and a cultural sense of commonality (of purpose) should thus, by implication, be relatively easy to implement, since you would expect them to be met with welcoming arms by a staff of disenchanted and depressed employees, grasping at the opportunity to repair their damaged self-esteem.

My own research interest in the subject area was triggered by the experience of working for an organization that had suffered a crisis of confidence, and which tried to repair its tainted image through running an internal branding project, which would culminate in an external rebranding campaign. Contrary to what the corporate branding perspective would lead you to expect, this project was met with considerable resistance and a compact wall of cynical employee attitudes to the cultural change efforts of management. The research project for my Ph.D. studies at Lund University was inspired by these experiences and aims to investigate the interface between external impressions of an organization, often referred to as its *brand* and *image*, and internal expressions, its *culture* and the *identity* of its employees, in organizations that have suffered crises of confidence in their relation to external stakeholders, what one might call *publicly disgraced organizations*. The aim is partly to problematize the corporate branding alignment ideal in general, by empirically investigating organizations where the brand-culture alignment is broken – whether and how easy it is to repair or realign – but more specifically also to explore the identity processes among managers and employees in disgraced organizations.

A key proposition I advance is that the corporate branding perspective underestimates the cultural complexities involved in restoring the damage to a publicly disgraced organization's image and employee morale. These complexities stem in large part from the fragmented nature of contemporary Western discourses on morality, social legitimacy and (conversely) disgrace. It is increasingly difficult to arrive at a shared agreement on what moral standards should be employed when judging whether a specific organizational practice might be deemed as legitimate or disgraceful. This causes substantial difficulties in addressing allegations of misconduct and attempting to realign diverging impressions of the organization, without risking to offend the sensibilities of other stakeholders. The plurality of moral standards also implies a ready availability of alternative discursive

resources for employee identification, in a context where those discourses aligned around the organization's brand and public image have become damaged. This phenomenon (the plurality of moral standards and discursive resources available for identification) may be seen as a key feature of our time, whose implications for the notion of public disgrace, as well as associated organizational dynamics, has arguably been overlooked in the organizational doctrine related to the corporate branding perspective.

Moreover, the findings suggest that both managers and employees appear concerned with maintaining a consistent representation of their own roles in the scandal, which exonerates them from culpability and thus preserves an intact sense of moral self-worth. This jars somewhat with the theoretical foundations of the corporate branding perspective, which relies heavily on the dramatist perspective of Goffman (1978), and implies an understanding of identity as *front stage selves* that people do not take so seriously. This suggests that employees of a disgraced organization should be willing and keen to realign their own identities with a reinvented corporate image, if it carried more positive associations compared to the image that had been damaged. My own findings indicate something to the contrary, namely that such efforts are likely to be resisted.

The empirical material of the thesis consists partly of participant observations from my own experiences of working for a publicly disgraced organization. The original aim was to complement these with life-story interviews, with employees in other publicly disgraced organizations. My first attempt to gather such empirical material was aimed at a primary school that had been the subject of a media scandal shortly after I started my PhD studies. As I reached out to contact key members of the organization that had been involved in the scandal, I discovered that many of them were reluctant to participate in the study. In the end, I was only able to interview four staff members. Many of the key stakeholders simply refused to be interviewed. This experience was repeated when I attempted to contact members of two other organizations that had become the subject of media scandals – none of their employees agreed to be interviewed this time. The experience made me realise the difficulties involved in securing access to first-hand empirical material from disgraced organizations. There is a

natural desire for people that have been involved in such events to move on and leave the past behind.

The difficulties of securing access more broadly made me realise how difficult it would be to gather enough empirical material for a full-blown qualitative research study. At the same time, I had progressed quite far in analysing the scant material I had, and thus felt ambivalent about dropping the subject altogether. I therefore agreed with my supervisors to reduce the scope of the thesis, treating my empirical observations as vignette studies, and to focus more on the theoretical contribution of my analysis. The primary purpose of this thesis will thus be to elaborate a theoretical model of employee and managerial coping strategies in organizations that suffer crises of confidence. The model draws on narrative identity theory and sociological observations regarding institutional pluralism, providing an understanding of narrative representation of instances of organizational disgrace (and one's own role in them) as an employee coping strategy for repairing a damaged sense of self, and furthermore attempts to explain how such strategies may impact an organization's overall ability to mobilize change efforts, and repair a damaged external image. The reduced scope of the study also motivates why I have lowered the ambition to a Licentiate thesis, rather than a PhD thesis.

Research questions

The thesis will attempt to address the following questions:

- How do employees in organizations that have suffered a crisis of confidence narrate the sequence of events that culminated in allegations of misconduct in the press?
- How are subsequent managerial efforts to restore the damage to the organization's image represented in these accounts?
- What role do employees convey for themselves in these plots, vis-à-vis the role of other stakeholders, both internal and external (i.e. managers vs employees, the press and/or public opinion), and how do the different stakeholder accounts compare to each other?

- How do these narratives contribute to the observed phenomenon of inertia and resistance to managerial change efforts, e.g. by shaping affective attitudes of different stakeholders towards each other?
- How do such reactions compare to the predictions of the corporate branding perspective?

Theoretical orientation

The present section on theoretical orientation is divided into three sub-sections. The first sub-section briefly traces the intellectual lineage of the corporate branding perspective, and its relation to earlier conceptions of organizational culture, and elaborates on those key concepts within that perspective, which are relevant for my research problem, as well as their alleged inter-relationship. This serves a number of purposes. My own research problem aims to problematize certain predictions made by scholars associated with the corporate branding perspective, which I believe to have informed commonly held views on how to restore confidence and boost employee morale, in organizations that have suffered allegations of misconduct. In order to pinpoint the reasons for which I believe these views to be misguided, it is useful to elaborate on what prior assumptions the corporate branding perspective rests.

The second sub-section contains a theoretical elaboration on the notion of public disgrace, and how the latter phenomenon can be understood in relation to the corporate branding perspective's view of organizational image and culture, discussed in the previous sub-section. The section then closes with an account of narrative identity theory, which I have chosen to adopt in analyzing the empirical material, situating such an analysis within the broader context of my overall theoretical perspective.

Organizational culture and the corporate branding perspective

The formal and definitive conception of organization studies is often seen to lie in Herbert Simon's *Administrative Behavior*, the first edition of which was published in 1945. Frustrated with how micro-

economists viewed the decision-making processes inside individual companies or organizations as a black box, Simon set out to develop a theory of precisely the decision-making processes in administrative organizations. The main gist of his theory is that rationality in administrative decision-making is *bounded*, or constrained, by such factors as inadequate skills or knowledge, lack of information (a problem of communication), and/or identification of the decision-maker with goals other than those of the organization at large (which might be due to departmental or other loyalties). The task of administration thus becomes to design the organizational structure, or decision-making environment, such “that the individual will approach as closely as practicable to rationality (judged in terms of the organization’s goals) in his decisions” (Simon, 1957: 322). An entire chapter is devoted to “Loyalties and organizational identification”, the principal conclusion of which is that rationality in decision-making can be limited by an individual decision-maker’s “failure to identify himself correctly with the goals of the whole organization” (ibid: 323). According to Simon, it is possible (most of the time) “to reorient an individual from identification with a subgoal of the organization to identification with a broader and more inclusive goal” (ibid: 324). This notion, that employees can be manipulated to personally identify with the goals of the organization at large, became the ultimate premise of much work on organizational culture that came to follow.

Simon’s theories established at an early stage the notion that the decisions, or more broadly the behavioural patterns, of employees could be optimized through ensuring that their loyalties and identification were attuned to the goals of the organization. The importance of this cultural factor in ensuring efficiency and productivity was further emphasized by the ideas of Robert Selznick, whose *Leadership in Administration* (1957) can be seen partly as a polemic against Simon’s theories. Selznick argued that Simon’s focus on *efficiency* as a criterion to judge the adequacy of decisions led to a preoccupation with administrative problems which were less significant than those concerned with the *leadership* of organizations (Selznick, 1957). Because of the increasingly important role corporations play in society, Selznick argued that the executive becomes more of a statesman, as he makes the transition from administrative management to institutional leadership.

Selznick writes further that one of the most important tasks for such leader-statesmen is that of infusing day-to-day behavior with long run meaning and purpose, one of the chief techniques for which is the elaboration of socially integrating myths. A stronger managerial accent on teleology (what is the ultimate aim of the company and its broader role in society) and social accountability would also foster a stronger sense of meaning among employees, in relation to the work tasks they carry out for the company. As argued by Lind (2000), Selznick's work contributed to a shift in academic focus within organizational theory, away from analytical issues related to strategic design of organizational structures and administrative efficiency, to the study of institutional factors related to leadership, culture and meaning. Selznick also contributed to the elaboration of an authoritarian, paternalistic leadership ideal in the leadership and management literature that drew on his work.

Burrell (1999) has highlighted how this early generation of organization theory scholars (and those who would carry out research in a similar tradition) were highly influenced by a particular interpretation of the works of Max Weber; one that highlighted the institutional superiority of bureaucratic structures and the need for elaboration of Weber's ideal type bureaucracy construct. Underpinning the work of these scholars was a progressive belief in the centrality of modernity, characteristic of the *Zeitgeist*. The development of the postwar welfare state (reaching its apex in the U.S. during the Eisenhower administration in the 50s) and the move towards corporatism had created a belief that the royal road to the good society, characterized by increased welfare and affluence for all its members, was through progressive improvements in the techniques of production, not only via technology but also through the organization of work activities in more rational processes, and dissemination of new products through improved marketing techniques. The bureaucratic organizational model thus became a vehicle, of paramount importance, for realizing the goals of the corporatist welfare state – that of liberating mankind from the historical shackles of poverty – through the organization of work activities in more rational processes, which would theoretically serve to increase output efficiency and hence the amount of goods and services available for consumption. The role of organizational culture was, by extension, to bind employees together around this common societal goal, seeing as this was the higher goal of

all organizations in the welfare society, and the role of the leader was precisely to instill such a cultural sense of commonality (of purpose).

Within the context of the bureaucratic organizational ideal, the notion of organizational culture is also linked with various instruments of work-task coordination and control. The problem of coordination of work tasks in large organizations was highlighted by the early generation of organizational scholars (like Simon and Barnard). Mintzberg (1983, 1989) identifies six mechanisms for work-task coordination: a) mutual adjustment, b) direct supervision, standardization of c) work processes, d) outputs, e) skills and f) norms. The latter of these is defined as management control of the norms infusing work, usually for the entire organization, so that all employees function more or less according to the same set of beliefs. Organizational culture, according to this perspective, thus becomes an important vehicle for coordination and control, since it is the medium through which standardization of norms is achieved.

An explosion of academic literature on organizational culture erupted in the 1980s. This may be seen in connection with the general influence of cultural studies at the time, and inspired particularly by the cultural anthropology of Clifford Geertz (1973), which had turned the study of cultures into a highly fashionable concept. The notion of studying organizations much like anthropologists had studied primitive cultures also took hold around this time, which provided organizational scholars with an exciting, new methodology for empirical work. The increase might also be explained by the fact that business administration as an academic discipline is relatively young, and there was a general increase in the volume of academic publications in management and organization theory during the decades of the 1970s and 1980s. The dominant studies of the day were still performed following the model of instrumental reason established by Taylor and Barnard though, in which managers and management scholars are enjoined to identify the critical variables that, once controlled effectively, will yield predicted improvements in business performance. Wiener (1988), for instance, views organizational culture as a system of common values, which, when adequately expressed, enables the organization to guide employee behavior, in a manner conforming to its goals, policies and strategies. As such, the culture of an organization can be a valuable asset, in terms of improving

productive efficiency. Inadequate values on the other hand, in the sense of values that do not conform to corporate goals and strategies, can be a significant burden.

Another view, still characterized by a technical interest and a prescriptive approach, is that of Wilkins and Ouchi (1983), who defined culture as “shared social knowledge”. They also developed the notion of clans as alternative governance mechanisms within an organization. Clans and shared social knowledge serve to align individual employee goals with those of the organization and thus guide employees in making the right decision when confronted with novel situations. Ouchi (1980) also suggests that noneconomic governance mechanisms, such as trust, may serve to increase economic efficiency in exchange relationships within an organization. Martin and Meyerson (1988) view organizational culture as a strategy to establish a kind of “social glue”, which has an important normative and regulative effect on employee behavior. Similarly, Ray (1986) views organization culture as the “last frontier of control”, whereby the upper echelons of management seek to activate feelings among employees that bring about loyalty and solidarity with the company. Common to all the aforementioned studies, is the view that organizational culture is a variable which can be controlled and manipulated, so as to bring about desirable consequences. Corporations are thus, in theory, able to intentionally and actively harness the souls of employees through designing strong organizational cultures that articulate normative blueprints, through which the corporation's values, beliefs and norms can be transcribed onto their employees (Abrahamson, 1997; Barley and Kunda, 1992). One should perhaps concede that there were some who already took a less prescriptive view of culture, suggesting that it develops in a more passive, evolutionary way. Schein (1985) viewed culture as "a pattern of basic assumptions - invented, discovered, or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration - that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems. (Schein, 1985: 9)"

Following the postwar critique of corporate bureaucracy mounted by sociologists and philosophers writing in a radical humanist tradition (Riesman, 2001; Whyte, 1956; Jackall, 1988; Marcuse, 1966), as well

as neo-liberal arguments about the inflexibility of large corporations in responding to competitive pressures, the ideal of the bureaucratic organization gave way over time to another ideal-type, captured by Mintzberg's catchy term "adhocracy": that of the innovative organization. In adhocracies, distribution of work tasks was no longer to be based so much on specialization in organizational silos, but to rely (ideally) more on team-based work, where the unique competencies of individual employees would complement each other, fostering creativity and innovation. Coordination of work was likewise no longer to be based so much on standardization of work-tasks and results, but to rely more on mutual adjustment through horizontal alignment (i.e. teamwork). Rather than in-sourcing all resources in a huge bureaucratic behemoth, the ideal of the network economy was promoted, whereby smaller independent firms would enter into a network of medium to long-term transaction agreements. The authoritarian leadership style promoted by Selznick was also replaced by a new leadership ideal: that of the transformational leader, who would harness, enable and cultivate the unique competencies of his team members (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985), rather than culturally brainwash them to buy into and commit to the goals of the organization. In response to the more left-wing, humanist critique of bureaucracy, this mode of organization was also promoted as being less conformist, freer, fostering creativity, personal development and learning as well as encouraging individual responsibility (Mintzberg, 1979).

The shift in attitudes vis-a-vis ideal organizational structures (from bureaucracy to adhocracy) and leadership (from authoritarian to transformative) arguably preceded the parallel intellectual development on matters relating to organizational culture. The trajectory of ideas started somewhat later here, tracing a roundabout path via Michael Porter's influential works on strategy. Porter, rather startlingly, employed ideas on industry concentration and profitability (previously used to motivate antitrust regulation) drawn from Industrial Economics (Bain, 1951; 1956) to devise the notion that firms should seek to analyze the industry structure they operate in, to identify positions where they would be able to profit from competitive advantages (Porter, 1980). Porter's ideas were eventually somewhat modified by critics within the very analytical perspective on strategy he helped establish, who blamed him for focusing too much on firms'

external environment, which led to an overly optimistic view of firms' abilities to entirely overhaul their operations and align them with some new competitive strategy identified as desirable. Instead, they argued, firms should make an inventory of their own strategic capabilities and resources, and compare that with the insights on strategic opportunities gleaned from analyzing the industry structure (Barney, 1991; Prahalad & Hamel, 1990). This critique, in turn, inspired a broader reorientation of attitudes within business administration, captured by the so-called "resource-based view of the firm". According to this view, firms should seek to harness and cultivate those resources (technical competencies, customer base, marketing tactics) which they have developed over time, to consolidate their strengths and utilize them to strengthen their competitive advantage. This marked an important shift in attitudes within business administration, which previously could have been said to treat firms and the environment they operate in more like blank slates, on which new strategies, cultures and so on could be transcribed.

The resource-based view of the firm was, in turn, a chief source of inspiration for the corporate branding perspective. Here, the notion of organizational culture as something developing organically over time (rather than being actively steered and shaped by a Selznick-inspired paternalistic leader-statesman), fostering strong employee loyalty and identification with the firm, is viewed as an important and tremendously valuable strategic resource, fused with notions of brand authenticity driving a positive external image of said firm. We can see a confluence of notions of authenticity in this perspective, being the product of a deliberate attempt to bridge the corporate communication and branding perspectives on corporate brands, identity and image, and organizational studies on organizational culture and identity (Hatch and Schultz, 2000; 2002). While the corporate communication and branding literature has traditionally stressed external perceptions of the organization's image (e.g. that of its customers), the organizational studies perspective has stressed the internal interpretation of employees and managers of an organization, of how they believe that outsiders perceive them. Hatch and Schultz attempt to bridge this by defining organizational image as "a holistic and vivid impression held by an individual or a particular group towards an organization", being "a result of sense-making by the group and communication by the organization of a fabricated and projected picture of itself" (Hatch and

Schultz, 1997: 359). Organizational identity, in turn, is defined “as grounded in local meanings and organizational symbols and thus embedded in organizational culture”, which is seen “as the internal symbolic context for the development and maintenance of organization identity” (ibid). The corporate brand thus becomes an important strategic resource for an organization, as a focal point around which the image, culture and identity of the organization can be harnessed.

According to the corporate branding perspective then, employees are of paramount importance for successful branding, since they are key to building relationships with all of a company's stakeholders, as well as contributing to the meaning of the brand through giving expression of the identity of the company to others (de Chernatony, 2001; Harris and de Chernatony, 2001; Hatch and Schultz, 2001 and Balmer and Soenen, 1999). How employees engage with and enact the values and vision of the brand is seen as central, their cultural behaviour either supporting or damaging the company's claim to brand uniqueness and attraction (Schultz and Hatch, 2006). Furthermore, organizations should seek consistency between the collective internal identity of their employees, and the way they project themselves externally to their environment through various kinds of branding and image management tactics – rather than seek to internally control the attitudes of its employees through standardization of norms via cultural blueprints. A number of recipes for achieving alignment are provided by corporate branding scholars, which typically involve an initial assessment of (any) existing misalignment between image and culture or identity. One example is the ACID test proposed by Balmer and Soenen (1999), where an assessment is made of the (mis)alignment between five identity types: 1) actual, 2) communicated, 3) conceived, 4) ideal and 5) desired. To achieve stronger alignment, de Chernatony (1999) furthermore argues for the importance of value orientation quizzes and surfacing employees' mental models, to diagnose employee value and cultural alignment with the brand vision. Hatch and Schultz (2003) emphasize organizational storytelling as an important tool to strengthen brand identity, a tool which can also be used to seek alignment with the brand image, if the stories are used as impression-management devices in interactions with stakeholders.

While matters relating to coordination and control are typically de-emphasized in the corporate branding perspective (presumably since

they jar somewhat with the anti-authoritarian emphasis on creative individuality, personal sovereignty and authenticity), other scholars have highlighted how branding, while traditionally seen as a marketing tool, can also be understood as an exercise in management of meaning, a management and leadership practice aimed at the regulation of work identities among employees (Kärreman and Rylander, 2008). Identity regulation may indeed be seen as an informal, insidious yet perhaps no less efficient form of management control, compared to more traditional bureaucratic and output-measurement control mechanisms (Alvesson and Wilmott, 2002). Related studies have shown how such informal, non-obvious socio-ideological control mechanisms may be important features, particularly of companies in the knowledge economy (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2004). By appeal to the social prestige of an organization's brand or image, employees may be lured to intensify their identification with it, and carry out (often hard) work to further improve it, since their own sense of self-esteem stands to gain in the process. These types of control mechanisms are less overtly prescriptive or normative in nature, taking on much subtler forms (Bains, 2007; Jermier, 1998) compared to the bureaucratic types of control mechanisms, appealing rather to employees 'as they really are', as captured in the concept of the 'neo-normative organization' (Fleming and Sturdy, 2007).

To summarize, the corporate branding perspective draws on a broad spectrum of managerial disciplines (branding, marketing, communication, organizational culture and identity theory) to construe a vision of an ideal-type organization, as one representing the organic whole of its employee base and their unique competencies, with an image and a brand whose value stands in direct correlation to the authenticity and strength of internal employee identification with the organization's culture and values. A key argument is that organizations that suffer a crisis of confidence do so because of a misalignment between internal and external stakeholder perceptions of them. To repair such a misalignment, corporate branding scholars argue that management should actively seek to repair the damage to the external image through a bottom-up process of attempting to re-align employee identification with the organization's desired values and culture, following various diagnostic tests to determine what values that external stakeholders (customers, owners, regulators, etc) believe the organization should represent. As shown in the Expedition Nordinsure

case study, these arguments were instrumental in informing the logic of the internal branding project, which was initiated as a response to the bonus scandal. However, I believe that the Yardstick school case study shows that such beliefs are more broadly ingrained in the prevailing organizational logic of appropriate responses to allegations of misconduct – even in organizations that are not seen to possess a strong brand. As I will proceed to argue in the next section, this argument rests on a number of premises. Firstly, it only posits potential misalignment between internal and external stakeholders of an organization, implicitly assuming that external perceptions are typically more uniform. Secondly, it arguably underestimates the difficulty in arriving at a commonly shared view regarding what aspects of a disgraced organization's internal elements (values, culture, etc) are somehow problematic and need to be fixed.

A key argument I will return to is that these premises build partly on anachronistic notions of moral standards and the way these are used as a) criteria whereby external stakeholders judge organizational conduct and b) narrative resources in individual representations of the self as a morally legitimate subject. Contemporary society is characterised by a plurality of moral standards, which means that external stakeholders may have very different perceptions of whether an organization is misconducting itself or not. There is hence no guarantee that managerial reactions to address allegations of misconduct stemming from a certain external stakeholder may not in turn be construed as disgraceful or scandalous by another stakeholder. Since it is difficult to ascribe a universally acknowledged sense of guilt in contemporary organizations, managers or employees moreover have little incentive to recognize any such ascription, thus providing little impetus for the type of personal redemption narrative that would appear to be required for the employees and managers to become motivated to collectively engage in repairing the damage done to the organization's brand. This fact also causes substantial organizational resistance to attempts at managerial change and organizational control informed by the corporate branding perspective, in disgraced organizations.

The argument I suggest is theoretically indebted to the philosophy of history perspective represented by Reinhart Koselleck and his concept of *Begriffsgeschichte* (roughly translated as conceptual history). A key argument of Koselleck's is that historical understanding, as well as

understanding of the present, is only made possible by the fusion of a synchronic and diachronic perspective. At any moment in time, we find ourselves at a junction between synchronic and diachronic orders, whereby the concepts that inform our understanding have both a contemporary meaning, as well as lingering semantic roots from different historical contexts. By its nature, this junction is constituted by an overlapping of diverse elements, of different histories advancing at different rates. Hence Koselleck developed a “characterization of the moment of experience as a point of contemporaneity in which all that occurs together by no means enters into this moment in a uniform fashion” (Koselleck, 2004). Using such a historical lens, one might interpret the corporate branding perspective as informed on the one hand by very contemporary notions of brand authenticity and individual self-realisation, but on the other hand also by quite anachronistic notions regarding the degree according to which the moral standards used to assess the legitimacy of an organization are universally shared, by those external stakeholders that scrutinize them, as well as by the organization's employees. As I will proceed to argue in the next section, such notions are more associated with a historical period, when the earlier described ideal-type model of corporate bureaucracy flourished.

Social legitimacy and public disgrace

In this thesis I use the term disgrace to denote the condition befalling an organization that has been subjected to allegations of misconduct in the press. I have chosen this term, because I would like to study and analyse the condition in a broad, anthropological sense. The Oxford English Dictionary lists five definitions of the term grace, the third of which is related to Christian Beliefs, being “the free and unmerited favour of God, as manifested in the salvation of sinners and the bestowal of blessings”. Since many religions share similar concepts, I would like to propose a slightly broader religious definition of the term as a state of divine favor. As noted by Durkheim (1912), who went so far as to posit the idea of society as the soul of religion, there is a strong anthropological link between religious and moral authority, meaning that a state of divine favour or disfavour typically has moral

connotations. Accordingly, the OED lists a secular version of the aforementioned third definition of grace, as the condition of being favoured by someone”, the example use provided being: “he fell from grace with the tabloids after he was sent off for swearing”. The example use is noteworthy, because it touches on the role played by mass media as agents of moral authority in modern Western societies, which will be brought up later in this section. For now, I propose to unpack the term to an even looser version, and suggest a definition of grace as being the condition of being favored by whatever moral authorities (whether religious or secular) that prevail in a given community. Conversely, *disgrace* denotes the condition of having fallen *out* of favour with such authorities.

Having proposed *agents of moral authority* as those who distinguish between the members of a community to be held in favor and those to fall out of grace, it follows that such a distinction requires some form of moral standards, according to which said members may be judged. Before proceeding to discuss the nature of moral standards employed in contemporary cases of organizational disgrace, I would like to elaborate briefly on the historical trajectory according to which they have been formed. This serves the purpose of providing a theoretical link to the account of narrative modes and tropes in the following section on narrative identity theory. In that section, I make the argument that narrative identity may be defined as a form of self-representation aiming to convey the self as a morally legitimate subject. I also claim that different moral standards lend themselves to differing notions of self-worth, and that the narrative mode employed in expressing such forms of self-representation is likewise constrained by the moral standards prevailing in a given community, at a given point in time. Elaborating briefly on past moral standards thus serves to clarify that relationship.

The trajectory of moral standards in Western culture

The early Christian era and the origin of Western virtue ethics in Antiquity

From a historical and anthropological perspective, early and so-called primitive societies have often espoused a form of virtue ethic, which may be defined as behavioural rules corresponding to codes of personal conduct associated with and favoured by divine authority. As

observed by scholars in the tradition of Legal Anthropology, such tribal codes also function as basic coordination devices in medium to large communities, carrying benefits from the perspective of social organization and stability (Malinowski, 1926). Disgrace in a tribal setting is then caused by a member having broken with the code of virtues espoused by the tribe in question, causing him to fall out of favour with the prevailing divinity and moral authority. The corresponding punishment typically involves banishment, i.e. exclusion from the tribal community. Narrative fills an important function in this context, for example in the form of cautionary tales, which represent the personal misfortunes of tribal members that have broken against moral standards in the past. Indeed, Frye (1957) speculates that the plot structure of narrative genres (like tragedy and comedy) might have originated in the religious/magic rituals of primitive societies, drawing a specific analogy between tragedy, in its ironic mode, and the scapegoat ritual.

As argued by Werner Jaeger, the roots of the Classical tradition of virtue ethics go back to the Ionian philosophers, and their conception of a law-based social order, mirroring the physical laws governing the natural world. A concept which has been central to this tradition is that of *paideia*, which finds its most articulate theoretical expression in Plato's elaboration of the ideal state in *the Republic*; a concept which might be roughly translated as a form of virtuous education. Plato's conception of the ideal state is one of the good society as based on the perfectibility of its citizens, via a form of philosophic-dialectical education designed to instil them with an ideal set of virtues (Jaeger, 1986).ⁱ

An important feature of Plato's ethical reasoning is its intimate grounding in his metaphysical teachings, causing a direct correspondence between his epistemological skepticism about our capacity to arrive at truth, and the virtuous use of dialectic reason, to rid ourselves of false convictions. The metaphysical basis for Plato's ethical system, and its role in justifying a political system designed to bring about the good society, was a key source of inspiration for early Christian thinkers, such as St. Augustine and Origen, who sought to integrate key components of (neo-)Platonism in the notion of the Church State, which played an important role in inspiring subsequent medieval efforts to rebuild an institutional framework from the ruins of

antiquity, a historical process that started with the Church taking over the administrative framework of the Roman empire – based around the administrative unit of *dioceses* introduced after the Tetrarchy – and culminated with the appearance of the modern European national states.

Plato's notion of *paideia*, in particular, came to play an important role in the early Christian conception of humanism. Augustine remains quite close to Plato's ethical teachings, in avoiding any positive, absolute definition of the good, arguing that we have been made incapable of comprehensively understanding the good, justifying this with the Judaeo-Christian doctrine of man's essentially sinful nature, brought about by Adam and Eve's fall from grace. Augustine is thus fiercely critical of the pursuit of worldly honour, through actively attempting to be virtuous, in some positive sense. Only through contemplation of the evangelical mysteries and the mystery of faith, could the irrational and egoistic nature of human passions be restrained, by inspiring the more passive, core Christian virtues of compassion and humility. Another key Church father was Origen, whose theology Jaeger (1961) claims to be "based on the Greek idea of *paideia* in its highest philosophical form" (ibid, p 68), and his understanding of Christianity as "the greatest educational power in history" (ibid, p 65), shouldering a *meliorist* calling to improve humanity that is in essential agreement with Plato's philosophy.

The moral standards of the early Christian era may thus be summarised as founded in the philosophical traditions of Greek antiquity, with emphasis on Plato's metaphysical and ethical teachings. The forms of self-worth conferred by these moral standards are thus closely related to the key virtues elaborated by Plato and the early Church fathers: compassion, humility as well as a capacity for dialectical reasoning, required to pass moral judgement. One is thus a good person to the extent that one is able to exhibit discipline and self-control over irrational, aggressive impulses and subject one's decisions in life to dialectical scrutiny, to determine the least bad course of action. This is not a particularly individualistic form of self-worth, but rather one which emphasizes individual restraint and the collective righteousness of a society governed by religious institutions, capable of disciplining and tempering man's assertive nature. Conversely, the early Church fathers did not take a very judgemental stance on sinners; as long as

they were able to realise their sins through confession and penance, they were allowed the grace of God. To fall out of favour with the Church, and into a state of divine disgrace, thus required a chronically vicious nature: an unrepentant display of traits opposed to the early Christian virtues, vices such as pride, cruelty and arrogance.

The Christian Church plays an important institutional role in the theology of the early Church fathers, and consequently in the ideal model of society that they envisage. First of all as a didactic agent, whose task is to train a social caste of philosopher-priests in the philosophical foundations of Christianity's historical mission, as well as the arts of dialectical reasoning required to pass sound moral judgement. Secondly, it becomes a key agent of moral authority, by virtue of the training in moral reasoning acquired by its leaders. This has a number of consequences in the European history of the early Christian era. Firstly, the institutions of the Church come to play an increasingly important legislative role, as the principal authority on interpretation of Roman law, forming the legislative basis of the Holy Roman Empire. Secondly, the Church over time establishes its own ecclesiastical jurisdiction, founded in canon law. Both these roles sit uneasily alongside the traditional role of secular rulers as legislators and chiefs over jurisdictional powers.

The Humanist renaissance and the Protestant revolution

With the rediscovery in the 13th century of his key texts on ethics and politics, Aristotle's thought arguably came to play an even bigger role than Plato's philosophy, at least in the Roman Catholic world, through the integration of his virtue ethics in the scholastic doctrine elaborated by Thomas ab Aquino. Following Weber (2003), this intellectual turn might be seen as directly responsible for a number of subsequent developments, and as such merits some further attention. In the Nichomachean Ethics (the basis for the Thomist doctrine), Aristotle starts off with a similar concession as that of Plato: that the good can not be defined in terms of a set of generalizable laws with universal applicability, although he rejects Plato's idealist notion of an absolute ontological basis for the good.ⁱⁱ What Aristotle adds to Plato's system chiefly consists of a teleological dimension, as well as a (consequent) elaboration of those sets of virtues which characterize a good person – criticizing Plato for having insufficiently conceived of the qualities that characterise a good man. This, Aristotle argues, was an erroneous

deduction from the statement that the good can not be defined in terms external to it, leading to the false conclusion that those virtues which make a man good can not be comprehended by human understanding (Aristotle, 2009).

Instead, Aristotle defines a good human being in functional terms, much like the definition of a cobbler would be someone who makes good shoes. This then becomes the purpose and goal (*telos*) of a human life: to become as good a person as it is possible for us, each and individually, to become. Aristotle then proceeds to elaborate on a set of moral and intellectual virtues which characterize a good man, each defined as the middle road situated on a plane, between a triangular set of opposing vices (e.g. courage, *andreia*, defined as the rational midpoint between cowardice, *deilos*, and two types of recklessness), analogous to the Socratic view on physical health. A special privilege is accorded to wisdom, *sophia*, an intellectual virtue which Aristotle conceives of as a combination of intellect (*nous*) and knowledge (*episteme*), aimed at grasping the sources of knowledge and truth, and hence preoccupied with universals rather than e.g. the particularities of political and moral praxis (being the domain of *phronesis*, the virtue of practical judgement). He then proceeds to argue that wisdom, *sophia*, is a pursuit requiring a certain amount of *otium*, leisure devoted to philosophical reflection, and *skhole*, meaning "school, lecture, discussion", an activity that involves learning or self-improvement. Since it can reveal the divine nature of the good, those persons capable of *sophia* (who are rare), are naturally accorded a special privilege in Aristotle's ethical system (Aristotle, 2009).

The scholastic tradition had a tremendous influence on the Catholic doctrine, infusing it with a more optimistic view of man's capacity for active pursuit of virtuousness, inherited from Aristotle. The everyday man's pursuit of worldly honour, through excelling in some practical art (*techné*), is conveyed in a significantly more positive light, allowing for a more individualistic measure of self-worth, compared to the Augustinian/neo-Platonist doctrine. Likewise, a worldly ruler is seen as capable of being more just, if he successfully pursues the virtue of *phronesis*, giving rise to the Humanist ideal of the virtuous prince (*vir virtuti*). A noteworthy aspect of the scholastic doctrine is the practical implications carried over from the privilege that Aristotle accords to the pursuit of wisdom, *sophia*. This privilege might be seen

to have inspired and justified the Catholic concept of the *consilia evangelica*, the divine calling of members of the priestly caste (as well as monks), conceived of as a lifestyle of ascetic monasticism, to allow for contemplation of the evangelival mysteries, and the moral supremacy of such a lifestyle to the worldly adherence to *praecepta* required by the common man (a notion inherited from Aristotle's argument on the need for laws to complement a system of virtue ethics).

An important consequence of the Thomist doctrine was thus that the Catholic Church arguably became more confident (if not complacent) in its righteousness as a religious institution, and consequently in its exercise of moral authority. There are a number of contemporaneous practices of the Catholic Church, such as the doctrine of papal infallibility and the commercial sale of letters of indulgence, which are often seen to have been inspired by the Thomist turn, and which would later become the target of criticism associated with the Protestant movement. More imminently, the jurisdiction of the Catholic Church had increasingly come into conflict with secular jurisdiction. Skinner (1978) provides examples of a number of 14th century English court cases where a civil plaintiff had accused a member of the Church, and the ecclesiastical court had controversially ruled in the Church's favour, against convincing evidence, causing a popular reaction towards Church authority. This made it more socially legitimate when Henry VII eventually refused to abide by the Catholic Church's refusal to allow him divorce, causing the subsequent Anglican split. On the level of international diplomacy, the Italian city republics were contesting the rights of the Holy Roman Empire to exact taxes or tribute. A number of European thinkers were accordingly beginning to question some of the key tenets and implications of scholastic moral philosophy. Marsiglio of Padua was one of the first to suggest that the Church should be stripped of legislative and jurisdictional powers, which instead should fall under the domain of secular rulers. Macchiavelli attacked the humanist ideal of the virtuous prince, arguing that citizens are better served by a prince who is coldly rational, even capable of cruelty and military assertiveness when the situation so requires. Erasmus of Rotterdam wrote satirical letters poking fun at the Thomist virtues of *sophia* and *otium* (Skinner, 1978). The humanist renaissance thus sparked a critique of the Church's role as the ultimate agent of moral authority in Western cultures.

