

Narrative mediation and discursive positioning in organisational conflicts

By Nikolaj Kure



Nikolaj Kure obtained his PhD in September 2008 at the University of Aarhus, in Denmark, for a project on narrative techniques as a means for organisational change. He now holds a position as assistant professor at the Centre for Corporate Communication, University of Aarhus. His major research areas include: organisational change, narrative practices, conflict resolution, and organisational decision-making. He can be contacted at: nku@asb.dk

Abstract

In this paper, I expand on the use of narrative practices in the field of organisational mediation. Building on the mediation approach put forward by John Winslade, Gerald Monk, Alison Cotter, and Sara Cobb, I propose to conceptualise the organisation as a hierarchical discursive field that shapes organisational conflict patterns. On this basis, I suggest four mediation goals for the narrative mediator who engages in organisational conflict resolution: stimulating a sense of contingency; externalising the conflict; discovering hidden organisational experience; and building alternative stories about organisational practices. In a participatory research process with a Danish health organisation, I try to reach these goals by means of position map 1 and outsider-witness practices. Thus, the article contributes to the theoretical understanding of organisational conflicts as well as to the use of narrative practices in the resolution of such conflicts.¹

Keywords: organisational discourses, organizations, power, narrative mediation

As documented in a number of contexts, narrative practices have been astonishingly helpful in therapeutic settings (see, for example, Freedman & Combs, 1996; Payne, 2006; White, 2007; White & Epston, 1990; Zimmermann & Dickerson, 1996). During the last ten to fifteen years, this promising trajectory has led mediators to apply narrative techniques within the realm of conflict resolution (Cobb, 1993, 1994, 2004; Winslade, 2003, 2006; Winslade & Monk, 2000, 2008; Winslade, Monk, & Cotter, 1998). The theoretical cornerstone that supports these mediation practices is Foucault's concept of the discourse as 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak' (Foucault, 1969, p. 49). Concretely, a discourse is understood as a local semantic system that shapes the identities of the parties in a relationship by functioning as a background for 'position calls' (Davies & Harré, 1990; Drewery, 2005; Winslade, 2006). A position call is an invitation to assume a relational identity, for instance, when a manager meets an employee's suggestion at a meeting with the following response, 'Please, let's be reasonable for a second'. In responding this way, the manager positions the employee as 'irrational' whereas she herself is constructed as 'rational'. In this sense, the manager uses a culturally privileged discourse, the discourse of rationality, to shape social positions of relative power and disadvantage; the 'rational' manager as the privileged, the 'irrational' employee as the disadvantaged.

Conflicts are seen as the results of such polarising positioning practices. Thus, narrative mediators do not understand conflicts as effects of objective, contradictory interests that should be mediated; rather conflicts are seen as expressions of positioning practices that marginalise or negatively define persons in conversations (such as positioning the employee as 'irrational'). Narrative mediation, consequently, focuses on the expansion of the discursive resources that are drawn upon in such polarising positioning practices (Winslade, 2006). The main goal in this context is to create the conditions for the growth of alternative relationship stories that challenge the dominating discourses in the relationship. In the above example, the mediator would engage in opening space for new stories about the manager/employee relationship, for instance, by examining the participants' hopes and intentions which may foster new stories about the relationship as a space for 'creativity' or 'honesty' (and not just 'rationality'). In effect, this would help constitute a new discursive background that does not fit into the events of the dispute and opens for less polarising and marginalising positioning practices.

A number of studies have convincingly shown that narrative mediation is fruitful in the resolution of conflicts that involve a relation of relatively little complexity, for example conflicting couples (Winslade, 2003; Winslade & Monk, 2008) or disputing neighbours (Monk, Winslade, Crocket, & Epston, 1997; Winslade, Monk, & Cotter, 1998). However, Holmgren (2008) has recently shown that narrative practices also contain the potential as mediation tools in complex organisational contexts. The present paper aims at bringing narrative practices further into this little-explored territory by developing new ideas about the use of narrative practices as a third party mediation tool in organisations. To this end, I start off by reflecting on how organisations can be understood as webs of privileged and marginalised discourses that function as a background for position calls. By means of a participatory research process with a Danish health organisation, I hope to show that this framework is helpful when understanding conflicts in organisations. I end the paper with a number of reflections on possible ways of using narrative practices as intervention tools in organisational settings.

