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Abstract

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Keywords

Whose, story, selective, retelling, organizational, change

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WHOSE STORY IS THIS?

THE SELECTIVE RETELLING OF ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

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ABSTRACT

Organizational change is a multi-authored process in which respondent and research narratives have causal as well as documentary and explanatory properties, shaping reputations and seeking to colour the nature and direction of future actions. We argue that academic case study narratives are too readily excluded from analysis and regarded as unproblematic solutions to logistical questions of data analysis. However, intervention narratives typically rely on respondent accounts that exhibit inconsistencies and are attributable to personal sense making, impression management, and political agendas. By drawing on processual and narrative approaches, we show how coherent narratives of change are achieved despite such inconsistencies through the related processes of audiencing and discoursing, and that research producers and consumers must therefore be ‘genre aware’.

INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the potential contribution of a narrative perspective to processual theories of organizational change and examines the implications of change as a multi-story process. We do this by first, outlining the role of the researcher as storyteller; a problematic domain often overlooked in studies that focus on naturally occurring tales and anecdotes. Second, the role of narratives as tools for sense-making, impression management, and the pursuit of political agendas is considered. Third, some of the main non-trivial dimensions on which respondent accounts of change can vary are

considered. Fourth, the ways in which different research orientations and case authoring genres handle such contradictory data are examined. Finally, we argue for a perspective that views change as a multi-authored process, in which stories and narratives have causal as well as documentary and explanatory properties, with the power to influence and persuade, to make things happen.

THE NARRATIVE TURN IN SOCIAL SCIENCE

The ‘narrative turn’ in social science views all writing as narrative writing (Richardson, 2000; Cortazzi, 2001), regarding theory as a stylized form of story (Sutton and Staw, 1995). In organization studies, this narrative construct is particularly evident in reports of change. Pettigrew’s (1985) study of organization development in the chemicals company ICI, and Reisner’s (2002) account of the success and subsequent profits collapse of the United States Postal Service, share narrative properties. They each begin with a problem period (‘once upon a time’), describe a series of interventions (‘and then, and then’), and conclude with outcomes (‘happy/sad endings’). Plots typically concern the relative success and other consequences of interventions. However, processual analyses of change have rarely deployed narrative perspectives. Pettigrew et al. (2001, p.697) call for approaches to understanding change that display, ‘dedication to time and history [. . .] portraying change as continuous processes and not just detached episodes’. By depicting contextualized and multilayered event sequences, linking antecedents to consequences over time, leading to a point or moral, a narrative perspective appears particularly relevant to that agenda.

Narratives already pervade organization studies in various guises, such as teaching case studies, and executive autobiographies. Critical incident research interviews generated narratives that led to the infamous two-factor theory of work motivation (Herzberg, Mausner and Snyderman, 1959), and have been used to identify formative events in the development of leadership capabilities (Bennis and Thomas, 2002). As narrative perspectives have become more fashionable (Monin, 2003), research has focused on naturally occurring tales, anecdotes, and stories. Boje (1991; 2003) treats the organization as a storytelling system, mining anecdotes for insights into political advantage in conversation. Boyce

(1996) argues that stories provide cues to organizational cultures. Barry and Elmes (1997) consider corporate strategies as forms of narrative construction whilst Barry (1997), explores the use of narrative therapy to develop change agendas. Gabriel (1998; 2000) uses stories to access the emotional and symbolic components of organizational life; and Cunliffe, Luhman and Boje (2004) argue that researchers cannot avoid enacting and locating themselves in the narratives of others. Treating organization theory as a literary genre, Czarniawska also notes that plots rely on intentionality, and are theory-laden, expressing causal relationships, offering explanations. Equating case study research with fiction, she argues that, 'In a good story, the events are its facts, and the point is its theory' (Czarniawska, 1999, p.16).