This line of thought, characterised by Skinner (1978) as a humanist critique of humanism, culminated with Luther and his doctrine of salvation founded in the concept of *sola fide*. Fiercely critical of scholastic moral reasoning, Luther asserted that the good can never be positively revealed to us through rational contemplation, reverting to a more Platonic conception of the good as impossible for us to absolutely comprehend, a condition brought about by Adam's fall from grace. Salvation can thus only be achieved through faith alone (*sola fide*), a principle which also ruled out the existence of any teleological dimension to the Protestant ethic. We can not achieve salvation, according to the Lutheran doctrine, through finding out some divinely ordained *telos* to our wordly lives, and doing our best to become as good a person as possible, within the context of such a life-goal. We still may have a wordly calling (to become a cobbler or a merchant), but this is entirely distinct from and unrelated to any opportunity for salvation (Weber, 1930).

As argued by MacIntyre (1988), the Protestant theological turn simply necessitated the Enlightenment project to justify an ethical foundation of the law, in and out of reason alone, seeing as it could no longer find divine sanction. As I will proceed to argue, Kant and Hegel are two key philosophical contributors to this project, who warrant special attention. They do so by virtue of having conceived of a constellation of the modern national state as agent of moral authority, by capacity of its legislative mandate and its jurisdictional powers, and its relationship to the free press as well as the process of knowledge production in academia. This constellation has consequently also shaped the secular notion of disgrace in modern Western societies. Moreover, the 20th century crisis of Kantian moral reasoning has caused significant changes to our understanding of this notion, causing important shifts in the way it is perceived by stakeholders in organizations that become subjected to allegations of misconduct in the press.

The Enlightenment project and the triadic relationship between the state, academia and the free press as agents of moral authority

The abolition of a teleological dimension to the Protestant ethic ruled out any divine origin or sanction for the secular law. By doing so, Luther thus opened up the field for a secular conception of humanism – one where it is up to humans to jointly come up with such a conception of the good society (determined by the righteousness of its

laws and soundness of its political institutions), as we would all like to live in. The secular humanist project is thus premised on the Protestant implication that it is up to us to decide what worldly moral laws to live by, an implication which gave rise to a powerful interplay of social forces, and a dynamic conception of historical progress that has shaped Western modernity. It was Kant who initiated the project to do so, through attempting to rationally justify the universal validity of a set of moral precepts, to serve as the foundation for a positivist legal tradition, using his notion of the categorical imperative: what every rational human being must agree to be the right course of action in a set of generalizable ethical dilemmas. While only a subset of Western nations converted to the Lutheran or Calvinist doctrine, the influence of Enlightenment thinkers on ethics and politics (like Kant) ranged much wider, and in many ways overlapped with anti-teleological impulses coming from the revolution in the natural sciences, which had a significant impact on those Enlightenment thinkers who conceived of a new, more scientific, basis for studying what Foucault has called the “sciences of man” (Foucault, 1970).

Auguste Comte, a key Enlightenment figure, argued forcefully for a “positivist” program for the social sciences, which he envisaged to wholly replace the more teleologically oriented traditions in the humanities, infused by what he saw as irrational superstitions. Instead, the social sciences should be guided by the goal to come up with rational solutions to social problems, motivated through reason alone and drawing on empirical methods from the natural sciences, rather than any purely analytical appeal to teleology or metaphysics. As argued by Foucault (1970; 1978), the empirical methods in the “sciences of man” often came to rely on specifying norms for appropriate human conduct, and devising remedies for deviations from such norms, conceived of as states of illness or disorder – whether deviation from normal blood pressure or vitamin content in the medical sciences, or deviations from norms of emotional reactions in psychological research. It might be argued then, that the notion of norms and disorder in modern societies at least partially came to replace the notion of virtue and sin in pre-modern societies. There is furthermore a certain overlap between the Kantian notion of categorical imperatives, and the notion of norms in the psychological traditions, as rational patterns of human behaviour, causing the notion of norms to carry a certain moralistic charge. Nevertheless, the concept

of sin carries a much stronger moralistic implication of personal guilt than the psychological concepts of mental or personality disorders. Since deviation from norms of human behaviour is typically explained by recourse to a combination of genetic and environmental factors, blame falls less heavily on the shoulders of human agency, an aspect of modernism which finds literary expression in the tradition of the French realist novel (see section on Narrative Identity theory).

Another key contributor to Enlightenment thought was Hegel, who formulated his philosophy in direct opposition to Kant's key ontological premises. Hegel's metaphysical position rejects Kant's distinction between the world of experience, and any more essentialist reality as useless, recognizing that our observations of "objects" are inextricably linked with our "notions" of those objects. Knowledge can then be described as a cognitive instrument ("notions), which aids us to interpret and make sense of our sense-perceptions (of "objects"), but which at the same time is inextricably bound up with those objects. What Hegel does recognize is that knowledge (notions of objects) can contain inherent contradictions. This implicitly means that knowledge, as a cognitive instrument, is limited in its capacity to interpret observations in a self-confirming way; at some point internally contradictory notions (of objects) break down in the face of observation (of those same objects). While Hegel delighted in pointing out the flaws of reasoning in Kant's philosophy, he did not draw the conclusion from these errors that the entire Enlightenment project was thus doomed to fail. Instead, he adopts a version of Plato's model of dialectical reason, arguing that we can find out (in negative terms) what is wrong, in an ethical, as well as epistemological sense, although we may never find out what is absolutely good, right or true (in some positive sense). By incorporating the model of dialectical reason in a historico-philosophical framework, it then becomes possible to come successively closer to an approximation of the good, right and true – through the successive elimination of a cumulative set of errors.ⁱⁱⁱ

The role of the state in this context is to pass legislation that conforms to the prevailing moral opinions of a political community, whether these opinions be perceived in the Kantian sense, as absolutely true in the sense of a categorical imperative with universal validity, or in the more loose Hegelian sense, as the currently prevailing notion of moral truth, itself a product of a dialectical historical process. In a democratic

political system, it is the role of political parties of various stripes to elaborate political agendas for such legislative changes, and convince their voters that such legislation is in the common interest of the electorate as a whole. The role of academic research in the social sciences and humanities is correspondingly to elaborate the underlying categorical imperatives that justify new legislation, or alternatively (according to the Hegelian view) detect internal contradictions in the prevailing notions of moral truth that underpin existing legislation, in order to replace them with less contradictory ones.

The role of the free press is to disseminate such academic findings to a broader community, in order to build public opinion in favour of passing the corresponding legislation, and sway the electorate to vote for those parties that advance a corresponding agenda. Incidentally, Sweden was the first European country to pass a Freedom of Publication Act, inspired by the Enlightenment writer Peter Forsskål, who argued in his *Thought on Civil Liberty* that “the life and strength of civil liberty consist in limited Government and unlimited freedom of the written word” (Forsskål, 1984). As argued by Forsskål, freedom of the written word is the Government's surest defense in a free state, seeing as it “develops knowledge most highly, removes all harmful statutes, restrains the injustices of all officials” (ibid), thus causing loyalty and respect for such a mode of government, among the citizens of a country. Another key task of the free press, apart from building public opinion for fairer legislation, is thus to uncover injustices and abuse of power and authority. It follows that the press has an important role as agents of moral authority in modern societies. While the exercise of moral authority ultimately rests with the legislator and the judiciary, the free press plays an important role in supporting both of them; through building public opinion for more righteous legislation, as well as uncovering injustices undetected by the police and/or judiciary. We may correspondingly define two types of disgrace in modern Western societies, both inspired by Enlightenment thought on the ethical foundations of legislative and jurisdictional practice, and mediated by the role of the free press in its Enlightenment constellation with the secular powers that be.

The first type of disgrace may be defined as of a more personal character, corresponding to the revelation that an individual or organization has either abused the powers granted him/it by the office

or role he/it occupies, or simply broken the law through actions that have failed to receive the attention of the jurisdictional powers. The second type of disgrace is of a more collective character, corresponding to a realisation of the unfairness (or moral untruth, in a Kantian sense) of some prevailing piece of legislation. The latter type of disgrace would typically involve an injunction to pass new legislation, which would serve to address the perceived injustices in the prior legislation. There exists a third potential variation of the second type, corresponding to a realisation of the mutually conflicting nature of a set of institutional norms that regulate a certain organisation or activity, and likewise involving an injunction to political or legislative reform. As I will proceed to argue in the following section, the crisis of Enlightenment moral reason in the 20th century has had profound implications for our understanding of all these forms of disgrace.

The crisis of moral reason in the 20th century, and the notion of disgrace in a pluralist society

It is precisely the aforementioned constellation of the modern national state and its relationship to knowledge, which comes under such violent attack – and, by association, the entire humanist tradition of thought – in the postmodern turn in continental philosophy. Influenced by reports of repression and censure coming out from the communist states of Eastern Europe, as well as the horrors of Mao's cultural revolution in China, philosophers like Jean-Francois Lyotard (who had previously been a devoted Marxist) and Michel Foucault expressed a deep disenchantment with the potential for human emancipation in large scale political projects based on some utopian vision for humanity. One of the more curious aspects of the postmodern turn, is to what degree it was simultaneously inspired by Hegel – specifically through the works of the French philosopher Jean Hyppolite – yet also constituted a rejection of him, specifically the influence his philosophy has had on totalitarian political ideologies based on some model of utopian historical determinism. A hint of this ambivalent influence may be gleaned from Deleuze's review of Hyppolite's *Logique et existence*, a work where he tries to correlate Hegel's *Phenomenology* to his *Logics*, and which raises important questions of language, being, and difference – aspects which were to become hallmarks of French postwar philosophy (Hyppolite, 2015). As Deleuze puts it, a central

turn for subsequent French philosophers came with Hyppolite's expositions on how Hegel transformed Kant's ontology of essence into "an ontology of sense".

Lyotard drew on narrative theory, defining the function of myth in primitive societies, as to integrate individuals into the system of moral laws and rules of social conduct pertaining to the culture into which they are born, whilst simultaneously serving to legitimate those rules by the morale of the myth. He then proceeds to argue that the Western university ideal is based on a conception of knowledge (rooted in Hegel's phenomenology and, more broadly, the German Romantic tradition of philosophy), which in itself might be seen as a kind of meta-narrative epic, where the heroic protagonist becomes knowledge itself, which progresses through a speculative trajectory to develop ever more rational and just means of organising social life in Western Civilization. Crucially, and unlike traditional myths, it is a narrative, the precise nature of whose morale is deferred to some future point in time, by virtue of the prophetic promise of Hegel's historical dialectic. Lyotard then argues that this supreme and unifying meta-narrative has suffered a legitimation crisis, during the course of the twentieth century. This legitimation crisis has been precipitated partly by Wittgenstein's insights into the inability of the language of science to reflect anything beyond its internal logical structure, let alone the complexity of the phenomena (whether natural or social) it purports to study, and the related epistemological critique of the positivist position (citing Kuhn and Feyerabend); partly by the historical experiences of various 20th century terror regimes, and the realization that such regimes themselves had been legitimated by appeal to such a meta-narrative arc – the historical destiny of some chosen race or political movement to bring about utopia. Lyotard thus connects (narrative) meaning (and specifically the historico-teleological Hegelian form that has haunted continental Western society since the Enlightenment) with terror, and consequently embraces what he calls "the postmodern condition", as one in which we jointly should strive to reject the human need for teleological meaning, recognising and celebrating instead the plurality and complexity of human experience (Lyotard, 1978).

Foucault also addresses his critique against precisely that constellation of the modern national state and its relationship to knowledge, which Lyotard argues to have been influenced and justified by Hegelian

phenomenology, but focuses his argumentation on how knowledge has come to function as a form of internalized social control in that constellation. Foucault accorded a preliminary privilege for his archaeological project to those discourses “that define the sciences of man”, and he defines this project as the study of the emergence of particular (types of) statements within those discourses (Foucault, 2002). There are some key similarities with Hegel: the key notions characterizing a certain phenomenological phase, in that they fundamentally condition our apprehension of the world (or the object, in Hegel’s terms) resemble the poststructuralist concept of discourse, in the sense of a historically grounded pattern of talking (and thinking) which governs how the members of a given society apprehend social phenomena described (or indeed constituted) by said discourse. Foucault views discourses as the primary vehicles of a culture, at a given time in history (Foucault, 1972; 1990).^{iv}

Foucault was initially reluctant to take up Hegel’s concept of inherent contradictions, as an explanatory mechanism for the genesis of new knowledge claims within the discourses relating to “the sciences of man”. The notion of inherent contradictions, in some essentialist sense, indeed becomes problematic, if we take the Duhem/Quine proposition seriously: i.e. that an observation (of the social or natural world) can be interpreted in an infinite number of ways, thus presumably also in ways that do not give rise to inherent contradictions, in relation to a particular notion (Duhem, 1991). Instead, Foucault developed the notion of power as the ultimate driving force for the emergence of new types of “statements” within his discourses of study, an idea which came to be crystallized more in his genealogical phase, and which is indebted to Marx’s base/superstructure dichotomy. The concept of genealogy is borrowed from Nietzsche, whose philological study of morality traced the origin of Western society’s Judeo-Christian ethics to a power struggle, in which the Jewish people sought to liberate themselves from slavery in Egypt. This collective experience gave rise to the development of an ethical code based on the equality of all humans before a monotheistic God, which would legitimate their struggle for liberation and the vision of a society where no Jew would have to be a slave. Nietzsche criticized this ethical code as essentially moralizing, grounded in the resentment felt by the Jewish slaves towards their oppressors (Nietzsche, 2003). Foucault inherited a profound aversion to moralizing from Nietzsche. His genealogical

account of e.g. the rise of the prison system is analytically similar to Nietzsche's Genealogy of morals; he sees it as a result of a class-based power-struggle where an emergent European bourgeois class developed a moralizing ideology around criminal care, hypocritically rooted in an ostensibly humanist empathy, which served to legitimate and mask ulterior economic interests related to social control (of e.g. criminals; Foucault claims that theft in 18th century France was rampant, and threatened the capital accumulation of the emergent bourgeoisie) and disciplining of the workforce (Foucault, 1991).

The image of post-Enlightenment knowledge advancement (at least in "the sciences of man") that emerges in Foucault's accounts, is thus one driven by shifting power constellations, where an emergent Western bourgeoisie uses "knowledge" and creates scientific theories to drive agendas for social change (mainly to do with disciplinary aspects of social control) that serve its own interests. There are no inherent contradictions (in some essentialist sense) in the bodies of knowledge and associated social practices they seek to replace or reform (such as the corporal penal system), such contradictions are only rhetorically constructed to lend popular support to the aforementioned agendas for change. By equating knowledge with power, Hegel's vision of a historical trajectory of consciousness, culminating in a phenomenological phase characterised by absolute knowledge, thus becomes disturbingly transformed, into a vision of Western civilization as one progressing to devise ever more effective means of internalizing social control through knowledge (absolute control, then, rather than knowledge). While Foucault's Power/Knowledge critique is specifically addressed to the role of knowledge production in the social sciences, the broader implications of this critique are to fundamentally shift the view of the humanist concept of *paideia* – the importance of educating human passions towards desiring the good – as an instrument of control and oppression, rather than pursuit of the good society. Lyotard and Foucault have exercised a profound influence on contemporary left-wing political parties, which have increasingly de-emphasized an earlier focus on social justice, focusing more on normative critique and minority rights issues.

The postmodern turn in continental philosophy has in many ways been parallel to a trend in Anglo-Saxon moral philosophy, towards increasingly espousing some variant of moral skepticism, via the

influence of the emotivist moral theory (Moore, 1993; Ayer, 1936; Stevenson, 1944). According to this tradition, ethical claims are seen as being neither rationally justifiable nor empirically verifiable (hence analytically meaningless) – they only express an emotional affect that seeks to co-opt the object of the ethical claim into doing as the utterer desires. From this perspective, competing moral claims are then seen as equally (in)valid, thus incommensurable and systematically unsettling, reducing moral positions to a matter of (more or less arbitrary) choice and opinion, akin to an aesthetical one. One may provide a reason for choosing a certain ethical position (such as choosing the side of the poor and disadvantaged), but there is no recourse to establishing the rational supremacy of such a reason over another. In other words, there exists no moral authority external to the self, which can oblige us to choose a certain course of action – regardless of the logical validity of any argument telling us to do so. For, as the emotivist analysis suggests, there exists a plurality of rival moral statements that can each be rationally justified through perfectly legitimate logical arguments, but the arguments are all premised on prior value judgements, which can not themselves be proven either true or untrue, since they are nothing but subjective expressions of preference, attitude or feeling.

The political consequence of the emotivist tradition, as argued by Moore (1993), is that the state has no political authority to impose a single conception of the common good, but must content itself with providing a liberal platform for the pursuit of individual goods. The emotivist traditions has exercised a strong influence on contemporary political right-wing parties, which have increasingly de-emphasized an earlier focus on traditional values, and instead focused their party programmes more on economic liberties. There are strikingly overlapping anti-authoritarian concerns in such a neo-liberal political vision, and the left-wing liberal position advanced by the contemporary postmodern left. A contemporary Anglo-Saxon political philosopher like John Gray, drawing on the analytical traditions of emotivism to conceive a political vision of value pluralism and liberalism, articulates an essentially similar critique of the Enlightenment tradition, as that voiced by Foucault and Lyotard, viewing the notion of progress as well as the philosophical humanist tradition as ultimately fake and hypocritical conceits, masking the underlying power interests of various social groups that have

historically used them to legitimate regimes of oppression (Gray, 2003; 2007).

From the preceding account, it should be clear that while the moral standards employed to denote disgrace have shifted over time in the Western humanist tradition, reason has historically been accorded a central role in justifying them; whether through eliminating erroneous moral decisions through a process of dialectical enquiry, tempering irrational impulses to guide ones actions in a virtuous direction, elaborating categorical imperatives to serve as a legislative basis or identifying contradictions in the established political order. Whichever form such rational argumentation might have taken, its logical validity has been regarded as morally obliging us to choose whatever course of action it prescribes, and failure to do so would have been perceived as disgraceful. Rational argument may then be seen as the ultimate source of moral authority in this tradition, and the legitimacy of any agent attempting to exercise such authority has rested on his/her ability to rationally justify it. With the crisis of moral reason in the 21st century, an important break occurs in this tradition. Reason is no longer seen as capable of justifying the validity of a certain moral standard over a rival one. Moral standards are seen to rely on prior, emotionally grounded value judgements, which themselves are impossible to rationally justify as absolute or universally true. Likewise, the only recognised authority obliging us to a certain course of action, as well as passing moral judgement over it, is the self.

There is thus a broad agreement, across the political spectrum, around a contemporary vision of the political process as an unstable equilibrium of rival value judgements, rather than a process of rational enquiry whose objective is to determine universal moral truths that can inform what political agendas we are to pursue. Political parties now represent the subjective interests of social groups that share certain value judgements, rather than seek to convince their voters that their policies are in the common interest of the electorate as a whole, in some objective sense. The social sciences in turn do not seek to establish who has the right answer to a shared problem formulation, but rather conceive their activity as a multi-paradigmatic fields of enquiry, governed by different knowledge interests, underlying value judgements and problem formulations (Habermas, 1972). The press in turn do not seek to convince their readers of the righteousness of

political agendas, through appeal to rational argument intended to convince them of the objective truth of propositions established by the social sciences, but rather seek to sway their readers in favour of a certain agenda by appeal to the emotional basis of the value judgement which supports that agenda. This state of affairs has a number of implications and consequences, with direct bearing on the subject of my thesis.

Firstly, political consensus has become increasingly difficult to establish. With an understanding of moral statements as capable of being either true or false, then one has to at least entertain the possibility that one's own moral convictions may prove to be false. This arguably caused a greater inclination among politicians of a previous era to subject their own political arguments to rational scrutiny, and a willingness to reach compromises with the opposition, in cases where their arguments did not appear to hold up. Since the notion of moral and/or political truths has been abandoned, there is less incentive for political parties to reach such compromise solutions with opposing members of the political spectrum, which are often required to implement broad, large-scale reforms. A secondary aspect of the problem is that voters themselves become increasingly hard to convince of the (moral) truth, or righteousness of a given political agenda, causing increasing political fragmentation and lower tolerance for political compromise by the parties that represent their interests. This has caused an increasing prevalence of hybrid solutions, based on partial and/or minor reforms to existing legislation, that reflect and draw on a plurality of political logics, with frequently conflicting policy objectives. A good example is provided by the second case study in this thesis, the Yardstick school. Since it is perceived as politically impossible to garner support for full privatisation of the Swedish school system, political parties that represent interest groups dissatisfied with the collectivist nature of the system have initiated reforms that seek to combine a publicly funded system with elements of competition (between private and public agents) and free choice (of which schools to send your children to). Such solutions tend to cause substantial friction, since it is difficult for organizations to abide by the plurality of institutional norms that they are informed by – they can often be inherently and/or mutually contradictory or inconsistent. The increasing regulatory complexity that has resulted from this state of

affairs in turn causes a greater potential scope for allegations of organizational misconduct.

Secondly, the meaning of ethically contingent terms like disgrace, scandal and misconduct – which rely on some culturally shared set of moral standards - has become more ambiguous. In the modern era, they were linked to individual or organizational deviations from shared moral and political beliefs, or alternatively linked to perceived failures of a certain piece of legislation, economic or political system hitherto believed in, associated with the three types of disgrace discussed in the previous section. These days scandals are conceived of as, at best, subjective moral judgments shared by a certain social group. During the course of a scandal playing out, this means that the stakeholders involved may be accused of breaking with several, mutually conflicting sets of institutional norms (by journalists of varying political stripes), simply through attempting to address those allegations of misconduct that they were initially accused of. It also means that the tone of articles revealing instances of misconduct has become more personal, typically directing blame at responsible individuals, appealing to emotional attitudes of their target audience, rather than seeking to engage them in a rational debate over the possible systemic causes of such problems. If no system, legislation or institutional norm can be absolutely right or wrong, and if there is no interest in reading about the inherently problematic nature of the institutional logics at work, then the cause of the scandal must be the personal fault of the person responsible, for failing to abide by that norm which the journalist feels it is wrong to have broken.

Thirdly, it becomes increasingly difficult to establish a universally shared or at least acknowledged ascription of guilt, in an organisation that has suffered allegations of misconduct in the press. There are a variety of morally infused discourses available to rhetorically argue for why an instance of alleged misconduct might be seen as perfectly legitimate conduct, when employing an alternative set of institutional norms and corresponding value judgements. This in turn means that there is no personal moral injunction for managers or employees of an organization subject to allegations of misconduct in the press, to cast their life story in the manner required for the predictions of the corporate branding perspective to hold true.

Disgrace and scandal in organizational studies

A common perspective on social legitimacy in organizational studies is that of the new institutional theory (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio and Powell 1983, 1991). According to the proponents of this perspective, “organizations are driven to incorporate the practices and procedures defined by prevailing rationalized concepts of organizational work and institutionalized in society” (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; 340), thus becoming isomorphic with their institutional environment. Furthermore, organizations “that do so increase their legitimacy and their survival prospects, independent of the immediate efficacy of the acquired practices and procedure” (ibid). Organizations are seen “as dramatic enactments of the rationalized myths pervading modern societies” (ibid; 346), reflecting deeply ingrained and “widespread understandings of social reality” (ibid; 343). The notion of institutional isomorphism, and the use of terms like rationalized myths, in itself hints at the emergence of a more skeptical view as to the absolute truth or universal applicability of organizational principles, but it nevertheless defines social legitimacy as premised by “prevailing rationalized concepts”, implying the existence of a single, dominant set of such concepts. We can draw a parallel then, between my own use of the term grace/disgrace, and the notion of social legitimacy/illegitimacy in the neo-institutional perspective. Likewise, social legitimacy is premised on the existence of rationalized concepts of organizational work, which are analogous to my own use of the broader, anthropological notion of moral standards.

Another component of the neo-institutional perspective is that of the institutional environment. Organizations are subject to intermittent inspection and evaluation, practices which themselves form part of the institutional environment, and which threaten to undermine legitimacy, by potentially uncovering real events and practices that deviate in their substance from the ideals promoted by the institutional environment. Members of various organizational audiences are engaged in an ongoing process of scrutinizing and evaluating organizations, although with varying attention levels devoted over time. They form perceptions and judgements, such as legitimacy, reputation and image, which are influenced in part by active impression management on behalf of the organization (Elsbach, 2003). A publicly disgraced organization, one suffering a crisis of confidence, can thus be conceived of as an

organization, which has been subject to inspections and/or evaluations that have uncovered factual events and/or practices, interpreted in a manner so as to contradict or deviate from the institutionalized rules/myths of the environment in which they operate, by those scrutinizing stakeholders who have uncovered them. Again, we can draw an analogy between my own use of the term *agents of moral authority*, and those scrutinizing stakeholders that form part of the institutional environment.

A way to link this perspective to the corporate branding perspective, would be to say that an organization suffering a legitimation crisis, has had its image tarnished, through the uncovering of events and/or practices in the media that are construed as illegitimate, in deviating from the prevailing rationalized myths of their institutional environment. The organizational literature suggests that an organizational image thus tarnished will have a significant negative impact on the identification of employees with the organization they work for, which in turn impacts their self-esteem, commitment to the firm and more broadly their well-being, as observed by Dutton and Dukerich (1991), in their study of the New York Port Authority, which suffered a tarnished image as a consequence of the homelessness problem, which they were eventually forced to tackle under the force of community pressure groups. In another article, Dutton, Dukerich and Harquail (1994) claim that employees of an organization with a damaged image may suffer “shame, disgrace, or embarrassment” (ibid: 242), and, ultimately, “depression and stress” (ibid: 240). The consequences of employment in low-status organizations are generally thought to be “less identification, less commitment and less job satisfaction” (Terry, 2003: 229). Alignment between organizational and individual identity, resulting in employee identification, is by contrast linked to increased need satisfaction, cooperative behavior, performance and job satisfaction (Ashforth et al, 2008).

By virtue of the above, organizational scholars drawing on social identity theory (see next section for an overview of identity theories) posit that individuals are likely to attempt to repair their damaged sense of self-esteem, using a variety of tactics. These might include highlighting alternative identity traits or emphasizing identification with an alternative social category or grouping, e.g. identification with one’s profession rather than the organization one works for (Elsbach

and Kramer, 1996). A key question for my thesis revolves around how such identity repair strategies impact the organization's overall ability to mobilize change efforts, and repair the already damaged external image. Contrary to the implications of the corporate branding perspective, Kjærgaard, Morsing, and Ravasi (2010) have indicated that individual communication acts used by employees to restore their personal self-esteem and identity may lead to organizational inertia and limited efforts to engage in organizational identity work, despite the presence of a negative organizational image. One reason for this may be the ready availability of alternative discursive resources for individual identification (employee and managerial), in a context where those discourses aligned around the organization's brand and public image have become damaged.

As discussed in the section on organizational culture and the corporate branding perspective, during the heydays of corporate bureaucracy, the prevailing institutional logic in administrative organizations was relatively monolithic. Herbert Simon's theories of administrative efficiency and Philips Selznick's thoughts on leadership and culture were integrated into an ideal-type model of organizational bureaucracy, inspired by the Parsonian take on the sociology of Max Weber, which in turn was anchored in a broader ideal-type model of political economy (the welfare state), infused by a secularized version of the Protestant ethic: a relatively compact understanding of the common good as constituted by mobilizing citizens to perform rationally organized and conscientious work, in the context of a political system based on distributive social justice, enabling equal opportunities for success and a decent, even affluent, level of living standards for all.

As previously discussed, the anti-authoritarian reactions to this model gave rise to an alternative conception of the ideal-type model of political economy, as a liberal platform for the pursuit of individual (rather than common) goods. Organizational scholars grounded in the neo-institutional perspective have recently begun to investigate the notion of institutional pluralism, a situation where organizations often operate "within multiple institutional spheres" (Kraatz and Block 2008: 343). As argued by Boltanski and Thevenot (2006), contemporary Western societies are consequently no longer based on a single social order, but an interweaving of multiple orders. Boltanski

and Thévenot identify six "orders of worth", which they define as systematic and coherent principles of evaluation, according to which the legitimacy of societal stakeholders is measured. These multiple orders are not associated with particular social domains but coexist in the same social space. In this framework, individual organizations are no longer subjected to a single, monolithic institutional logic, but rather to a plurality of institutional logics and moral standards, according to which they must seek to negotiate legitimacy. Hospitals are put under pressure to comply with medical professionalism and with commercialism (Reay and Hinings 2009), universities have to respond to the requirements of both public science and industrial application (Owen-Smith and Powell 2001).

The phenomenon of institutional pluralism may be seen as a key feature of our time, whose implications for the notion of public disgrace, as well as associated organizational dynamics, has arguably been overlooked in the organizational doctrine related to the corporate branding perspective.

A narrative perspective on identity

As described in the methodology section, the study will rely partly on so-called life story or oral history interviews, particularly in the case study of the Yardstick school. The life story interview draws heavily on narrative theories of identity. These are similar to discursive theories of identity (eg., Knights and Willmott, 1989; Grey, 1994; Strangleman and Roberts, 1999; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002), but differ from them in some important ways. Discursive theories were launched in polemic against what were perceived to be more naïve, essentialist aspects of social identity theory. According to social identity theory, our identities are the product of certain group categories, which we identify with to gain a sense of self-esteem, and compare other groups with. An attractive social identity is one which is distinctive, prestigious, and against which out-groups can be easily contrasted (Tajfel, 1978, 1982; Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Hogg and Abrams, 1990). Discursive theorists, on the other hand, highlight the fact that identities are not given by any inherent essence of the social groups people aspire to belong to, but rather that these aspects are

constructed by a historically grounded discourse and thus liable to change over time. Identities are thus treated as relatively fluid entities, which are 'fixed' by disciplining discourses. These discourses are bodies of text which construct identities in particular and delimited ways, and whose content and ideals change over time.

Discursive studies take us some way in acknowledging how transitional experience involves a re-construction of identity during times of socio-cultural change through positioning of the self within and in relation to broader socio-cultural discourses (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2004). What discursive theories of identity transition are less able to explain is how individuals seek to make sense of more idiosyncratic, personal experiences that prompt identity transitions, such as working for an organization that one previously identified with heavily, which suddenly becomes the object of public criticism and whose image thus becomes tainted, without the broader socio-cultural discourse having undergone a transition. Since our object of study is managerial and employee identity work in publicly disgraced organizations, a discursive approach might thus appear to fall short of helping to further our understanding of such subject matter. This also explains why certain organizational scholars have turned to narrative theory (cf Halford and Leonard, 2006), to understand identity transitions as a more historically reflexive and active reorientation of one's subject position in relation to discourse, mediated and resolved by the use of biographical imagination – a practice that also involves repositioning of the self within the discursive order, but with emphasised reflection on personally salient, self-defining events and experiences in life (Idema and Wodak, 1999; Newton, 1998, 1999).

According to narrative theories of identity, the self is represented through a skilful weaving of stories (Somers, 1994; Gabriel, 1999; Rhodes and Brown, 2005; Ezzy, 1998), whereby the teller's subjectivity (and that of individuals forming part of his/her social context) is in interplay with the life it seeks to interpret and articulate (Ricour 1981; Widdershoven 1993), creating a combined understanding and representation of the self that takes the form of a personal life-story (Bruner 1986). The emphasis and relative salience given to the meanings of a particular temporal domain as they are configured in relation related to the life-story's broader, temporal whole thus constitutes the function of narration, in relation to

identification and self-representation. This function becomes operational through emplotment. In a life-story context, emplotment is about configuring disparate life-experiences, actions and characters (all of which presuppose a temporal dimensionality) into comprehensible, chronologically and causally ordered sequences in such a way that these parts may be 'grasped together' in a manner that arrives to an acceptable representation of the self (Ricoeur 1981). The objective of inquiry for a narrative study of life is not so much to impose concrete and verifiable structures on a person's life-account, but rather to understand how the individual makes sense of his or her present life experiences through a reflexive configuration of his or her personal biography (Erben 1998).

In these terms then, while a narrative approach is similar to discursive approaches to selfhood in that they both share an interest in exploring how the self takes on meaning through linguistic, historical and social structures (e.g., Parker 1990; Potter and Wetherell 1987), it also differs markedly in a number of ways. One difference revolves around the idea of the 'subject'. Social constructionist critics might argue that identity narratives are simply individually reproduced and configured cultural scripts, and have no deeper meaning for the individual; that we publicly espouse social norms and moral values to seek legitimacy, but constantly betray them in our actions. Postmodernists will claim that we are always incoherent, and tell different stories about ourselves to different people, that the notion of a unified subject – a conscious, autonomous and delimited individual acting as a bearer of meaning and a subject around which the social world revolves – is a "Western myth" (c.f. Collinson, 2003). This criticism is, to some extent, misplaced, being directed against such adherents of narrative theory that are ascribed a naïve belief in the alleged coherence of some autonomously constructed, highly idiosyncratic life story. While there is a broad range of perspectives represented within sociological research employing narrative theory (for an overview, cf Polletta et al, 2011), the tendency is to treat particular modes and genres of narration as formal templates, which people employ to fashion meaningful accounts of their experiences, in the context of work-life roles constituted and legitimated by a certain combination of discourses and institutional logics. Life stories are here seen as following relatively formal narrative conventions, drawing themes from a repertoire of social discourses, rather than the result of a free process of creative

literary invention. It should be conceded, however, that a narrative approach does gain much of its interpretive power from exploring the experiential struggle between a sense of self (unity) and non-self (disunity, fragmentation). However, the impetus for such a struggle need not necessarily be seen as biologically conditioned (or otherwise inherent to human nature); on the contrary, it is fully commensurate with a social constructionist understanding of the unity of one's subject position as a culturally conditioned ideal.

Particular narrative forms/genres (tragedy, comedy, satire) and tropes (metaphor, metonymy, irony) are also designed to provoke specific reactions of emotional affect, an observation which can be traced back to Aristotle's *Poetics*. This aspect of narrative theory also helps us to understand a richer and broader spectrum of emotional reactions to identity transitions, than those associated with discursive or social identity theory, which focus on reactions related to loss or gain of social prestige, through identification with some new social group. Sennett's (albeit casual) use of narrative theory, in terms of making sense of individuals' reactions to flexible capitalism, can be cited as a fruitful example of using narrative theory to understand personal, character-related consequences of working under conditions associated with "flexible capitalism" (Sennett, 1997).

It might be worthwhile to contrast such an employment of narrative theory, primarily oriented towards the study of identity and individual self-representation, against other attempts to introduce narrative theory to the study of organizations, since there are significant differences in terms of empirical application, as well as meta-theoretical implications. Among the most well-known attempts to employ narrative theory in the study of organizations, are the works of Sköldbberg (1994) and Czarniawska (1997, 1998, 1999). In his 1994 paper, Sköldbberg analysed a series of organizational change projects in Swedish municipal and county administration. His main contention is that neither of these change projects were prompted by a clear and well-articulated problem, requiring a solution to be achieved through the change project initiated; concluding that the "changes seemed to lack referents, appearing as elusive chimeras or 'simulacra'" (Sköldbberg, 1994; 228). Sköldbberg instead contended that the change projects studied followed a narrative pattern of organization (although it is somewhat unclear by whom the changes were narrated), revealing

“deep structures” of narrative meaning and sense-making, that Sköldbberg sees as historically recurrent dramas played out on a revolving stage, drawing on the narrative theories of Hayden White (1973). From the account of the empirical cases provided though, it is rather difficult to understand *why* the particular narrative genres and modes employed to fashion meaning to the observed organizational changes were chosen, and by *whom*. In a later, co-authored, paper, the interpretive approach to narrative analysis employed by Sköldbberg is elaborated more theoretically, clarifying the generative interpretive role of the researcher, although with less emphasis on ontological claims about the non-reality of the organizational phenomena studied (Feldman, Sköldbberg and Brown Debra Horner, 2004). The main theoretical model of organizational dramas is elaborated further in his book, “The Poetic Logic of Administration” (Sköldbberg, 2004). Barbara Czarniawska has developed a similar general theory of organization, which essentially treats individual organizations as narrative fictions (1997, 1998) and organization theory itself as a literary genre (1999). There is likewise a strong meta-theoretical emphasis in her work, on ontological aspects related to a certain species of social constructionism, viewing the organization as a fictional entity, which is sustained through some transcendent process of narrating itself.

