Managerial Storytelling: How We Write Up Managerial and Academic Stories in B2B Case Study Research

Abstract

This study reintroduces the debate regarding the generally accepted qualitative research approaches in the B2B literature by focusing in case studies and the nature of knowledge that can be accessed through managerial interviews. In this paradigm, the researchers have commonly adopted approaches to both the interview process and the analysis and reporting of research findings that generally assume the veracity and factuality of the interview data. We question these assumptions through empirical evidence collected in unconventional interview settings. This study displays the situational, ephemeral and ultimately unstable nature of managerial 'truths' imparted in the interviews. We argue that the data should be viewed as stories and their reporting is a form of storytelling. Adopting a constructionist ontology and interpretivist epistemology accompanied by in-depth ethnographic fieldwork and methodological pluralism is suggested to for the generation of new compelling and interesting research. The nature of realist knowledge and truth claims in academic B2B discourses is thus reconsidered by offering new perspectives that endorse findings conceptualized as compelling stories of pragmatic academic and managerial value.

Keywords: stories, storytelling, interpretivism, case studies

INTRODUCTION

"Many, many years ago lived an emperor, who thought so much of new clothes that he spent all his money in order to obtain them; his only ambition was to be always well dressed. He did not care for his soldiers, and the theatre did not amuse him; the only thing, in fact, he thought anything of was to drive out and show a new suit of clothes." from the Emperor's new clothes by H.C. Andersen

As this study considers the nature of knowledge in B2B research as the collection and interpretation of managerial stories, we wish to illustrate it through the passages of a well known one, similarly to what Shankar and Patterson (2001) did in the field of consumer research. We contest, that many passages of this children's story bear close metaphoric resemblance to the current state of qualitative research currently conducted in the IMP paradigm and B2B discourses on a more general level, especially focusing on the case study method. Even as our approach is certainly not novel, our attempt is to further attract interest to questioning the methods and philosophical approaches we utilize in conducting qualitative research. Even as debate in the nature of knowledge fired up with its linkages to the so-called 'science wars' (e.g Lutz, 1989) or the 'crisis of representation' (e.g. Marcus and Fischer, 1986; Van Maanen, 1995; Lincoln and Guba, 2000) that had influence in the IMP as well (e.g. Cova, 1994; Easton, 1995; Tikkanen, 1997), there has been startlingly little new debate on these issues after turn of the millennium in B2B literature (see IMM 2010 special issue vol. 39, iss. 1 for a notable exception).

In the field of marketing, the foundational questions were raised by the seminal debate between a relativist perspective (Anderson, 1983, 1986; Arndt, 1985) and the mainstream logical empiricist (what is commonly, although misleadingly called 'positivism' in the contemporary vernacular) perspective (Hunt 1990, 1991, 1992). Even as we agree with Hunt's (1991) critique of the misuse of the term 'positivism' regarding its historical heritage, we will adopt it throughout this study as it has become of common use in the literature – we are not anymore speaking about the members of the Vienna Circle, rather with positivism we have become to mean what could be termed as 'naïve realists'. For a naïve realist, a center for knowledge (a single, logocentric 'truth') exists and is readily accessible with the methodologies and readily describable in accurate ways through language.

In other discourses, such strategic management, organization theory and consumer culture research (CCT) there has been critical talk on the sense and senselessness of applying different methodological and philosophical approaches to research. These battles are well documented in the pages of *Strategic Management Journal* (e.g. Van Maanen, 1995; Kwan and Tsang, 2001; Mir and Watson, 2001; Powell, 2001; Gibbert, Ruigrok and Wicki, 2007;), *Organization Science* (e.g. Wicks and Freeman, 1998; Cook and Brown, 1999) and *Journal of Consumer Research* (e.g. Hirschman, 1986; Hudson and Ozanne, 1988; Arnold and Fischer, 1994; Sherry and Schouten, 2002). However, such talks have recently rarely appeared in the field of industrial marketing (see e.g. Borghini, Cova and Carù, 2010; Dubois and Gadde, 2002; Dubois and Gibbert, 2010; Easton, 2010; Visconti, 2010 for notable exceptions) and therefore we wish to continue this discussion also in this field of inquiry.