Discursive positioning and organisational conflict

Inspired by Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory (Laclau, 1990; Laclau, 2005; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), I proceed to conceptualise an organisation as a hierarchic web of dominating and marginalised discourses that condition conflicts. I suggest that the idea of a 'discursive hierarchy' is a key concept when understanding conflict patterns in organisations. This concept helps us understand how some dominating discourses offer privileged subject positions from which some (privileged) members are entitled to negatively define others, ultimately resulting in 'polarised positions'.

Building on Foucault's concepts of discourse and subjectivity, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) define the subject as 'a subject position within a discursive structure' (p. 115). Identity is not given by an inner individual core, but is constituted in the network of discourses that 'recruit' subjects to assume certain positions. Thus, organisational identities are made possible by discursive systems of meaning that offer positions from which to act and speak. Subject positions are organised by so-called 'nodal points' (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 112); a term originally used to describe the 'buttons' in a sofa to which the cover and lining is attached. Transferred to a discursive context, the term signifies the central and prominent sign that organises and keeps a discourse together. For example, a democratic management discourse is organised by the nodal point of 'democracy', which structures the social actions of the democratic manager. In other words, by structuring the discourse, the nodal point constitutes an overarching intention in the position, for instance, to ensure that all management initiatives are somehow democratic.

A central point in the discourse theory is the assumption that all discourses strive to control social practices (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 137). If we accept this, we can think of organisational discourses as systems of meaning that aim at determining different fields of practice in an organisation (for example, the fields of management, cooperation, decision-making, and so on) by pushing their subject positions forward as 'logical' identities. Laclau and Mouffe, however, insist that no discourse is ever able to establish itself as the only thinkable resource for identity. For example, a democratic management discourse may try to fixate all managers as democratic managers, but the discourse always finds itself challenged and disturbed by competing discourses that offer alternative positions from which to act and speak. For example, an authoritarian management discourse could compete with a democratic management discourse.

This point is a derivative of the distinct poststructuralist dimension implicit in the Laclauian discourse theory. Thus, Laclau and Mouffe draw heavily on the French poststructuralist, Jacques Derrida (2004), who shows that any discourse is constituted by setting a 'constitutive difference' with regard to other competing discourses. Paradoxically, struggling discourses function as each other's condition of existence (Laclau, 1990, p. 39), which, by implication, rules out the possibility of total discursive dominance. Instead, at least two competing discourses will operate on the same field of practice, battling to present their subject position as 'proper' or 'normal'. In effect, the organisation is the scene for a never-finalised discursive struggle, where some discourses, in the course of time, gain a prioritised, however temporary, right in the production of social reality.

I propose that, imagining organisations as unstable, discursive hierarchies is a fruitful pathway into understanding organisational conflict patterns. It allows us to analyse how some organisational members are systematically subject to negative definitions, due to an unequal distribution of power and privilege in the organisation. For instance, we can imagine an

organisation in which an authoritarian management discourse dominates and defines the authoritarian manager as the 'proper' manager. In this discursive context, managers recruited by a democratic management discourse are at risk of being positioned as suspect, unproductive, and even abnormal. These democratic managers may be negatively defined along the lines of, 'In this organisation, the manager is the one making the decisions and, if you think you can leave it to your employees, then you're wrong!' In other words, the hierarchic structure legitimises practices of negative positioning and paves the way for normalising judgements.