Sköldbberg and Czarniawska are similar in this latter respect, that they both make relatively strong ontological claims about the insubstantial reality of organizational phenomena, claiming them to be nothing more than fictional constructs. My own approach to and use of narrative theory differs slightly from these two in its main emphasis and application, as it focuses on analysing individual oral history interviews as narratively constituted identity positions, that draw on narrative conventions to represent the self as a morally legitimate subject. Narrative representations of self are seen as modally conditioned by the broader cultural scripts on social legitimacy that form part of a certain society, at a given historical moment. In particular, the prevailing moral standards of a given society impose constraints on what is seen as a morally legitimate subject, and thus constrain the type of self-worth and moral sense that is possible to express in a life story, and convey to others. It is relatively obvious that such life history interview accounts are by definition “fictional” on the one hand, but on the other hand, there is no particularly strong

ontological or meta-theoretical implication that necessarily follows from such a view, as to the reality (or fictional nature) of the organizational phenomena studied.

It is also a perspective which (arguably) provides a neater fit with the research methods for empirical data collection commonly employed in qualitative research. It is questionable whether a researcher ever has sufficient access to empirical data to make claims for the existence of collective organizational narratives, being the focus of Czarniawska and Sköldbberg, rather than those individual stories told by the managers and employees selected for interviews. In the context of my research topic, the question of interest is simply how such individual managerial and employee identity positions (being conveyed in oral history interviews) are impacted by allegations of organizational misconduct in the media, damaging the organization's external image, and how this affects the interviewees' incentives to mobilize collective efforts to restore and improve said image. From this perspective, the reality or non-reality of various organizational phenomena is a largely irrelevant point. It is a more pragmatic research orientation, which does not see any need for metaphysical speculation about the reality (or non-reality) of organizational life, nor making any strong meta-theoretical assertions vis-à-vis the "fictional" (or non-fictional) nature of organizational phenomena.

Ethics and narrative self-representation

One reason for the aforementioned critique of narrative theory is its strong theoretical roots in structuralism, which became the target of poststructuralist critics like Derrida and Foucault. The field of narratological studies has been much discredited by its association with structuralism, whether the syntagmatic structural analysis (Greimas, 1966) pioneered by Vladimir Propp's study of Russian fairy tales (Propp, 1969), or the paradigmatic approach of Lévi-Strauss (1955) and his followers. Syntagmatic analysis views specific genres of narrative as following a determinate, universally prevalent plot sequence (termed *fabula* by Propp) of narrative functions, arranged in a chronological linear order, while the discursive rendering of these functions (*sjuzhet*) can be more varied (a generic hero may be a peasant boy or a prince; a blocking antagonist a dragon or a witch).

Paradigmatic analysis, by contrast, views narrative meaning as following universal patterns of organization (e.g. good/evil).

These views have been largely discredited by contemporary narrative research, which prefers to highlight the distinctness of narrative forms, and how they are embedded in specific cultural contexts. While many contemporary narratologists acknowledge that e.g. most works written in the genre of tragedy in the Western canon follow a nearly universal plot sequence, this is not, following Derrida's (1969) critique seen as evidence of any deep structures, but rather a historically contingent cultural convention. Most Western dramatists have quite simply been conscious of Aristotle's rules of poetics, and have used them as basic storytelling templates, giving rise to intra-canonical narrative patterns. The syntagmatic (sometimes also called thematic) aspect of narratives has hence been de-emphasized in favor of modal aspects, concerned more with the manner of telling of a story, stressing voice, point of view, transformation of the chronological order, rhythm and frequency. Many authors (Sternberg, 1993, Ricoeur, 1984, and Baroni, 2007) have furthermore insisted that thematic and modal narrative aspects should not be analysed separately, especially when dealing with the function and emotional impact of narrative sequence and plot. This subtle shift in perspective serves to align narrative theory better with sociological perspectives (e.g. symbolic interactionism) that emphasize the discursive character of social life, and the enactment of social scripts. Nevertheless, contemporary perspectives do tend to emphasize how a specific, historically contingent cultural configuration of society is linked to particular structural patterns and forms of narration that tend to prevail more than others, at that particular time and place. This makes it possible to reconcile contemporary narratology with some of the insights gleaned from structuralist analyses (cf Frye, 1957; White, 1973). It is also an emphasis which restores a stronger appreciation for the literary analysis conducted within the German philological tradition (De Man, 1986).

A common example is the relationship between the social structure of Iceland during the Viking period, and the narrative form of the Icelandic sagas. The prevailing heroic virtue ethic (courage and loyalty being chief among the virtues of a Viking clan member), which bound individuals into an ineluctable network of moral obligations – to exact just revenge following the murder of a friend or clan member – caused

an inevitable spiral of vengeance and death, as vividly captured in e.g. Njal's saga. As argued by MacIntyre (1988), the human lives of social elites in Icelandic society thus had a determinate form, the form of a certain kind of story – that of the heroic epic. MacIntyre goes further to argue that the “narrative form of epic is embedded in the moral life of individuals and in the collective social structure” (MacIntyre, 1988: 124) of Iceland during the Viking period: “heroic social structure is enacted epic narrative” (ibid). He then proceeds to argue that the virtue ethic provides a stronger teleological basis for narrative representation of selfhood, compared to deontological or utilitarian ethical systems, but does not elaborate much on how the forms of narrative self-representation might differ in such moral communities, and why such forms of narrative identification should be less satisfying than the heroic epic.

As argued by Taylor (1989), notions of selfhood and identity are inextricably bound up with ethics, in a more general sense. Morality has always been linked with self-esteem, in the sense of a perceived estimate of self-worth, mediated and ratified in the mirror reflection of self, provided by a moral community. The link to narrative is that literary works often portray their characters as facing moral dilemmas requiring determinate choices, with a plot structure determined by the choices they make. An important figure in this theoretical context is Paul Ricoeur, and his phenomenological enquiry into our perception of time, as well as his attempts to develop an ontology of identity (1984, 1995). Ricoeur contrasts his take on personal identity as selfhood (using the latin term *ipse*) with what he considers as the wilful paradoxes (or *aporias*) of those, primarily Anglo-Saxon, philosophical traditions that have enquired into the idea of personal identity as sameness (*idem*). Clearly, we are not the same person over time, so the *idem* notion is not applicable to identity in the sense of an understanding of self. Instead, Ricoeur bases his understanding of identity as selfhood on a narratological definition, thereby drawing heavily on Aristotle's concept of unity of action.

In the *Poetics*, one of Aristotle's requirements for tragedy is that the plot or action of the play can be grasped together, in the sense that each sequence of the plot will be perceived by the audience to follow logically upon the preceding one – or at least as a highly probable outcome of it. As Ricoeur convincingly argues, what determines the

extent to which an audience will perceive a narrated protagonist's course of actions as logical (or at least highly probable) is culturally contingent, and more precisely depends on shared ethical standards regarding the right course of action under certain given circumstances. Ricoeur then proceeds to define his concept of identity as selfhood in an analogous way: as the ability of an individual in a given culture, to represent his personal life story as a more or less unavoidable sequence of actions, given the circumstances that were presented to him/her. In other words, the identity of the life story *with itself* is dependent on the ability to convey it to an audience, as the only morally intelligible course of action, given the circumstances. This is arguable a more general definition of narrative identity as selfhood, than that of MacIntyre, which seems to require an orientation towards pursuit of some personal virtue or *telos*. We might thus reformulate our definition of narrative identity, as a combined understanding and representation of self that takes the form of a personal life-story, which seeks to cast the protagonist's course of action as morally intelligible.

The moral aspect of narrative, while clearly not the only aspect worthy of narrative analysis, thus provides a bridging link between ethics, narrative and identity. While focusing on the moral aspect of narrative theory may seem justified for the purposes of this thesis, it should be emphasized that such a focus is not warranted from a purely literary perspective. As pointed out by Frye (1957), all theories of tragedy as morally explicable must sooner or later run into the question whether and why an innocent sufferer in tragedy, who has committed no personal error, is not a tragic figure. Indeed, the lack of moral intelligibility does not render the fate of e.g. Cordelia in King Lear any less tragic, rather it serves to heighten the bitter irony of it. From a purely literary perspective, narratives do not require morally intelligibility to have an impact on their audience. However, if we define identity as a narrative representation of self that aims to be morally intelligible, the focus seems perfectly legitimate. Also, Frye's argument may well be turned on its head. Isn't it precisely because of her moral probity that the fate of Cordelia is so tragic? Perhaps a tragic character is not required to commit a "real" error, it suffices that it is plausibly perceived as an error by the agents of moral authority in the dramatic setting, for the unrolling of personal misfortune that construes the required plot structure.

As argued by Taylor (1989), the forms of self-worth conferred by a moral community differ, depending on the ethical system it embraces, which in turn constrains in what sense a narrative protagonist may be portrayed as a good or righteous person. Within a community sharing a system based on virtue ethics, a good person is one who displays courage, loyalty, generosity and/or whatever particular virtues are promoted in that culture. Such forms of moral self-worth clearly lend themselves well to narrative representations that follow the conventions of the heroic epic: in portraying a heroic protagonist as a paragon of virtue. There is a certain hierarchical aspect to moral communities sharing a system of virtue ethics, in that the degree of an individual's righteousness varies with his strength of character – some people are more righteous than others. The virtue ethic has thus historically been more prevalent in strongly hierarchical societies, such as the aristocratic warrior societies of archaic Greece and the Icelandic Viking culture, where the heroic epic has also been a predominant narrative form.

In a moral community sharing a deontological ethic – such as the Protestant ethic analysed by Weber (1930)^v – no particular person is capable of being better or worse than others, through autonomous actions of his/her own choice. The laws and institutions that govern a particular society may on the other hand be more or less sound than those of another: society can thus be narratively represented as either good or bad. Accordingly, the protagonists who suffer a tragic fate in the French novels of the Realist tradition do so, not primarily because of some personal character flaws (as in classical tragedy), but because of an unjust social order. One is hence a good person, primarily in the collective sense of being a member of a moral community sharing righteous laws, which causes a stronger sense of identification with the political and legal constitution of the society one belongs to. The Protestant ethic still lends itself to celebrating a certain kind of heroes, typically those who have engaged in political struggle to improve social justice, or those that have made some theoretical contribution to the justification for certain laws, seen as valid and righteous at that time.^{vi}

To further explore the ethical aspect of narrative, and its relation to self-representation and self-understanding, it might be worthwhile to elaborate on some narrative genres and tropes, and the ways in which

the moral sense of these is determined by the ethical belief system prevalent during the time that they prevailed. In the following, I will devote particular attention to a specific literary theorist, Erich Auerbach, who sought to correlate narrative forms and modalities to the historical ethical belief systems of the phase in Western culture which the analyzed narrative formed part of (Auerbach, 1953). The reason for such a focus on Auerbach's historical perspective is my strong belief that the present is never possible to fully separate from the past. When we tell stories, we employ ancient narrative conventions, dating back to a tribal past. To understand how and why the use of such narrative conventions, in the representation of an employee or managerial self as a morally legitimate subject, may either strengthen or weaken identification with an organizational brand or image, it is useful to recall what purposes such conventions have served in the past.

Auerbach's historical account of Western narrative conventions

Heroic epic is the narrative form that bears the most direct relationship to the moral order, which it forms a cultural expression of and whose standards it seeks to imbue in its audience: the protagonist of a heroic epic is portrayed as an ideal member of that moral community, in which the story is embedded – someone who surpasses all others, in displaying the range of virtues thus celebrated. As posited by Aristotle (1994), the plot in a heroic epic is less tightly bound by unity of place and time, compared to the genre of tragedy to which it is related, and can have a greater variety of plot structures, involving both positive and negative/tragic endings for its protagonists. Epic plots involving the downfall of a heroic protagonist extol his fate, singing an elegiac praise of his virtues, and tend to involve an element of critique, of the social circumstances that caused his downfall. Epic plots involving the triumph of a heroic protagonist are structured more as an ideal success story, whereby the protagonist triumphs over his adversaries, by showing proof of possessing those moral standards that the epic seeks to imbue in its audience.

Odysseus finally returns home to his family on Peloponnesus, after having suffered an epic trajectory of ordeals, out of which he emerges

triumphant, having defeated his adversaries through deploying precisely those moral virtues (*arete*) that were embraced by the aristocratic warrior elites in archaic Greece. These included both traditionally recognized heroic virtues like courage and loyalty, but also, crucially, cunning (*metis*). In the medieval heroic epics of the knightly Romance tradition (*chansons de gestes*), the notion of personal triumph is often rendered more symbolic; of the triumph of the Christian religion and culture, over the pagan peoples it sought to defeat (Auerbach, 1953). While Roland ultimately dies fighting the Saracens, his fierce loyalty and courage (as well as horn-blowing lung capacity) enable Charlemagne to defeat the Muslim enemy: Christianity triumphs (rather than Roland personally), through the virtuous behavior of its followers. Auerbach argues that this symbolic dimension to some extent already prefigures the later progression in the Realist tradition, towards emphasizing the righteousness of society rather than individual members of it.

Tragedy is a narrative form that, like the heroic epic, involves an essentially good, as well as powerful protagonist, of some worldly importance – although one being brought down by a mistake (*hamartia*). The plot structure of tragedy is thus inverse to comedy, in which the protagonist ultimately meets a happy ending. Another distinction from comedy lies in the requirement that the tragic protagonist be an essentially good and powerful person (at least in its romance phase), meaning that the subject matter of tragedy (as well as epic) is rendered in a sublime style. By contrast, the characters of classical comedy (e.g. the comedies of Petronius) are represented in a “low” style, as ordinary men, and laughter is aroused mainly through ridiculing their vulgar tastes and lowly manners. According to Aristotle (1994), the plot structure of classical tragedy is thus designed to instill fear and pity in its audience (rather than humorous contempt, as in comedy), perhaps serving to render the established social order more acceptable to the disenfranchised, by showing how nobody is immune to the powers of Fate; how downfall and misfortune can afflict even the most powerful and virtuous in society – since we are all human and prone to mistakes. Frye (2000) accordingly relates the origins of the genre in its romance phase, to “a period of social history, in which an aristocracy is fast losing its effective power, but still retains a good deal of ideological prestige” (Frye, 2000; 37).

Aristotle's rule of classical tragedy remained a dominant literary convention in the Western canon up until the 19th century Realist movement in French literature, whereby the common man, the *hoi polloi* that were the exclusive subject matter of Greek comedy, became a more legitimate subject matter for tragic narratives. Auerbach (2003) famously proposed that this mingling of, what in the classical tradition were seen as separated literary styles – the sublime (confined to tragic-heroic topics in classical literature) with the realist subject matters of ordinary people (confined to the low style of classical comedy or farce) – is what characterizes the dialectical trajectory of the Western literary tradition, influenced by the dual cultural heritage of the aristocratic society of ancient Greece, and the Judaeo-Christian emphasis on the righteousness of a law-bound social order, together with an associated preoccupation with the moral dilemmas, trials and tribulations of ordinary men.

A key concept in Auerbach's analysis is the notion of historical forces. In classical tragedy, the protagonist's downfall is the, relatively simplistic, result of a failure to bring his actions into conformity with the divinely ordained system of ethical virtues; this constitutes the notion of *hamartia* in classical tragedy. As a consequence, classical Greek tragedy has a highly schematized and moralistic character, whereby tragic downfall and misfortune results directly from a personal failure on account of the protagonist to be fully virtuous. With the Judaeo-Christian tradition (particularly the Judaic emphasis on the righteousness of the divine law), there ultimately follows a stronger appreciation for how a tragic protagonist's downfall can be the result of what one might call internal contradictions in the ethical precepts that have guided his actions, giving rise to a form of "intra-historical" notion of tragedy. The protagonist's downfall is not only a story of personal misfortune, but becomes symbolic of flaws in the underlying social order that have guided his actions. The virtuous pagans in Dante's *Inferno* are disqualified from an afterlife of blissful eternity, not because they were essentially bad, but because they happened to be born in a culture, which had not yet embraced the Christian faith. With the secular humanist turn prompted by Luther's rejection of Catholic virtue ethics, such tragic narratives ultimately acquire a further "intra-historical" dimension of irony; when notions of some common good that we have voluntarily and collectively chosen to live by (rather than perceive as imposed by divine authority) are seen to result in the

opposite of what they intended to achieve: corruption, terror and oppression, say, rather than the good society. The blame for the mistake (*hamartia*) is thus shared, rather than individual.

According to Auerbach, the intra-historical nature of the Western realist tradition thus renders it less moralistic: individual tragedy can result not only from personal failure or moral flaws, but from the inner logic of a social order, which has become morally contradictory. While earlier literary works often involved social critique that addressed flaws in the social order, they typically did so by portraying individual representatives of a certain social class (being the target of critique) as personally flawed or immoral. One might say that there is a shift in focus from the (lack of) personal virtues and righteousness of the characters portrayed, to the (non-)righteousness of those laws and other social conventions that determine human action within a given social order. Tragic narratives in the Western Realist tradition were thus often associated with powerful injunctions for social change, of the legal and institutional framework that determined human action. By contrast, tragedy in the classical tradition takes the prevailing social order as given, solely implicating individual moral responsibility for the tragic fates it portrays. This can be seen as related to the shift in the ethical doctrine propounded by the Lutheran and Anglican churches in Northern Europe, with a stronger emphasis on redemption through faith coupled with the universal moral authority of the secular law, away from the virtue ethic historically propounded by the Catholic Church, which placed greater emphasis on the individual's redemption through more idiosyncratic, personally virtuous behaviour.

According to Auerbach, the first writer to properly convey such an intra-historical nature of human destiny was Stendhal, or Henri Beyle. Auerbach relates this to the personal life experience of Stendhal. Born into a bourgeois family shortly before the French revolution, he made an impressive military and administrative career under the Napoleonic regime, only to see this thwarted during the subsequent Restoration period – experiences which rendered him acutely conscious of the historically contingent aspect of human fortunes. In *Red and Black*, he successfully conveys the stifling social mood of the restoration period, confining talented and ambitious individuals from non-aristocratic backgrounds to mediocre career options within the Church, and causing an atmosphere of impending crisis and boredom among the

elites. Conscious, as they were, of the futility of the Bourbon attempt to restore conditions long since made obsolete by historical events and processes, the regime created, among its adherents in the ruling classes, “an atmosphere of pure convention, of limitation, of constraint and lack of freedom” (Auerbach, 1953; 456); no longer able to seriously believe in the social order they represent, “they choose to talk of nothing but the weather, music and court gossip” (ibid). This is the backdrop against which Julien’s fateful romance plays out in the novel; a tragically conceived destiny, determined by a very concrete historical moment. Such an intra-historical conception of human destiny is carried over into Balzac and subsequent writers in the French realist tradition. Balzac, like Stendhal, situates his characters in a “precisely defined historical and social setting” but arguably goes further to conceive of this relationship “as a necessary one: to him every milieu becomes a moral and physical atmosphere which impregnates the landscape, the dwelling, furniture, implements, clothing, physique, character, surroundings, ideas, activities, and fates of men, and at the same time the general historical situation reappears as a total atmosphere which envelops its several milieu” (Auerbach, 1953; 473).

To extrapolate further the link between ethics and narrative, one might relate the ultimate failure of the Enlightenment project to articulate universally valid ethical standards, to the high modernist movement in literature. As argued by Auerbach, the novels of Virginia Woolf, James Joyce and Marcel Proust mark a definitive shift in the representation of their protagonists’ inner life. While the Realist tradition represented the protagonist’s course of action, conveyed as a coherent, linear plot, as determined by inner thought processes – whether through rational deliberations, moral conviction, emotional compulsions or otherwise – the high modernist tradition inverts this scheme, by representing inner, reflexive thought processes as randomly and incoherently triggered by outer sense impressions. We might see this inversion as a consequence of an ethical crisis, whereby novelists in the high Modernist tradition no longer perceived the contemporary Western traditions of moral reason as capable of determining a righteous course of human action, but rather as a plurality of empty norms incapable of determining an objectively righteous course of human action, which we are painfully conscious of as having justified historical excesses of violence, terror and oppression. While the high Modernist moral anxiety primarily grew out of the aftermath of the First World War, the movement’s

creative peak being in the 1920s, the subsequent experiences of totalitarian terror regimes and World War II only served to reinforce such anxieties, causing a more widespread adoption of associated literary conventions: free, indirect speech or alternatively first person, reflexive narration – narrative aspects that became standard conventions in e.g. the existentialist literary movement (Auerbach, 1953).

Auerbach is sometimes criticized for a bias towards the Realist tradition in Western literature^{viii}, and for not fully appreciating the literary qualities of the Modernist movement. However, it is possible to strip out the bias of his analysis, by summarising some of its key dimensions into a few neutral observations. The French Realist tradition was characterised by a mingling of the high/sublime style of Greek classical tragedy, with the more ordinary subject matter of classical comedy; the preoccupations, trials and tribulations of ordinary people, adding a sublime dimension to the everyday lives portrayed in these novels. The sublime dimension in classical tragedy results from the awe that is inspired in the audience, by the tragic protagonist's fate; how an ultimately good person is capable of error, making a mistake that results in a tragic chain of events. With the Realist tradition, this dimension is infused into the subject matter of ordinary people's lives, through a more symbolic, intra-historical aspect; the norms and conventions of society are capable of error, causing individually tragic fates. With the Modernist tradition, this sublime dimension is lost, owing to the moral anxiety that grew out of the postwar era, and a resulting skepticism towards the Enlightenment project of creating a good society.

The postwar era of the 20th century witnessed more of a wholesale, mass-movement kind of anti-authoritarian and anti-conformist turn against the moral heritage of the Western tradition, building on the same philosophical ground of anti-Kantianism and emotivism, but ultimately infused with less high Modernist anxiety and self-doubt. As argued by Lasch (1979), one might see the celebrity autobiography genre as a literary by-product of this turn. While these are stories that typically follow the plot structure of the heroic epic – the protagonist's triumph over adversity, followed through a plot sequence of loosely related incidents – they typically lack the moral and symbolic dimension of either classical epics or the medieval *chanson de geste*.

The moral sense is that there exist no universally valid moral standards, the conformity to which can assure the common, as well as individual good. They are stories of individual achievement (of fame, social status and prestige) rather than symbolic of any shared virtues or moral norms, the abiding by which would constitute moral probity, enabling individual triumph or success as well as contributing to the common good. While there is a strong sense of righteousness in such stories of triumph over adversity, it is a strictly individual sense of righteousness, one whose moral sense (if any) typically consists of some variant of a negative or anti-moralistic ethical precept, e.g: “don’t let anyone tell you how you should live your life”.

The point of this section has been to demonstrate the ways in which the ethical standards embraced by a given culture at a given point in time condition the prevalent narrative modes, in the sense of determining the form of the narrative’s moral meaning; whether it extols the virtues of a heroic warrior-society or those of the aristocratic class in a feudal society, rally-calls for changing some ethical norm or legal institution of post-Enlightenment bourgeois society, or asserts an anti-moralistic injunction to live as you like. This is not to say that all narratives have a predominantly moral meaning. Much of the modernist and postmodern novelistic output has abandoned the plot conventions of the Western literary tradition (tragedy/comedy, etc), meaning, *inter alia*, that they often lack an explicit moral sense. There is likewise a strong anti-moralistic strain running throughout the Western canon, where examples worth citing might be Juvenal, Bocacchio, Rabelais and Huysmans. The point is simply to state that such narratives that contain an explicit moral sense, are necessarily articulated in relation to the prevailing ethical standards of the time, which conditions and/or constrains the types of moral meaning that are possible to express.^{viii} Even anti-moralistic works express their (negative) moral sense, in relation to the prevailing ethical standards (whether virtue ethics, Kantian, or utilitarian). More broadly, my proposition is that individual identities, defined here as constituted by personal life-stories and/or oral histories of specific incidents/events, designed to cast their protagonists in a manner that enhances their self-worth, are likewise constrained in the modes of narration available for self-representation. Of course, it is entirely plausible that an individual employee in a publicly disgraced organization might recount his experiences to others, following the narrative conventions of a full-blown classical

tragedy, but it is likely that such life-stories would be regarded as slightly ridiculous by their intended audiences, forcing a need to re-adjust the modality of narration to a more socially legitimate and acceptable version.

Finally, I would like to propose that the particular role a person casts himself in his/her personal life story bears heavily on the course of action he/she chooses to follow. Such a perspective aligns narrative identity theory quite neatly with sociological perspectives like symbolic interactionism and the associated dramatist tradition in social science, which draws heavily on the sociology of Erving Goffman, and the ideas of Kenneth Burke, as argued by Prasad (2005). Burkes ideas in particular are based “on the assumption that the process of living gains meaning through the interpretation of one’s own, and others’, actions”, and that these interpretations are “fundamentally dramatic in nature” (Prasad, 2005; 52). The dramatist tradition thus shares a central idea with narrative identity theory, namely that “individuals construct their identities through a continuous process of dramatic narration to both themselves and others” (ibid).

Ethics and narrative tropes: a reconciliation with Frye’s modes of narration

In his essay on historical literary criticism, Northrop Frye developed a theory of literary modes of narration, which draws on Aristotle’s *Poetics*, specifically on Aristotle’s observation that the protagonist in a fictional work can be either “a better person than we are, in others worse, in still others on the same level” (Frye, 1957; 33). Frye chooses to avoid a moral interpretation of this qualitative distinction, instead classifying fictional modes according to the hero’s “power of action, which may be greater than ours, less, or roughly the same” (ibid). If superior in kind to other men as well as equipped with supernatural powers, the protagonist hero will be a divine being, and the story about him will be cast in a *mythical* mode. If superior in degree, the protagonist is rendered in a *romance* mode of narration; as a hero “whose actions are marvelous, but who is himself identified as a human being” (ibid). If superior in degree to other men, but not supernaturally so, the protagonist is rendered in a *high mimetic* mode, characteristic of most epic and tragedy. If superior neither to other

men, nor endowed with supernatural powers, the protagonist is rendered in a *low mimetic* mode; as “one of us”, such that the reader or audience responds to a sense of “his common humanity, and demand from the poet the same canons of probability that we find in our own experience” (Frye, 1957; 34). According to Frye, this is the mode pertaining to most comedy and realistic fiction. Finally, if inferior in power and/or intelligence to ourselves, “so that we have the sense of looking down on a scene of bondage, frustration or absurdity” (ibid), the protagonist is rendered in an *ironic mode*.

Frye then proceeds to sketch a similar chronological development in the history of Classical and Western literature, as that more elaborately traced out by Auerbach, but fitting it to his own scheme. Frye was heavily influenced by Spengler, Toynbee and other historico-philosophical theories of the cyclical lifespan of civilizations. He accordingly conceives of the passage from mythical to ironic modes of narration as following a universally prevalent chronological sequence, ordered within a deterministic cyclical pattern, destined to repeat itself throughout history, in all conceivable human civilizations (past and future). This notion was famously taken up by Hayden White, who drew on Frye’s ideas to create a more systematic scheme, governed by the notion of literary tropes. Roughly speaking, the *mythical* and *romantic* modes of narration rely more heavily on the metaphorical trope, the *high* and *low mimetic* modes on metonymy and synecdoche respectively, while irony is represented as a trope in itself (White, 1973). The notion of such deep narrative structures has subsequently been much criticized, in line with the critique against structuralism discussed in the beginning of this chapter. However, one might still concede that the Western narrative tradition has, roughly speaking, progressed according to a similar historical pattern, without conceiving of this as governed by a law-like cyclical process. Frye’s modes of narration may instead be seen as determined by a particular development of ethical belief standards in Western civilization, one peculiar to our culture, without necessary implications for the sequential development of ethical belief standards and associated narrative traditions of other cultures.^{ix} In the following sections, I will attempt to show how Frye’s modes of narration (along with White’s tropological analysis) can be made to align with the perspective laid out in the previous section, on the relationship between particular ethical belief standards and modes of narrative representation.

Starting with the mythical mode of narration, the protagonist is represented primarily by the use of metaphor: a hero equipped with supernatural powers thus becomes an ideal-image of goodness (to aspire to, although impossible to imitate in real life). This is quite natural, given an understanding of the common good as determined by the virtuousness of individual moral agents. In this mode of narration, the social order is taken as given, lying outside the sphere of ethical concerns. Myths are thus similar to fairy or folk tales, in that they are allegorical tales, whose purpose is moral inspiration, rather than realistic representation. The principal myth of medieval Western civilization was naturally the evangelical stories of Jesus Christ, seen by many theologians as equivalent to an inspirational tale; the story of a life which one should seek to imitate in one's daily actions^x. In the romance mode of narration, the protagonist is represented primarily by the use of metonymy: in epic or tragedy the hero is still conveyed as decidedly more virtuous, as well as more capacious (near-supernatural human powers), than an average individual. These tales often exist alongside myths^{xi} during the same historical period, but serve slightly different purposes. Myths primarily serve a religious and ethical purpose within a given cultural system, drawing on Geertz' discussion of religion and his definition of a cultural system as "a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic" (Geertz, 1973; 90). They provide an understanding of the social world that a particular tribe inhabits – an account of the world's genesis as well as the (natural and social) laws that have come to govern it – and serves to integrate them into that society's moral order. The heroic epic and tragedy likewise serve to integrate society according to a given moral order, but also serve a secondary function of extolling the virtues of a ruling class in an aristocraticfeudal society; a form of political propaganda designed to increase support for the established social order.

In the high mimetic mode of narration, the metonymic trope still prevails, in characterizing heroic protagonists as superior in degree to an average member of society. The moral sense in which he is superior has shifted somewhat however; he is represented as heroic primarily by virtue of engaging in political struggle to improve social justice,

rather than because of displaying any traditional virtues or personal character traits. In the genre of comedy or romance cast in a high mimetic mode, the plot structure involves a heroic protagonist who triumphs over his adversaries, in achieving a transformation of an initially unjust social order (governed by absurd rules and regulations), into a more righteous one (governed by a more sound constitution, which the protagonist has succeeded in effecting). In tragedy, the protagonist suffers a tragic fate, not because of any personal character flaws, but because of his life story being embedded in an unjust society. This is a mode of narration prevalent during an era of Western civilization, when the dominant ethical system has shifted from one based on virtue ethics (based on the probity or virtuousness of the individual), to one based on the probity of the secular law. In the low mimetic mode of narration, the protagonist is portrayed primarily using *synechdoche*. Narrative protagonists (whether tragic or comic) are here represented as stripped of moral agency, their course of action determined by the laws and social conventions of the society they form part of, with a very limited capacity to change them. Protagonists of tragic genres in this mode of narration, encounter a tragic fate due to the improbity of the laws that govern their actions, rather than due to any personal character flaws. Comedy in the low mimetic mode involves the disintegration of a society based on unjust laws, causing a happy end.

Finally, in the ironic mode, the universal moral probity of the law is seen to be compromised, incapable of determining a just or righteous course of action, with any degree of certainty. Heroic protagonists that triumph over adversity are still cast in a light of individual righteousness, but in an ironic way. On the one hand, they can enjoy significant social status and prestige, but such a sense of self-worth has been stripped of any moral meaning. While they may be portrayed as successful and worthy of admiration, this is done ironically, in the sense that the narrator makes clear that this does not mean that they are admirable or good because of having acted according to some ethical standard (whether a virtue, or obeying some Kantian laws) the narrator himself subscribes to. Being represented as a good protagonist in an ironic mode thus involves the narrator making clear that one does not really mean what is conventionally meant by a “good” person, i.e. one who acts according to shared ethical standards designed to achieve the common good.

As argued by Frye, his sequential model of narrative modes does not imply that irony is a trope or stylistic device exclusive to our own time. The satires of Aristophanes, or for that matter Boccaccio, are masterworks of ironic narration. Ironic tropes are commonly employed in narratives aiming for some degree of social criticism, whereby e.g. the moral self-image of a certain character, representing a social class targeted for critique, may be represented in a tone of seeming seriousness that nevertheless carries an indirect insinuation of the opposite meaning of what has been said. Irony is a stylistic device, which was highly treasured by the ancients, who indeed also gave name to it. It is, according to Auerbach (2003), “a mediate and indirectly insinuating form of discourse”, which “presupposes a complex and multiple system of possible evaluations” (Auerbach, 1953; 221). What might be argued is that irony has been a common stylistic device in historical periods when the prevailing social order (whether based on a system of aristocratic virtue ethics, or a deontological ethic) has come to suffer a crisis of legitimation; one where the ethical standards that have historically justified it have come under attack, and are no longer seen as conducive to the common good, but rather as mechanisms for the perpetuation of a certain (morally deplorable) social order, and the (unjustified) privileges enjoyed by the elite social class in that order. Irony may thus be associated with historical moments when the prevailing social order has undergone a dramatic shift, where literature has played an important role as a medium for social critique, of the elites of an established social order, and has been used as a vehicle for advancing the political agenda of a social class wishing to challenge them. What Frye does argue, is that irony is the “underlying tonality” of our *contemporary* mode of narration, such that it infuses all narrative works written in our time. This may be linked to a more fundamental crisis of legitimation in Western societies, one where our traditions of moral reason have come to be seen as ultimately incapable of achieving the common good.

As observed by Frye, protagonists portrayed in such an ironic mode of narration, who encounter a tragic fate, suffer from a certain narrative paradox. Because the ethical belief standards traditionally used to evaluate the probity of human behavior are no longer seen as valid, the protagonist of an ironic tragedy can not be portrayed as morally flawed (according to which standards would he be judged so?), nor as having

acted according to prevailing moral standards which themselves can be judged either good or bad, he is only somebody who arbitrarily gets isolated from the society he previously belonged to; through “having been unlucky, selected at random or by lot, and no more deserving of what happens to him than anybody else would be” (Frye, 1957; 41). Irony thus renders tragic fates narratively unintelligible, in the sense that Aristotle speaks of narratives as bound by a certain unity of action that renders them intelligible; they are unintelligible because the catastrophic fate of a tragic protagonist is not plausibly related to his broader situation. If there is a reason for the protagonist’s downfall, “it is an inadequate reason, and raises more objections than it answers” (*ibid*). Frye thus compares the protagonist in ironic tragedy to the Biblical character of Job. Job can rationally defend himself from the charges that, if true, would make his catastrophe morally intelligible, “but the success of his defense makes his catastrophe morally unintelligible” (Frye, 1957; 42). Ironic tragedy thus assumes a certain horrific quality, in that no plausible reason is provided for the protagonist’s downfall or catastrophe, making his fate unintelligible and in that sense less bearable, accounting for the nightmarish atmosphere in e.g. Kafka’s novels. The paradox deepens in that, while such narratives typically avoid any moralistic judgement of the characters portrayed or of the laws and conventions guiding their behavior, the reaction in the reader or audience is ultimately one of (moral) revulsion against the kind of society that has arbitrarily isolated such ultimately innocent protagonists, without being capable of providing any good reasons for doing so.