Narratives thus offer more than cues, insights, and metaphors. They display patterns of causality, highlighting the cast of characters, contrasting motives, evolving relationships, tensions, conflicts and backstage behaviours. Descriptions of event sequences can thus be analysed in terms of embedded theory, and several commentators note that narratives are a source of understanding in their own right (Putnam, Phillips and Chapman, 1996; Butler, 1997; Czarniawska, 1998 and 1999; Knights and Willmott, 1999; Brown, 1998; Gabriel, 1998 and 2000; Boje, 1991 and 2001; Cortazzi, 2001). King's (2003, p.372) *History of New Zealand* illustrates how the 'humanitarian' historian James Cowan tended to sentimentalise 'Maori life to the point of unreality':

At whatever moment writers chose to 'freeze' history there would always have been Maori whom they would regard as 'good' and 'bad', courteous and discourteous, traditionalists and innovators, activists and idlers. Second, it suggested that everything worthwhile about Maori life lay in the past and would soon be lost irretrievably. And, third, it tended to blind observers to the fascinating and innovative adaptations that Maori were making at the very time Cowan was writing. (King, 2003, pp. 372-73).

Discussing methods for developing organizational theory from process data, Langley (1999, p.695) emphasizes that narrative strategies produce detailed and *accurate* chronologies of events. But

respondents typically furnish process researchers with conflicting versions of the same sets of events (Dawson, 2000; Buchanan, 2003). Although these contradictions have long been recognized, their implications for authoring intervention narratives and for change theory have rarely been explored. Pettigrew (1990, p.272), describing his theory of method for contextual research, notes the occurrence of 'contradictory accounts'. His response is to 'present a pluralist analysis where different versions of reality are revealed by the range of actors who operate with a variety of interests and perceptions'. He argues that, 'Where the research teams are confident about the balance of empirical evidence and there is a strong link between that evidence and their theoretical framework, the researcher's interpretation can predominate' (p.272). O'Connor (1995) presents (to management annoyance) the self-serving accounts of four groups involved in organization development. Brown (1998) presents three contrasting group accounts concerning the implementation of a medical support system. O'Leary (2003) reveals four conflicting 'narrative constructions' in her analysis of change in a newspaper company. Fincham (2002) shows how those involved in computer systems development in a financial services organization revised narratives attributing success and failure in order to influence future courses of action. Fincham's account is exceptional in reaching beyond the description of contrasting accounts, to consider how narratives can inform explanations of change processes.

Although accurate and objective narratives of change are elusive, most research narratives are presented as definitive versions of events. Boje (2001, p.2) is critical of this 'counterfeit coherence'. Based on the presumption of coherence, case narratives are conventionally regarded as theoretically unproblematic solutions to the logistical problems of data collection, analysis, interpretation, and presentation (Richardson, 2000, p.923). However, researchers cannot assume that all respondents possess perfect organizational knowledge. In addition, as accounts are tools for personal sense-making and self-justification, contradictory accounts are hardly surprising (Bies and Sitkin, 1992; Read, 1992; Weick, 1995). What is surprising is that processual change theorists have not systematically addressed these contradictions.

GHOSTS OF THE READER AND THE AUTHORIZING PROCESS

Individuals and groups advance accounts of events that maintain and reinforce their behaviour, positions, and identities. Corporate accounts gloss decisions and actions in terms of internal and external public relations and corporate image. A dominant narrative often emerges, justifying decisions ('this action was necessitated by that set of circumstances'), and focusing attention on selected themes and characters ('the successful outcomes were due to our actions'). The conventional response to contradictory data involves triangulation (e.g., Pettigrew, 1990). However, triangulation thus deployed becomes a politicized tool for arbitrating between competing accounts, legitimizing one, silencing another. Triangulation also diverts attention from the possible revision of accounts over time, as organizational knowledge is first scripted, then selectively retold, sustained, revised and eventually replaced (Parker, 1997). Such revision is illustrated by Doolin's (2003) study of a New Zealand hospital. He notes how change is performed through multiple narratives, and how the appropriateness of past decisions is rewritten to support current objectives.