According to Honneth (1995), situations of negative positioning are likely to give rise to a 'struggle for acknowledgement'. When our discursive intention is devalued or rejected as unfit, we will struggle to regain a sense of value. However, the struggle for acknowledgement is often carried out as a destructive strategy that challenges other people's preferred identities. Thus, the initial negative definition sparks off cyclical and reciprocal patterns of negative positioning practices that ultimately result in 'polarised positions'. In this line of thought, conflict patterns can be seen as the end results of the organisation's discursive hierarchy that distributes unequal relations of power and entitlements in the organisation. A conflict, thus, is not an expression of some people being inherently 'destructive', 'bad' or 'conflict provoking' (described by Winslade & Monk, 2000, as an 'essentialist' account of persons), but is seen as an implication of a discursive structure that fuels 'polarised positions'.

Analysis of an organisational conflict

In this section, I attempt to show how a conflict in a Danish health organisation can be analysed as a result of discursive power operations. The organisation, called Centre for Motoric Disabilities (CMD), is a research unit that treats patients based on an interdisciplinary logic.² It is believed that back pain is not simply the result of physical/mechanical breakdowns but is driven by a network of physical, psychological and social factors. Consequently, a medical doctor, a social worker, a physiotherapist, a psychologist, and an occupational therapist, are all part of the team responsible for deciding which treatment should be chosen for the specific patient. Members of the organisation have recently experienced patterns of conflict and frustration in their decision-making practices. The conflict has not yet assumed a gargantuan size with fixed polarised positions, but it does play a significant negative role in the organisation's life. In order to understand how discourses condition the conflict, I have interviewed all team members and participated in a number of staff meetings.

Two members, the physiotherapist Thomas, and the psychologist Pernille, seem to be particularly victimised by the conflict, as they experience a high degree of frustration and a lack of recognition of their perspectives and competences. These patterns, as I will show, can be understood as a result of a discursive battle between the discourses of 'difference' and 'equality', of which the latter seems to prevail. When analysing the interview transcripts, it becomes clear that Thomas and Pernille share the same decision-making rationale. They both prefer to observe the patient strictly from their own mono-functional perspective, and seem to assume that the best treatment is reached if the team members stick to their particular perspectives when diagnosing the patient. Furthermore, both Thomas and Pernille prefer to word their treatment proposals as knowledge-based assessments, for instance, illustrated by Pernille:

Pernille: We want to do the treatment that is documented.

Interviewer: Yes.

Pernille: That is the expert, where the expert can ...

Interviewer: Yes, what can the expert do?

Pernille: What we know works, what we know works.

Here Pernille describes how she prefers to discuss treatment proposals from an expert position; based on 'what we know works' and what 'is documented', Pernille finds herself obliged to formulate her observations of the patients as expert assessments. On this basis, we can argue that Thomas and Pernille intend to activate the *differences* among the team members to the benefit of the patients. In other words, the position from which Pernille and Thomas speak and act is singled out by a discourse of difference that shapes a decision-making practice where differences in team members' functional perspectives and knowledge resources are highlighted and valued. The discourse of difference has 'recruited' Thomas and Pernille, whose actions are structured by an overall intention of making differences in perspectives and knowledge explicit in order for the team to reach an effective solution. However, both Pernille and Thomas experience that they are consistently urged to suppress this ambition. For instance, Thomas describes how he finds himself forced to apply a more 'broad' perspective when diagnosing a patient:

Physiotherapist: Well, with this broad perspective in mind, I first of all need to assess whether physiotherapy matters, is it relevant at all to engage in physiotherapeutic exercises?

Interviewer: What do you need to consider?

Physiotherapist: I need to consider that because the team ... well you could say that we should get a broad picture of the patient, so I need to consider whether physiotherapy matters.

Interviewer: What does this mean?

Physiotherapist: Well, you could say that if the patient has so many psycho-social problems that it doesn't make sense to demand that he exercises twice a week, you can't make that demand.

Interviewer: No, no.

Physiotherapist: Sometimes you need to hold that back.

Interviewer: And what does that make you do when you see a patient like that?