There is a similar paradox at work in ironic genres, where the plot centers around the success of its main protagonist, and his triumph over adversity, as in comedy and heroic epic. If his adversaries are not really villains, in the sense of morally deplorable (since no good reason can be provided for them being so), then on what grounds has he triumphed, and earned the success and privileges he enjoys? One may conceive of this as accounting for the ambiguous fascination with celebrity in our culture. On the one hand, celebrity (rather than moral integrity) is the only recognized criterion of success in Western culture, and celebrity autobiographies have become a genre with enormous commercial success, but on the other hand there is a strong appetite for reading about celebrity scandals, where the behavior of celebrities is portrayed as scandalous. We seem to feel a dual

fascination and envy-tinged aversion towards epic or comic characters who have become successful, having triumphed for no good reason, similar to the revulsion felt towards a society that arbitrarily isolates tragic protagonists, likewise without providing any good reasons.

The table below attempts to summarize the relationship between modes of narration, tropes and ethical paradigms, as well as the parallel to Auerbach's historical account of the Western literary tradition.

Table 1.
Relationship between ethical paradigms and literary conventions

Ethical paradigm	Mode of narration (Frye)	Prevailing narrative trope (White)	Prevailing style (Auerbach)	
			Comedy	Tragedy
Virtue ethics	Mythical /romance	Metaphor	Low	High/sublime
Deontology	High/low mimetic	Metonymy/ Synecdoche	Mingling of high/sublime and low style, adding an intra-historical dimension	
Pluralism	Ironic	Irony	Loss of sublime, intrahistorical dimension; replaced by anxiety and self-reflection	

The mythical and romance modes of narration (following Frye's scheme) have been more prevalent in historical societies that have embraced a form of virtue ethic. The metaphor is a key trope in this narrative mode, commonly used through embodying a one or several virtues in the figure and feats of a heroic protagonist. In tragic narratives, the protagonist faces downfall through having committed a moral error; the tragical plot sequence unfolds as a logical chain of events, caused by this momentary deficiency in his moral character. The high and low mimetic modes have historically been more prevalent in a historical period when Western societies were undergoing a period of social transformation - subsequent to the Protestant critique of the Catholic Church, and under the influence of Enlightenment thinkers - towards embracing a social order

underpinned by deontological and/or utilitarian moral standards. The metonym and synecdoche are key tropes in these narrative modes, typically involving the representation of a protagonist's course of action as determined by the laws and social conventions of the society he or she forms part of. This resulted in a mingling of the high/sublime style of classical tragedy with the low style of comedy. Protagonists of tragic genres in this mode of narration encounter a tragic fate due to the improbity of the laws that govern their actions - due to an unjust society, that is, rather than any personal character flaws. Finally, the ironic mode of narration has been more prevalent in societies where the prevailing social order is suffering a crisis of legitimation, and the moral standards underpinning it are increasingly being questioned.

What types of oral history narratives would we expect to hear from employees in a disgraced organization then, if the predictions of the corporate branding perspective were to hold out? Depending on the fate of the interviewed protagonist – whether he or she rode out the scandal successfully or not – one would expect a narrative structured either according to the genre conventions of romance, epic or tragedy, but in both cases arguably cast in a high or low mimetic mode of narration. We could start by considering the hypothetical example of a manager who rode out the scandal and successfully engineered a moral reorientation of the organization such that its brand and external image were restored in the eyes of the public. Such a story bears strong resemblance to the romance genre in the high mimetic mode, involving a plot structure with a heroic protagonist who triumphs over his adversaries, in achieving a transformation of an initially unjust social order, into a more righteous one. The key difference would be that the story takes place within an organization, a kind of micro-society, and the initial state of affairs that had caused the organization to fall out of favour with the press is caused by unsound internal policies , guidelines and/or managerial practices.

Conversely, if the interviewee was an employee implicated somehow in the alleged misconduct, one would also expect some form of turnaround in the protagonist's moral stature, where the character in question is able to recognize the validity of the allegations in the press, and the consequent probity of efforts by management to turn the organization around to a more just state of affairs. In order for the employee in question to recognize the need to restore the

organization's brand and external image – which the corporate branding perspective presupposes - the narrative account would crucially require a capacity of the employee in question to recognize the validity of those allegations of misconduct that constitute the reason for the organization to have fallen out of favour. At the very least, one would expect an account that recognizes the reality of the damage done to the organization's brand or image, and a personal compulsion to restore it, due to the intimate association between brand value and employee well-being/self-esteem that the corporate branding perspective suggests. If the employee is able to ride out the crisis, the expected account might be one of personal redemption and exoneration; the story of an employee who has come to realise the moral error of the organization's prior practices, and the righteousness of the transformed workplace. If he/she is fired, one would expect a plot structure drawing on the genre conventions of tragedy.

The expected narrative accounts described above both bear a strong resemblance to the high and low mimetic modes of narration, in requiring a capacity to recognize the validity of those allegations of misconduct that have caused the organization to fall out of favour, or at least the reality of the damage done to the organization's brand/image. A key aspect of the high/low mimetic mode of narration, is that personal blame falls less heavily on a tragic protagonist in this mode. A tragic fate is the result of erroneous laws and social conventions, rather than personal vice. One would thus likewise expect an employee who suffered a tragic fate, to recognize the validity of the allegations of misconduct and the consequent moral error of the organization's prior practices, since doing so might actually project the attribution of blame onto less personal, institutional factors.

As argued previously in this section, the mimetic modes of narration have historically been more associated with a period when Western civilization was undergoing a social transformation towards democratic societies, with a rule of law rooted in deontological moral standards, under the sway of Enlightenment philosophy. To recognize an allegation of misconduct as valid would arguably require a moral belief system that subscribes to the possibility of absolute and universally valid moral truths. As argued in the section on disgrace, contemporary Western societies are increasingly embracing a pluralist social order, whereby a plurality of moral standards are recognized as

equally valid. I believe that the two case studies of this thesis illustrate the difficulty of achieving a shared representation of moral error in a disgraced organization that forms part of a pluralist social order. As I will attempt to show in the (albeit limited) empirical material, employees have access to a highly flexible repertoire of moral arguments, as to why their own conduct may be seen as perfectly righteous. Attempts by management to achieve a shared representation of guilt, or at least a common problem description, are likely to be received as authoritarian and conceited. Moreover, employees are likely to dis-identify with a disgraced organization's brand/image, choosing instead to highlight alternative (e.g. professional, or more personal) identity markers. This is reflected in the ironic mode of narration employed in the oral history accounts of interviewed employees at the Yardstick school, as well as my own account of the rebranding project at Northinsure. Efforts by management to restore the organization's brand/image through some transformative change programme are likely to be portrayed as misinformed and conceited, and met with lukewarm enthusiasm, contrary to the predictions of the corporate branding perspective. This arguably serves to further weaken employee motivation and identification with the organization, posing questions as to the efficacy of branding as a cultural control mechanism in disgraced organizations.

Methodological considerations

According to Bryman and Bell (2011), a research strategy (in the context of business research) can be defined as the overall orientation of a research project, with respect to epistemological and ontological considerations, as well as the role of theory in relation to research. In this section, some epistemological and ontological considerations that have guided the research strategy will be reviewed, before proceeding to specify the research design in more detail: the structure of the case studies, the chosen approach to data collection, analysis and interpretation of data, and finally some reflections on trustworthiness.

Philosophy of science orientation

It should be relatively clear from the description of the research problem that the present proposal carries a qualitative research orientation. The attitude vis-a-vis the role of theory is inductive, i.e. the ambition of the study is to generate new theories about the relationship between organizational image, culture and managerial/employee identification in disgraced organizations, or at least enrich and modify existing ones, to try and further our cognitive understanding of the empirical observations carried out. A qualitative research strategy is typically also held out to be associated with an interpretivist epistemological orientation, and a constructionist ontology (Bryman and Bell, 2011), in contrast to positivist and objectivist orientations. As highlighted by Bryman and Bell (2011: 611), and as argued by Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2009), this is to some extent a misleading dichotomy. There is no fundamental difference between a positivist/empiricist ontology and a constructionist one, in the sense that neither orientation relies on the realist/idealist insistence on uncovering some layer of objective reality underlying our observations of the external world.

Furthermore, strict adherence to a social constructionist ontology typically involves a somewhat reductionist attitude to theory development and knowledge advancement. This means that the contribution of social constructionist research, apart from general theoretical or philosophical expositions, is limited to comments or analyses of established constructions and/or texts, with a highly limited scope to “accomplish a progression in knowledge development or produce anything of more general theoretical value.” (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2009:205). The philosophy of science position I would like to subscribe to, is thus one commensurate with the somewhat “loose” ontological/epistemological position favoured in Alvesson and Sköldbberg’s reflexive methodological approach. This is a position which recognizes a) the inevitable condition of scientific endeavor, that all there is available to us is on the level of empirical observation and b) the condition that all observation is theory-laden (Hanson, 1958; Kuhn, 1962; Duhem, 1991), but nevertheless favours a more ambitious attitude towards theory generation than that typically associated with social constructionist research, following a more hermeneutical line of enquiry, associated with the knowledge traditions in the humanities rather than those of the positivist social sciences. This is a long-established tradition of enquiry influenced by philosophers like Vico (1999) and Hegel (1977), and which has been theorized as an analytical endeavour by philologists like Dilthey (1989) and Gadamer (2004). Quite contrary to the positivist or realist traditions in the social sciences, it has always emphasized the contingent nature of social reality - how it is dependent on mutual, shared attributions of meaning that change over time - but avoids drawing overly reductionist and anti-theoretical conclusions from this observation. It argues that such historically contingent attributions of meaning are key to understanding and analysing social phenomena, viewing mankind as social animals suspended in webs of meaning they themselves have spun, without therefore calling for all such meanings to be deconstructed.

If knowledge and observations provided by sensory perception, themselves inextricably fused with theory-laden interpretation, constitute the only basis for our knowledge of the world, then knowledge advancement (if that is what we desire) calls for a form of immanent reflexivity - research guided by reflection on whether the current body of knowledge in a given domain give rises to a cognitive

representation that is inherently sensible and does not result in contradictory observations or interpretations. A key aim of scientific research then becomes to identify such potential contradictions, trying to achieve Bachelardian *epistemic breaks*. Such efforts ought, ideally, to take place at several stages of a research project: 1) in formulating a research question, 2) when deciding upon and designing an appropriate methodology and approach to data-collection, 3) when interpreting the empirical material on the various levels of a) hermeneutical sense-making, b) critical challenging of conventional interpretations and c) reflections on our own role as authors and researchers. I will discuss how this has been applied to the design of my own research project in the following sections on research design.

Two vignette case studies, with an exploratory selection logic

According to Bryman and Bell (2011), case studies entail “the detailed and intensive analysis of a single case” (Bryman and Bell, 2011: 59). It is a popular and widely used research design in business research, perhaps partly since case studies “provide a vehicle through which several research methods can be combined” (Bryman and Bell, 2011: 60, citing Knights and McCabe (1997)). In putting together the case studies for this thesis, I draw on a combination of documents (newspaper articles, books and public documents, as well as emails and other internal documents to which I have had access), interviews with key participants in the sequence of events under study, together with an element of auto-ethnography and direct observation (in at least one of the cases). My ambition has been to provide a rich, multi-voiced empirical material, providing for inspiration with respect to theory-generation, along the lines suggested by Eisenhard and Graebner (2007). The (collection of) various sources of data is described in the following section. In combining these data sources and constructing my cases, I strive for an element of triangulation – i.e. cross-checking findings from e.g. direct observations or newspaper articles with interview questions, with the hope to achieve greater confidence in the findings. Triangulation is also strived for in analyzing the empirical material, once it has been collected. The ambition is to abstract key

commonalities from the specific circumstances and particularities surrounding the individual case studies, and to generate theories with more general interpretive value.

The case organizations have been selected primarily on the anticipation that they will provide an opportunity to learn more about the subject matter I have chosen to study, i.e. the brand/image-culture/identity interface in publicly disgraced organizations. This is also the reason for using multiple cases (rather than an “intrinsic” case), since this design is typically employed to explore more general phenomena, rather than to gain insight into the particularities of a specific situation, as pointed out by Stake (1995), cited in Bryman and Bell (2011). Furthermore, the case organizations chosen for study are arguably of very different kinds, in terms of their core activity, governance structure and the nature of the alleged misconduct which precipitated their fall from grace. The hope is that the differences will serve to bring out both commonalities that might generate theories with more general interpretive value, as well as particularities that yield insight into the specificities of particular instances of public disgrace, for particular kinds of organizations.

The Yardstick school is a primary school in Southern Sweden, owned and administrated by the local municipal authority and run on a non-profit basis. It has a history of problems with various successions of headmasters and municipal administrators, who have unsuccessfully tried to implement the school reform introduced in Sweden in 1993. The problem can be said to have revolved around the entrenched power position enjoyed by a core group of conservatively minded teachers, who were unwilling to adopt the new tuition standards, viewing them as progressive, liberal hogwash. With time, their insubordination became an increasing source of embarrassment and discomfort for the municipal authorities, who felt they had to set their foot down. As they installed a new team of hard-nosed headmasters at the school, who saw no alternative but to replace the insubordinate teachers, a negative spiral of bad publicity erupted. The allegations of misconduct varied quite broadly: from bad management of the change process (on the part of the headmasters and municipal authorities), to poor human empathy, chaotic working conditions and high staff turnover causing worsening of tuition standards, etc. The allegations

can however be summarized as centering around issues of incompetent management.

Northinsure is a Swedish insurance company, incorporated and run for profit purposes. It is one of the oldest, most prestigious companies in Sweden. It's history is one of starting out as a domestic medium-sized insurance company, proceeding through a process of organic growth and acquisitions to become the dominant player in the Nordic region, and finally launching a successful international expansion strategy, which established it as a major player on a number of foreign markets. During the course of this last international expansion phase, the incumbent management team were the recipients of a variable remuneration package based on a stock option scheme, which resulted in huge bonus compensations during the runup to the bust of the IT-bubble, a period when the share price performance of Northinsure, in line with the rest of the Stockholm Stock Exchange, was astronomical. As details of the magnitude of these bonus compensations came to the attention of the press, a spiral of negative publicity ensued, which served to uncover an array of related and unrelated instances of misconduct, on behalf of the management team – allegations which mostly centered around issues of (im)morality.

As can be seen from the above, these are indeed very different organizations, having furthermore suffered bad publicity for very different reasons. As argued above, it is hoped that these differences will yield insights stemming from both commonalities, as well as particularities. The commonalities, in terms of an overall tendency for employees to dis-identify with the image of a disgraced organization, are hoped to prompt reflections on the relationship between image and identity, that could generate theories of more general interpretive value. The particularities, in terms of e.g. the specific tactics used to repair one's self-image in a morally disgraced organization vs one whose alleged misconduct is more related to matters of competence, are hoped to yield insights into the specificities of (dis)identification tactics; how these depend on the organizational setting, the nature of the disgrace suffered, as well as the broader cultural discourses on social legitimacy in relation to that specific instance of disgrace.

As pointed out in the introduction, there are significant weaknesses associated with the empirical study, due to difficulties in negotiating access to organizations that have suffered allegations of misconduct.

Due to the limitations in the empirical material, the explorative approach to interpretation of data should be emphasized. In other words, the empirical material is not treated as capable of adjudicating between different hypotheses, or corroborating a certain theoretical interpretation at the expense of another, but rather as a vehicle for exploring how the theoretical model of narrative identity presented in this thesis may be used to interpret the (scant) empirical observations.

Approach to data collection

Newspaper articles and other documents

By definition, the subject area entails a wealth of written empirical material about the organizations under study, describing the specific circumstances and events that the journalists claim to constitute the scandal in question. There is, in other words, a chronologically arranged track record in the public domain, which traces precisely the specific chain of newspaper articles, TV debates and other media attention, which have caused said organizations to fall out of public favor. These are of tremendous value in collating our case studies, since they articulate precisely how the organizations' image has been constructed as disgraced or tarnished, and how this image has been disseminated in the public consciousness. By providing an account of this chain of media attention, the hope is to be able to reconstruct the image of disgrace that managers and employees in the organizations under study had to relate to, in their identity work as well as efforts to internally handle the crisis and restore a working cultural atmosphere.

As observed by Jackal (1988), the discursive structure of media accounts that deal with corporate scandals is typically to contrast some instance of organizational (mis)behavior with prevailing social mores and norms (however hypocritical) that run counter to it. As such these media accounts also reveal some of the connection between branding/ and image management and the broader socio-political discourse governing legitimacy.

In the case of Northinsure, the media accounts covering the scandal range over a period of 1-2 years, with coverage in national and

international press. Books and academic studies have also been written about the scandal, which provide a longer history of the organization and how its public image has developed over time. In addition, as an employee of Northinsure, I had access to internal documents (emails, intranet publications), which described and provided instructions for the internal branding-culture alignment project under study.

In the case of the Yardstick school, there is a long and complex history of problems with various successions of headmasters and municipal administrators that have received spurious media attention in the local press, over a relatively long period of time. It is possible however to identify a period of intensified media attention, covering the chain of events that constituted the recent scandal, which run over a period of 2-3 years, with coverage ranging from local newspapers (the main source of attention during the initial 1-2 years), culminating in a massive blowup in national press and TV.

To ensure anonymity of the organizations under study, I have had to avoid explicit references to the various media accounts, and disguise the circumstances and events sufficiently so as not to divulge sensitive material. These newspaper accounts will be contrasted against internal employee and managerial accounts of how the organizations have tried to cope with a scandalized public image. In the case of the Yardstick school, I have had to rely primarily on interviews as a source for such internal accounts, whereas in the case of Northinsure, I have had the opportunity to conduct more ethnographic, direct observations during a period when the company conducted an internal branding project.

Oral history interviews

As observed by Bryman and Bell (2011), interviews are probably the most widely employed method for data collection in qualitative research. This is partly due to their flexibility, since they allow researchers more leeway in terms of coordinating personal and professional lives with the research project. For the purposes of studying managerial and employee identity work, especially when adopting a narrative perspective on identity (see also the previous section on theoretical orientation), life story interviews are arguably also the most appropriate vehicle for data collection. The aim of life story (or oral history) interviews with a narrative analysis perspective,

is to elicit “interviewees’ reconstructed accounts of connections between events and between events and contexts” (Bryman and Bell, 2011: 531). Life story interviews are thus related to what Prasad (2005) labels the dramatist traditions in qualitative research. The focus is not so much on eliciting the facts of a particular life or sequence of events, but to elicit the interviewees perspective, “as revealed in the telling of the story” (Bryman and Bell, 2011: 531). There is also “a concern with how that perspective changes in relation to different contexts” (ibid). Since our research interest is precisely how managerial and employee identity work relates to the context of the organizations external image and/or brand, and how that relationship is affected by events that cause said brand/image to become tarnished (i.e. a change of context), life story (or oral history) interviews would seem the most natural and obvious method for data collection. Within this methodological tradition, there is furthermore a distinction between life history and oral history accounts. A life history is an account that people give about their entire lives, where they are more or less free to focus on the events that feel most significant to them. The oral history interview is somewhat more narrowly oriented, in that the subject is asked to reflect upon specific events or periods in the past. Since our main research interest revolves around the impact of public disgrace on managerial and employee identity work, the storytelling process during the interviews will be steered towards the specific chain of events which were portrayed as scandalous in the respective media accounts (as detailed in the previous section).

At the Yardstick school, I have had the opportunity to interview the following people:

- The head of school management at the municipal administration authority
- One of the three headmasters who worked at the Yardstick school during the chain of events associated with the scandal (the other two declined to participate)
- Two teachers who worked at the Yardstick school during the chain of events associated with the scandal

The selection of interview subjects has been based on an ambition to elicit how managerial and employee life stories differ, in terms of the perspective revealed and the narrative style employed. I have thus

chosen to interview management representatives (headmasters as well as representatives from the municipal authority) as well as teaching staff.

At Northinsure, the effort to elicit internal accounts of how the organization has coped with disgrace have been oriented more around ethnographic observation, where naturalistic oral histories have been elicited more indirectly, through conversations with managers and staff, as well as in the auto-ethnographic account of my own experiences as an employee at Northinsure. This will be discussed more in the next section.

As a qualitative research method in the social sciences, interviews have been subject to a number of criticisms, which it would be negligent not to raise. These criticisms relate particularly to interview-based research carried out within the positivist tradition, when based on a naïve objectivist correspondence theory of truth about the social world – i.e. that interviews can provide the researcher with direct access to facts about behavior and attitudes of interview respondents. As positivist social science has itself revealed, interview responses can be highly unreliable; people can not be trusted to provide reliable information even about such basic facts as their height, weight and drinking habits. As Silverman (2006) points out, positivists have typically tried to resolve such difficulties by building in “checks and remedies into their research designs” (Silverman, 2006:120).

Silverman distinguishes another response to these difficulties, a qualitative research approach which he labels “emotionalism”, where the aim is to access the *subject* behind the interview respondent, and gain access to his/her *lived experience* through open-ended depth interviews where interviewee and interviewer seek to gain a deep mutual understanding. Precisely the same criticism (as that directed towards positivism) can be directed at emotionalism however. As Silverman puts it, the “well-meaning humanistic social scientist may thus have uncritically taken on board a common sense assumption about the immediacy and validity of accounts of human experience and emotion”(ibid:126). Silverman then proceeds to discuss the constructionist approach to interviews, where the focus is rather on how interviewer and interviewee collaborate to construct meaning in the specific interview setting. The interview thus becomes a subject rather than a resource. Such an approach has been criticized for

narrowness however. The solution, according to Silverman is to avoid treating interview respondents as individuals with unique experiences, but rather “as members of a variety of cultures, who draw on culturally available resources to construct their stories” (ibid, 134). These stories are often moral tales, where the interviewee attempts to portray himself/herself in a socially legitimate manner.

Since my interest is precisely the (culturally constructed) identity work of individual members of a disgraced organization, how it is affected by such crises, and the relationship to the broader social discourse on legitimacy, interviews seem like an adequate method to draw out such identity narratives. The problem arises whether we want to interpret these as somehow mattering to the interviewee, more than as a locally produced interview response, constructing a socially legitimate subject. According to narrative psychology, people’s identity narratives have a profound importance for their sense of self and psychological well-being, infusing life with unity and purpose (McAdams, 1993). This stands somewhat apart from the postmodern traditions, whose proponents are more skeptical about both the possibility and value of grasping the intentionality of individual accounts. This is more broadly related to the differences between a discursive and a narrative perspective on identity, and the assumption of a unified subject, which is discussed in more detail in the section on theoretical orientation.

The problem is also more broadly related to the essentialist/constructionist debate in social science, where there is a divide between researchers who claim that some human traits are biologically conditioned or otherwise essential to our nature, while constructionists will claim that all human behavior is culturally conditioned, or socially constructed. With respect to identity however, the essentialist/constructionist debate is somewhat of a red herring. Even evolutionary psychologists, such as Stephen Pinker, will readily admit that identity, along with money and other cultural artifacts, is a social construction. Nobody in academe is seriously claiming that identity is an essential human trait. But just because we view it as a social construction, does not mean that it is irrelevant to people on some deeper existential level. Having an authentic self-identity is a powerful social norm and ideal in contemporary society, enforced by a variety of cultural institutions (lifestyle magazines, self-help books and therapists) and powerful sanctions. Failure to construct an authentic

and socially legitimate narrative of self may thus contribute strongly to feelings of anxiety, inferiority and alienation, regardless of whether identity is an essential feature of human nature and, arguably, whether we are ever capable of mustering a unified sense of self (however subjective). The dramatist, storytelling impetus may well be there, whether it is culturally or biologically conditioned. It need likewise not be grounded in a unified subject, but can be seen to fit quite nicely with the notion of a fragmented self, where the storytelling impetus is associated with a constant struggle to avoid and repair disunity and fragmentation in one's sense of self.

There is of course another risk, that interviewees will produce self-narratives they perceive as adequate to the topic of the interview, and in relation to broader social norms and mores, while producing completely different stories to colleagues in relation to the same topic (disgrace). This risk is to some extent overlooked by Silverman, but more pertinently highlighted by Alvesson (2011), who displays an even more skeptical attitude towards interpreting interview material. For Alvesson, we have no way of knowing whether the interviewee is telling us a moral tale, revealing his deeper emotions and beliefs or simply lying – for a variety of reasons, including fear of reprisal from superiors (Alvesson, 2011). There is no simple way of remedying this, Alvesson only suggests that we should consider a number of different “metaphors” for the interview situation, to reflect over the reasons for what has been said, and try to determine which metaphor, on balance, seems to fit best. Alvesson suggests a way to support such reflection, by adopting a mixed methods approach, where interviews are combined with an element of ethnographic observation. Concretely, this would involve spending an amount of time at the research site, and trying to collect “naturally occurring” talk and data, according to the approach favored by ethnographers (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009). This data would then be contrasted and triangulated with the interview data, to assess correspondence between the self-narratives told by interviewees and the naturally occurring talk and stories told e.g. during coffee breaks and informal meetings. The opportunities for combining interviews with ethnographic observation naturally vary according to the empirical site, but at least in the case of Northinsure, I have found opportunity to combine naturalistic oral accounts with a strong element of complementary ethnographic observation. One caveat is that combining research methods will posit greater

methodological difficulties, in terms of treatment of qualitatively different research material, and combining interpretations drawn from them. The discussion on interpretation of interview data will be brought up in the next section.

Auto-ethnography and direct observation

A popular methodological alternative to interviews in business research, is that which draws on the methods and conventions of ethnography, and adopts these in the study of organizational settings. Rosen (1991), quoted in Bryman and Bell (2011), understands this as distinctive from the classical anthropological studies of so-called primitive cultures, because it is concerned with social relations related to goal-directed activities. It is an approach which requires “intense researcher involvement in the day-to-day running of an organization, so that the researcher can understand it from an insider’s point of view” (Bryman and Bell, 2011: 425). The popularity of organizational culture as a concept has also entailed a revelation of ethnography as an “obvious method for understanding work organizations as cultural entities” (ibid). The ethnographic method is broadly speaking based on the researcher immersing him/herself “in a group for an extended period of time , observing behavior, listening to what is said in conversations both between others and with the fieldworker, and asking questions” (Bryman and Bell, 2011:426). The objective is to study, inter alia, the construction of cultural norms, expressions of organizational values and patterns of workplace behavior.

In the case of the Yardstick school, it seemed inappropriate to try and negotiate access to conduct an ethnographic study, partly because of the sensitivity of the matter, but partly also because conditions had changed so much since the most intense reverberations of the media scandal. I started to conduct research into the Yardstick school about a year after the dust around the scandal had settled. By this point, both the management team at the municipal authority, as well as the headmasters at the school, had been replaced and few of the original teaching staff remained. It would thus appear as if the opportunity to study the impact of the scandal on managerial and employee identity work in real time had disappeared. Interviews on the other hand allowed for a retrospective approach, to study how managers and

employee's life stories had been recursively altered by working in a disgraced organization.

Gaining access to conduct an ethnographic study of an organization that has undergone public disgrace would seem to be very difficult, by definition. Public scandals tend to make organizations very cautious about their communication strategy with the general public, and alert to any risk of disseminating information that might further damage the brand/image. In the case of the Yardstick school, former managers and employees individually agreed to participate in interviews, on the condition that their identities or the identity of the school not be revealed. I did not gain official access by the head of the municipal authority or the current headmaster of the school. As such, there is an element of covert research to the project.

In the case of Northinsure, the covert aspect has been more pronounced, as I was able to benefit from being an employee of the company at the time, and as such had the opportunity make direct participant observations, under cover, so to speak. The specific variant of ethnographic method adopted might thus be best labeled as covert ethnography, or alternatively at-home ethnography, a method described by Alvesson (2003; 2009). Briefly, At-home ethnography is a study in which the researcher describes a setting to which he has a 'natural access' and in which he is an active participant, on equal terms with others. The researcher in this case works in the setting and uses his experiences and knowledge of the organization as well as his access to empirical material for research purposes. The research is, however, not the individual's major preoccupation, he is primarily a member of said organization, a trait he shares with his colleagues - apart from times when the empirical material is targeted for close scrutiny and writing. The researcher is thus not an ethnographer in the sense of being a 'professional stranger' (Agar, 1986) or a researcher primarily dedicated to studying the specific setting. "Participation comes first and is only occasionally complemented with observation in a research-focused sense /.../ the idea of at-home ethnography is to utilize the position one is in also for other, secondary purposes, that is, doing research on the setting of which one is also a part" (Alvesson, 2009).

The choice of method was not an entirely active one. It was rather made possible by the fact that I was employed by Northinsure during

the time that the internal branding project went through its major stages. Having worked over five years as a management consultant, I had reached a stage where I desired a change to my professional life, which increasingly had begun to impact my personal life and circumstances in a way I found detrimental. As I knew that the application process for a PhD position was likely to be prolonged, I took up a job offer with Northinsure, who I had worked for on several consulting assignments in the past, and who offered me an attractive employment package, also involving a significant reduction in workload. Having simultaneously submitted an application to join a research project aimed at a critical study of branding practices, I was naturally positively surprised when this coincided with the launch of Expedition Northinsure, thus providing me with an opportunity to study a live, contemporary branding project from the inside – and furthermore, one taking place within the context of a publicly disgraced organization.

The format of the ethnographic part of the Northinsure case study is a narrative, loosely structured in the form of diary entries, where I have noted down experiences and social events linked to the various phases of the project. As such, it also provides the opportunity for narrative analysis, in the sense of examining what kind of narrative style I employed in relating to the branding project as an employee. During the course of this research project, I have successively distanced myself from the experiences as an employee of Northinsure, and have come to view the internal branding project in a somewhat different light. I have thus been able to re-examine the cynical tone and satirical narrative style which I employed as an employee, and consider how this tone (and my personal attitude to the organization's branding efforts) has been shaped by the media accounts of the scandal, the broader social discourse of the day, and finally the influence which critical attitudes towards branding and organizational culture has had on my own identity.

My reasons for wishing to anonymise the account of the Northinsure case are primarily ethical. As I embarked on the study I felt increasingly ill at ease about making observations about people's behaviour and reactions, without having sought their prior consent. There is a substantial literature dealing with ethical issues related to covert ethnography (Beauchamp et al., 1982; Bulmer, 1982; Herrera,

1999; Warwick, 1982). Some would go so far as to completely discourage it, considering it an illegitimate breach of the integrity of those you deign to study. There is, furthermore, a risk that the jobs, livelihoods and careers of the people you study could be compromised. Regardless of how hard the researcher tries to anonymize case details and the names of participants in the study, it is impossible to fully conceal personal identities from those that know the organization well. I have had similar moral reservations about publishing the case study, but in the end settled for anonymising the account. Anonymisation ensures that the name of the organization and the employees will not turn up in internet search engines, which limits the spread of the study. Furthermore, I don't believe that any of the information contained in the case study is compromising for the characters portrayed.

Data analysis and interpretation

In analyzing and interpreting the empirical material from the case studies, I will strive to employ a hermeneutic approach guided by reflexivity, a research ideal promoted by Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2009). According to this view, interpretation of ones empirical material, obtained through deploying a chosen qualitative method (whether interviews, ethnographic observation, discourse analysis of texts or some combination of these), can be seen as occurring on several levels. One occurs at the immediate level of registering the data (writing down observations, transcribing interviews) where we select those data elements that seem particularly meaningful to us, and compile them in some way. Out of this, some pattern hopefully emerges, which we submit to an initial hermeneutical effort of trying to make sense of what has been said or observed.

A second level occurs when we subject this initial interpretation to an alternative reading, through deploying some "meta-theoretical" perspective, such as critical theory or post-structuralism/postmodernism, aiming to detect whether the interpretation we made at the initial stage is not governed excessively by prevailing conventions, whether shaped or influenced by political, ideological or other social norms. At this level, a non-conventional interpretation of the empirical material might even yield novel insights

or perspectives that could inspire a reformulation of the original research question, and the development of an alternative proposition or theory - this is a fruitful way of treating reflection on the empirical material as a source of inspiration for theory-development, trying to create mysteries that can subsequently be solved e.g. through revisiting the empirical site and performing a secondary, alternative study, in line with the approach for mystery construction proposed by Alvesson and Kärreman (2007).

Having gone through reflective interpretation and re-interpretation on these different levels, some tentative body of text will presumably start to emerge, containing a more or less consistent argument. At this stage, it might be cautious to temper our enthusiasm and reflect on our own role as researchers; whether by the selective treatment of data, and our subjective interpretation, we have not constructed a version of reality that carries the well familiar risks of, say, becoming co-opted by power interests, or otherwise risks constructing subjects (whether groups represented by participants in our research study, or other constituencies) in a way that has profound social implications for the way they are being perceived. In other words, reflecting on the power implications of our role as knowledge producers (using a Foucauldian vocabulary), bearing in mind ethical and political considerations.

The nature of the research text might well alter, as we subject our observations and tentative interpretations to reflection on these levels (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2009). This does not constitute any guarantee that our research will thereby end up better, more interesting or ethical - but it might nevertheless be seen as a useful discipline to impose on oneself, aiming to steer one's research efforts in such an (ideal) direction.

Trustworthiness

Bryman and Bell (2011) provide an overview of some of the discussions within the field of qualitative business research, on whether and how to apply criteria for reliability and validity in assessing the trustworthiness of qualitative research, measures which are commonly utilised in quantitative research. While they note that many have criticized the application of such concepts to qualitative

research, since they seem to carry connotations of quantitative measurement (typically not a concern in qualitative research), they review a number of alternative assessment criteria, proposed by qualitative researchers. The present discussion on trustworthiness will be oriented around the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985, 1994) as presented in Bryman and Bell (2011). These are: *credibility*, *transferability*, *dependability* and, *confirmability*.

Credibility

According to Guba and Lincoln (1985, 1994), credibility is a qualitative research ideal that mirrors the notion of internal validity in quantitative research. While accepting that there can be several possible accounts of a certain aspect of social reality, this criterion targets the overall feasibility or credibility of the account that the researcher arrives at. It can be established through practices such as respondent validation and triangulation. The practice of triangulation, as carried out in the context of the proposed research project, was reviewed earlier in the section on case study methodology. Respondent validation has been practiced during the interview phase of the project. I have taken notes during all interviews, and have tape recorded those where the interviewee has felt comfortable with recording. The interviews have then been written up as a coherent narrative, rather than a direct word-for-word transcription of what was said. The write-up has then been sent back to the interviewee for validation. In most cases, this has resulted in a significant number of amendments and embellishments, where the interviewee has corrected a misapprehension (on my part) and/or extrapolated some detail of the narrative to add context and flavor. The resulting narrative has thus been co-authored by researcher and interviewee, although obviously it is the interviewee's account which I have tried to replicate in a coherent text in the first place.

Transferability

While qualitative research findings are typically more oriented towards the contextual uniqueness and significance of the aspect of the social world being studied, transferability is nevertheless argued by Guba and Lincoln (1985, 1994) to mirror external validity, in being a criteria which aims to promote precisely the quality of richness, in order to provide a “thick description” of the studied context, which can serve as a kind of database for other researchers to judge whether the findings in question can be transferred to other, similar contexts. I have strived to ensure the richness of the accounts provided, primarily through the use of the case study methodology, where I have combined accounts of the studied phenomena from a variety of sources: newspaper and other media accounts, interview accounts as well as participant observation.