Czarniawska (1998, 1999) notes that authoring research narratives involves skills similar to those of the novelist. Case study reports are crafted, based on the selection of data sifted from multiple sources, to produce credible and engaging results. Fontana and Frey (1994, p.32) discuss the need for data to be 'cleaned and streamlined and collapsed in rational, non-contradictory accounts'. Dawson describes the 'daunting task of trying to prepare the material in a digestible form for publication' (1997, p.401). Observing that 'stories change depending on who is telling them', Pentland (1999, p.715) argues that, 'selective silencing is an unavoidable feature of narrative'. As photographers decide what lies inside the frame, narrators decide which information to present. While fictions are designed to entertain, organizational narratives are often intended to present arguments which colour the perceptions, and judgements of their audiences. Narratives are not neutral. Accounting for change is an activity with political aims. This lack of neutrality, politicization, and persuasive intent, applies both to respondent accounts and to research-based narratives. Case studies of change are thus always a selective retelling, written for particular purposes and audiences. The ghost of the reader presides over the authoring process.

Narrative is a tool for manipulating meaning, a counter in the game of organizational power, status, and influence, used to establish the dominance of a viewpoint, to deflect challenge, to justify goals and actions, to mark as dubious the motives of others. The history of change at a given location is thus more appropriately viewed as an account authored to service the present and future objectives of the narrators. Such reconstructions are important to an understanding of current contextual conditions under which change processes might unfold in future. Power thus belongs to the best storytellers (although audiences whose interests are threatened can retaliate with good stories of their own). Czarniawska and Devon (1996) comment on 'the deadly power of the ruling narrative'. Narratives may be 'compelling tales', but they are also partisan, interpreting the past and anticipating the future, operating in the service of particular agendas, goals, and frameworks of understanding. The voices of competing narratives are often muted by the dominant account (Dawson, 2000), the version given to researchers, the version in company newsletters, and the version that managers present at conferences. The official account often reflects the political positioning of key stakeholders. From a managerial perspective, a coherent success story with a clear bullet-point summary is more compelling than a complex tale with overlaid plots and characters, challenges to management judgements, and ambiguous outcomes. In the selective retelling of intervention narratives, researchers may become complicit in protecting the dominant narrative, lending it objective credibility and protection against attack from subversive accounts.

Diversity of interpretations can be stabilized through the co-optation, accommodation, and suppression of competing views. Using an orchestral metaphor, instruments capable of distinct tunes can be drawn into an ensemble performance. Where there is perceived mutual interest in sustaining co-operation, challenge may be withheld, and the dominant narrative may be difficult to dislodge. Closure is not necessarily permanent, however, as there are always opportunities, given constant fluctuations in organizational power-political positioning, for the 'rewriting of history' to support competing agendas, replacing current narratives, wholly or partially (Forster, 1994). Narratives are thus fragile, flexible, unstable, capable of revision, of partial retelling, of parody, and of radical reinterpretation (e.g.,

Collins and Rainwater, 2003). The researcher thus works at the interface between the expectations of the reader's ghost, and the perceptions and purposes behind the respondent's voice. This location is characterized by choices concerning which voices will be heard and believed, and how those voices will be empirically and theoretically contextualized.

DISCOURSING AND AUDIENCING

The researcher is thus inevitably faced with selectively retelling the change narrative. But whose version of events will be presented, to whom, and how? Change narratives pass into theoretical and practical utterances, sieved through research aims and political agendas, and also through research orientations, which Burrell and Morgan (1979) called paradigms. To illustrate, we will adopt the recent framework of research orientations developed by Deetz (1996; see also Schultze and Leidner, 2002). Deetz' 'dimensions of contrast' rely on discursive moves and social relationships, rather than on procedures and individuals. One dimension of difference is 'local/emergent' versus 'elite/*a priori*', based on the sources of ideas and concepts, either in dialogue with respondents, or established by the researcher from theoretical considerations. The second is 'consensus' versus 'dissensus', based on relationships between research aims and the dominant social discourse, with the aim either to confirm unity of understanding, or to expose conflicts and tensions. These dimensions produce what Deetz (1996, p.198) describes as a 'convenient four-space solution', identifying the 'analytic ideal types' (p.195) comprising: a *normative* or *modern discourse* that assumes progressive enlightenment, rationalization and control; an *interpretative discourse* that regards individuals as sense-making, as engaged participants, as co-creators of social structures; a *critical discourse* views organizations as sites of political struggle; and a *dialogic* or *postmodern discourse* that focuses on the role of language in the constructed and polyvocal nature of social reality.