Physiotherapist: Well, sometimes ... What I'm getting at is that sometimes I think that the patients do not get enough physiotherapeutic treatment.

Interviewer: Okay.

Physiotherapist: Sometimes I think that they [the patients] are not getting enough support for the physical training.

The quotation shows that Thomas prefers to make the strict physiotherapeutic demand that patients should exercise in situations when they do not 'get enough physiotherapeutic treatment'. In making his particular perspective explicit, Thomas highlights his difference from the other team members in order to enhance the diagnostic quality. At the same time, however, Thomas describes how he is unable to offer this mono-functional observation to the team, 'You can't do that', and, 'Sometimes you need to hold that [the observation that the patient could

benefit from physiotherapy] back'. Thomas finds himself compelled to secure a 'broad perspective' on the patient and to subordinate his specific mono-functional observations to a cross-functional gaze. In other words, Thomas seems to be subjected to a negative definition, as his intention to apply his specific functional perspective is not acknowledged in the organisation. Thomas' intentions are not seen by his fellow team members, as he is indirectly told that his practices are not come *il faut* and appropriate in the organisation. Thomas, in short, is subjected to a normalising power process that compels him to assume a more 'correct' and privileged position in the decision practices, in this case the position of taking a 'broad perspective' on the patient.

I will argue that these processes of negative definitions, particularly aimed at Thomas and Pernille, are powered by a discourse of equality that has managed to suppress the discourse of difference. Thus, my interviews with the team members show that two practices dominate the decision behaviour in the team, both structured by a discourse of equality. First, the majority of the members diagnose the patient using a cross-functional gaze. In doing so, the observer directs her vision to all dimensions of the patient (the physiological, the social, and the psychological) and does not limit her observations to a strict mono-functional gaze. Second, closely related to this holistic observation, the team members display a dominating practice of communicating about the patient in a reflective and tentative manner. Illustratively, the occupational therapist, Josephine, describes how she words a treatment suggestion as a hypothetical reflection:

'In that case I might think that I will propose that she [the patient] consults Pernille [the psychologist].'

Here, Josephine applies a double-tentative communicative mode: before she can even begin to propose a treatment suggestion, she must reflect upon whether she wants to propose her suggestion or not. These social actions adopted by a majority of the team members are, I will argue, structured by a discourse of equality. When the member observes the patient holistically, she integrates all perspectives in her vision, thereby symbolically valuing all perspectives as equally important. When the member words her treatment proposal as a tentative reflection, she does not vouch for her proposal as being more valuable than others but recognises that other proposals are equally justifiable. In short, the preferred way of making decisions in the organisation seems to be structured by an idea of equality, which disposes the team members to symbolically show that all perspectives are equally valuable in the treatment of the patient.

Summing up, the analysis indicates that two discourses, one of equality and one of difference, are both striving to define the proper social behaviour in the organisation's decision processes. Neither of the discourses is able to fully obtain this goal, but the empirical material suggests that the discourse of equality plays a privileged role. In the context of mediation, the crucial point to be made, I suggest, is that the configuration of discursive dominance and suppression is exactly what structures the repeated negative definitions of Pernille and Thomas. The discourse of equality has assumed a privileged role in defining the preferred decision-making practices which legitimises and nurtures negative definitions of Pernille and Thomas. Put differently, the hierarchy of marginalised and privileged discourses functions as a legitimising background for the praise of some practices and the disparagement of others. In this case, Pernille and Thomas, being recruited by a marginalised discourse of difference, are an easy prey for repeated negative definitions, which ultimately sparks off frustration and creates the foundation for patterns of polarising positioning.