Dependability

Bryman and Bell (2011) mention that dependability, mirroring the concept of reliability in quantitative research, has not been very popular as a trustworthiness criterion in qualitative business research, arguing that it can be very demanding for those assigned to ensure it: i.e. research supervisors (in this case, my PhD thesis supervisors) assigned to audit the various records of the research process. As a researcher, one can still aim towards enabling dependability, through keeping a robust record of each phase in that process: fieldwork notes, interview transcripts, data analysis decisions and so on. I have strived to ensure dependability through organizing and maintaining a record of each phase in the research process, so that at least the potential for auditing my research process is sound.

Confirmability

Confirmability mirrors objectivity, and is related to dependability in that Guba and Lincoln propose that establishing confirmability should be one of the objectives of those assigned to audit the research process. While complete objectivity is impossible to strive for in the research

process, this criterion is nevertheless concerned with ensuring that the researcher has acted in good faith, and not overtly allowed personal values or theoretical inclinations to “sway the conduct of the research and findings derived from it” (Bryman and Bell, 2011: 398). During my research process, I have had many (often frustrating) discussions with my supervisors concerning the extent to which my theoretical orientation and tentative findings have been swayed by personal values, interpretive biases and/or theoretical inclinations. This has forced me to consider alternative viewpoints and potential interpretations in a number of instances, and the research process and findings have certainly been shaped by this aspect of the supervisory process.

Two vignette studies

Expedition Northinsure: rebranding the black pig

Introduction

This chapter provides a vignette case study of a recent branding project at the Swedish insurer Northinsure. The project went under the name Expedition Northinsure, and was initiated due to a perceived brand weakness, in the wake of a bonus scandal in the early 2000s and a subsequent hostile takeover by an international financial conglomerate. The method used is based on an at-home ethnographic account, made possible by the fact that I was employed by Northinsure during the time that the branding project went through its major stages.

According to certain scholars associated with *the corporate branding perspective* (Balmer and Gray, 2003; de Chernatony, 1999; Hatch and Schultz, 2003), organizations should strive to seek strong alignment between the way the organization is perceived by external stakeholders, often referred to as its image (Hatch and Schultz, 2003) or brand reputation (de Chernatony, 1999), and the way its employees perceive and understand it, its (brand) identity, embedded in the organization's culture, the common heuristic framework of its employees. Some scholar's introduce another dimension, typically referred to as the organization's (brand) vision (de Chernatony, 1999; Hatch and Schultz, 2003), designed to capture management's aspirations and ambitions for the brand's future. The case study illustrates how the project design and theoretical underpinning for Expedition Northinsure draws strongly on the corporate branding perspective, in its ambition to restore Northinsure's damaged image or reputation and achieve stronger alignment with organizational culture and identity, but that the project nevertheless met with limited success.

Background¹

Northinsure was until its delisting, following the hostile takeover by an international financial conglomerate, one of the oldest listed company in Sweden. Founded in response to a growing demand for insuring expensive industrial equipment, the company initially sold primarily fire insurance, but soon expanded into life and property and casualty insurance. Around the turn of the 20th century, Sweden had around 40 independent insurance companies, a large number for such a small economy. Although Northinsure was one of the largest, its combined market share (life and P&C) was only about 5-6 percent. During the 1930's and 1940's, the sector was subject to heightened political debate, with several proposals from the Social Democrats to nationalise the sector, due to the need for consolidation and rationalisation. In the end, this was achieved by providing the sector incentives to do so through legislation and supervision, in particular the law from 1948 regarding the conduct of insurance business. Through a combination of luck and visionary management, Northinsure came out of the consolidation period during the 1950s and 1960s as a winner. In 1969 its market share had increased from 5-6% to about 35%, making the Northinsure conglomerate by far the largest insurance group in Sweden. The list of insurance companies acquired by Northinsure during these two decades runs long.

The postwar decades were a period of unparalleled economic growth in Sweden, primarily due to the circumstance that Sweden remained neutral during WWII, and thus emerged from the conflict with an unscathed industrial production capacity, able to satisfy the demands of a ravaged postwar European economy, in dire need of rebuilding itself. The growth of real disposable income that ensued meant that premium revenues for Northinsure experienced an exponential growth, causing the accumulation of high profits and a strong capital position. After the consolidation, the sheer size of Northinsure meant that this had become a problem. To achieve return on this large chunk of capital, it had to be invested, either domestically or abroad (share-

1 The Background section consists of a brief account of Northinsure's corporate history, summarized from books about its history that Northinsure published on its 100th and 150th anniversaries, as well as a summary of the newspaper articles that accounted for the scandal.

buybacks and paying back money to shareholders via dividends was not an established practice at the time). Due to the limited opportunity to grow further on the domestic market, Northinsure chose to grow internationally. A subsidiary had launched a reinsurance business in the U.S. in the late 19th century, which later became a joint venture between Northinsure and a U.K. partner. When it started to experience financial difficulties in the late 60s, Northinsure chose to buy out the partner, and initiated an aggressive relaunch, focusing on the new product line liability insurance. It eventually grew to become a significant player on the U.S. insurance market.

The 1970s were a difficult period in Sweden. The export-led growth of the 50s and 60s started to dwindle, due to reduced international demand caused by the OPEC crises. A period of high real salary increases meant that core Swedish industrial goods had become subject to competition from cheaper Asian producers. The Swedish general insurance sector was locked in a cycle of price wars that had resulted in chronic negative profitability for a number of years. As Northinsure experienced financial difficulties in its domestic business, the U.S. expansion instead started to contribute significantly to profitability. Combined with a revised “matrix” organizational model, designed to render some structure to the organizational mess that had resulted from the successive fusions, this contributed to foster a federal culture of self-governing subsidiaries, the high trust culture finding particularly strong resonance due to the successful growth of the U.S. business. This culture would lay the foundation for further international expansion, but arguably also the future bonus scandals that rocked the company during the early 2000s.

Possibly the most important international venture launched by Northinsure, was the investment in a U.K. life insurance subsidiary. A group of British insurance professionals approached Northinsures CEO in the late 1970s, with a proposal to launch a U.K. life insurer focused exclusively on selling unit-linked life insurance contracts, provided on a technologically advanced IT platform, that would allow the policyholder significant flexibility to e.g. switch his investment between different funds. Unit-link insurance was at the time a relatively new phenomenon, originating in the Dutch market, and only sold in the Netherlands and the U.K. Traditional life insurance involves the policyholder paying in premiums (either single or

recurring) towards a pension, the funds managed and the value of which guaranteed by the insurer. Should equity markets crash around the time of your retirement age, the insurer will thus guarantee that you are able to withdraw a pension corresponding to at least the sum of premiums you have been paying in (and in some countries, a certain minimum guaranteed return). The provision of such a financial guarantee entails significant risk to the life insurer, since it typically invests at least a proportion of the premium payments in equities, which can either rise or fall in value. With a large customer base and diversified age distribution, this risk becomes smaller, but can still cause financial distress in times of severe equity market disruptions. The unit link insurance model on the other hand entails very little financial risk for a life insurer. It is basically similar to saving money in a mutual fund. The life insurer is only responsible for the administration of your pension payment at retirement, but bears no proprietary financial risk in the event of a market downturn, since the value of your pension capital is not guaranteed. The only risk borne by the life insurer is any mortality or longevity risk caused by so called policy “riders” that the customer may opt for, e.g. lifetime annuity pension, death insurance, etc. This also allows the product to be classified as a life insurance rather than a savings contract, meaning it carries tax benefits in most jurisdictions. Mortality/longevity risks are typically more stable and predictable over time compared to financial risks, entailing lower volatility and thus easier to manage.

On the surface, unit link does not appear to be a very attractive product from a policyholder perspective – certainly the product has been stripped of most of its insurance element, since there is no financial guarantee left. However, the value is seen to lie in the transparency and flexibility of the underlying investment. With traditional life insurance, the management of your pensions savings is more or less a black box. You get a financial guarantee, but the insurer invests your funds at his discretion, and credits you a preliminary bonus each year (on top of any guaranteed return) based on the performance of its underlying funds. With unit-link insurance, you are able to decide whether you want to invest a higher or lower proportion of your funds in equities or bonds at any point in time, and the value of your pension policy is completely transparent. The value of a traditional life insurance policy on the other hand is more opaque.

The preliminary bonus can be withdrawn if the markets were to perform particularly badly around the time of your retirement. From the perspective of a life insurance company, unit-link is somewhat of a money-making machine. An administration fee is charged each year, either as a percentage of premiums paid that year or of the accumulated pension capital (the sum of all premiums paid over time). Typically, the client will choose to invest his funds in an actively managed mutual fund that charges an annual management fee. Since the life insurer is typically able to lump together a large number of client funds into a single investment with the fund manager in question, it has become market practice for the fund manager to pay an annual rebate (essentially a retroactive discount on the fund management fee) to the life insurer, based on the size of the investment mandate. Although some European jurisdictions have started to forbid this, the rebate is typically not paid back to the policyholder, but appears as a source of revenue in the life insurer's profit and loss statement. Unit link insurance contracts are thus somewhat of a cash cow for life insurers, especially when the individual policyholder savings are high in value – with little or no financial risk, since the policyholder bears all financial risk when markets go down.

The U.K. business quickly became a resounding success story, with the company achieving staggering growth in the -80s and -90s. The business model soon became the object of increased attention from Northinsure's management board, and in the late 80s, Northinsure launched an international subsidiary headed by John Greedy, whose primary aim was to export the unit-link life insurance model internationally. John Greedy's main focus was directed at a U.S. life insurance subsidiary, American Northinsure, which he took over in 1990. The export of the U.K. business model, with some minor modifications, again became a resounding success. Premium payments tripled in 1991, compared to 1990 levels, doubled in 1992, and almost quadrupled in 1993. By 1999, premium payments were 24 times as high as in 1992, and the following year American Northinsure had taken the market leading position in the Variable Annuity segment, with a 7,5% market share. John Greedy was accordingly declared a business guru by the American corporate press. The launch of the international subsidiary even became the subject of a Harvard Business School case study. While Northinsure did not invent the concept of unit link life insurance as such (it had been around as a savings form in

the Dutch market for some time) the company can be credited with recognizing the commercial potential of unit link at an early stage, and improving its customer appeal via offering it on a high-tech IT platform, allowing increased customer flexibility in terms of actively managing their investments. Northinsure should also be credited with successfully pioneering unit link as a savings form in a number of markets (Sweden, the U.K. and the U.S.) where it had little or no prior share of the overall savings market. These achievements combined to shape an organizational identity which accentuated such features as a culture of product innovation, a spirit of entrepreneurship and a high trust culture, where individual employees with good business ideas would be given significant freedom to realize them.

Unit-link insurance was prohibited in Sweden until 1990. It was in connection with the 1992 pension reform, when Sweden shifted from a PAYG (or “unfunded”) pension system to a PAYE (or “funded”) system that unit-link insurance became permitted, partly thanks to strong government lobbying from Northinsure. Following a large-scale change of Northinsure’s management board in the mid-1990s subsequent to the appointment of a new CEO, Northinsure started selling off its entire portfolio of businesses active in segments other than unit-link life insurance. The strategy became extremely popular with investors and analysts. The stock started performing exceptionally well, and the market value of Northinsure’s stock soon reached dizzying heights. In the late 90s, Northinsure managed to tick all the boxes in terms of what the investor community happened to cherish at the moment: 1) it had managed to achieve successively higher turnover growth than peers for a significant period, in 2) a market segment (unit linked life insurance) that was growing rapidly; 3) it was able to export its business model successfully from country to country and finally 4) Northinsure spoke the language of the investor community, using popular buzzwords and catchphrases of the day, such as “focus on core competencies” and “streamlining growth”. By the late 90s, most of the large American investment banks were rating Northinsure as a “strong buy”, calling it such things as an “insurance company of the future”. One influential analyst compared Northinsure’s stock to Häagen Dazs; “it sounds expensive until you taste it.” At its peak in the first half of 2000, Northinsure’s shares reached a market value of 250 billion Swedish kronas. This made it the largest European life insurance company by market value at the time, a dizzying achievement for what

started out as a provincial fire insurer active in a tiny European economy.

By a curious coincidence, the option-based bonus programme “Wealthbuilder” [sic] created for Northinsure’s top management, which was linked to Northinsure’s share price, expired almost exactly at the time that Northinsure registered its peak market value, in May 2000. When the sums involved began to transpire to the market, the makings of Sweden’s arguably biggest corporate scandal ever was in the making. It takes a couple of years for the press hunt to really build up. When the full-year results come out for 2001, and Northinsure reports a large financial loss for the first time in many years, significant attention is drawn to the sums paid out in executive compensation, particularly the Sharetracker and Wealthbuilder programs. It transpires that the sums paid out significantly exceed the negative profits Northinsure was making, and journalists began questioning why management was draining Northinsures profitability to fill their own pockets.

After a couple of years of negative press, the scandal reaches a peak in the autumn of 2003. By this time, a number of incidents have built up. The initial negative press surrounding the bonus affair was renewed in early 2002, when it transpired that top management had lobbied to renew the incentive program indefinitely after it terminated in May 2000, despite all the negative media attention – although it was subsequently stopped by Northinsure’s board of directors after 4 and a half months. The sale of the fund management business to a regional bank in 2002 eventually became the subject of a lawsuit, since the proceeds were unrightfully distributed between the shareholders of Northinsure AB and the owners as well as customers of the mutual life insurer Northinsure Liv. American Northinsure, once a success story then had to be “fire-sold” at a fraction of its previous market value, after severe mismanagement following John Greedy’s replacement as CEO.

The peak was reached when an article in *Veckans Affärer* was published, which revealed how top members of Northinsure’s management team had secured luxury rental flats in Stockholm, managed and owned by the Northinsure Liv-owned real estate investor Conscientia, for themselves and their family. Not only that, but Northinsure’s vice-CEO had negotiated with Conscientia to finance an

extortionate refurbishment of one of these apartments that he had secured for his son, ultimately at the expense of Northinsure's shareholders, while other tenants of Conscientia's properties were declined basic renovations. These allegations eventually all became subject of a public investigation and lawsuit against Northinsure's management board and board of directors. By the time the investigation reaches its conclusion in the spring of 2004, the sums involved in the various executive compensation programs become known. Over the period 1997-2002, these had cost more than 4 billion Swedish kronas. Of these, 3 billion kronas were paid out based on unrealistically high expectations of future profits (as reflected in Northinsure's inflated share price in 2000), that were never to emerge. John Greedy alone had earned a combined sum of 360 million SEK, from local and global incentive programs. The workings of the once hailed life insurance prodigy were now judged to be an exercise in unbridled corporate greed.

The bad press and low profitability of Northinsure during these years caused the share price to crash. Around the same time, the international financial conglomerate Southinsure was once more looking for acquisition targets in the U.K. Southinsure was one of a number of large South African conglomerates that had tried to diversify its business internationally subsequent to the fall of the apartheid regime. The fear among the predominantly white shareholder community was that the ANC would revert to its more extremist political roots, initially having had more of a communist revolutionary agenda; that South African corporates would become the object of national expropriation, as was happening in Mugabe's Zimbabwe. By diversifying its capital base internationally, Southinsure's foreign subsidiaries could be branched off if expropriation were to happen, and the values there embedded could thus be rescued for the shareholders. Southinsure's headquarters were already in London, were the Southinsure plc holding company was based. So far it had acquired a U.S. life insurance business, and a couple of smaller fund managers in the U.S. and the U.K. Southinsure had always wanted to acquire a U.K. life insurer however, and had previously been in discussions with Northinsure to acquire its U.K. subsidiary, discussions which ultimately failed. By the time they decide to launch an aggressive bid for Northinsure in the fall of 2005, its market value is down to less than 50 billion SEK, less than a fifth of the valuation in June 2000.

Southinsure's bid was eventually successful, and Northinsure was acquired in early 2006. This becomes a tremendous shock to the employees and the management board, more than half of which are replaced by a combination of recruits from peer companies and Southinsure managers. The trust culture is immediately abolished, and Northinsure goes from being a prodigal independent life insurer, the pride of Swedish blue chip companies, to a tightly controlled subsidiary in a diverse financial conglomerate, broken up into three subdivisions. The traumatic loss of prestige that Northinsure experienced during the mid 2000s lives on in the corporate culture to this day, as something of a vacuum, a feeling that something big and significant has been lost. There is a notable absence of pride in the company, a sentiment strongly felt only a few years earlier, replaced by a feeling of subdued collective shame and a defeatist attitude towards the parent company.

Clearly, Northinsure's brand image suffered tremendously from the various scandals and the subsequent takeover. It went from being a star on the Swedish corporate sky, to a black sheep – the epitome of the corporate greed culture during the late -90s – to finally end up simply an anonymous subsidiary in a global conglomerate. Several attempts were made at restoring the public image subsequent to the scandals and prior to the takeover. A notable example is the TV commercial launched in 2004. The setting is a Northinsure sales office, where a Northinsure representative is trying to persuade a customer to buy an insurance policy. She is constantly disturbed by an enormous black pig that runs around in the room, with the word "The Rumour" painted in Swedish on both its sides. The catchline is then that Northinsure has to work twice as hard at managing its client funds and regain customer trust, due to the rumours surrounding the company following the various scandals.

After the takeover however, Southinsure implemented a large cost savings program, aimed at realizing synergies within the group. Little money had been spent on branding and marketing since then. It was against this backdrop that the new branding project, Expedition Northinsure, was launched in early 2010.

Expedition Northinsure

The project was announced by the respective department heads at the weekly department meetings. While our own department head tried hard to sound enthusiastic about it, me and most of my colleagues reacted with cynical apprehension, questioning the need to spend working hours on activities with little practical value for the company, and poking satirical fun at the cheezy powerpoint slides and pictures that accompanied the kick-off presentation. One item in particular became the target of much satire, a treasure map seemingly pasted into Powerpoint using Microsoft Clip Art, which was to symbolize our collective search for Northinsures values. Our boss was frequently interrupted during the presentation, with jocular references to the fraudulent business practices of the previous management team, thus disturbing the attempted discourse of renewal and return to the organization's core values.

At a later general staff meeting, the head of Communication holds a longer, more elaborate presentation about the project. He tells us that the project started off with a customer diagnostic phase, whereby a selection of Northinsure's policyholders were asked to fill out questionnaires, with some being interviewed in a follow-up phase, about their perceptions of Northinsure's brand, image and values. He also shows the results of a commissioned study on brand strength, the outcome of which being that Northinsure is perceived to have the weakest, most anonymous brand value of all financial services peers in Sweden. He continues and emphasizes the importance of a strong brand in contemporary consumer culture, arguing that it is imperative for Northinsures financial survival to strengthen its public image – hence the rationale for the project. My personal reflection at this point, is how branding can then be so important for a life insurer, since Northinsure retains a market leading position and has continued to grow at a pace similar to or higher than the market – yet apparently it has the weakest brand. Surely the choice of occupational or retail pensions provider has more to do with access to distribution channels for occupational pensions (primarily brokers) and the incentives you give them, and in the retail space objective facts such as competitive fees and evidence of high historical returns. There are few matters of

social prestige involved in choosing your pension provider, unlike more conspicuous types of consumption, like cars and expensive watches. All evidence seems to indicate that this is an area of consumption where the rational choice model of consumer behaviour actually has some sway. I wonder how many of my colleagues reflect on this, we are all conscious of our market position and sales performance relative to peers, so the paradox should be evident.

We furthermore learn that the project is structured into six phases:

“Stage 1: What do we bring along for the journey?”

Phase will run from March 10 to April 16.

The first stage is a training camp where your expedition team shall acquire the knowledge you need on the journey towards the most satisfied customers on the savings market. The training camp consists of questions about what Northinsure stands for, where we are going and why. The more you train, the better prepared you will be for the next stage. And for the future.

Stage 2: Are we prepared for future hardships?

Phase will run from March 31 to April 21.

Now the training camp is over and the expedition team will be tested. In this phase you encounter a knowledge test consisting of a number of issues. If you and your group have been involved in Stage 1, you will correctly identify issues and manage them easily. Pep and help each other! The more common knowledge we have at Northinsure, the better prepared we are for future hardships.

Leg 3: Collect around the campfire!

Phase will run from April 21 to May 26

At Northinsure, we have a long tradition of pioneering spirit, inventiveness and product development which has benefited both our customers and society. We are now investing heavily in really understanding what customer value means and what it means to make the customer happy in all circumstances. Now it's time for your team to sit down around the campfire and share stories of our activities. Stories dealing with specific events which led you and your group to feel proud, become involved or seen as a sign of innovation. These may be events where you have been involved personally or events you

have heard about from time to time. These stories are an important part of who we are and can give an indication of where we are going. The two stories in the group you like best will

be submitted to Northinsure's common bank of stories.

Stage 4: Use our value compass!

Phase will run from May 26 to August 27.

An expedition may contain difficult choices. Therefore, a compass can be good to have. Northinsure's compass is based on our values. Respect. Integrity. Accountability. Pushing Beyond Boundaries. Passion. They are the foundation of our brand platform. They form the basis of our personality which means that we are perceived as open, simple and committed to our customers. In Stage 4 it is the task of the Group to come together to play a value judgement game. In the game you are using our value compass to handle various dilemmas you may face in everyday life.

Stage 5: Ten stories about our continuing journey

Phase will run from August 30 to September 24.

During the fifth and final stage, we will present ten amazing stories from stage 3 which are about what we can achieve when we are at our best.

Ten demonstration that we are transparent, simple and dedicated. Your task is to inspect stories and express opinions on them. The stories will then be used internally but also for recruitment and marketing purposes

Goal: Whereto the onward journey?

On September 24 Expedition Northinsure is over, but our journey towards its final destination, the most satisfied customers on the savings market, continues. During the expedition, all employees have acquired new skills and contributed in various ways to Northinsure's development. At the finish, you will be able to obtain results and memories from Expedition Northinsure but also what the onward journey looks like." (Translation from Swedish by the author)

The head of Communication then finishes with an illustration of how our organization's identity, values and brand all come together. It is a flower. Its roots are our values (Respect, Integrity, Passion, Pushing

Beyond Boundaries and Accountability), its kernel our DNA, presumably drawing on our history (Ideas for life), its leaves our personality (Open, Simple and Engaged) and its flower our customer promise (Self-confidence and security in change).

During the first phase of the project, few of my colleagues choose to log into the web-based application with questions about Northinsure's history. At the next department meeting, our head impatiently notes that only two of us have accessed the online application, and this only once. Commenting that this phase admittedly does not yield any scores for our team, it is still necessary to build up knowledge for the second phase, if we are to be successful.

The second phase coincides with quarterly financial reporting. Most of us are very busy, and when our department head tries to encourage us to put more effort into the project, some of my colleagues lose their temper and openly state that they are not going to waste any time on answering stupid questions. After the department meeting, a couple of colleagues comment on how lame they find the whole idea of the project.

At a subsequent department meeting, our head announces the third phase. We all watch an online video with an anthropologist who does consulting work on "storytelling" for large companies in the private and public sector. In the video, he talks about the need for employees to share stories about their experiences in the company, in order to create a meaningful organizational culture that motivates people to commit to their work and feel loyalty to the company. These types of stories also ultimately shape the public perception of Northinsure, how customers see us. By providing us employees with a sense of commonality and purpose, this cultural imprint is conveyed via our brand and customer interfaces to the people that choose to place their savings with us. Neither of us in the team have ever seen or spoken to a customer, so the message of the video doesn't quite resonate with us. We mainly work with financial reporting and thus have no interactions with customers. In terms of stories and culture, the big elephant in the room is the story which no one talks about: about how Northinsure was taken over subsequent to a hostile takeover, and how we now just feel like powerless subordinates, under the yoke of a suspicious and distant foreign owner.

Our head then announces that we should all go out for a drink, “to gather around the camp fire” and recount stories about our experiences in Northinsure. A meeting invite is sent out after the meeting, for an afternoon the coming week.

The atmosphere at the pub is one of resigned cynicism. None of us is able to come up with a representative story of our team’s experiences, the implicit undertone being that the work we do is just routine and meaningless reporting to the parent company, so that they are able to feel in control and making sure that our operations are transparent. There is also an undertone, again, of bad feelings in the team. Neither of the two stories date from the time when the colleagues in question were working in our team. Below is a transcript of the stories:

The helpful Northinsure – In Northinsure, there is a tradition of helping and being there for other people that sits in our spinal cord. When XX was on his way to the office one morning and found a lost bus pass it was natural for him to pick it up. Once in the office X, who is an actuary, searched for the phone number of the owner of the bus pass, rang her up and simply said - Hello, my name is XX and I am calling from Northinsure and have your bus pass, you may want to come to our new office and pick it up. The voice at the other end of the handset, greeted XX with surprised joy and screaming; an hour later they met in our beautiful new reception. To help us get a better world with more solidarity between people is obvious when working with long-term security in everyday life.

The customer-friendly Northinsure – We were working all through the night to launch the new insurance product, so that customers would get their insurance policies and investments be implemented. The new year 2005 had just begun and Northinsure's Swiss department launched an endowment product that was unique with its flexibility in terms of investment opportunities. But it was not just the product that was unique, but the massive increase in new insurance applications and registering them as quickly as possible to meet customer expectations. What the customer probably did not know was that it was the company's CEO who sat down with the customer service department to answer incoming customer calls, the finance department helped to write insurance policies and the sales manager opened custody accounts. Everyone had fun, the priorities were clear - customers would arrive by telephone, they would know when they could get their

money invested and were entitled to personal service at all times and it did not matter who did what as long as the task was solved.

We skip the fourth phase. A couple of colleagues in the team have had private discussions with our department head, where they have made it clear that they will refuse to waste any more time on the project. He thus makes no attempt to gather us together at the next Finance department theme day, when all the teams in the department are meant to sit down and play the value judgement game on the roof terrace. I did not witness their discussion with him, but from what they told me afterwards, it seems like he quietly acquiesced to their demands.

I sneak up to have a look at what the other teams from the department are doing nevertheless. It seems like a traditional board game, somewhat like Jeopardy or Trivial Pursuit. Players are given question cards with everyday moral dilemmas connected to the workplace and customer relations in particular, and are given multiple choice alternatives for how to act. There is always a right answer, and the team with the highest score wins the overall round. Wine is being served, along with finger-food and fruit. I help myself to some wine and stroll around the terrace to observe the other teams' reactions. I witness a number of persons giving wrong answers, and reacting in a somewhat baffled manner. Clearly, the subject of corporate integrity, business ethics and sound employee value judgements is a sensitive topic at Northinsure. The basic conceit of the exercise comes across as a bit awkward: as if the management board are keen to test us, to ensure that we all have adequate ethical standards. There is a shared feeling that this comes across a little presumptuous, given that it was the Management Team and Executive Board of Northinsure who were responsible for the scandals, not the employees in the field.

The fifth phase involves watching 10 video recordings of the team stories that have been selected as most representative of our culture, and are meant to foster feelings of commonality and purpose. The whole department gathers together in the same auditorium where the head of Communication gave the kick-off presentation. Most of the stories that have been selected are told by different sales team across Sweden, Norway and Denmark. They revolve, for the most part, around the common themes of customer orientation, resolving difficulties for customers and helping them find the right savings solution to fit their needs. Some of them come across as overly

emphatic, to the point of kitschy, sentimental exaggeration. I see some of my colleagues making faces at each other, during these videos. Subsequent to the screening, we are encouraged to vote on the intranet for the video that appealed most to us. A couple of weeks later, the winners are announced in an email, where the so called Dream Prize is also announced. The Dream prize apparently consists of a creative inspiration field day, evening, and a subsequent dinner. I hear a number of sarcastic comments about the Dream prize in the corridors, subsequent to this email.

Aftermath

About a month prior to the internal screening of the videos, it was announced that there would be substantial changes in the management team. There had been rumours about this for a number of weeks, but the magnitude of the changes took everyone by surprise. Among the people being replaced were the CEO of Northinsure and the CEO of Northinsure's banking subsidiary – two of the utmost senior management team representatives. The CEO had been the sponsor of Expedition Northinsure, and the CEO who replaced him seems to have dismissed the project as a waste of time. None of the indications of the project culminating in an external marketing campaign, or that the internal branding work would continue, were fulfilled. A bizarre email was sent out by the former CEO, a whole month after he was replaced. It encourages us to carry on the spirit of Expedition Northinsure and not to waste the effort that has been made to build our brand and culture. There are undertones of indignation, suggestive of an accusation against the new management team: that they are not taking this as seriously as they should, and thus wasting all the money and effort that has been put into the project.

Analysis and tentative interpretation

The structure of the project, with an initial customer diagnostic phase followed by internal value orientation exercises and quizzes, show obvious influence from the corporate branding perspective. According to this perspective, organizations should seek consistency between the collective internal identity of their employees, and the way they project themselves to their environment through various kinds of branding and image management tactics. According to some scholars, such identity

aligning activities are especially important for organizations who have experienced a public scandal, or otherwise have been associated with a public impression of disgrace (Dutton, Dukerich and Harquail, 1994).

A number of recipes for achieving alignment are provided by corporate branding scholars, which typically involve an initial assessment of the existing misalignment between image and culture/identity. One example is the ACID test proposed by Balmer and Soenen (1999), where an assessment is made of the (mis)alignment between five "identity types": 1) actual, 2) communicated, 3) conceived, 4) ideal and 5) desired. The preliminary phase of Expedition Northinsure, when customers were asked to articulate their impressions of Northinsure, clearly follows the logic of such a diagnostic, as does the effort to dig into Northinsure's history as a company to find "actual" examples of the "desired" brand identity. To achieve stronger alignment, de Chernatony (1999) furthermore argues for the importance of value orientation quizzes and "surfacing employees' mental models", to diagnose employee value and cultural alignment with the brand vision - elements of which we can see examples of in the first two phases of Expedition Northinsure, as well as Phase 4. Hatch and Schultz (2003) emphasize storytelling as an important tool to strengthen brand identity, a tool which can also be used to seek alignment with the brand image, if the stories are used as impression-management devices in interactions with stakeholders. The last two phases of Expedition Northinsure have clearly picked up on this notion.

A key observation from my own account of the project, is how little enthusiasm it was met with internally. This contrasts sharply with the predictions of the corporate branding perspective, which emphasizes how strong alignment between organizational and individual identity is linked to increased need satisfaction, performance and job satisfaction (Ashforth et al, 2008). Efforts by management to restore a more positive image of the organization should thus, by implication, be welcomed by employees. My initial interpretation of these observations were that the project was lame and conceited, and that attempting to associate Northinsure with responsible corporate citizenship was a bit daring, coming from the company behind the largest corporate scandal in Swedish history. By choosing to completely smooth over the scandal years, the attempt to recreate Northinsure's corporate history as one infused by social responsibility

is fated to be seen as little more than window-dressing activities by its employees.

With time, I began to reflect more on the somewhat exaggerated nature of my own reaction, and that of my colleagues. In my own case, I can see how this was partly influenced by my own identity conflicts in the dual roles I was performing: that of a fake corporate persona, masking an “authentic” covert ethnographer, carrying out theoretically informed research about management practices, with a radical critical lens. My reaction to the project, cynical distancing, was thus predetermined and biased from the outset. As these reflections began to temper my cynical attitude toward the project, I began to see how my own reaction could be reframed as a key research question. There was a certain tension between the violence of my own distancing from the branding project, and the relatively innocuous nature of it. Why was it so important for me to conceive of it as fake and lame? As I began my formal Ph.D. training, I started to immerse myself in the literature on identity theory, and began to see how my conflicting attitudes towards my own business career might be seen in the light of an attempt to identify with alternative social categories. One might see this realisation as a consequence of adopting a discursive perspective on social identity theory, whereby perceived status is acknowledged as a highly subjective measure and not determined by any internal essence of the social groups people aspire to belong to (Knights and Willmott, 1989). I thus gradually began to shift the focus of my interpretation away from the fakeness of the project, to the over-determination of my own attitudes towards it. However, since the reactions of my colleagues had been similar, I began to wonder what mechanisms might lie behind the commonality of our attitudes, even though most of them did not come from a similar background to my own.

Something they had all commented on was the conceitedness of “fixing” the company's image through window-dressing activities. It dawned on me how this was rooted in the fact that they themselves had already disidentified with the company, subsequent to its' image having been damaged by various media scandals. Subsequent attempts to rebrand the company were perceived as fake and inauthentic, a reaction which might be understood as culturally conditioned by contemporary notions of authenticity and self-expression, which have become commodified as important markers of social status and

prestige (Fleming, 2009). These reflections sparked a broader research interest into organizations that have suffered crises of confidence, and how the damage done to the image of the organization affected the willingness of employees to identify with the need for change efforts. In a culture which increasingly turns on the ability to identify with a prestigious self-image, of seeing oneself reflected in the social status of the company one works for, or in the profession one has chosen, organizations become increasingly reliant on a prestigious external image, as a cultural steering device. This latter interpretive turn marked a further shift of focus, away from the specific circumstances of the project run by the organization I worked for, towards the broader contemporary phenomenon of social status and identity as a key mobilizing agent for human effort; how publicly disgraced organizations might end up in a state of inertia, where they lose the ability to mobilize employees to improve the company's external image, as well as address and remedy the concrete problems which have caused it to fall into disrepute. This has also prompted a shift in theoretical perspective, geared more towards understanding the satirical tone of my own attitude towards and representation of Expedition Northinsure (as well as the initial interpretation of the case), from the perspective of narrative theory, particularly an understanding of narrative modes as conditioned by the ethical belief standards prevalent in a particular culture, at a particular point in time.

As argued in the theoretical section on disgrace, Contemporary Western culture has increasingly given up on the idea of constitutionalism, the Enlightenment project of elaborating a progressive social order, justified on the basis of some absolute and universally valid conception of social justice, derived through reason alone. Instead we live in an era of institutional pluralism, whereby a plurality of moral standards and institutional logics are recognized as equally valid, with potential conflicts between them seen as unresolvable. This creates the conditions of possibility for an ironic mode of narration: “a mediate and indirectly insinuating form of discourse”, which “presupposes a complex and multiple system of possible evaluations” (Auerbach, 1953; 221). When rereading my own account of Expedition Northinsure with such a perspective, it has become increasingly clear how my representation of the project leaders – as ultimately ridiculous characters, self-deceived about the potential of improving the image of a hopelessly damaged brand – is heavily

shaped by an ironic mode of narration, with an ultimately comic/satiric plot structure.

As argued by Frye (1953), the movement of comedy is usually a movement from one society to another. The initial society is typically depicted as controlled by habit, ritual bondage and arbitrary law, a state of affairs which the action of comedy moves towards breaking. These rules and regulations are often characterized as absurd and preposterous, an aspect that increases with the extent to which the drama is narrated in an ironic mode. The basic plot structure involves a protagonist whose fortunes change, in parallel to the transformation of the society he forms part of. The obstacles to the protagonist's desires thus form the action of the comedy. These obstacles are typically represented by a blocking antagonist, the humor character. The humor in comedy is usually someone with a good deal of social prestige and power, who is able to force the initially described society into line with his obsessions. The humor is thus intimately connected with the theme of the absurd or irrational rules and regulations, which the comedy's action moves towards disrupting. At the end of a comedy, a new society crystallizes around the hero; one that the audience has recognized all along as the appropriate and desirable state of affairs. The more ironic the mode of narration, the less distinct the features of this final society. Comedy in an ironic mode is thus basically equivalent to satire, where the final state of affairs is simply disintegration, rather than any passage to a distinctly new social order (Frye, 1953).