When these issues have become raised in B2B literature, they have included the consideration of the 'postmodern' changes in society (e.g. Arias and Acebron, 2001) and the postmodern/post-structuralist critique of epistemology and respective research methods and the representation of research (e.g. Gummesson, 2003; Cova and Salle, 2007; Borghini, Carù and Cova, 2010; Visconti, 2010). More recently, voices calling for more pluralistic

approaches to field methods and rapport have emerged as well. These have argued for interpretivistic approaches using ethnographic methods (e.g. Visconti, 2010) adopted from consumer culture theory research (e.g. Cova and Salle, 2007; see Arnould and Thompson, 2005 for an overview of CCT) and new forms of reporting research such as videography (Borghini, Carù and Cova, 2010).

One concern in our study is that even as novel viewpoints occasionally emerge in the B2B literature, the overt mainstream of the discipline still adheres to many positivistic underpinnings and thus remains rather uncritical about the nature of the knowledge generated by its dominating methods. We wish to reconsider qualitative B2B case research from a postmodern and pluralist perspective – abdicating the possibility for stable knowledge (e.g. Firat, Dholakia and Venkatesh, 1995; Firat and Venkatesh, 1995) or a universal direction B2B research is or should be taking. In line with Gummesson (2003), Dyer and Wilkins (1991) and Lounsbury and Glynn (2001) we attempt to establish case studies as collections (or rather, *productions* [Denny 2006]) of constructed stories – which can however have substantial pragmatic value for academicians and managers alike. The goal of this study is critical yet humble in the sense that we do not wish to eschew past B2B research or to say that extant B2B literature is 'bad' research or that it has no pragmatic value. But we do wish to further sensitize B2B scholars to address the 'big' ontological questions with the same keenness that has marked the examination of the methodological iterations of the criteria for 'good case study research' (e.g. Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2003; Flyvbjerg, 2006).

Much positivistically oriented case study research in B2B has become beguiled in the iterating of a methodology (for further 'rigor' towards 'truth') with many paradoxical outcomes rather than the consideration of the fundamental notion of 'knowledge' that a method such as the case study can facilitate. Thus, we call for the acknowledgement of the big picture from an interpretivist perspective. *What is the fundamental nature of knowledge we can obtain from case studies? What do our data sets consist of? What does our academic writing consist of? How should we reconsider the nature of our writing in B2B literature?* For explanations, we will adopt views on the veracity of truth claims from consumer culture theory and organization theory.

MARKETING AND THE CASE STUDY METHOD

> "One day two swindlers came to city; they made people believe they were weavers, and declared they could manufacture the finest cloth to be imagined. Their colours and patterns, they said, were not only exceptionally beautiful, but the clothes made of their material possessed the wonderful quality of being invisible to any man who was unfit for his office or unpardonably stupid."

Much in the same sense as clothes shape social interaction in society, methodological sophistication grants marketing the status of science in society. The mainstream of marketing research long has been dominated by the logical empiricist paradigm (the colloquial 'positivist' in the contemporary vernacular of the discourse) (Anderson, 1983; Arndt, 1985; Hunt, 1990). This has led marketing scholars to emphasize rationality, objectivity and measurement and has left little space for alternative approaches (Arndt, 1985). The prevailing marketing paradigm still leans onto logical empiricism in formulating a priori models or theories that are transformed into hypotheses and, consequently, tested (Anderson, 1983). This may be linked to the 'physics envy' of marketing scholars, resulting in 'intellectual snobbery' to gain respect and ramp up university ratings (Tapp, 2007).