Narrative mediation in organisational conflicts

The above analysis supports Art Fisher's idea that there are no 'innocent places' (Fisher, 2005). Even in a context where equality is the ruling logic, we still find a discursive power field that privileges and marginalises some actions and some subjects. Even in the realm of equality, there is normalising power. Importantly, this analysis does not imply a nihilistic or relativist stance where all discourses are equally justifiable and ethical. On the contrary, it highlights the importance of a continuous ethical reflection on the discursive power operations in organisations. In this context then, what is the task of the narrative mediator? When no promise of a power neutral place can be given, which are the aims of the mediator engaged in organisational conflicts, such as the one described above? I suggest that the overarching task of the narrative mediator is to support a dialogue that enables the group to rearrange the discursive background that, prior to the mediation, legitimises negative positioning practices. Such a discursive rearrangement will not create a power-free space where no conflict will take place; however, it will constitute a discursive background that redistributes the current relations of relative privilege among the organisation's members. Metaphorically speaking, a discursive rearrangement will wet the discursive gun powder and, in effect, short-circuit the existing conflict patterns.

Before reflecting on how to do this in practice, two theoretical points should be clarified. First, I assume that the telling of alternative stories will reshape the discursive hierarchy in the organisation. Thus, I propose that an organisation's discursive formation is produced and hierarchised through collective narrative processes. For example, the team at CMD may share a number of successful experiences with the holistic treatment approach. If such experiences are knitted into a story that highlights the value of equality, the discourse of equality is supported and regenerated. In other words, if alternative stories about organisational practices can be constructed, the discursive configuration may be challenged or rearranged. Secondly, I suggest distinguishing between the use of narrative practices in relations of relatively little complexity (such as couples, disputing neighbours etc.), and in multi-relational contexts such as organisations. As mediators (Winslade, 2006; Winslade et al., 1998) have pointed out, narrative mediation in two-person relations should focus on the construction of new stories of the specific conflict relation. However, when the task is to change social patterns in organisations, it seems more helpful to support the building of alternative stories about the organisation's practices (for instance, alternative stories about decision-making). This may be a subtle distinction but, I suspect, an important one. Thus, if the mediator aims at the re-telling of specific problematic relations in the organisation, the intervention may not reach the organisational discourses that constitute the background for the conflict-provoking positioning. The mediator may resolve conflicts involving specific members but will not intervene at an organisational level. Therefore, I propose that the narrative mediator's aim should be to cooperate with the organisational members in exploring preferred organisational practices and values, and stimulate the emergence of narratives that support these practices.

In a two-day seminar with the CMD team, I experimented in using a range of narrative practices to this end. The goals of the mediation process were: to stimulate a sense of contingency; to externalise the conflict; to rediscover hidden organisational experience with preferred values and practices; and to build new narratives that support these preferred values and practices.

Stimulating an organisational sense of contingency

When engaging in the resolution of organisational conflicts, mediators are often met with the conception that conflicts are inherent and unchangeable parts of the organisation. Conflicts are seen as the results of disputes between fundamentally contradictory and irreconcilable parties. In this context, I propose that the first mediation goal is to create a sense of contingency; that is to advocate the idea that conflicts are the results of decisions that can be undone. In this respect, the narrative mediator's task is to establish an unstable and open discursive field that disturbs the existing conception of conflicts as immanent and fixed. In practice, the mediator may initiate the process by meta-communicating that change is indeed possible, for example, by elaborating on previous conflict resolution experiences, by creating a sense of urgency in resolving the conflicts, by emphasising the importance of change in the organisation, or by allowing participants to express their hopes and expectations in the mediation process.

Externalising conversations

As I have hoped to show above, the conflict at CMD is not anchored in 'bad' or 'conflict-provoking' persons, but rests in the normalising effects of the organisation's discursive web. Consistent with this analysis, the mediator, throughout the two-day seminar, speaks in the rhetorical mode described in narrative therapy as an externalising conversation (White & Epston, 1990; Winslade et al., 1998). He talks of the conflict as an 'it' that has momentarily taken control of the organisation and invites the participants to do the same. By using this rhetorical figure, the change agent meta-communicates that the problem is the problem, whereas the persons involved are recipients of its evil effects. In effect, the externalising conversation mode allows the participants to separate themselves from the conflict, which helps avoid the identification of culprits or rascals and, furthermore, makes the conflict tangible and addressable.