In my own narrative representation of the rebranding project, Northinsure management's efforts at restoring some measure of cultural authority are in the end defeated, moving the employee community from a controlled state of managerial attempts at rigid regulation, to an emancipated state of disintegration and increased freedom. These attempts at more rigid regulation are characterized as completely absurd, with no concession to the notion that a stronger brand might even be desirable for Northinsure. The main antagonist – the head of Communication responsible for the project – is accordingly characterized as a ridiculous character, obsessed by an irrational idea of branding, and the need for Northinsure to enhance its brand value, through a set of utterly preposterous and meaningless rituals. In the end, the project is described as having had no tangible impact on the

organization, partly due to key members of the management board (who had sponsored the project) getting fired – with the implication that their dismissal by the parent company board might be at least partially related to the absurdity of Expedition Northinsure. The attempt at imposing stronger cultural authority thus fizzles out, and certain of the humor characters are deposed or replaced, causing the initially more rigid social order to disintegrate into a non-distinct state of increased employee freedom. Such a representation of the events, and my own role in them, is arguably more likely to emerge in a culture, where the historically prevailing social ethic has suffered a legitimation crisis, rendering a plurality of judgements and an associated ironic mode of narration possible.

It is also a representation of self (my own role in the chain of events described) that shapes a distinct subject position: one which does not easily lend itself to mobilizing collective efforts to restore a damaged organizational image. While my account of Expedition Northinsure may be seen as a truthful representation of my own reaction to the project – as well as those of my colleagues that feature prominently in it – the interesting point is not so much the personal reasons provided for my skepticism, but rather what cultural conditions contribute to making such reactions and subject positions possible, and what the consequences of such conditions are for using branding as a cultural steering device. This latter interpretive turn shaped the subsequent research orientation of my thesis project, and prompted the idea of conducting a series of case studies of organizations that have suffered crises of confidence, using oral history interviews as an empirical data collection method, analysed using a narrative perspective on identity.

The key finding of this case study then is that there are significant difficulties involved in seeking to actively steer a disgraced organization towards increased alignment between internal identity and public impressions. Some scholars have indeed highlighted these difficulties, and argue, in contrast to the identity alignment ideal of corporate branding scholars, that organizations are embedded in complex social environments and have to relate to multiple stakeholders – an observation more attuned to an understanding of the contemporary social order as characterized by institutional pluralism. In order to sustain their legitimacy, organizations are thus likely to engage in audience-adaptive or even hypocritical constructions and

projections of their identity(ies) – “to talk in a way that satisfies one demand, to decide in a way that satisfies another, and to supply products in a way that satisfies a third” (Brunsson, 2003: 27). In times of public disgrace, organizations are even more likely to develop and employ different accounts to different stakeholders that may or may not be consistent with their beliefs or actions. Perhaps Northinsure should simply have been more hypocritical, and accepted as unavoidable the fact that it operates in a complex environment, requiring a decoupling between the internal identity of the company and its employees and external image management and branding activities designed to restore its public image.

The Yardstick school: a scandal that spiralled

Introduction

This chapter provides a case study of a scandal that befell the Yardstick school, a primary school in Southern Sweden, as well as the municipal authority responsible for running the school, during recent years. The empirical material for the case study consists of newspaper articles, as well as interviews with managerial and teaching staff at the school, as well as the municipal administration unit in charge of the school. The chapter begins with a background, describing the history and present state of the Swedish school system, as well as general problems which this system has experienced on the whole, that provide a better understanding of the circumstances which shaped the course of events that constitutes the scandal at the Yardstick school. This is followed by an account of the newspaper material, a tentative analysis of the interview material, and finally a concluding discussion.

Background

The Swedish school system is commonly said to date back to 1842, when the Folkskole reform was introduced by a parliament act. The act established a compulsory four-year primary school for all Swedish children, the "Folkskola". The system has developed over time,

according to a historical trajectory that bears many similarities with other Western countries, shaped and influenced by a similar set of ideals.

Initially, while the primary level of *Folkskola* was state-funded, children who enjoyed school and had good grades at the primary level could choose to switch to a secondary school called *Högre allmänna läroverket* (HAL). HAL was however not free, so most students came from well-off families (although a limited number of stipends were available for exceptionally gifted but poor pupils). The teaching style at HAL, particularly at the theoretical *realskole* branch, had a reputation for being highly authoritarian, and as such was the subject of much criticism from social democratic as well as liberal commentators, in the early to mid 20th century. Of particular note in this genre of commentary was the 1944 movie *Hets* (scripted by Ingmar Bergman), where Stig Järrel portrays a sadistic latin teacher going under the nickname Caligula, who drives his pupils to despair. Caligula is an authoritarian and manipulative beast of a schoolmaster, who plays on his bourgeois, idealist and inhibited pupils' fears of dissatisfying their parents stern expectations. His award of grades is determined not so much by merit, as by personal fealties. While the Caligula character was probably an unbalanced portrayal of a typical schoolmaster under the old regime, it did convey an important aspect of the profession: to be a teacher in the HAL was seen as a highly prestigious occupation, by virtue of being tasked with the education of the future elites of Swedish society. The authority of the schoolmaster was unquestioned and his reign over the classroom was supreme.

After a number of successive trial launches in different parts of Sweden, the reform of 1972 established a 9-year mandatory (and free) *grundskola* (primary school) in all of Sweden, and an optional but still state-funded three-year *gymnasium* level (secondary school). From the outset, the reform has had to struggle with what might be seen as inherent difficulties in the implementation of mass-education, which typically takes the form of a conflict between an ambition to maintain high educational standards – an ambition which easily falls prey to accusations of elitism – and an emancipatory ambition to bestow the benefits of education and enlightenment as broadly as possible, especially targeting disadvantaged social groups, who, it is argued,

require additional teaching efforts to overcome historical barriers of class, race and privilege.

In Sweden, the solution to this seeming dilemma has been through the articulation and implementation of various pedagogical reforms, which have substantially altered the curricular requirements. These have taken the form of "teaching plans", läroplaner, which specify what subjects should be taught, the pedagogical methods to be used, together with, more broadly, the societal values and goals that should permeate education. Five teaching plans have been introduced for primary school, grundskolan, so far: in 1962 (Lgr 62), in 1969 (Lgr 69), in 1980 (Lgr 80), in 1994 (Lpo 94) and the latest in 2011 (Lgr 11). One consequence of these curricular reforms has been the successive deemphasising, sometimes to the point of disappearance, of many previously mandatory subjects, mostly drawn from the humanities, which used to form part of the classical humanist education ideal – an ideal which consisted in the goal to educate good (in the sense of morally sound) men and women, not just bestow them with practically useful knowledge. The schoolmaster of the old regime thus saw himself as much as a moral and spiritual guide of the young, as a conveyor of knowledge. Partly inspired by Bourdieu's ideas on cultural capital, and more broadly the sociology of taste/aesthetics (Bourdieu, 1973; Veblen, 2005), there has been a strong reaction towards the humanist tradition.

In particular, Bourdieu's ideas on cultural capital have changed the attitude towards the traditional primary and secondary curriculum associated with the bourgeois classical education ideal. The study of ancient history and classical languages, together more broadly with the knowledge traditions in the humanities, has become associated with methods for class discrimination, whereby a ruling bourgeois power elite constructs standards of aesthetic and moral judgement, which become cultural markers of class distinction. This anti-elitist turn has also reinforced a pedagogical shift away from the ideal of the authoritarian schoolmaster, who drills his pupils in hard facts of determined areas of study, towards a more inclusive approach, whereby the pupils are allowed to have more influence over what they are taught and how. It should be noted that this anti-authoritarian turn has not exclusively been a concern of social democrats or other left-wing political parties. In the latest curricular reform (initiated by a

right-wing coalition), much emphasis has been placed on more practical subjects of study, and the school system's role in training and educating future entrepreneurs. Recently, the head of the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise (a liberal corporate lobby group) motioned that history should be dropped altogether as a mandatory subject in primary school.

With the final abolition of the *Högre Allmänna Läroverk* in 1972, an initial blemish on the prestige of the teaching profession might be seen to have emerged. Previously, secondary school teachers in the HAL were tasked to educate the children of those social elites, who could afford it. Now they had to put up with pupils from all social classes, along with being robbed of their supreme role as moral and spiritual guide of the young. Furthermore, the new teaching plans dictated ambitious and far-reaching changes to teaching styles and the underlying pedagogical framework, which all drastically impinged on the individual teacher's authority to determine his own teaching style, educational standards and methods. Many of these changes were seen as wholly legitimate, since the teaching profession had a notorious reputation for being populated by authoritarian schoolmasters, free to abuse their power position in whatever way pleased their sadistic whims. Each new teaching plan has ventured further into circumscribing the authority of individual teachers, specifying in ever more detail how teachers must adapt their educational curriculum and style, so as to align with an ever more progressive pedagogical framework. This often results in a generational conflict at schools, where adherents of the "old guard" of teachers with relatively more authoritarian inclinations, come into conflict with newly-trained, more idealistic teachers who embrace the new, more progressive curriculum and pedagogical framework.

On the municipal level, the municipal administration carries out regular and comprehensive reviews of all teachers and headmasters employed at schools within the municipality, ensuring that they adhere to the current teaching plans as well as the work-hour requirements agreed in the ÖLA. The state-run School Inspection has furthermore been tasked with a secondary layer of review, to ensure that the current teaching plans and curricular requirements are fulfilled, through conducting regular inspections at schools across Sweden. This contrasts markedly against e.g. the Finnish school system (which

coincidentally has one of the highest performance records in the world), where teachers are allowed significantly more discretion in determining the contents and teaching style of their classroom lessons, a context in which the Swedish review system would be seen as an intrusion on the teacher's professional integrity.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, being a state servant was seen as a highly privileged form of employment. The status of state servant began to diminish somewhat with the anti-bureacracy critique of the 1950s and 1960s, which was further picked up and embellished by the neo-liberal political movements of the 1980s and 1990s, who argued that state-run bureaucracies were inefficient and staid compared to privately run corporations, who relied more on cutting-edge management doctrine to constantly improve their efficiency, customer-orientation and competitiveness. A consequence of this was the political initiative commonly referred to as "New Public Management" policies, which sought to introduce management techniques from the private sector in various state and municipality-run sectors of Swedish society – following an international trend in so doing.

With respect to the school system, NPM policies were embodied in the Lpo 94 and Lpf 94 teaching plans, as well as the 1995 ÖLA agreement between the Association of Swedish Municipalities, and the two teaching-staff labour unions in Sweden. Among other things, the ÖLA abolished a long-running privilege associated with the teaching profession, namely that of relatively generous and flexible hours of work. Previously, teachers were required to spend a minimum amount of teaching time in classrooms per week (typically less than 20 hours), with the remaining brunt of their work-time free to dispose of at their own discretion, whether to prepare for classes at home or at an office in the school building where they worked, in the morning or in the evening. Instead, the in-office working hours of teachers were specified to a minimum of 1360 hour per year. This drastically reduced the discretionary proportion of work-time, along with reducing the amount of vacation time per year, and served to further decrease the status and desirability of the occupation.

Since the 1970s, the salary levels of teaching staff have also lagged markedly behind the levels of salary inflation in other sectors of Swedish society, presumably due to a general cultural devaluation of public sector work, causing a public unwillingness to allow for tax-

funded public sector salary increases. This successive chain of developments has served to render the teaching profession as a relatively low-status occupation, in the eyes of contemporary Swedes. Its low popularity is reflected in the grade requirements for admission to "Lärarhögskolan", a separate institution of higher learning and examination body responsible for turning out qualified teachers. In many municipalities, grade requirements (over and above a "pass" in all subjects) have been dropped altogether, causing a widely observed drop in the performance record of recently qualified teachers (as compared to earlier generations).

Recently, there has been an intensification of the public debate around the Swedish education system. It was rated as the no 1 political issue in the most recent parliamentary elections, following a heated debate about falling performance standards, carried out in newspapers, TV-shows and political debates. The point of contention has been the drastic fall in performance standards of pupils graduating from Swedish secondary school, compared to historical performance records, as well as in an international context. Swedish schools currently rank as among the poorest in the OECD, in terms of pupil performance scores on internationally comparable tests. The blame has more or less uniformly fallen on the teaching profession, with some variation in the alleged cause of this fall from grace. Some right-wing liberal commentators have blamed the progressively anti-authoritarian pedagogical framework successively introduced through various teaching plans, which has placed ever more emphasis on the pupils choosing for themselves what they want to learn from a menu-based curriculum in each subject, rather than, say, imposing minimum standards of acceptable achievement in core subjects.

Other critics have focused on the administrative reform of 1994, whereby budget responsibility for the school system was diffused and rolled out to municipal authorities. Left-wing commentators have focused more on the low salary-levels of teachers, and the job's lack of social prestige (although careful not to acknowledge how certain social democratic reforms have contributed in this respect). The debate arguably derailed completely with the TV-show "Klass 9A", where a group of pedagogical experts travelled around Sweden to visit particularly badly run schools. In these shows, individual teachers were confronted and "shamed" – American reality show style - by said

pedagogical experts, in a highly choreographed exercise which triggered massive indignation among the high number of viewers who followed the show. The public attitude to teachers in Sweden has since become that of a scandalised profession.

It is in this heated context which the headlines surrounding events at the Yardstick school start to emerge, initially mainly in the local press, but culminating with nationwide TV and newspaper coverage.

The media coverage

The background to the chain of events that constitute the scandal at the Yardstick school is that of a typical generational conflict between an older guard of teachers, and a younger administration team at the local municipal authority, eager to ensure that the school adheres to the latest teaching plan and other relevant regulation. The school had been de facto run by a group of four elderly teachers of the old regime (called the Gang of Four, in a peculiar reference to the Chinese political faction who were charged with instigating the cultural revolution, subsequent to the death of Mao Zedong), who had refused to implement Lpo 94, as well as live by the work-day requirements imposed by the labour contract agreement set out in ÖLA 95. The teachers at the school stuck to their own version of the old curricula, and only showed up for teaching classes, refusing to put in the office face-time stipulated by ÖLA 95. The performance record of pupils at the school was however above the national average, and successive teams of headmasters and municipal administrators found it hard to break the hold of the Gang of Four, in terms of the routines they imposed and lived by. And so the Yardstick School maintained its own regime, in defiance of national regulation.

As such, the history of the affair goes back much further in time, with a long chronicle of press articles tracing the insubordination of the School, as it became apparent through publicly available inspection protocols from e.g. visits by the School Inspection, that the school was being run in plain defiance of national regulations. There is a further dimension to this press chronicle, in that the municipality had received a long list of complaints from parents of children with learning difficulties, who claimed that certain teachers at the school were harassing pupils with lower abilities – reports of which sometimes

transpired in the local press. This all accumulated to an image of the Yardstick school as being run by a group of authoritarian schoolmasters, in patent insubordination to the municipal authorities, refusing to implement national regulations. In the end, this image became unacceptable to the municipal authorities, who felt a need to demonstrate decisive action, and confront the situation. Ironically, it was precisely this decision that set off the chain of events, which would subsequently come under such intense public scrutiny. The attempt to react upon negative publicity thus only triggered a counter-storm of media scrutiny, causing a scandal of massive proportions

I have chosen to delineate the chain of events covered in the press, by the point in time when the team of headmasters at the Yardstick school receive notice of discharge from the municipal authorities in June 2008. This decision was taken by a new head of school administration, Ada (see interview accounts in the next section), who had been hired by the municipal authorities, partly with the task to finally try and achieve adherence to Lpo 94 at the Yardstick school, since the school had been receiving renewed criticism from the state School Inspection, calling for immediate action. The below diagram shows the monthly frequency of articles in the two main local newspapers (called here "The Southern Daily" and "The Southern") covering the chain of events from June 2008, up to April 2011, when the team of municipal administrators are given notice of discharge from their positions.

Incidentally, the notice of discharge coincided with a period when the school had suffered budgetary problems, leading to some minor news coverage about the reshuffling of pupils into larger sized classes, to save money. One of the first articles in the Southern Daily in June 2008 thus contains an interview with Ada, the new head of school administration, questioning her motives for replacing the headmaster team in the midst of budgetary difficulties: surely a recruitment is costly? Here, an institutional logic that draws on notions of chronic cost inefficiency in public administration is deployed to implicate the municipal authorities as wasteful, in their use of tax-funded public resources. None of the background to the conflict at the school is presented as rationale for the replacement.

In September 2008, several incidents unrelated to the change of administration and headmaster team are reported: a pupil at the school is harassed online, and someone paints a swastika on a locker. There is

a lot of marked indignation in the commentary to the articles however, with implicit allegations that the school is badly run. In November 2008, the parent of a pupil files a report to the state School Inspection. According to Lpo 94, a school should only have one headmaster, to ensure accountability. The Yardstick school has a temporary headmaster team of three (though only one on full-time), which has been appointed to ensure successful implementation of and transition to precisely Lpo 94. This is not actually in breach of Lpo 94, since only one of them has responsibility for the wellbeing of the pupils, the others have administrative and supporting duties. Nonetheless, much is made in these articles of "questionable" practices at the Yardstick school, drawing on institutional logics to do with (the lack of) professionalism and competence in public administration (as compared to the private sector), which implicate the municipal authorities and headmaster team as incompetent stooges, unable to adhere to the very teaching plans they have been tasked to implement.

A period of relative quiet ensues until March 2009, when news emerge that a private primary school, Education Inc, plans to establish itself in the region. Under the Swedish system, since 1994, private schools have unlimited rights to establish themselves alongside municipally run schools. As long as they don't charge supplementary tuition fees, they are allocated "skolpeng", a tax-funded per-pupil allotment to cover the costs of teaching and administration. This system has put a lot of pressure on the municipally run schools, since when a private school is established, it draws away pupils from the municipal schools, thus reducing their budgetary allotment. Since municipal budgets are required to balance at all times (see below), this forces them to cut costs, typically in the form of teaching staff and books. As a consequence of Education Inc's establishment, the municipal authorities are forced to take the difficult decision to hand out notice of discharge for 15 teachers in the region. This is reported in the local press as a minor scandal, with articles containing plenty of speculation as to how the situation at the Yardstick school will deteriorate further, with even less teachers per pupil than before. A lot of hard words and questions are directed to Ada and the Yardstick school headmaster team, as to why they've taken such a drastic decision and how they plan to cope with the resulting loss of staff.

It is worth noting that the staff discharge was not the result of a discretionary decision by the municipal authorities. In 2000, the Swedish state government introduced a requirement for municipal budgets to balance. The purpose of this requirement was to avoid debt financing of municipal spending, and chronic budget deficits. While many municipalities are underfunded by local tax revenue, and thus dependent on budget contributions from other municipalities via the state-imposed so-called Robin Hood-tax, the budgeted revenue for any fiscal year must always exceed the budgeted costs. Realised funding shortfalls need to be restored to surplus over a three-year cycle. Within the context of the municipal school system, where privately run schools are allowed to compete with municipal schools, this creates a competitive advantage for the privately run schools, since (unlike their municipal peers) they can run temporary deficits, aiming to attract pupils from the municipal players through e.g. increased spending on tuition. All schools are funded by a municipal per-pupil allocation, which is intended to cover the cost of teaching, rent, teaching materials etc. Since running a school is inevitably associated with a certain fixed proportion of the total cost base (such as ground rent), an unexpected reduction in the number of pupils (and hence allotments) will typically cause a realized funding deficit. Given the municipal balance requirement, this may well cause a spiraling competitive dynamic, where a lower number of pupils causes municipal spending cuts, which in turn cause more pupils to transfer to the private competitor. This risk has indeed been highlighted in some of the public inquiries that preceded the school reform, which allowed for competition between private and municipal schools.

Education Inc's decision to establish themselves in the region furthermore lies outside the control of the municipal authorities. None of the articles contain any broader discussion of the inadequacies in this specific aspect of the Swedish school system, whereby the free right to establishment of private schools in a municipally funded system (with a fixed per-pupil cost allocation) threatens the financial soundness of existing municipally run schools, nor their consequent competitive disadvantage (caused by the municipal budget balance requirement). The full blame for the discharge of the 15 teachers is put on the municipality. Again, these allegations draw on institutional logics related to professionalism and competence in public administration, presuming that if the municipal school managers were

somehow more competent, they could, through some quasi-magical administrative trick, achieve budget balance without dismissing any staff. A new vice headmaster for the Yardstick school is reported to have been hired in April, to replace one of the previous trio who has handed in her notice. Some questioning of this decision is made, contrasting against the decision to fire 15 teachers.

The discharge of the 15 teachers had to adhere to prevalent labour laws in Sweden, meaning that the most recently hired staff had to leave first. This means that "the Gang of Four" were unaffected. With time, it becomes increasingly clear that this group of teachers have no intention to accommodate their teaching style and curriculum to Lpo 94, despite hard efforts by the headmaster team to drive through its implementation. In May 2009, it is reported in the press that four teachers at the Yardstick school have received notice of discharge for "personal reasons". The articles cite difficulties in agreeing with the new headmasters, but no account in respect over what matters is given, creating the impression that the headmasters simply didn't like them. A local union head ("Bo") is interviewed, who calls the decision "unheard of". He claims to have previously experienced only one such case of discharge for personal reasons, but there the motive was relatively clear. Bo claims that there are no substantial grounds for discharge in this case - eventhough resistance to the implementation of national mandatory regulation might be seen as a relatively valid ground.

The newspaper articles here draw on a rather different suite of institutional logics (as compared to previous articles), which are more to do with fair and unbiased managerial treatment of staff, implicating the municipal school managers and headmaster team as despotic and biased by personal fealties. This is a common attitude towards politicians as well as employees in public administration in the right-wing pre, fuelled by a populist version of management doctrines, which claims privately run organizations to be more professional and efficiently run: the profit-motive allegedly ensures that promotion is based on merit alone (since otherwise profitability would be impaired). Of course, there are no empirical investigations or analytical models which support this claim: the principal-agent problem is equally applicable to privately owned organizations as organizations under

public administration, giving rise to the same theoretical incentives for personal fealties and bias or patronage.

In October 2009, there is another flurry of allegations, following a report written by the Swedish Work Environment Authority (SWEA), which claimed that the circumstances surrounding the discharge of the 15+4 teachers had created an unsound working environment, detrimental to the wellbeing of the teaching staff at the Yardstick school. Here, we encounter institutional logics typically associated with the discourse on leadership: the ability to maintain a positive and inspiring work environment. The headmasters are implicated as lacking in empathy and talent for leadership. Spring 2010 is relatively quiet, until May 2010, when it is announced that the headmaster team at the Yardstick school have handed in their resignations. No account of their reasons for doing so is given. The articles quote the politically appointed president of the municipal cultural committee, Caroline, who expresses consternation and disappointment. “When we hired this headmaster team”, she is quoted as saying, “we perceived it a long-term recruitment to facilitate and implement demanding change work at the Yardstick school”, implicating the decision of the headmaster team as an irresponsible and selfish act, tantamount to leaving a sinking ship. The institutional logic at work here is more explicitly moralistic, compared to those previously deployed to construct the behavior of the headmaster team and municipal authorities as scandalous. Their decision to resign is construed as disgraceful, primarily from the vantage point of such old-fashioned moral virtues as duty and loyalty to one’s employer; virtues which arguably jar somewhat with the NPM doctrine about flexibility, careerism and personal sovereignty.

In reality, the background to the resignation was an escalating conflict between the headmaster team and the municipal administration. The discharge of the 15+4 teachers had not sufficed to remedy the school’s financial situation, since more pupils than expected chose to leave the school and join Education Inc in the autumn of 2010, partly as a result of all the negative press coverage surrounding the Yardstick school. When the results started to turn red, the municipal authorities implemented a budget freeze –in line with instructions from the politically appointed municipal cultural committee – meaning that the headmasters could not hire any additional staff, buy any new books, or

even hire temporary replacement teachers for ordinary staff on sick leave. After the report from the SWEA, many teachers start to call in sick excessively, partly as an act of demonstrating their disapproval of the conditions at the school. With no budgetary capacity to hire temporary replacement staff, many pupils miss out on a substantial part of their curriculum during the semester. Furthermore, the remaining teaching staff have to work overtime to cover for their absent colleagues, meaning that they often arrive unprepared for classes in subjects for which they have no formal training. Finally, under the weight of the negative press coverage and the lack of financial support from the municipality, the headmaster team decide to give up. Of course, none of these reasons are accounted for in the press coverage.

In August 2010, it is reported that a new team of headmasters have been hired to the Yardstick school. September and October are relatively quiet, until the bomb detonates in November 2010: the new team of headmasters are to resign after only 2 months of service. It eventually transpires that one of them leaves his assignment for medical reasons, although no account of what specific reasons is given, apart from stress. Also in November, it is reported that a group of parents have filed an application to the state School Inspection, to put the school under state administration. In the period November 2010 to March 2011, there is a perfect storm of press coverage. Little of what is reported constitutes newly transpired incidents or circumstances at the school. Instead, the whole repertoire of previous incidents is recycled and revisited, as a kind of (mostly jumbled and incoherent) chronological account and reminder of the chain of events leading up to the application to the School Inspection. This exercise in “taking stock” does result in a number of new takes on the affair, providing polemical material for further scandal constructions. In November, there are 4 interviews in the Southern with members of the municipal board, who are subjected to a form of interrogation which falls firmly in the naming and shaming genre of journalistic inquiry. The questions are all of the form: “How could you have allowed such a state of affair to come about?”. There are no questions that address systemic aspects of the affair, or even try to unravel more particular causes; the focus is entirely on scandalizing the politicians, municipal administrators and headmasters subjected to the interrogation.

The media attention culminates in January 2011, when Ada's superior is reported to have been noticed of discharge, and in February 2011, when Ada herself is reported to leave her post. A number of articles follow in both the local newspapers, which raise speculative questions as to the reasons behind their discharge. The journalists claim to have called the head of the municipal authority to ask for the causes behind the discharge, but report that no answers were provided, implicating some sinister and sordid background motives, which the authorities presumably prefer to keep away from public scrutiny. In reality, this is a common tactic for organizations subjected to negative publicity. A sacrificial offering of a scapegoat – by discharging some responsible authority figure involved in the affair in question - is commonly advised by PR-consultants as an effective impression-management device, to satisfy the journalistic and readership desire for retribution, ultimately serving to deflect media attention – a phenomenon referred to by Jackal (1980) as “blametime”. Subsequent to the notice of discharge, media attention indeed gradually fizzles out. In March 2011, a final flurry of “taking-stock” articles are published in both the Southern and the Southern Daily, which are based on a reported assessment of the total number of teachers (52) that the pupils in a specific class (9a) has had, during their three years of upper primary school, but there are no allegations of misconduct directed at specific persons involved in the affair, presumably since none of them are around any more.

The managerial interview accounts

Both Ada and Hilda start their accounts by providing a background story as to their chosen career-paths. They both started out as primary school teachers in Southern Sweden, but were offered to switch over to managerial careers; Ada as head of school administration in a number of municipalities, Hilda as headmaster for a number of schools. They both express a measure of pride in this, viewing the respective promotions as a token of merit and achievement in their career lives. Hilda, who is the elder of the two, in particular emphasizes how skewed the gender distribution among headmasters was when she got promoted, adding a further sense of triumph to her account of such an achievement:

“You must understand, that when I started working as a teacher in Lund – this was in the late 1960s, mind you - the notion of a female headmaster was unheard of. The profession was dominated by old men (“gubbar”). So you, see, when I was offered the job, I was both flattered and at the same time a little scared. There was a lot of talk behind my back among my male colleagues too. It didn't help that Lund at the time was a very conservative part of Sweden.”

Ada emphasizes how her decision to switch to municipal administration was motivated by her interest in leadership:

“I liked being a teacher, and I think I was quite good at the job. However, I had reached a point in my life where I wanted to take on something new, a challenge. This is what appealed to me about the job offer in municipal administration, the leadership role – it was a new challenge, and I have always been interested in leadership. With hindsight though, I am not sure I should have accepted the role at Bowlaby municipality. I have learned a lot from this episode, I don't think I would accept a role involving a similarly charged situation, with the same level of media attention.”

The basic plot structure of most narratives, as proposed by Freytag (1968), typically involves an initial exposition part, which serves to introduce the main characters in the story, how they relate to one another, their goals and motives, etc. In terms of narrative structure, we may see this exposition as an initial “move” or narrative function that serves to establish the protagonist of the story (one is always the protagonist in one's own life story) as having attained a certain level of meretricious achievement and position of repute, at the outset or commencement of the story that is to follow. This is a commonly employed opening function in tragic narratives, going back to classical Greek tragedy.^{xii}

Both Ada and Hilda proceed to describe the circumstances surrounding their respective appointments as municipal head of school administration and headmaster. Ada had been working in a municipality with school children from more socially distressed backgrounds, when she was offered to take up a position in the Bowlaby municipality: an area where most pupils come from more privileged family backgrounds. It struck her as an attractive offer, since the work at her previous employer – while rewarding – was

ultimately very difficult, given the conditions and circumstances created by the social background of the pupils in the municipality. Likewise, Ada had reached a stage in her career, where she felt keen on taking on new challenges. They then both proceed to describe the situation at the Yardstick school, in relatively similar terms: the flagrant insubordination of the authoritarian teacher regime; along with incidents of harassment of pupils with lower learning abilities, circumstances which had accumulated over time to reach a situation which was simply not seen as acceptable, by the School Inspection or the municipal authorities in charge. Here then was an assignment, with a clear and important purpose, together with an unambiguous, morally sound justification. In terms of narrative function, this still follows a typical morphological pattern for tragedy, whereby the protagonist is presented with an important and/or challenging problem, typically in the form of a task or undertaking, the response to which is subsequently to bring about his/her downfall.

Both Ada and Hilda take great troubles to describe the importance of the task: how the situation at the Yardstick school had completely derailed, and reached a point where it risked being closed down, if decisive action was not taken. Ada emphasizes the unambiguous instructions from the municipal cultural committee:

”We were told in clear terms what our task was: we simply had to address and remedy the critique from the School Inspection. We had to force the teachers to adhere to Lpo94, otherwise the school would be closed down. From my superior, Bengt, I was informed that this would most likely involve loosening the hold of some of the senior teaching staff at the school. This is why we ultimately decided to hire a new headmaster team. Bengt told me that the old headmaster Lea had been around for a couple of decades, and had insufficient authority to influence the senior teaching staff. When instructed by the municipal authorities to enforce Lpo94 in the past, she had shied away from confronting the ”Gang of Four” and connived at their insubordinate practices. We would probably need to replace her with a team of headmasters with more firmness and authority, preferably external hires, since they would not be bound by personal feelings, fear or loyalty to the senior teaching staff.”

Again, this is a typical convention in tragic narratives: of presenting the protagonist’s assignment as absolutely and ineluctably demanding decisive action, inaction is not an alternative.^{xiii}

They then proceed to describe the events that followed. Ada describes how she and Bengt confronted Lea, the headmaster at the Yardstick school at the time, with the requirement to implement Lpo94, and their subsequent realization that she would not be capable of achieving this task. The decision was taken to replace Lea with a new headmaster team, and furnish them with the mandate to implement the required changes. She then proceeds to describe the hiring of the new headmasters, and how both she and her superior were initially very pleased by the commitment and initiative they showed, as well as the rapidity with which they attempted to implement the switch to Lpo94.

Hilda confirms this picture. She was the second headmaster hired to the team of three that were assigned to “fix” the issues at the Yardstick school. Initially, she was only assigned on a 50% contract, working part-time as a headmaster at another municipal school. Elsa, who was hired on a full-time basis, had general headmaster responsibilities, while Ada was assigned specifically with the task to enforce adherence to Lpo94. She describes how she set about doing so in a no-nonsense managerial style:

”I simply gathered all teaching staff to an initial meeting and presented them with the situation as it was. We had to adhere to Lpo94, or the school would be closed down. There was some grumbling from the Gang of Four on hearing of this, but I didn't leave any room for alternatives. I then presented them with my project plan, and they were each tasked to return to me with individualised teaching plans for the upcoming semester, showing how they would incorporate the Lpo 94 requirements. I was initially surprised by how compliant they turned out to be. I guess they had finally come to understand the seriousness of the situation.”

At this point in Ada's narrative, the account switches over to what Freytag terms the “rising action” phase, whereby the basic problem or conflict in the plot is rendered more complicated, by the introduction of related secondary conflicts and/or obstacles. In tragic narratives, things go relatively well for the protagonist during the rising action phase, up until the moment of climax, which marks a change for the worse. Ada describes how the hiring of the new headmaster team initially garnered some unfortunate negative publicity (as described in the press account above). Furthermore, her superior (“Bengt”) chooses to resign 6 months after she joined the municipality, and is replaced by

an external hire (“Örjan”), who Ada initially finds it very hard to get along with. Nevertheless, she maintains a positive attitude and eventually learns to adapt to Örjan’s hard-boiled management style. Throughout this phase of Ada’s interview account, she repeatedly emphasizes how she maintained a positive attitude and a firm belief that the change project would eventually be successful.

The climax (or *peripeteia*) in Ada’s account occurs around the summer of 2010, when the two headmasters (Elsa and Hilda) hand in their resignation. This comes as a complete surprise to her, although she acknowledges that she had felt squeezed between Örjan’s hardcore insistence on pursuing swift progress in the change efforts, and the headmasters’ complaints that things were running too fast, and that they needed more resources. While the actual chronology of events appears to be more stretched out in time (when triangulating with other sources), Ada represents this climax as a more or less simultaneous conjuncture of negative incidents. Education Inc is established, forcing her to dismiss 15 teachers and effect a budget freeze, the headmaster team resigns and the Yardstick school suddenly becomes a scene of turmoil, with disenchanted teachers protesting against harsher working conditions brought about by the budgetary difficulties. Following this narrative climax, the plot in her story takes a turn for the worse, with a declining sequence of unfortunate actions and events that eventually leads to the dismissal of Örjan, and her own replacement.

While she admits to an initial feeling of frustration, bordering on mild despair, she nevertheless collects her spirits, and sets to work finding a replacement for the headmaster team that resigned. Her positive spirits are somewhat restored, as she manages to find what appears to be a suitable replacement. However, an ominous foreboding of the future turn of events occurs when the resigning headmaster team show up for a handover meeting at the municipal authorities, together with the replacement team that Ada has hired. For no explicable reason, Örjan throws a tantrum and starts accusing the resigning team of irresponsible behavior and lack of loyalty. Ada believes that this gave the replacement team a bad impression of their future employer, which may account for the fact that they chose to leave so quickly. Shortly after this meeting, the sequence of declining action starts gathering momentum. The municipal authorities organize an information meeting during the early autumn of 2010, which parents of pupils at

the Yardstick school are invited to attend, where Örjan and Ada were planning to provide more information to said parents, to explain the reasons for the turbulence at the school, and assuage their fears regarding the future. This meeting derails completely. Just before Örjan plans to present a powerpoint presentation with an account of the change project initiated at the school, a renegade teacher hijacks the meeting by inserting a USB-stick in Örjan's laptop, and pulling up an alternative powerpoint slide with a picture of a burning oil-rig and the headline "This is the Yardstick school". Örjan gets no opportunity to present his presentation; instead the meeting is taken over by indignant parents who use the opportunity to vent their frustration with members of the local press, who were also present. A flurry of negative publicity follows.