From a Kuhnian perspective, the current research in marketing focuses on mopping up the already made developments and such stable state may hinder the possibility of larger breakthroughs in marketing science (Arndt, 1983). This paradigm has also dominated the qualitative research done in the confines of industrial marketing as there has been a tendency to pre-erect research questions and the findings, in a truly Yinian (1971; 2003) fashion are to be transferable and generalizable (searching the 'one truth').

Marketing as a scientific inquiry focuses largely on their contribution to marketing practice rather than on the larger society (Anderson, 1983). Therefore, the orientation of marketing scholars is similar to how "fishermen study fish rather than as marine biologists study them" (Tucker, 1974: 31). We can see the similar positivistic backdrop in Saunders (1999, p. 85) who stated that quantitative methods salvage marketing from being an art into being a science and from being only conjecture into being rigorous.

Underpinnings of the case study method

"That must be wonderful cloth," thought the emperor. "If I were to be dressed in a suit made of this cloth I should be able to find out which men in my empire were unfit for their places, and I could distinguish the clever from the stupid."

Much in the same sense as the beautiful cloth in the emperor's new suit, the methodological sophistication is built in case study research. Essentially, case study method can be described as a research strategy that investigates a phenomenon within its context, where the boundaries between the phenomena and the context are not clearly evident (Yin, 2003: 13). For this reason, the method has been popular regarding relatively unestablished fields to uncover novel theoretical insights. However, the way the method is understood and utilized in B2B literature has its share of potential problems. Indeed, the very notion of case studies being specifically suitable for uncovering novel insight for theoretization seems problematic, and entails a 'positivistic' notion of a field 'maturing' to more refined and rigorous methods to uncover a truth after the basic tenets have been established.

Case studies have been described as inherently contextual and lacking clearly definable boundaries, and are intended to produce idiographic knowledge as generalizing from a single case study is considered challenging (Stake, 1995, p. 7; Flyvbjerg, 2006), excluding such approaches to case studies as case survey (e.g. Lucas, 1974; Larsson, 1993) which are intended to produce nomothetic knowledge. However, positivistic underpinning remains strong across all forms of case studies (e.g. Gibbert, Ruigrok and Wicki, 2007). Despite understanding the contextual and unbound nature the methodological goals for case studies have aimed to the production of universal answers, be it with regards to sample sizes (Eisehardt, 1989) or the methods used to judge the 'objectivity' of the data and findings (Yin, 2003). These 'positivistic' approaches have enjoyed a remarkable persistence despite their problems and incommensurability with most contemporary philosophical paradigms that have to do with human sciences (sociology, linguistics) and hold strong due to their rootedness in western thinking and in the positivist undertones incorporated in otherwise interpretivist research (e.g. Holt, 1991; Thompson, 1997; Kincheloe and Tobin, 2009).

Entering empirical fieldwork

In line with this positivistic backdrop, much of contemporary B2B case study research derives its research designs from natural sciences and assumes that in a very real sense that the truth can be uncovered and reported if only the methods are rigorous enough. Field settings are often entered with predetermined research questions as to verify or refute the existing 'truth' of the matter. Rarely, however, do we question this approach and the steering effect of the approach and its theory- and value-ladenness. This approach easily leads to rearranging reality to suit our purpose, rather than to enable us to see anything new (e.g. Arndt, 1983). Most importantly, this approach hinders the capacity to produce in-depth case studies as we gravely exclude many factors and nuances as unimportant due to the fact that they don't directly enable us to answer our research question.