In the beginning of the two-day seminar, the participants are invited to see the conflict as an 'imagined other' (Winslade et al., 1998) that has forced its way into the organisation. In pairs, the participants are asked to reflect on, 'Which problems have taken over or influenced the organisation?' These 'others' are written on a blackboard, symbolically constituting the common enemies that stand in the way of a preferred future. The participants are now asked to interview each other in pairs, using an interview guide prepared by the change agent. This technology is a development of traditional narrative practices where the therapist/mediator interviews the clients/conflict participants. However, in settings with many participants who should all have a chance to voice their stories, the structure of participants interviewing each other is a way of making this possible in the allocated timeframe. In the first section of the interview, the interviewer invites the interviewee to elaborate on the problems or dilemmas that most significantly influence his/her work life, and to signify these problems/dilemmas with appropriate names. The interviewee is asked, 'What would you describe as suitable names for the problems or dilemmas that influence your team?' Then, the participants come up with their individual naming such as 'insecurity' or 'management absence'. Next, the effects of the problems are mapped by questions such as: 'How does "X" make you think and feel about yourself in the organisation?'; 'What would you call the atmosphere that "X" creates in the team?'; and 'What would you call the position or mood that "X" creates for you as a colleague?' In articulating problems as external forces, this line of interviewing undermines the idea that the conflict is caused by flaws located inside the participants and paves the way for a resistance against the conflict.

Discovering hidden organisational experience

The invitation to resistance begins by asking the participants to take a position against the problems. Thus, the participants are asked to evaluate the effects of the problem: 'Do you like the effects that the problems have on the team?' If the participants evaluate negatively ('No, I do not like the effects of the problems'), questions that examine hidden experiences of alternative organisational practices, competences and values can be introduced. Spotting these untold experiences takes place via a range of questions that aim at making the participants justify their negative evaluation by describing preferred practices in the organisation. The participants are invited to elaborate on questions such as: 'When you do not like the effects of the problems, can you describe how you would prefer the team members to act and communicate?'; 'Which values in the organisation would support this preferred practice?'; and, 'Which competences in the organisation would gain a bit more space if your preferred organisation became reality?' After each of the questions described here, follow-up questions are made which have the participants give examples from their everyday life. When responding to these questions, hitherto un-storied events, which highlight hidden values or competences, become visible. For example, a participant elaborates on a concrete process with a patient where each team member offered a diagnosis specifically based on their functional perspective. In her opinion, this procedure was valuable as it resulted in a precise diagnosis and an effective treatment. Thus, an 'invisible' or forgotten event that articulates the value of using members' differences is highlighted and, thereby, becomes a part of the organisation's reality.

Building alternative stories about organisational practices

The process of spotting hidden organisational experience establishes the building stones for stories challenging the dominating discourses in the organisation. However, as Winslade et al. (1998) stress, a narrative is not just a chronological list of events. The recovered events, therefore, must be woven into a coherent storyline featuring thematic consistency and characters that develop and demonstrate competences and values. This 'performing of meaning' (Bruner, 1986) is stimulated by means of the technique described in narrative therapy as the 'outsider-witness group' (White, 2007). This process starts by each pair offering a summary of their interviews to all participants. Meanwhile, the group has been divided into smaller groups of two or three who are asked to witness their colleague's account of un-storied events and hidden values. The technique includes four steps. First, the outsider-witness group selects an *expression* they have particularly noticed in the summaries of the interviews. For example, the persons in the witness group might say, 'We noticed that she said that she preferred to use functional perspectives more actively in decision-making'. The exact phrasing should be used in order to make sure that there is a direct link to the concrete utterances. The second task is to offer an *image* of the person telling the story, which aims at highlighting the intentions, competences and values of the person being witnessed. For example, the outsider-witness group could say, 'We see her as a lioness fighting for the patients' well-being'. In the third phase, the outsider-witness teams are asked to reflect on how the story *resonates* in their own organisational lives, for example, by saying, 'We have talked about how we recognise the ambition to take more care of our patients'. Finally, the outsider-witness group accounts for how the story has *transported* them to see or think differently about practices in the organisation. They might respond, 'We have talked about how using our functional perspectives a little bit more might add quality to our decisions'.