Table 1 summarizes these discourses, their objectives, and the status that they grant conflicting accounts of change. Following Czarniawska (1999), these may be considered as *genres* in which research narratives are differentially constructed. A normative genre is concerned with the codification of practice; conflicting accounts are irrelevant (e.g., Hamel, 2000, complete with seven-

step guide on ‘how to start an insurrection’ if change is too slow). An interpretative genre exposes multiple realities; conflicting socially constructed accounts are anticipated (e.g., Brown, 1998; Fincham, 2002). In a critical genre, the aim is to embarrass power figures; conflicting accounts confirm power inequalities and exploitation (e.g., Knights and McCabe, 1998). The purpose of a dialogic genre is to frustrate claims to truth; contradictory views reinforce this viewpoint (e.g., Collins and Rainwater, 2003).

Table 1: Genres and conflicts

Genre	Status of conflicting accounts
Dialogic process theory frustrate truth statements	<i>Confirmatory</i> ; display the polyvocal nature of social existence, reveal complexity, challenge status quo, confirm fragmentation and lack of coherence in accounts of ‘reality’
Critical process theory embarrass power brokers	<i>Illustrative</i> ; provide further evidence of conflict, struggle and resistance, expose power differentials, give voice to the silenced and powerless, perpetuate the struggle
Interpretative process theory expose multiple realities	<i>Expected</i> ; access lived experience and individual sense-making, socially positioned accounts expose the social construction of organizational change phenomena
Normative process theory codify practical guidelines	<i>Irrelevant</i> ; soft data, unhelpful, confusing, troublesome, unverifiable, uncodifiable, non-cumulative, interesting anecdote only, surgically remove by triangulation

Table 1 thus also caricatures four genres or category of process theory. The choice of genre in which to author a change narrative may be coloured by personal values, research aims and methods, and data quality. However, researchers must also adapt their narrative voice such that it is commensurate with their target audience adopting, say, a normative genre for practitioner groups and traditional academic journals, an interpretative genre for mainstream sociological readers, and critical or dialogic genres for colleagues and publications with more radical and post-modern affiliations respectively.

Consequently, narratives of change are both *discoursed*, being authored in a particular genre, and

audienced, in order to influence a particular target readership; (this outline sidesteps the option of combining elements of more than one genre, through creative theoretical necessity, and/or to appeal to mixed or atypical audiences). Academic authors using the genre-of-choice of their audience are thus more likely to be appreciated by that constituency. With a practitioner audience, credibility may be jeopardized by an admission that the researcher working with a dialogic discourse cannot provide either an accurate account of their investigation, or generate clear recommendations from the findings. In contrast, the development of clear practical management guidelines may alienate an audience of critical postmodern organization theorists.

CHANGE AS A MULTI-AUTHORED PROCESS

Change can thus be conceptualized as a multi-authored process, in which stories, accounts, and narratives display causal as well as documentary and explanatory properties. Respondent accounts provide the evidence base from which descriptive research narratives, causal inferences, and theories can be generated (and genred). Any account of an event sequence is potentially theory-rich, explaining contextualized linkages between antecedents and outcomes, leading to a point or moral. Through explaining what happened, and anticipating what should happen next, accounts are post-hoc theories, and before-the-event determinants, and have the potential to be causal factors in the change process (Fincham, 2002). Respondent accounts relate event sequences of interest, while seeking to shape perceptions of processes and outcomes, promoting particular views as legitimate, and seeking to damage the credibility of opposing positions, as well as influencing the nature and timing of future change trajectories. A research narrative can describe an event sequence, advance a particular interpretation and explanation of events, and influence publishing opportunities.