Next, Ada describes being called to a budget meeting with the municipal council, where she is upbraided for failing to secure budget balance, and admonished to increase budget discipline thenceforth. A complete cost freeze (on new staff hires, temporary staff as well as book purchases) is instigated as a consequence, causing increased teacher dissatisfaction with the circumstances at the school. In conjunction with this, the newly hired vice headmaster at the Yardstick school begins showing peculiar signs of distress, with stories of tantrums and emotional outbursts circulating among the teaching staff. Eventually, it transpires that he has had a nervous breakdown, and he is taken off duty for treatment. Shortly after this, the remaining headmaster resigns, after less than three months at the job. This is the time when the negative publicity reaches a climax, during the period November 2010 – March 2011. Not much of substantial weight occurs during this period, the resignation simply appears to have been the final straw that triggered a perfect storm of indignant publicity. The situation at the school now manages to make national headlines, and Ada is asked to participate in a TV interview to answer questions from a presenter on a national news show. She is particularly bitter about this episode:

"It was awful. They filmed me from this awkward angle, where I was standing in a corner of the room. All the questions were formulated in extremely simplistic terms, designed to lay the blame fully on me as an individual, like: How did it come to this? Why have so many teachers and headmasters resigned? How do you think the pupils will be affected by such

high turnover of staff? There was no room to explain any of the background and causal factors behind the chain of events I was trying to ride out. It took me a long time to get over this interview, I still get angry when I look at the photos that circulated in the press afterwards, with me standing in that corner looking like a fool. I was completely unprepared for it. Given what I know now, I would never participate in a TV interview again, not under such circumstances.”

Ada manages to hire another replacement team (who end up staying longer), but is nevertheless offered by the municipal authorities to change her post, shortly after Örjan was given notice of discharge. She describes this as a disappointment. She was keen to finish the change work that she had started, to stay on and show that she could successfully resolve the conflict. Instead, she was offered to step out of the limelight, something she perceived as ultimately humiliating. She does claim that the municipal authorities were keen to point out to her that the decision was made for strategic reasons, to deflect negative attention from the press – rather than having anything to do with her personal capabilities. She persists in feeling somewhat humiliated by the transfer though, and still gets hate mails from one of the teachers that were asked to retire prematurely:

“When I was offered the other job, it was obvious that they wanted to remove me from all the press attention. I was a little offended by this, since I hadn't done anything wrong. The school was ultimately following Lpo94. I was doing my best to manage the budget squeeze caused by the flight of pupils to Education Inc, and things were beginning to stabilise. I would have preferred to ride out the storm and make sure that the school would continue to run smoothly. I remember feeling all empty inside during the summer that followed. I tried to take up some of my prior interests in gardening, to occupy myself and stop my mind from cycling back through the chain of events that caused all this, but it was hard. With time, I have learnt to appreciate my new assignment as education strategist. It enables me to think more about the long-term issues, and of ways we can avoid similar situations in the future. Occasionally I am reminded by the scandal, like when I get emails from this teacher who claims that I have ruined his life.”

She shows me a transcript of an email from one of the teachers that were forced to retire, in which he claims that his honour and reputation

as a teacher has been soiled for all time to come, and that his retirement package is insufficient to live comfortably on. He claims to have planned to continue working much longer, to ensure a better pension.

The climax in Hilda's story occurs somewhat earlier than in Ada's. Following her being hired in March 2009, there is a similar plot sequence of rising action, during which she maintains the belief in a positive outcome for the change project she was hired to facilitate. Hilda describes the situation at the Yardstick school when she joined as lacking a "we-feeling", something she immediately set about working to change. There had furthermore been a visit by the School Inspection, which had resulted in a negative report. According to the report, Hilda claims:

"The project to implement Lpo 94 had caused a dip in teaching quality, due to confusion about the new knowledge goals, as well as transition to a new teaching plan in the middle of ongoing studies."

Hilda rapidly set about implementing a follow-up program to remedy the identified problems, which yielded distinctly positive results, in an internal follow-up study conducted with pupils at the school. At the same time, it became increasingly apparent that the "Gang of Four" persisted in their attitude of resistance to the change efforts, and so she and Elsa took the difficult decision to have them discharged and/or replaced. Hilda is careful to point out that the report from the School Inspection made explicit mention of a "phalang" of teachers, whose resistance to the new teaching plan was blamed for e.g. much of the confusion around knowledge goals – the discharge of key members of this phalang was not the result of some subjective whim of hers or Elsa's, unlike the way it was represented in the press. Hilda furthermore thinks that the discharge was performed in a respectful manner:

"Some of them were offered early retirement. You know, these people were quite old, two of them would have reached retirement age within the coming year anyway. Others were offered replacement jobs at different schools, one of them is actually working with me here at my new school – we get along fine now. I personally believe it is important to show appropriate respect for people who have worked for that long, and I believe that we succeeded in

doing so. A lot of the bad press subsequent to the Gang of Four being removed came from one specific teacher, Leif, who was also a member of the teachers' union. We really didn't get along, I think he overreacted and exaggerated wildly. But of course, the press loved to quote him and his rants.”

Leif was the one interviewed in the article in the Southern, where the discharge of the “Gang of Four” was reported, and who claimed that there were no substantial grounds for their dismissal. Hilda makes no mention of the teacher who persists in sending hate mails to Ada.

The period of rising action, during which Hilda maintained a persistent attitude of positive expectations with respect to the outcome of the change project, and during which significant achievements were made towards this end, is relatively short, lasting from March 2009 until the start of the autumn term. Hilda represents the sequence of events during the autumn term as a condensed climax, during which a confluence of negative events conspired to turn the tide of action against her and Elsa. The opening of Education Inc results in a higher loss of pupils than expected, causing the onset of budgetary problems and the concomitant cost freeze that resulted in a negative spiral of teachers calling in sick due to stress, and increasing discontentment with the way things were being run. A group of teachers, where Leif featured prominently, demand an inspection from the Swedish Working Environment Agency (SWEA), claiming that the way the dismissal of the Gang of Four was carried out had negatively impacted the mood and work environment among remaining colleagues at the Yardstick school. Hilda blames Lef for drumming up such negative sentiments among his colleagues, which ultimately influenced the negative tone of the report issued by SWEA. The negative publicity that ensued from this report had an almost self-reinforcing effect on the negative attitudes of the teaching staff, even though the articles were heavily biased. As Hilda puts it:

“It was like the negative publicity about us, the headmaster team, fuelled another wave of teacher resistance, cynical attitudes and dissatisfaction. Some teachers took the opportunity to participate in interviews, where they would reinforce the blame on us (the headmasters), others started to call in sick excessively or simply fail to show up for classes they were supposed to

teach. Since we had no financial means to employ substitute teachers, pupil satisfaction with the teaching standards fell back again.”

Like Ada, Hilda initially refuses to surrender in the face of this negative climax, but simply rolls up her sleeves and sets about working on a program to remedy the problems identified by the SWEA inspection. She believes that they had made relatively good and substantial progress towards the end of the autumn term, but the impact of the negative publicity on the teachers’ attitude was beyond repair. During the spring term, it also transpires that the Yardstick school has incurred a budget shortfall for 2009 of 200,000 SEK, despite cutbacks on staff and the implemented cost freeze. The municipal council prove to be entirely merciless on hearing of this, insisting that stronger measures are taken to enforce budget discipline and hold costs down. With such compact resistance from both the teaching staff at the school, as well as lack of understanding from the municipal council and authorities, Elsa decides to give up and hand in her resignation. When Hilda hears of this, she likewise decides to leave her job.

Compared to Ada’s account, the sense of downfall and personal misfortune is less acute in Hilda’s story. It was her voluntary decision to leave the school, she was not dismissed or conveyed as incapable of performing her job, an impression which Ada shows a more bitter apprehension about. Hilda does comment on the negative publicity generated by her decision to quit in relatively bitter terms though. There were several articles where her and Elsa’s resignation were conveyed as irresponsible and selfish acts, in the midst of such ongoing turmoil at the school. The head of the municipal council in particular was quoted as feeling disappointed with their decision, having expected that they would stay on longer to bring the change project to a close. Hilda thinks it highly ironic that she should be conveyed as irresponsible, when it was the head of the municipal council who insisted on merciless adherence to budget discipline, under such chaotic circumstances – leaving Hilda no choice but to resign. Even though the sense of downfall and misfortune is substantially downplayed in Hilda’s narrative, there lingers a tone characteristic of a bitter end to this episode of her life:

“If I had the opportunity to choose again, I definitely would have declined the job offer at the Yardstick school. It has marked my career in a way that I find to be completely undeserved, and which still leaves me feeling bitter when I think about it. But I am happy that I chose to move on when I did. If I were to have stayed on, I believe it would have damaged my career prospects more seriously.”

The teaching staff interview accounts

Similar to the managerial interview accounts, the teachers I have interviewed all commence their respective accounts of the sequence of events at the Yardstick school with a background story or exposition segment, providing me with some detail as to their career history. Those who have chosen to participate are individuals who have worked as teachers for some considerable period of time, with an age range of 55-65. They are also teachers who have stayed on at the Yardstick School: I have not been able to contact any member of the Gang of Four, all of whom were dismissed. There is a shared concern to provide evidence of professionalism. Beata, the math teacher, provides detailed statistics of her pupil's subsequent grade records, upon entering secondary school:

”More than half of my pupils have gone on to choose a Science or Technical program at secondary school. I don't mean to say that everyone needs to study science, but we have a shortage of engineers and university graduates from the Natural sciences in Sweden, and I believe a lot of it is due to poor Mathematics teachers in primary school, who fail to either awaken the pupils' interest in mathematical subject, or simply to make them understand the subject. Most of those who have chosen other programs have furthermore graduated with excellent grades in Mathematics.”

Holger, the English teacher, proudly emphasizes the high scores his pupils have always demonstrated on national tests. The shared background picture of the Yardstick school is thus one with a solid history of achievement, run by a proud group of teachers with strong professional integrity.

As they move on to describe the replacement of the incumbent headmaster in mid-2008, they all employ similar narrative conventions

in describing this event: that of a sudden crisis, a problem appearing out of the blue. While Beata acknowledges that the previous headmaster had displayed some weakness in authority, neither she nor anyone else was conscious of the change having been precipitated by a negative reputation or image of the school. When I ask them about the long history of negative reports from the School Inspection, highlighting the failure of the school to implement Lpo94, they dismiss these as empty concerns. As Beata puts it:

“I believe this is a common attitude among teachers, across the country. We all think it’s preposterous to allow pupils to choose for themselves what they want to study: how could they have any idea what to choose? And besides, Lpo94 was replaced last year by LG11, where this requirement was abandoned. Now they have returned to the ideal of minimum standards in core subjects, something we pursued all along.”

There is an element of ironic truth in what Beata says: the most recent teaching plan for Swedish primary school (LG11) has explicitly abandoned the requirement (in Lpo94) that pupils be assigned the matter of designing their own modular curriculum, from a menu-based system. However, there are many other requirements that remain unchanged from Lpo94, which the Yardstick school had been criticized by the School Inspection for failing to implement.

There is a striking contrast here to how the initial problem situation is described in the managerial interview accounts. Both Ada and Hilda describe the problem at the Yardstick School as one, which absolutely and ineluctably demanded decisive action. If nothing was done, the School Inspection would close down the school. By contrast, the interviewed teachers describe the initial situation as that of a school in perfect working order, suddenly and without reason hijacked by a group of power-hungry, naive and inexperienced despots, bent on ruining this wonderful school that the teachers had worked so hard to build, for so many years. They both highlight how poorly they were informed of the upcoming changes. There was no information meeting. The dismissal of the prior headmaster was announced as the same day as an article about it appeared in the press. The new headmaster team entered the scene with much pomp, bombastically proclaiming that huge changes were going to be made, so that the school would finally be brought into submission, and adherence to Lpo94 would be

achieved; conveying a picture of an irresponsible prior regime of flagrant insubordination. According to Beata and Holger, all teachers found this form of communication objectionable, based on an image of the school that none of them recognized:

“We were all proud of the solid teaching standards at the school and the collective experience we had accumulated over time. The school was consistently scoring high in regional ranking, when comparing pupil results on national test. We all found the shaming rhetoric of the headmasters to be highly offensive, representing us as insubordinate and irresponsible.”

The sequence of rising action that follows is one where things go rather badly for the protagonists in the stories (the interviewed teachers), mimicking the conventional narrative form and genre of comedy (Freitag, 1968), rather than the tragic drama of the managerial accounts. The blame for this negative turn of events is universally placed on the new headmaster team, who come across as the blocking antagonists, the *humor* character in classical comedy, in these stories. Beata mentions how, as part of the transition to Lpo94, they changed the teacher-class order, such that each year-class would now have the same teacher in every subject:

“For instance, all pupils in their seventh year of primary school would have the same math teacher, whereas previously they would have had the same subject teacher during a three-year period – i.e. class 7C would have had the same math teacher during years 7-9 of primary school. This transition was made suddenly, rather than phased in. Of course, this means that the pupils who were mid-way through their curriculum lost all continuity in tuition on the subject matter in question. I personally asked Elsa whether we should not consider an alternative approach, and phase in the transition over time, rather than do it all overnight – but she and Hilda refused to listen to any advice from us. They consistently chose to command the moral high ground and dismissed all opinions and suggestions from us as irresponsible resistance and insubordination.”

The picture Beata conjures up of the headmasters is a somewhat ridiculous one: a group of self-deceived and inexperienced despots, commanding a false moral high ground. Such an antagonistic blocking character is common to the basic plot structure of comedy, one who is

in charge of an initial social order portrayed as governed by absurdly rigid rules and regulations. The degree to which such a character is represented as preposterous and absurd (along with the rules and regulations he is trying to enforce) increases with the extent to which comedy is narrated in an ironic mode, common to satirical comedies. In satirical works, persons commanding positions of power and worldly significance are held out to absolute ridicule, using a variety of literary techniques, such as irony, parody, burlesque, exaggeration, juxtaposition and double entendre (Frye, 1953).

The climax in the teaching staff interview accounts arrives with the dismissal of the four teachers, who were accused by Hilda (and her colleague) as resisting the transition to Lpo94. This was the hair that broke the camel's back (in Swedish: "the drop that caused the kettle to overflow") for Holger. Up until then, he (as well as Beata) had sympathized at least partially with the headmaster's change efforts:

"We all realized that some things needed to change. But the way they handled the dismissals was completely inhumane. This is when we really lost all motivation to follow through with the reforms."

The mood among the teaching staff now took on a unison tone of discontent, and a group of them (including Holger) mobilized to demand an inspection from the Swedish Work Environment Authority (SWEA). Holger describes it as an almost cathartic experience, when the inspectors arrived and started asking about how people felt:

"Some of us started crying, when the lid was finally let off".

The negative tone of the report that was subsequently issued was widely cited in the local press, which served to reinforce the discontented atmosphere and attitude of resistance among the teaching staff. As Beata puts it:

"We felt that the tide had turned".

From this point onwards, there is a rising sense of triumph in the teaching staff accounts, as they proceed to recount the succession of failures and misfortune that befell the headmasters Elsa and Hilda, and

their short-lived successors. There is a loosening of the dramatic tension, characteristic of comedy in its phase of declining action, and an increasingly light-hearted, humorous tone in the accounts. Things had taken a turn for the better for the teachers, now that the headmasters and municipal administrators had been so unconditionally and conclusively blamed and shamed in the press. The action more or less fizzles out with Ada's replacement. As Beata puts it:

“Things are running quite well now. We run the classes and teach more or less entirely according to the latest teaching plan (LG11), and everyone is more or less satisfied with how things are being run.”

There is an interesting paradox in the accounts: if the transition to a new teaching plan (or at least parts of it) was not such a big deal – as Beata puts it: “things are running quite well now” and everyone is more or less happy with the new regime – then what was the point of such violent resistance to the change efforts? The circumstances that provoke the highest levels of indignation and resentment in the teacher accounts are primarily centered around the notion that the school should have had a negative reputation or image, and the implication that they should have been to blame. There is little substantial critique of the contents of the teaching plans they were to adopt (apart from the modular curriculum aspect, an aspect which the headmasters did not push that strongly for anyway, conscious of its abandonment in the upcoming transition to LG11), meaning that the tone of ridicule has little or no symbolic dimension, in the sense of a broader social criticism. The teachers mainly object to having been implicated as responsible for a negative image.

Discussion

Analysis of the media account

One of the less disputable observations of the media account is that, while the substance of the allegations leveled at the responsible stakeholders (the municipal authorities and the headmasters at the Yardstick School) is often contradictory (in terms of the broader institutional logics at stake in the conflict), there is a common thread permeating the entire account: that of the disgraceful behaviour of

whichever stakeholder happens to be the subject of the article. There is an extraordinary plurality of (frequently jarring) institutional logics and moral standards deployed, to serve the purpose of construing the behavior of the headmaster team and the municipal authorities as scandalous. Moreover, there is virtually no discussion of the systemic aspects that have contributed to the difficult conditions at the school – e.g. the system of fixed per-pupil budgetary allotments combined with a municipal budget balance requirement, in a context where municipal schools are exposed to competition from newly established private schools, nor the generational conflicts associated with transition to new teaching plans and labour agreements, nor the associated long-term diminution of the status and/or prestige value of the teaching profession, causing lower teacher motivation and loyalty to stay at a particular school. From the perspective of the journalists, this has a logical career motive: indignation sells, and it seems to sell more and more, whereas nuanced political debate has less and less commercial value.

Furthermore, the plurality of institutional logics deployed in the representation of the scandal can be seen to rhyme well with an understanding of the current social order as characterized by institutional pluralism. As argued in the section on disgrace, in such a framework, individual organizations are no longer subjected to a single, monolithic institutional logic, but rather to a plurality of institutional logics and moral standards, according to which they must seek to negotiate legitimacy. As evident from the present case study, the same condition appears to prevail in the Swedish primary school system. Headmasters and municipal authorities must be professional administrators – capable of ensuring adherence to centrally dictated teaching plans – and competent managers with sound business acumen – in a context of zero political tolerance for budget shortfalls – as well as inspiring leaders, capable of instilling high motivation levels among their employees, and maintaining a positive work environment. They are also subject to institutional demands, with somewhat more old-fashioned, moralistic overtones: they are expected to remain dutiful and loyal to their employers under difficult circumstances, as well as treat their staff fairly – no parents would like their children to have to go to a school with high staff turnover. Good teaching standards require a certain continuity. One of the more striking features of the media coverage of the Yardstick school, is the moral flexibility

employed in arbitrarily constructing the behaviour of the stakeholders covered as scandalous.

While it might be argued that the appetite for scandal is not unique to a culture characterized by institutional pluralism, there are some distinct features that stand out in comparison. One is the limited opportunity to redeem oneself, by rational appeal to a common moral standard, which might otherwise sway the opinion of those who have agreed to judge your behaviour as scandalous. Another feature is the relative ease with which people, currently not scandalised by the press, are able to use arbitrary moral argument to justify just about any form of behaviour to themselves and peers – as well as how quickly and arbitrarily they can fall from grace. These consequences are borne out dramatically in the interview accounts of the stakeholders of the Yardstick school scandal, which we turn our discussion to next.

Analysis of the managerial interview accounts

There are striking similarities in the structure and form of the interview accounts with Ada, the municipal head of school administration, and Hilda, one of the headmasters at the Yardstick school. One should perhaps avoid an overly structuralist interpretation of this, seeing them as universal, deep morphological structures, or otherwise essentially inherent to human life-stories.

It is actually not so surprising that the managerial interview accounts should display such striking similarities. Both Ada and Hilda have chosen similar career paths within the contemporary Swedish school system, career options which are infused by a similar set of institutional logics. They have also been exposed to the same defamatory treatment in the press, causing the deployment of similar narrative templates; in order to make sense of their experiences, and as an attempt to exculpate themselves from too burdensome feelings of guilt. Both accounts are given narrative meaning and shape by the employment of ironic tropes, together with a tragic form of narration. The irony consists in how fate (in the form of public opinion and indignation, as drummed up by the press) turned against the good intentions of the work they tried to perform. They repeatedly emphasize how the Yardstick school did not adhere to Lpo 94, and how this was the (uncontroversial, and morally sound) rationale for the entire course of actions, which was conceived as a scandal by the

press. Tragedy results from the personal consequences this has had for themselves as individuals, in the sense of a fall from grace, thus obeying Aristotle's (1994) rule of classical tragedy, namely how it requires the downfall of an essentially good person of some worldly significance.

As discussed in the analysis of the media accounts, our time and culture is one characterized by institutional pluralism, a circumstance which shines through in the journalistic rendering of the scandal. There are some specific aspects of the interview accounts, where a distinctly ironic mode of narration is being employed – within a basic narrative form of tragedy – as a consequence of their lives being embedded in a social order infused by such an underlying ethical belief system. There is no symbolic, intra-historical dimension; the downfall of the respective protagonists is not symbolic of any flaws in the institutional logics and moral standards that have guided their actions. This is perhaps a natural consequence of a worldview characterized by institutional pluralism. No particular institutional logic or moral standards can be asserted to be rationally superior or inferior to another, they all have equal validity. The causes of the protagonists' downfall is thus in a sense extra-historical, i.e. something that lies outside the sphere of human agency, lending their narratives a somewhat fatalist flavor. The fact that a number of journalists conspired to convey a universally negative representation of the change efforts they instigated is seen in likewise fatalistic terms: this is how the press functions, and there is nothing we (as citizens in a democratic society, or bound together in some other collectivity) can do to change this circumstance, nor is it possible to sway public opinion, once it has been duped by the press. It was simply bad luck that the journalistic posse should have chosen to turn on them.

In a culture where reason has been rendered incapable of settling disputes between conflicting institutional logics or moral standards, there is no way to secure agreement around the need for certain rules or conventions that we might individually think journalists should abide by. Paradoxically, this shapes the managerial narratives so as to take on more of a moralistic aspect, causing a certain similarity to classical drama. If the social order can no longer be judged as bad, the blame for misfortune must by default rest on individual moral agents. Accordingly, the behavior of the teaching staff is conveyed as

unambiguously immoral, in the headmaster's account. They are the classical villains, whose corrupt attempts to sabotage and resist the change project are unconditionally caused by their egoistic failure to appreciate and abide by the (morally sound) institutional logic that justified the managers' initiative for change. There is no intra-historical appreciation of inherent contradictions in the teaching plans, or sympathetic understanding of generational conflicts caused by the declining prestige value of the teaching profession. The insubordinate senior teaching staff are the villains in the story, worthy of absolute contempt (rather than sympathetic understanding), whereas the press and public opinion come across as the inscrutable agents of Fate, which ironically provides them (the teachers) the upper hand in the moral conflict.

A key difference compared to classical tragedy centers on the notion of *hamartia*, of a personal mistake. Both Ada and Hilda admit to having been mistaken, in the sense that they would not have accepted their respective job offers (as municipal head of administration and vice headmaster respectively), with the benefit of hindsight. However, it is a mistake which has no moral dimension – it was not ethically wrong of them to accept the job offer. On the contrary, they claim to have persisted in attempting to do the right thing, throughout the entire course of action in their respective stories. The moral of their respective stories is then that doing the right thing is impossible, within the socio-ethical environment that their respective life stories take place, rather than any concession of a personal mistake. This is of course true, in the sense that it is nigh-impossible to reach resolution in contemporary conflicts of a moral nature, due to the perceived incapacity of reason to objectively mediate between conflicting institutional logics and moral standards, in a culture that has embraced institutional pluralism. It is also impossible to assert the institutional logic that guided the manager's actions as universally flawed, in some essentialist sense. But this renders a distinctly ironic mode of narration (Frye, 1953) to the tragic plot structure of the managerial interview accounts. The misfortune that struck them becomes morally unintelligible, since no good reason can be provided for what has befallen them, giving their stories a slightly nightmarish or horrific quality.

The emotional appeal of such a story is still one of pity, in line with Aristotle's view of the function of tragedy. However, it is a form of pity that acquires a much stronger sense of bitterness, than one, where we are led to pity the fate of a tragic protagonist on account of his, fundamentally human, error of moral judgement, or on account of his actions having been naively guided by flawed moral standards. Such a subjective retelling of one's personal life story may well lead to an entrenched identity position, coloured by personal bitterness and contempt for one's adversaries, which provides little incentive to stay on and resolve the conflict. It is also an identity position, which lends itself rather easily to ridicule by the opposing party in a conflict – of a pompous and ultimately self-deceived antagonist, corresponding rather well to how Ada and Hilda are portrayed in the teacher interview accounts.

Another key similarity that emerges from the interview accounts with Ada and Hilda, is how both cling on to an identical, discursively constituted notion of a professional identity, in order to assert a positive self-image: one defined by "leadership", of being a leader in the school system. Indeed, Ada was keen to correct my first version of the interview transcript, in which I had inadequately represented her grounds for deciding to switch careers, from being a math teacher, to assume a role in the municipal school administration. Her motivation was primarily to become a "leader" in the school system, sheer administrative work tasks would never have incited her. Apart from anything else, this is a revealing account of the extent to which New Public Management principles have permeated state and municipal institutions in Sweden: in Lpo 94 (and successive teaching plans), the role of headmasters and municipal school administrators is emphasized as a "leadership" role, rather than that of a manager or administrator. Clearly, the social prestige of this identity marker is something that these stakeholders cling onto, after the damage done to their public image, in their roles of managers in charge for conditions at the scandalised Yardstick school. The combination of frustrated indignation and contempt for the antagonists in the conflict (the subversive teachers at the Yardstick school), together with seeking refuge in a more privately (rather than collectively) determined identity position (as a leader), in order to salvage the social prestige value of one's public image, is an attitude which clearly does not lend itself to

constructive joint efforts to repair the damage done to the organization's image.

Analysis of the teaching staff interview accounts

Much like the managerial interview accounts, there is a strong correspondence in narrative form and modal aspects, between the various interview accounts with teaching staff at the Yardstick school. In contrast with the tragic form of the managerial interview accounts, the stories told by the interviewed teachers all assume the general narrative form of comedy, with some variation in the modal aspects employed: the degree according to which the common target of critique is characterized in accounts employing outright contemptuous and abrasive terms, versus those that employ a playful, more light-hearted and humorous tone.

Auerbach classifies satire as typically written in an intermediate style, between the low style of classical comedy, and the sublime, elevated style of tragedy, mixing elements of both – without becoming truly tragic or sublime. The subject matter of classical comedy, written in the low style, is exclusively the petty vices and moral corruption of the common man, the *hoi polloi*. Auerbach uses the example of Petronius' plays, to show the extraordinary realism with which Petronius portrays the vulgar speech and belief patterns of the parvenu tradesman class in Roman society of that era, and yet how this realism is only possible in classical narrative genres, whose objective is the contemptuous critique of lower social orders, solely concerned with holding their vices, follies and general character flaws up for ridicule. The absence of any intra-historical narrative dimension rules out the possibility of empathy with such characters; they are portrayed as universally and unconditionally base and corrupt, fully deserving of unsympathetic ridicule.

The realism of classical comedy is thus constrained by its inability to provide a fully fleshed out character portrayal, one that takes a sympathetic account of the motives for the protagonists' actions, rather than holds them out for contemptuous ridicule. Satire is concerned with the same objective, although the target of critique is shifted to more influential social groups: individuals that occupy positions of power in society and who are accused of various follies and moral shortcomings. Hence the mixture of stylistic elements; the realistic

character portrayal of the low style of classical comedy combined with elements of the subject matter of tragedy, in that the protagonists (and objects of ridicule) are persons of worldly significance, rather than common men. Auerbach uses the example of Boccaccio's Decamerone, whose satirical portrayal of the corruption and worldly vices of churchmen in 14th century Italy is characterized by a free, rich and assured sense of realism – as long as it stays within the confines of subject matter appropriate to the intermediate style. As soon as Boccaccio attempts to touch on the problematic or tragic, his style becomes weak and superficial. It is a style, which is “still too insecure and unsupported to serve/.../as a basis on which the world could be ordered, interpreted and represented as a reality and as a whole” (Auerbach, 1953:231).

In terms of plot structure, satire is similar to comedy: it involves the movement from an initial social order, governed by rigid and preposterous rules and regulation, towards a transformed social order, which the audience has recognized all along as the only appropriate one; what Frye (1953) has described as a movement from *pistis* to *gnosis*. The initial social order is typically enforced by a *humor* character, a ridiculous ruler who tries to enforce his obsessive ideas on how things should be organized, thus blocking the way for the heroic protagonist who tries to achieve the aforementioned transformation of the social order. The degree to which the initial social order, and the humor character who governs it, is characterized as preposterous increases with the extent to which an ironic mode of narration is being employed, ironic comedy being essentially equivalent to satire. Likewise, the more ironic the mode of narration, the less distinct the form of the transformed society which emerges with the resolution of the plot (Frye, 1953). In a fully-fledged ironic comedy, or satire, the initial social order simply disintegrates into disorder. Using Auerbach's terminology, we might say that ironic comedy lacks a certain intra-historical aspect: there is no injunction to positively transform the initial social order into something the audience might recognize as an improved state of affairs, only to resist any efforts at managerial control at all cost. The initial social order is seen as more drastically illegitimate, in the sense that all conceivable forms of social order are seen as nothing more than obsessive attempts at social control, by some power-hungry *humor* character.

When reading the teaching staff interview accounts, there is, again, a complete absence of Auerbach's "intra-historical" dimension; a total lack of appreciation for the motives of the antagonist headmasters (portrayed as blocking *humor* characters), as well as any sympathy for their fates – only a gleeful sense of triumph and rejoicing in their subsequent misfortune. Their attempts at enforcing adherence to national teaching plans is represented as obsessive and preposterous, an attempt to enforce absurd rules and regulations, lacking any form of legitimate sanction. The resemblance of the employee narratives to the basic plot structure of ironic comedy/satire is rather striking. Paradoxically however, the state of affairs which is brought about with the resolution of the plot is not distinctly different from that prior to the commencement of the drama. The Yardstick school is still subject to national teaching plans, which are not distinctly different from the ones whose implementation the employees resisted so violently. In fact, Beata proudly mentions that they are now fully compliant with national regulations, prompting the reflection why she resisted them so violently in the first place. This lends her account a distinctly ironic tone, in the sense that the state of affairs reached towards the resolution of her narrative is not one which her audience might recognize as distinctly improved upon, in terms of the rules and regulations governing it.

Concluding remarks

The extra-historical tragic fatalism which give narrative shape to the managerial accounts ultimately results in an emotional attitude of frustration, indignation and contempt for the teaching staff that failed to come around to their view of things, rather than any intra-historical appreciation of the reasons behind the resistance towards change exhibited by the teaching staff, which might otherwise have rendered them more sympathetic, less ruthlessly insistent on swift and immediate change, an attitude which would ultimately have resulted in a less flared-up, outright conflict. Instead, the managers seek to salvage their damaged self-esteem by clinging on to a socially prestigious identity marker (leadership), choosing to distance themselves from the chain of events, with the headmasters ultimately handing in their resignation. Likewise, the teachers interviewed portray the headmasters in heavily satirical terms, as ridiculous characters –

against which they contrast their own social prestige, as skilled teachers with rich experience gained during a long employment history. In such a context, it is not surprising that the predictions of the corporate branding perspective should not hold out: within a social order characterized by institutional pluralism, managers and employees in a disgraced organization have recourse to a variety of disidentification strategies, by which they can seek to salvage their self-esteem from any damage done by negative publicity. Another observation is the tendency for different stakeholders to blame the bad image on stakeholder groups other than themselves. The headmasters blamed the initial bad image on the teaching staff (who claimed to be unaware of any such prior negative reputation), and the subsequent chain of events on teachers who “ratted out” to the press. The teachers in turn blamed the chain of events entirely on the headmasters, an attitude which they found sanction for as the media torrent grew in intensity.

Relating these narrative representations to the previously discussed aspects of our contemporary social order (institutional pluralism), they might perhaps be understood as a consequence of the loss of any shared moral standards, or agreed conventions for settling disputes between rival moral traditions. People’s subject positions become more entrenched, with the loss of any recourse to plausible arguments for why one’s own actions might be universally seen as misguided. Acknowledging some real sense of guilt becomes a logical impossibility in such a social order, or at least profoundly meaningless. With the loss of an objective moral order to determine one’s own self-worth, the only thing left is a subjectively determined sense of social prestige or status. If one’s status comes under threat (in this case, by the headmasters’ implication that the teachers were responsible for a negative reputation that the school was alleged to have), the natural defense is violent protest and, if that fails, retreat into indignation and contempt. In narrative terms, this is likely to result in the representation of a manager, who tries to implement a change project to improve a damaged organizational image, as a self-deceived, conceited and preposterous *humor* character. Acknowledging any legitimate motives for his/her actions would be an implicit recognition of one’s own culpability in creating such an image – an unacceptable implication, when there is no recognized objective standard to determine culpability. This is an employee attitude which clearly does

not provide any incentive to jointly engage in improving the school's external image, but rather to resist any such efforts at all cost. If successful (through e.g. favourable media representation of one's predicaments), such resistance is likely to cause the managers to be ousted, causing a trajectory of events that would approximate the plot structure of comedy (the protagonists triumph over a preposterous and obsessive ruler) from an employee perspective, and that of tragedy (the downfall and personal misfortune of a decent ruler) from the perspective of the managers who tried to enforce such changes.

Tentative discussion of findings

My research interest in the topic area of this thesis was originally triggered by observations I carried out when working for my former employer, Northinsure, during a time period when they ran the internal branding project described in the first case study. Although the project was cleverly designed, and substantially informed by theories associated with the corporate branding perspective, it met with a compact wall of resistance and a cynical attitude of subversion among the employees in my team (including myself, as evident from the tone employed in the ethnographic diary rendition of the project), in relation to the efforts of management to engage us with the project. Initially, I blamed this on the lame and fake or inauthentic premises of the project, an attitude similar to that of my colleagues in the team, and was not able to see much of a research interest in these observations, laying them to the side for some time, and focused on searching for other empirical sites and research problems that would trigger my interest.

With time, I slowly started to reflect on why I had considered the project to be so lame, and how such an attitude might be rooted in notions of authenticity that form part of our cultural heritage, and the way in which authenticity, in the sense of a positive image or brand, is related to identification as a contemporary societal mobilizing agent for human effort. I also became increasingly apprehensive of the tone of satire that permeated my narration of the sequence of events, constituting my own account of the project. Satire, being a narrative genre connected with the critique of authority figures, can sometimes leave a bad taste in the mouth, as a story devoid of any moral dimension. My own description of the management team was that of a bunch of corporate stooges, conceited in their misguided efforts to convey Northinsure as an authentic organization, with a historical track record of corporate responsibility. In the end, there was nothing particularly sordid about the new management team. All of the culprits

behind the bonus scandal, which had caused the prior crisis of confidence for Northinsure, and the concomitant storm of negative publicity, had been replaced. Similarly, the project could be seen as a genuine effort to instill a stronger sense of commonality and purpose in the organization, making my own reaction (and that of my team) somewhat exaggerated and immature.

In parallel with these reflections, my supervisor suggested that I might conduct a study of another organization that had suffered a crisis of confidence, to see whether some of my tentative observations from the Northinsure case might be complemented with corroborating evidence from another case, or alternatively challenged, prompting a re-interpretation or broadening of my initial interpretation. Shortly afterwards, my attention was drawn to the Yardstick school, which had recently suffered a severe crisis of confidence, as the culmination of a prolonged period of negative publicity. The reflection that my own narration of Northinsure's branding project was heavily shaped by satire, prompted the idea of conducting a set of oral history interviews with various organizational members of the Yardstick school, to see whether similar patterns would recur in their own narration of events, and whether and how such narrative tropes might be connected with affective attitudes similar to those of my team at Northinsure. It also struck me as a theoretically robust way to a) study individual identity constructions in a way that provided a neat fit with a narrative perspective on identity and b) as a convenient way to tease out contrasting accounts of the chain of events that took place, the triangulation of which would hopefully bring out a more nuanced representation – seeing as the opportunity for direct participant observation was not there, given that the events took place in the past.