This process aims at opening the space for crafting alternative narratives of organisational practices. The flurry of newly recovered events constitutes new narrative material that can be organised into narratives articulating hitherto untold organisational values and practices. The participants are thus given the opportunity to collectively author alternative stories by linking events into a coherent storyline about the organisation's preferred practices and values.

The mediation potential of narrative practices

The emergence of new narratives may potentially challenge the grip of the conflict at CMD. As analysed above, the conflict is driven by a discursive formation that legitimises negative definitions of certain members. However, this process is interrupted if the team manages to author a narrative that highlights the value of using and honouring differences between members. In this sense, telling alternative stories is a way of resisting discursive power processes and shaping a new space of action in the organisation. Qualitative interviews with team members after the seminar indicate that the above processes have in fact instigated a discursive change. For instance, Kurt, the medical doctor and the formal team manager, realised the differences in the team in terms of power position, education and competences:

Kurt: We [in management] do not have the exact same role as the others in the team. And that's how it should be.

Interviewer: And that's okay?

Kurt: Yes, it is, that's the way it is.

Interviewer: And did you realise that during the seminar?

Kurt: Yes, more clearly. Well, when we started this project, it was like everyone was equal. No matter what, I was equal with the others, Julie was equal, everyone was equal. And Johan was equal, but we are not! That's an illusion. We have different roles to play, different competences, different educations, so we are not equal, we don't have the same role in the team, we don't and that has become clearer.

The occupational therapist, Ursula, makes a similar observation:

Ursula: In a way it has become clearer to me what class in the hierarchy I belong to, what I can do essentially.

Interviewer: Yes.

Ursula: For example, in relation to the team's future, I cannot do much more than shout and express that now we should do this or that. But it is Kurt's task to talk to the top-management; Kurt has got to do that. That is the hierarchy.

Interviewer: Okay.

Ursula: Now we would like to know what will happen to our team in the future, then I can make that clear to my leader, who is Kurt, who should take it a step further. That has somehow become clearer to me but in a good way, I mean now I don't have to blame myself for not acting, because I don't have the position to do so.

It is noteworthy that Kurt and Ursula both see the actualisation of the differences among members as a value. To Kurt, playing different roles in the team is 'how it should be', and respecting the formal hierarchy helps Ursula avoid blaming herself for not taking action on

strategic matters. Thus, the team members seem to have built a story that articulates the practice of applying differences as valuable. In theoretical terms, the participants have caused a discursive reconfiguration that places the discourse of difference at the heart of the discursive formation. The telling of new stories has constituted an alternative discursive frame that values expressions of differences as legitimate decision practices. On this basis, without being too conclusive, it can be argued that the use of narrative practices has redistributed the privilege and power in the organisation and, therefore, seem to hold a potential as mediation tools in organisational settings.

Concluding remarks

In this paper, I have tried to apply narrative practices as mediation tools in organisational settings. This ambition is highly inspired by the groundbreaking works of John Winslade, Gerald Monk, Alison Cotter, and Sara Cobb, who have investigated the mediation potential held by narrative techniques. Standing on the shoulders of these frontrunners, I have worded four goals for the narrative mediator all of which allow the organisation's members to rearrange the discursive formation that conditions organisational conflict patterns. These goals were: to stimulate a sense of contingency; to externalise the conflict; to rediscover hidden organisational experience with preferred values and practices; and to build new narratives that support these preferred values and practices. I would like to emphasise that this way of using narrative practices reflects one possible entry into the field of organisational mediation. However, I do hope to have shown that narrative practices hold a potential for conflict resolution in organisational contexts, which will, hopefully, be explored and expanded further in the future.