A narrative perspective may contribute insights to the agenda of Pettigrew et al. (2001), concerning approaches to change sensitive to time, history, and continuous process. Critical additions to that agenda concern, first, sensitivity to the purposive, competing, and shifting accounts of respondents, and second, awareness of the way in which research narratives are discoursed and audienced. Change implementation may be regarded as a collection of ongoing and jostling narratives, propelled by the

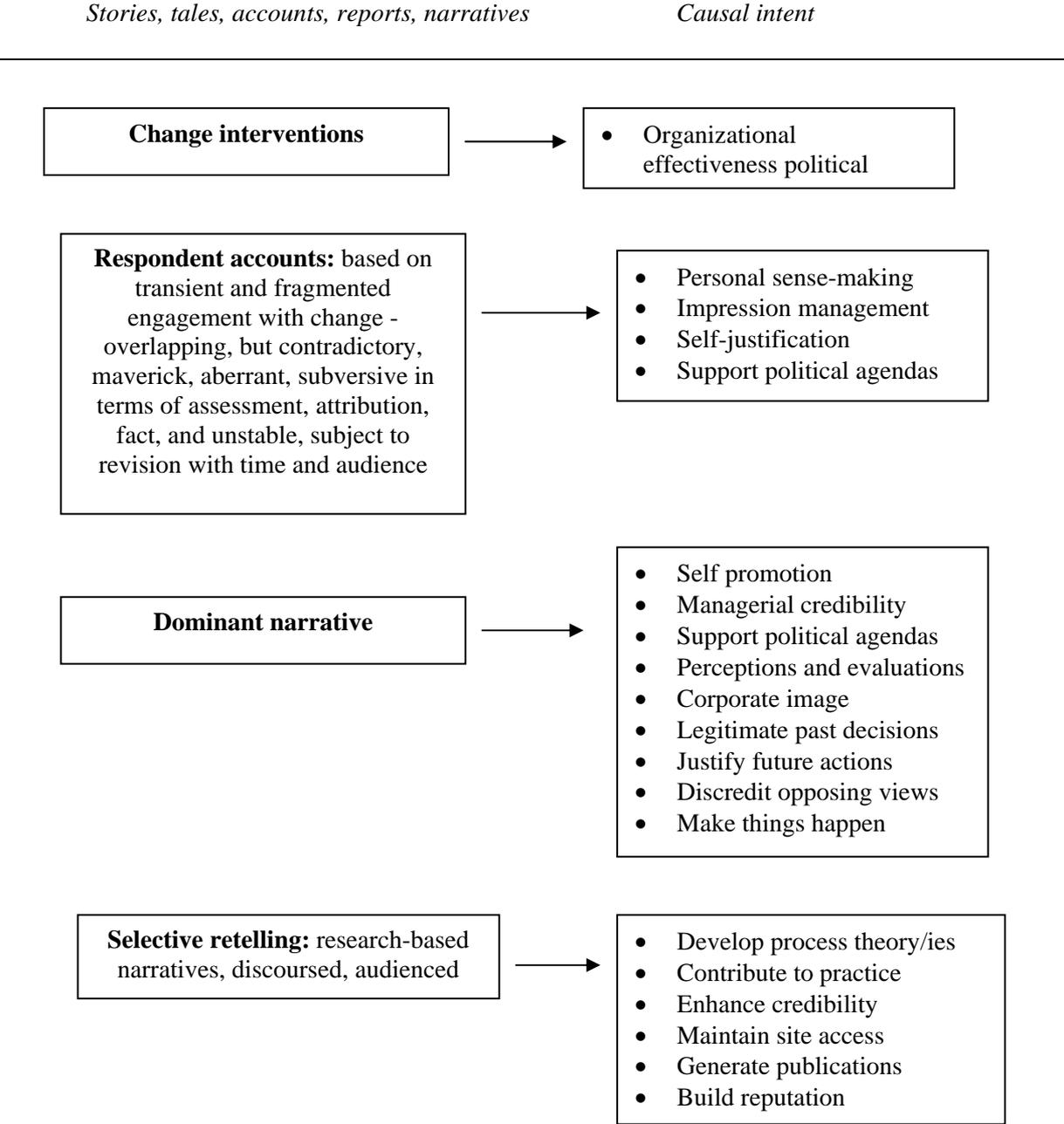
creative authoring of a sequence of interpretations and change interventions, plotting lines of action, casting heroes, villains, and fools, inventing plot twists and false avenues as circumstances require, anticipating a range of happy corporate and individual endings (Collins and Rainwater, 2003). But change is a narrative with many authors, each with potentially different views of how the plot has unravelled in the past, how it should unfold into the future, and the nature and substance of its endings. Process theories are meta-theoretical perspectives, which do not directly generate hypotheses, but provide instead lenses which reveal the contextualized, complex, iterative, politicized nature of change. A narrative perspective offers a complementary lens, emphasizing the contextual, temporal and sequential properties of change, and more significantly highlighting attempts to frame, plot, manipulate and direct episodes and event sequences along the authors' preferred trajectories, towards particular endings.