These interviews brought out a number of observations, which served to reinforce my re-evaluation of the internal branding project at Northinsure, as well as to further my understanding about how such reactions might be culturally related to an ideal form of organization, which draws on identification with the image of the company – of seeing oneself reflected in the social prestige of the brand/image of the company one works for – as a primary coordination and control mechanism, and how this organizational ideal has become so pervasive in contemporary society, as to shape the cultural environment of such

diverse organizations as secondary schools (under municipal administration) and privately owned insurance companies.

All representatives of the management team (the municipal administrators as well as the headmaster) chose to narrate the sequence of specific events connected with the Yardstick schools public disgrace, within a broader narrative arc of their own trajectory towards becoming leader figures in the administration of the Swedish school system. While the narrative of the problems at the Yardstick school took the shape of an ironic tragedy – that of their own best intentions in achieving positive change within a heavily problematic organization, and how these intentions resulted in the ironic effect that they were conveyed as culprits by the press – this episode was de-emphasized in relation to the broader life story of personal achievement as leaders in the Swedish school administration. These observations seemed to corroborate the emerging view within social identity theory, that individuals are likely to attempt to repair their damaged sense of self-esteem – subsequent to an image crisis in the company they work for – through emphasizing identification with an alternative social category or grouping (Elsback and Kramer, 1996), rather than collectively try to engage in restoring the image of their employer. In this case, the headmasters and municipal administrators sought to emphasize their professional identity as leaders, rather than identifying with the Yardstick school. At the same time, I was interested to note how their account of the events connected with the negative publicity, took on the narrative form of tragedy, with heavy emphasis on ironic tropes.

For instance, the headmaster at the Yardstick school told of how she and her superior worked hard to achieve change at the school, seeking to address the problems identified by the negative publicity in the press through a number of concrete measures: replacing teachers with problematic attitudes towards the new curriculum and towards progressive pedagogical theories in general, as well as lobbying with the municipal authorities for increased funds, to cope with the problems and furthermore adapt to the new economic conditions imposed by the opening of a private school in the municipality, which reduced the resource allocation for the Yardstick school (e.g. money for teacher salaries and books) by drawing away pupils. And yet all this effort was met by cynical resistance from the teaching staff at the

school, some of which agreed to participate in press interviews, where they served to consolidate the negative image in the press, through portraying the headmasters and municipal administrators as incompetent and ineffectual stooges. This consolidation of a negative image of the organization in the press had a self-enforcing effect of further undermining their change efforts, and their authority in general. Ultimately, the headmaster I interviewed and her superior voluntarily chose to leave the school, like a number of their predecessors had chosen to do, as well as their immediate supercessors. The municipal administration team in turn was dismissed and/or told to consider alternative careers, since the high staff turnover at the school had further consolidated the negative image of the municipal authorities, and they needed fresh faces to divert the attention of the press. There was a somewhat eerie, paradoxical twist to these stories. On the one hand, the managerial protagonists were either told to leave their jobs, or found themselves forced to do so by an impossible situation, causing a significant career bump, if not a complete sidetrack. On the other hand, neither of them could provide any convincing reason for why this happened; the resistance of the teaching staff and the press allegations comes across as morally unintelligible.

As I proceeded to conduct interviews with teaching staff at the Yardstick school, there was a curious correspondence in their stories, to my own narrative of the branding project at Northinsure, as well as observations parallel to those that transpired in the broader managerial narratives, of dis-identification with the organization's image, in favour of identification with an alternative social category. A similar satirical tone (to that conveyed by my narrative of the branding project at Northinsure), was furthermore present in the employee accounts of the management team's efforts to achieve changes and address the problems identified in the press. The headmasters and municipal administrators were portrayed as ineffectual and conceited stooges, their rhetoric of the need for positive change was perceived as moralizing, hypocritical, lame and inauthentic. Similar to the managerial stories, the employees chose to narrate the specific sequence of events at the Yardstick school, within an overarching story of personal achievement, emphasizing their identification with the teaching profession rather than the image of the Yardstick school, whose problems they blamed entirely on bad management. It seemed as if the employees derived a sense of almost perverse pleasure, from

relishing in an attitude of subversion to authority, and viewing their managers as moralizing, hypocritical imbeciles. This observation, in turn, seemed to corroborate the findings of Kjærgaard, Morsing, and Ravasi (2010), who have argued that individual tactics used by employees to restore their personal self-esteem and identity may lead to organizational inertia and limited efforts to engage in efforts to repair the organizational image.

While these two organizations (Northinsure and the Yardstick school) are very different – one being a didactic non-profit institution run and administrated by a public, municipal authority, the other a shareholder-owned insurance company run for commercial purposes – the similarities in the observed reactions to public disgrace prompted broader theoretical reflections on the relationship between image and identity. My tentative conclusions pointed in the direction that identification with the brand or image of the organization one works for – seeing oneself reflected in the social prestige of one’s employer – functions as an effective coordination or control mechanism only for such companies that have managed to maintain a brand or image carrying some measure of social prestige. For publicly disgraced organizations, this control mechanism would appear to break down, at least for the purpose of mobilizing employees to repair the damaged image of the organization. Contrary to what scholars associated with the corporate branding perspective would argue (cf Dutton et al, 1991; 1994), employees would not appear to become so disconcerted and/or distraught by the organization’s damaged image – choosing rather to highlight alternative identity traits to compensate the loss of organizational prestige – nor particularly motivated to repair the organization’s image. Attempts by management to repair it, through reinventing the organization’s brand or otherwise trying to instill a stronger positive identification with it, are unlikely to be successful. Such efforts also appear likely to bring a sense of personal bitterness, to the life stories of managers tasked with such an objective, given the satirical tone in which said efforts are likely to be received by their employees, and the managers' inability to make any intelligible sense of these reactions, given their own standards of judgement. In the following sections, I will attempt to elaborate on some possible reasons for the common attributes of these observations.

The ambiguous meaning of disgrace, in an era of institutional pluralism

An observation common to the two case studies, is the shrill tone of the media accusations, and the massive levels of public indignation they triggered. By contrast, it is striking how little substance was contained in these allegations, in the sense of an informed discussion of policy-related matters pertaining to the two cases. The main focus of the two press campaigns was to characterize the involved stakeholders as individually scandalous, rather than any discussion of possible flaws in e.g. the educational system or the system for financial regulation. Although the Northinsure case was a matter of national concern, no substantial changes in the regulation of executive remuneration packages were passed, as a consequence of the bonus affair. Likewise, since the accused Northinsure executives had not significantly breached any internal policies or regulations, they were ultimately acquitted of all charges brought against them, in the public prosecution that followed the press scandal. There is a curious tension here, between the shrillness of the allegations of misconduct, and the actual substance of the charges that could be brought against them in the public trial, a tension worthy of some further examination.

Firstly, the idea of variable remuneration packages, typically based on a performance assessment utilizing share price variability as a proxy for executive value generation, is a well-established form of executive compensation. It is theoretically rooted in ideas related to the Efficient Markets Hypothesis (EMH), as well as the principal-agent problem. Since executives (agents) have diverging incentives with shareholders (principals), stock- or option-based compensation packages is seen as an effective way of aligning executive incentives with those of shareholders. The fact that the value of the main index of the Stockholm Stock Exchange increased by 60%, in the nine-month period prior to the exercise date of the management team's remunerative option plan (causing their remuneration levels to balloon), was arguably a factor outside the control of the Northinsure management team. That the stock market peaked so rapidly, and subsequently collapsed, is nothing they could have predicted at the time that their compensation packages were designed. Nor were such dramatic share price movements, or stock market "bubbles", a

theoretically intelligible phenomenon, using the central paradigm in financial economics, according to which the rationale for variable executive remuneration has been worked out. Since, according to the EMH, current share prices are always the best reflection of rational investor expectations of future returns, the very notion of investment bubbles is an anomaly. A one year stock market return of 60% could only be caused by a collective dramatic shift in rational investor expectations of future profits, perhaps caused by the invention of some new technology, which would radically improve future levels of economic productivity. Such instances would over time be so rare as not to fundamentally alter the rationale for variable executive remuneration. While one could argue that there was a conflict of interest arising from the circumstance that the CEO and CFO of Northinsure were also members of the Board of Directors, thus having a vote in the decision about how their own compensation packages should be designed, this was not a unique circumstance in Swedish listed companies at the time. The lawyers of the management team made these exact arguments, in defense against the charges brought against them in the public trial, arguments which were ultimately successful.

Nor has the Northinsure scandal – or for that matter the more recent financial crisis – substantially changed the view on variable executive remuneration packages, nor the regulation thereof. While there are critical voices, expressing primarily moralistic sentiments pertaining to the levels of compensation in the financial services industry, the theoretical idea and economic rationale for variable remuneration has not been conclusively discredited in an academic context. Much like other social sciences, financial economics is a pluralist field of enquiry, where the Efficient Markets Hypothesis sits alongside other established paradigms (like Behavioural Finance), each claiming equal validity, although the recurrent financial crises of the last 20-30 years might be expected to have rendered the idea of rational investor expectations somewhat anomalous, if the associated academic community would be striving to agree on a shared paradigm.

Because of the prevalence of a plurality of academic paradigms and associated discourses and institutional logics, it is easy to see why managers involved in a public scandal have access to plenty of alternative discursive resources, whereby they might represent their

behavior in a righteous manner, contrasting with the shrill assertions of illegitimacy in the press. The CEO and CFO of Northinsure are likely to maintain a view of themselves, to this day, as having righteously merited the financial rewards they earned, by merit of having steered the company towards such heights of success, as it enjoyed during Northinsure's glory days. That the stock market crashed, causing their main unit-link/variable annuities business model to collapse, was arguably a factor outside their control. According to the institutional logic of variable remuneration packages, the executive remuneration program aligned their incentives towards shareholder value generation, and by merit of their substantial business acumen and financial engineering skills, they thus succeeded in making Northinsure the largest insurance group by shareholder value in Europe, creating spectacular levels of shareholder value, at least briefly so. Such spectacular levels of management-engineered growth and value-creation is worthy of exceptional compensation, at least using the institutional logic of variable executive remuneration. There are no universally valid standards of justification currently espoused in Western cultures, according to which such a subjective self-representation could be conclusively and ultimately held to be wrong.

While being a less prominent case, the story of the Yardstick school scandal is an even stronger showcase of institutional pluralism. The allegations of misconduct were directed towards a team of municipal managers and headmasters who were actually trying to enforce adherence to national standards at the Yardstick school. Swedish secondary schools are legally required to follow centrally dictated national teaching plans, as well as abide by the labour market agreements on teaching staff working hours. That they tried to enforce adherence among the Yardstick school teaching staff, to such legal requirements and national regulations, was the substantial cause behind the chain of events construed as a scandal by the press. Again, this accounts for a curiously ironic aspect to the press scandal. While there exists a plurality of moral standards and institutional logics according to which the municipal managers and headmaster team's behavior could be construed as scandalous by the press, on another level they were actually trying to remedy a state of affairs – the Yardstick school being in flagrant breach of mandatory national regulation – which was in itself a scandal. If both the problem they were trying to address, as well as their attempt to solve it, may be construed as a scandal – then

what would not be judged as a scandalous course of action in that context?

If anything and everything can be scandalous, the meaning of public disgrace has shifted somewhat, from that which it had in an earlier era. In a culture with a more monolithic conception of the common good, moral judgements may at least theoretically be recognized as valid by all involved parties, although interpretations of events can vary somewhat. In a culture with a pluralist conception of the common good, anything and everything may be conceived of as righteous, as well as scandalous. The reason why the press would construe a state of affairs as absolutely disgraceful is somewhat unclear, if simultaneously conceding that a multiplicity of judgements is possible, according to a variety of institutional logics and standards for justification. This is especially confusing, given that the aftermath of scandals does not usually prompt any substantial changes in the laws and regulations governing the state of affairs construed as scandalous. Contemporary scandals thus seem to primarily constitute a reality-show form of satirical entertainment, whereby the public arbitrarily agrees to select a scapegoat (similar to the Greek notion of the *pharmakos*) condemned to exclusion from society, without invoking any reasons for doing so recognized as more valid than potential rival standards of justification, according to which the scapegoat's behavior might alternatively be conceived of as righteous. Such forms of public entertainment bear similarities with Roman gladiator games, where the fate of the contenders was at the mercy of the audience, whose approval or disapproval of the contenders was determined by lot, based on the number of spectator thumbs pointing upwards vs downwards.

Ironic modes of narrative self-representation and organizational inertia

As argued in the above section, institutional pluralism allows for a divergence of identification strategies within an organization. While the corporate branding perspective argues that brands can be an effective resource to align organizational identification, harnessing it around a common image, this steering mechanism appears to have broken down in the cases under study, i.e. where an organization's

external image and reputation has been damaged by a scandal. Managers and employees no longer appear to share an incentive to emphasize a common discursive resource for identification. Among other things, this observation suggests that the psychological aspects involved in identity transitions are more poignant than one might expect, using e.g. perspectives drawing on social or discursive identity theory, and sociological theories of self-presentation.

The dramatist perspective of Goffman, which has inspired the corporate branding perspective, emphasizes the enactment of social roles in the presentation of self, using terms like ‘impression management’. These terms highlight the contrived nature of such a process, in e.g. the discussion of front-stage vs back-stage behavior. This implicitly suggests an understanding of selfhood, in the sense of front-stage social roles, as something that people do not take too seriously. Using such a perspective, one might expect people employed by an organization that had undergone a crisis of confidence, to be willing to engage more hypocritically in efforts aimed at collective face-saving and impression management, since there is arguably a shared interest in restoring the damage done to the organization’s image. What transpires from the case studies discussed in previous sections, is rather a strong need to maintain a more robust sense of (moral) self-worth and righteousness (however subjective), in the narrative representation of oneself communicated to others, as well as how one would like to see oneself reflected in the mirror image provided by such an audience. Such assertions of self-worth and righteousness are typically made by reference to a variety of institutional logics and moral standards, but also by contrast against some antagonist in the story, represented as immoral, lame, fake or hypocritical. In other words, incidents of organizational disgrace appear to cause strong reactions of emotional affect, associated with the loss of social prestige caused to an image which one used to highlight as an identity marker. These reactions cause a divergence of identification strategies in such organizations, which sabotage the mobilization of collective efforts aimed at restoring the organization’s external image.

The absence of a monolithic ethic in contemporary Western culture, recognized as capable of settling disputes concerning moral truth, thus allows a multitude of rival assertions of self-righteousness, in the cases

of organizational disgrace I have studied. These are often asserted by contrasting one's behavior against that of some antagonist held out as immoral, lame or hypocritical. Managers were keen to represent themselves as heroic protagonists tasked to improve the organization's image, implying that they themselves had no guilt in causing said image. However, when this was met with resistance, causing limited success, the narratives took on a tragic tone, especially for someone like Ada, who lost her job as a consequence of the ensuing scandal. Managerial representations of self thus followed the genre conventions of tragedy, using an ironic mode of narration: the heroic protagonist is impeded from righteously salvaging the organization (through recourse to some established institutional logic), not through having committed any *hamartia* or mistake, but simply for the arbitrary purposes of satisfying a public appetite for scandal, and because of the irrational and immoral resistance of narrowly self-interested employees. Employees in turn reacted violently against the implications of such change efforts; that some state of affairs caused by their own misconduct was the reason for such a bad image. They thus conceived of themselves as heroic protagonists in an ironic comedy (or satire), whereby some self-deceived or hypocritical antagonist tried to enforce a preposterously rigid and absurd change program – which was either represented as a ridiculous waste of money (Northinsure), or directly hurtful to the organization, as in the case of the Yardstick school – that the protagonists eventually succeeded in aborting, causing a happy ending.

Employing a dramatist perspective on narrative identity that draws on Burke, the particular role a person casts himself in his/her personal life story – and the genre conventions, together with narrative modality, employed in fashioning it – also bears heavily on the course of action that he/she is likely to follow, during the particular life sequence shaped by said role. The genre conventions of ironic tragedy, which the managerial narratives are shaped by, imply a limited incentive for the protagonist to exonerate him/herself, either from judgement perceived as false, by explaining how it really was, or from judgement perceived as correct, by doing penance and improving oneself. One is quite confident that the judgement is not absolutely valid or true (but rather an evaluation determined arbitrarily, almost by lot, to satisfy a public appetite for scandal), but conversely also that the very idea of exonerating oneself from such an arbitrary judgement is somewhat

pointless. This lends a tone of bitterness to the managerial narratives, shaped by resentment against a tragic fate for which no good reason can be provided, but also by an attitude of resignation – that nothing can be done to change it. These attitudes go some way towards explaining the observed aspects of organizational inertia, which ultimately caused such a high number of successive headmasters at the Yardstick school to hand in their resignation. High managerial turnover is for that matter a commonly observed phenomenon in organizations that have experienced crises of confidence.

The tone of bitterness – caused by a combination of resentment and resignation in the face of a tragic fate – furthermore lends a certain baroque quality to the managerial narratives. They are all shaped by a similar plot structure in which a heroic protagonist works hard and desperately to preserve an organizational order, whose external legitimacy is threatened by scandal, and crumbling from internal resistance. The personal reasons for sacrificing so much to uphold some institutional standard (e.g. adherence to a teaching plan) become somewhat unintelligible, when one is conscious that the standard itself is not essentially justifiable. This is a tone reminiscent of Auerbach's discussion of Ammianus, a Roman officer and historian, and his representation of the mob riots in Rome between A.D. 350-380. In his description of the Roman authorities' attempts to uphold order and protect the Empire, "threatened from without and crumbling from within" (Auerbach, 2005; 56), there is "always an element of bitterness, of the grotesque, very often of something grotesquely gruesome and inhumanly convulsive" (*ibid*). In the cases studied here, such a tone may be linked to the ironic mode of narration, and how it renders certain aspects of the narratives unintelligible and, thus, grotesque.

The ironic mode of narration, whereby no legitimate reason can be provided for the tragic end of the managerial narratives, nor for the satirical resistance in the employee narratives, means that there is no injunction for the world to change as a consequence of such resistance, as would be the case in a high or low mimetic mode of narration, such as the social critique embedded in the novels of the French Realist tradition. There is no resistance to the idea of branding as such, or calls for e.g. changing financial regulation (implying that the system and laws allowing for the bonus scandal were unrighteous, not just the

Northinsure management team), nor any substantial critique of the educational system. If the laws and conventions that constitute the prevailing social order are not recognized as being potentially right or wrong (they are simply inherited conventions that serve a certain practical purpose), then by default there must be something wrong with the individuals involved in a scandal – they must be the ones who are vicious, or alternatively righteous, if the scandal is to carry any meaning at all. But since we lack an alternative ethical system, according to which individuals might be judged righteous or not, we still invoke a plurality of institutional logics, which we simultaneously deem incapable of conferring such absolute judgements. This causes the aspect of moral unintelligibility previously discussed, which renders a bitter and grotesque tone to the managerial narratives.

The satirical narratives surfacing from the employee interviews have a more direct causal relation to the observed phenomenon of organizational inertia, due to the cynical attitudes they engender. However, there is a similar paradoxical quality to them, in that the reasons for such violent cynicism and affective reactions are on another hand not convincingly accounted for, by any good reasons provided by the employee narrators themselves, neither in the case of my own attitude towards Expedition Northinsure, nor the employee resistance at the Yardstick school. They all concede that the change effort was, at worst, somewhat silly (as in my own representation of Expedition Northinsure) or, alternatively, not entirely unjustified as such (as in the case of the need for reform at the Yardstick school), rendering the reasons for such violent resistance, and caricaturing of the managerial antagonists, somewhat grotesque and unintelligible. Nobody can convincingly argue that it is not valuable for contemporary organizations to have a strong brand (the rationale for Expedition Northinsure), and it is a legal requirement to follow the teaching plans (the rationale for needed reforms at the Yardstick school) – the employee narratives indeed concede that this is the case.

In a social context where the preoccupation with scandals, as a form of public entertainment, seems to be increasing, these observations pose a serious question for the efficiency of using brands as a cultural steering mechanism. In cultures sharing a common ethical standard, organizational identification can be raised to a level, according to which everyone may theoretically be perceived as righteous, as long as

they follow the shared standards – whereas people who break them are universally judged as in the wrong. This provides a stronger incentive for scandalized individuals or an organization to exonerate themselves, whether by explanation or by penance, which, in turn, provides a stronger incentive for mobilization towards the shared goal of improving a damaged organizational image. By contrast, in a culture characterized by institutional pluralism, each and every organization is liable to be scandalized (the selection of a scandal victim, or *pharmakos*, happening arbitrarily and by lot, or at least without invoking any reasons recognized as universally legitimate by involved stakeholders), meaning that a strong brand can not be so easily maintained, as a stable or reliable steering mechanism. Due, moreover, to the finality of scandal (given the limited incentive for, or meaningfulness of, exoneration), nor is it one which can be easily restored, once it has been broken. Finally, since organizations with truly strong brands are, by statistical necessity, always just a small proportion of the total number of organizations, it is a steering mechanism available to far fewer companies.

Problematizing the ideal of closure in narrative psychology

One of the main applications of narrative identity in the social sciences has been in the field of narrative psychology, as developed and popularized by McAdams (2006). According to McAdams, our sense of selfhood emerges from the stories we tell about ourselves; the construction of a plausible and coherent life story thus has tremendous therapeutic value. There is an implicit ideal of narrative closure as applied to identity and selfhood, according to this perspective. The attainment of narrative closure in one's life story is linked to a cathartic form of psychological redemption, which becomes a key objective of the therapeutic practice in narrative psychology. One further implication of the case studies analysed in this thesis (primarily the Yardstick school case) is that narrative closure may not be the most satisfying form of representing a life sequence, during which one has experienced personal misfortune.

When comparing the two managerial narratives reviewed in the Yardstick school case, there is a much more positive and light-hearted tone to Hilda's account of the scandal, than in that of Ada. Ada stayed one at the office of municipal administration, determined to see the change project through to its end, with an ultimate goal of achieving a sense of closure to this episode of her life. Unlike Hilda, this only resulted in her being dismissed from her job, since her ongoing efforts to improve the situation at the Yardstick school only became an intensified focal point for sustained media allegations of misconduct, in the end forcing her superiors to remove her from the focus of media attention. As Ada points out, her superiors made it very clear to her that her dismissal was not due to any misconduct on Ada's part – on the contrary, they praised her for the hard work and professionalism she had displayed during such difficult times. Nevertheless, she couldn't quite escape the impression of a career that had derailed. While she enjoyed her new job, it was definitely a less prestigious title than before and there was an uneasy tension between her resignation to the fact that she had been removed from her position on the one hand, and the fact that no particularly satisfying reason was provided for what in effect became a career derailment. Hilda on the other hand chose to resign from her post, once she recognized the impossibility of achieving any change whatsoever, in the context of being hounded by a journalistic posse that found reasons to construe whichever move she made as scandalous.

A possible conclusion from this might be that narrative closure may not be the most satisfying outcome of a life episode when one is experiencing personal misfortune caused by a scandal, but rather that escape from the associated drama (as it is being unfolded and narrated) may be a more satisfying strategy. Perhaps this holds especially true for a historical period when the predominant mode of narration is conditioned towards irony, by the plurality of moral standards and institutional logics employed by various stakeholders in contemporary social dramas, and the resulting tensions between different stories and versions of the same events. It becomes exceedingly difficult to exonerate oneself from culpability in such a situation – due to the absence of any moral standard or institutional logic recognized as universally valid, together with the boundless public appetite for scandal – causing a very limited potential for arriving at a coherent and closed representation of self that is recognized as morally legitimate,

and thus ultimately satisfying. Conversely, if one can find no reasons for the experience of personal misfortune (such as job loss), recognised as ultimately more valid than rival reasons according to which such misfortunes would be seen as undeserved, it is difficult to reconcile oneself with the idea of narrative closure.

This observation is similar to that made by Gabriel et al (2010), who studied the narrative coping strategies of managers and professionals who had been made redundant during the recent financial crisis. They found that those interviewees who had managed to reach narrative closure in their stories of job loss were not actually the most satisfied group of interviewees. Rather, they exhibited “a lack of control and an inability to find solace in their story” (Gabriel et al, 2010; 1705). This feeling was ultimately due to an inability to recognize any valid reasons for the misfortunes that had befallen them, viewing the *peripeteia* or key turning point in their life story (job loss), which had shaped their ultimate fate, rather as “a painful event, the product of cruelty, injustice and unfairness, from which there is no prospect of resuming or salvaging a career” (ibid). This observation is similar to Frye’s point that tragedy assumes a certain horrific and grotesque aspect, when cast in an ironic mode of narration: when no plausible reason can be provided for the protagonist’s misfortune, his fate becomes morally unintelligible, causing a somewhat nightmarish quality reminiscent of e.g. Kafka’s novels.

According to Gabriel et al (2010), coming to terms with job loss required more than “the construction of a plausible, gripping or completed story to account for trauma. Instead, it is more likely to happen when the narrator can construct a protagonist for his or her story, which enables them to move on as a person who has experienced trauma, endured trauma, but is no longer defined by trauma” (Gabriel et al, 2010; 1708). In the interview sample, this was identified with a distinct narrative coping strategy, one that downplayed the incident of job loss, avoiding to see it as a key turning point (*peripeteia*) in their lives, but rather as a minor episode in the ongoing unfolding of a life story, whose definitive narrative closure had not yet been achieved, a form of life story which the authors term *moratorium*, one that lacks formal closure, without such lack being seen as “a great cause of concern or anxiety for the storyteller” (ibid, 1704). There is a similar quality to Hilda’s representation of the Yardstick school scandal, and

its role as an episode in her life story, although naturally this was made easier by her choosing to resign from her job. She is ultimately the one who comes across as happier and more reconciled with her fate, compared to Ada. Escape may thus be the most satisfying strategy for managers in charge of an organization exposed to allegations of misconduct, for the purpose of embedding such a life episode within an overarching narrative representation of self that is ultimately possible to reconcile oneself with. Obviously, this has broader implications for an organization's ability to successfully manage an incidence of scandal, since it implies a likelihood for high managerial turnover during such an episode.

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i) Plato avoids any absolute definition of what constitutes the good (in terms of a determinate decision or action drawn from a set of ethical choices), arguing that the good is impossible to generalize into a set of absolutely righteous ethical precepts, with universal applicability. Plato instead resorts to telling allegories, as a way of illustrating the slippery nature of the good. Although the good does have an absolute ontological basis in Plato's realm of ideas (Plato likens it to the notion of a cosmic order), it can never be comprehensively understood in positive terms by humans, since our cognitive capabilities are insufficient for doing so. The good is that yardstick against which we measure particular decisions or actions, in terms of their moral worth, and thus can not be defined in terms external to it – Plato thus argues that the good must be seen as what we in modern logical terms would call an axiom, a necessary conditional premise for ethical reasoning (Plato, 2006). In later works, Plato equates the good, thus conceived, with God (in the singular sense, rather than the plurality of gods in the Greek pantheon), seeing as it represents a premise which we need to accept as being true for the practice of ethical reasoning to be meaningful, although we can not logically or empirically prove it (Plato, 2008), thus effectively making the question over the existence of the good equivalent to an article of faith. According to Plato (2006), we can however, when confronted with a specific moral dilemma, gain an understanding of what would not be good (in terms of particular decisions or actions available to choose from in that specific dilemma), through the use of dialectical reason. The proper exercise of reason, for the purpose of determining the good and just decision (in each individual case), through a process of elimination of the bad options, thus becomes the supreme virtue in Plato's ideal state, and the one which *paideia* has the purpose of bringing about in its citizens, through disciplined training in the art of mathematical and dialectical enquiry (Plato, 2006). It is also a virtue which comes close to being divine, since it is capable of revealing an indirect and partial understanding of the good, though always in a negative sense, by revealing what is bad.

ii) Like Plato, he also conceives of ethics as intimately linked to a form of *paideia*: that of educating the human passions into conformity with that which practical reason (*phronesis*) identifies as the right course of action in any specific case. Like Plato did in later works, Aristotle furthermore recognizes that his conception of the good is one where the cultivation of virtues (grounded in reason) needs to be complemented by laws, an idea elaborated in his *Politics*, since not all citizens can be trusted to rationally judge what constitutes the good,

and thus need to be bound by a set of simplified rules that approximate it (Aristotle, 1963).

iii) Hegel elaborates lengthily on the dynamics of this historical dialectic, arguing that the course by which new notions come to replace old ones comes about through an initial moment of negation of the old notion, in which human consciousness becomes increasingly aware of a lack of correspondence between its understanding of an object, and the object “in itself” (an sich). In discovering this discrepancy, consciousness is made aware “that what it previously took to be the in itself is not an in itself, or that it was only an in itself for consciousness”. For consciousness to negate what at first seemed an objective truth, and to regard this absolute truth as a mere “truth for consciousness”, is for consciousness to have lived through what Hegel terms an “experience”, a movement which can be seen as a “reversal of consciousness itself”. It thus becomes the historical-prophetic task of the natural and social sciences to continue to carry on the work of accumulating a body of knowledge, which, brought together under the mother science of philosophy, will bring about that future state of absolute knowledge, which will conclusively define the good society, together with the rational justification of those laws which constitute it (Hegel, 1977).

iv) The similarity between Hegelian “notions” and Foucault’s “discourse” is not spurious. Although Foucault was famous for rarely acknowledging intellectual indebtedness, an exception can be found in his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, “The Discourse on Language”, where he lays out his plan for the study of discourse, and pays homage to his mentor Jean Hippolyte:

“I know that, for many, his work is associated with that of Hegel, and that our age, whether through logic or epistemology, whether through Marx or through Nietzsche, is attempting to flee Hegel. . . . But truly to escape Hegel involves an exact appreciation of the price we have to pay to detach ourselves from him. It assumes that we are aware of the extent to which Hegel, insidiously perhaps, is close to us; it implies a knowledge, in that which permits us to think against Hegel, of that which remains Hegelian. We have to determine the extent to which our anti-Hegelianism is possibly one of his tricks directed against us at the end of which he stands, motionless, waiting for us.” (Foucault, 1990)

Foucault then proceeds to list five alterations that Jean Hippolyte worked “not within Hegel’s philosophy, but upon it, and upon philosophy as Hegel conceived

it; from this also, a complete inversion of themes.” These alterations include Hegel’s conception of “philosophy as a totality” and the deterministic end of self-consciousness, which Hippolyte transformed into a theme of “repeated interrogation” (ibid). Another key objection relates to the sweeping nature of Hegel’s argument, conjuring up a picture of a transcendent human consciousness, seeming to develop autonomously, without any disturbing interactions with social institutions, language or power interests.

v) Although arguably also the Judaic faith, and the ways in which it has historically influenced different versions of the Christian doctrine, by placing a stronger emphasis on faith and law-bound (rather than virtue-bound) moral righteousness in e.g. the doctrines of the early Church fathers

vi) Following the postmodern legitimation crisis (Lyotard, 1978), the laws are no longer seen as absolutely capable of determining the good, causing a weakening political dynamic in the development of those legal constitutions inherited from the Enlightenment tradition. The idea of a private morality, in a societal context characterized by a plurality of moral communities, has instead taken root. Adherence to a moral community is perceived as an act of volition uninformed by rational deliberation or religious tradition, as well as a corresponding hesitancy by the community to enforce adherence to moral precepts, since this would be seen as authoritarian and oppressive. We no longer like to invoke adherence to moral norms by appeal to authority, whether in the form of a divine authority or absolute and universal normative validity based on “objective” arguments derived through reason alone – instead we invoke subjective preference as the sole valid motivation for subscribing to moral values and beliefs. A curious aspect of this turn is that moral standards previously used to assess the righteousness of *society* (e.g. political theories about the ideal state) are now instead being used to assess a private form of righteousness, of individuals forming part of a moral micro-community; one’s private righteousness is being assessed according to the subjective probity of opinions shared by said community, without therefore calling for these to be implemented as binding national legislation. As argued by MacIntyre (1988), this has caused a certain moral disorder, in that we use moral arguments designed to assess the absolute and universal righteousness of moral laws, to assess a private and subjective form of self-worth. Treating moral arguments as mere expressive assertion of self-worth, when the form of these arguments has been derived using

the logic of the categorical imperative, easily results in a certain cognitive dissonance, typically expressed as a sense of frustration when such moral assertions are not shared by an opposing party. A common reaction by individual parties involved in such disputes is to resort to indignation and mutual contempt, leveled at the opposing party's unwillingness to come around to one's own (albeit subjective) opinion. This often involves portraying the motives of one's opponent as either transparently self-interested or the result of naïve self-deception. Paradoxically, this latter turn restores a certain hierarchical and exclusive quality to the forms of self-worth conferred by contemporary moral communities. It is common these days to use moral arguments to boost one's self image, and the image of the moral community one belongs to, through, inter alia, the inter-subjective social prestige which has come to be associated with certain "ethical" opinions and consumption choices espoused by the moral community one forms part of – whilst being cautious not to argue that such opinions or consumption choices should therefore be enforced on a wider community. This does of course confer an element of exclusivity to the notion of righteousness: everyone can not be righteous in contemporary society, but members of individual moral communities typically claim to be more righteous than the members of rival ones. As an example, ethical or responsible consumption has become a significant trend in recent years, but one seldom hears political discussions about e.g. improving animal rights protection through national legislation. While this may be partly due to the current impopularity of government regulation, one may at least consider another reason: that this would remove an element of exclusivity which ethical consumers find appealing.

vii) See for instance the foreword by Edward Said to the fiftieth anniversary edition for an account of this critique.

viii) This can be seen to align well with discursive identity theory, according to which individuals seek to identify themselves, in their work-life roles, with certain management discourses (knowledge work, leadership, innovation) that confer an aspect of social status, as well as being ethically infused, thus enhancing their perceived self-worth.

ix) Similarly, Frye's analysis of basic *mythos* or plot structures may be conceived of as valid, without therefore buying into the idea of them as "deep structures" in some mystical or metaphysical sense, but rather as narrative conventions which

have found a strong appeal within our own culture.

x) The ideal of the imitation of Christ was an important element of the early Christian doctrine. References to this notion are found in the earliest Christian documents, such as the Pauline Epistles. Augustine viewed the imitation of Christ as the fundamental purpose of the life of a Christian, and as a remedy and atonement for the sins of Adam. Saint Francis of Assisi believed in the physical as well as the spiritual imitation of Christ, and consequently advocated a path of poverty and preaching. The theme of the imitation of Christ was subsequently revived in the Devotio Moderna movement, lending the title to Thomas a Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ*.

xi) For instance, the characters in Homer's epics are a blend of human protagonists and divine beings. Snorre Sturlasson's Prose Edda, depicting the lives of legendary human ancestors, is mixed with allegorical accounts of the Genesis of the world, as well as tales of divine beings in the Norse pantheon

xii) Aristotle (1994) insisted that tragic dramas required an essentially good, as well as powerful protagonist – of some worldly importance – to be brought down by a mistake (*hamartia*). The meaning of *hamartia* has changed over time, and the protagonists of subsequent tragic dramas in the Western canon (e.g. Shakespearean) are often brought down by other factors, such as character flaws, some act of folly, or the inner logic of the prevalent social structure. Most tragic dramas in the Western canon do however involve an essentially good, often materially successful protagonist being brought down by unfortunate contingencies. Tragedy thus typically opens with a description of the protagonist as an essentially good person, often together with some indication of the measure of worldly success he/she has achieved.

xiii) For instance, King Lear must divide his kingdom between his daughters to ensure continued stability of rule (rather than descent into anarchy), and this requires determining who among them would be most fit as monarchs. However, this very act of determination turns out to be a mistake (*hamartia*), which results in the opposite of what it was intended to achieve: the wrong rulers are chosen, causing misrule, corruption and ultimate descent into anarchy.