Notes

1. I would like to thank Allan Holmgren, Anne Stærk, and Iben Andersen who have all been deeply involved in the process that has led to this paper. Furthermore, I would like to thank the members at The Centre for Motoric Disabilities for their insightful participation in the process.
2. The names of the organisation and its members have been changed in agreement with the organisation.

References

- Bruner, J. (1986). *Actual minds, possible worlds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Cobb, S. (1993). Empowerment and mediation: A narrative perspective. *Negotiation Journal*, 9 (3), 245–259. [doi:10.1111/j.1571-9979.1993.tb00706.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1571-9979.1993.tb00706.x)
- Cobb, S. (1994). A narrative perspective on mediation: Toward the materialization of the 'storytelling' metaphor. In J. Folger & T. Jones (Eds.), *New directions in mediation communications research and perspectives* (pp. 48–66). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Cobb, S. (2004). Fostering coexistence in identity-based conflicts: Towards a narrative approach. In A. Chayes & M. Minow (Eds.), *Imagine coexistence* (pp. 294–310). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Davies, B., & Harré, R. (1990). Positioning: The discursive production of selves. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 20 (1), 43–63. [doi:10.1111/j.1468-5914.1990.tb00174.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5914.1990.tb00174.x)
- Derrida, J. (2004). *Positions*. (A. Bass, Trans.). London, England: Continuum.

- Drewery, W. (2005). Why we should watch what we say: Position calls, every day speech, and the production of relational subjectivity. *Theory and Psychology*, 15(3), 305–324. [doi:10.1177/0959354305053217](https://doi.org/10.1177/0959354305053217)
- Fisher, A. (2005). Power and the promise of innocent places. *Narrative Network News*, (34), 12–14.
- Freedman, J., & Combs, G. (1996). *Narrative therapy: The social construction of preferred realities*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton.
- Foucault, M. (1969). *The archeology of knowledge* (Alan Sheridan, Trans.). London, England: Tavistock.
- Holmgren, A. (2008). Outsider-witness practices in organisational disputes. In J. Winslade & G. Monk (Eds.), *Practicing narrative mediation: Loosening the grip of conflict* (pp. 166–185). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Honneth, A. (1995). *The struggle for recognition: The moral grammar of social conflicts*. (J. Anderson, Trans.) Cambridge, England: Polity Press.
- Laclau, E. (1990). *New reflections on the revolution of our time*. London, England: Verso.
- Laclau, E. (2005). *On populist reason*. London, England: Verso.
- Laclau, E., & Mouffe, C. (1985). *Hegemony and socialist strategy: Towards a radical democratic politics*. London, England: Verso.
- Monk, G., Winslade, J., Crocket, K., & Epston, D. (Eds.). (1997). *Narrative therapy in practice: The archeology of hope*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Payne, M. (2006). *Narrative therapy: An introduction for counsellors*. London, England: Sage.
- White, M. (2007). *Maps of narrative practice*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton.
- White, M., & Epston, D. (1990). *Narrative means to therapeutic ends*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton.
- Winslade, J. (2003). Narrative mediation: Assisting in the renegotiation of discursive positions. *The International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, (4), 64–75.
- Winslade, J. (2006). Mediation with a focus on discursive positioning. *Conflict Resolution Quarterly*, 23(4), 501-515. [doi:10.1002/crq.152](https://doi.org/10.1002/crq.152)
- Winslade, J., & Monk, G. (2000). *Narrative mediation: A new approach to conflict resolution*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Winslade, J., & Monk, G. (2008). *Practicing narrative mediation: Loosening the grip of conflict*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Winslade, J., Monk, G., & Cotter, A. (1998). A narrative approach to the practice of mediation. *Negotiation Journal*, 14(1), 21–41. [doi:10.1111/j.1571-9979.1998.tb00146.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1571-9979.1998.tb00146.x)
- Zimmerman, J., & Dickerson, V. (1996). *If problems talked: Narrative therapy in action*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.