Figure 2 summarizes some of the dimensions of this perspective, founded on the simplified presumption that the causal intent of change interventions combines improved organizational effectiveness, with the political advantage of key players (Pfeffer, 1992; Buchanan and Badham, 1999). Respondent accounts of interventions are often based on transient and fragmented engagement with the change process, and can be contradictory as well as unstable (Pettigrew, 1990; Dawson, 1994). The content of those accounts can influence and contribute to personal sense-making and impression management attempts, to self-justification, and to the organization political agendas of individuals and groups (O'Connor, 1995; Brown, 1998; O'Leary, 2003).

The dominant or official narrative can be designed with several related outcomes in mind; individual self promotion, collective managerial credibility, building support for political agendas, influencing perceptions and evaluations of change programmes, maintaining corporate image, legitimating previous management decisions, providing justification for future lines of management action, discrediting opposing views, and simply making things happen (Barry and Elmes, 1997). Change interventions, respondent accounts, and dominant narratives generate research data, leading to a selective retelling of the event sequence, for particular audiences, authored in a chosen genre or

combination of genres. This selective retelling leads potentially to a number of outcomes; the development of genre-dependent process theories of organizational change, contributions to management practice (in some genres), researcher credibility and sustained access to the research site, and the possibility to publish findings and enhance reputation. This figure is presented as a heuristic overview, and does not imply any rigid linear causal chain of events, rather, it is our first attempt to capture some of the dimensions of change as a multi-story process.

Figure 2: Stories, narratives, and causal intent



The perceptive and informed reader

Co-creator of meaning, challenging and re-interpreting narratives
which genre is speaking ? What sits beyond the frame?

AUDIENCES OF CHANGE

The audiences for change intervention narratives have been treated up to this point as ghosts peering over the shoulders of research storytellers influencing, more or less passively, genre and presentation style. But readers are not passive, but perceptive and informed interpreters and active co-creators of meaning (Latour and Woolgar, 1979). Czarniawska's (1999) insistence on the importance of a good story is relevant in this regard, as the power of a narrative to persuade is based on the extent to which it engages the audience, captures the imagination, and provides entertainment as well as communicating ideas. Authors establish that engagement through choice of genre, writing style, presentation technique, and framing meanings to influence reader interpretations in particular directions. However well crafted the change narrative, however robust and compelling the theoretical statement, audiences may respond with combinations of support, reinterpretation, misinterpretation, modification, criticism, and rejection (Latour, 1990, p.91). A good story, on the other hand, can discourage subversive constructions. Latour (2003) further claims that audiences act as 'multi-conductors'; if it is in their interest to support a narrative, they may align with the account, enhancing its status. While the subversion of meaning by readers may never be fully tamed, it is clearly in the author's interest to select a genre commensurate with audience expectations and preferences.

CONCLUSION

In the use and analysis of data in the presentation of case studies we need to critically reflect on the place of narrative in capturing a story or stories of change. We argue that change is a multi-story process and that the reader of the change intervention narrative may be advised first to identify the position from which the author speaks, the genre in which the account is articulated, and the

theoretical and practical implications coloured by that choice. However, the reader is not fully informed as, in the selective retelling, it is never clear what information, what perspectives, what accounts the author may have decided to de-emphasize, or to omit entirely. In addition to genre-awareness, therefore, and being alert to the persuasive properties of a good story, research audiences should perhaps be advised to approach change narratives with a sceptical and inquisitive eye for the sidelined, the concealed, the ignored, and the excluded, for the material, issues, and voices that sit outside the author's frame.

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