The research question focused approach to case studies drives us out of contextuality and depth into replicability and increased sample sizes (e.g. Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2003). Eisenhardt, in the classic case study article (1989) advocates that building theories from case studies requires one to utilize multiple case study method. As Eisenhardt (1989) argues, cross-case analysis of four to ten cases can act as a basis for analytical generalization. These can be achieved by using methods such as cross case synthesis or pattern matching that essentially reduces the context into noise and emphasize focusing on generalizability (Yin, 2003). Continuing the same logic, Yin (2003: 34) describes four tests to evaluate the quality of empirical social research. Internal validity establishes a causal relationship where certain conditions are shown to lead to another (Gibbert, Ruigrok and Wicki, 2007; Yin 2003: 34). External validity refers to the generalizability of the findings beyond the immediate case study (Gibbert, Ruigrok and Wicki, 2007; Yin, 2003: 34). Finally, reliability is defined as the possibility of repeating the case study with similar results (Yin, 2003: 34). These tests are, essentially, against the idea of the case study method as the researcher should have a rich contextual understanding which he/she unveils in an elaborate form to produce a unique account of a phenomena in context.

When collecting data, case study researchers endeavor to the phenomena by asking the management their perception, in order to legitimize theirselves and to produce managerially relevant outcomes. This is usually done to elicit information from key informants (e.g. Arksey and Knight, 1999) and to follow theoretical sampling (e.g. Yin, 2003). However, such approach enables us to get the situational truth (or the corporate 'official truth') from the managers and the depth of analysis is hindered by the lack of critically evaluating neither the sources of evidence nor the reasons why such accounts are given (e.g. Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin 2003: 92). Oftentimes the focus on management as they are perceived to be causally empowered to mould the organization to their will (Hambrick and Mason, 1984). On top of this, there is a publication bias on success stories that these managers elicit (Rosenthal, 1979). These factors altogether lead to writing the history of winners and winnings which hinders the production of new and differing perspectives. However, these kinds of perspectives have been heavily questioned by critically oriented researchers in various paradigms such as historical research, organization theory and CCT (e.g. Peñaloza, 1994; Gherardi, 2000; Golder, 2000; Gaddis, 2002; Üstüner and Holt, 2007). Additionally, analysis of the data is rarely critically oriented, as the contextual understanding is limited to the management and approach to them is sympathetic (implying agreement). Therefore, we should rather focus on understanding the subject in the context he/she acts and to account for complexity (e.g. Sheth, 2007) and context dependency (e.g. Flyvbjerg, 2006).

Finally, when writing up results, the account can be constrained by the emphasis put on the initial research questions (as a kind of hypothesis) even before any empirical research was conducted. Resembling hypothesis testing, the construct is given precedence over the notion

of in-depth fieldwork (Yin, 1981; Eisenhardt, 1989). However, this leads into a form where findings are subordinated to the constructs and research questions and their role is to compel the reader of the rigor in the analysis (e.g. Dyer and Wilkins, 1991) rather than the richness of the findings themselves. This directs one to be restricted by the form of answering research questions both in the analysis and reporting. However, we suggest a quite different route, where the narrative should be empowered and from which explanations could arise from. Essentially, this would enable the production of new theory arising from the data. Therefore, more consideration on fit of the data points generated by the inquiry into the research questions and/or the narrative that we construct as a representation of reality.

The nature of knowledge in case study research

But what if we dare to contemplate the nature of knowledge and the ways we (attempt) to access it? And indeed, if we do, what does it leave us with?

Reading the literature, the question seems to always become boiled down to the distinction between the possibility for stable or the inherently unstable notion of knowledge or 'truth'. While the positivist takes the universal truth as an axiom that is attainable through more rigorous and 'better' methodological tweaking, the interpretivist eschews the possibility for such 'truth' as truths are the products of fleeting subjective constructions. Additionally, research can only be communicated to the effect of the language, which offers no direct access to any 'truth'. Therefore it is also impossible to construct science as progressing to any uniform direction (as that is also a construction) other than contextual pragmatic goals (i.e. managerial value of implications, satellites staying in orbits) that are by nature always political (i.e. managerial power, interest of the owner of the satellites and those who have access to them).

Criteria for 'good research' thus become an eternal question, as these criteria are equally situated constructs (e.g. Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994; Shankar and Patterson 2001), and taken to the logical outcome, can be only about does the study compel the reader (Holt, 1991) – whoever it may be and whenever the study is recited. This should not be seen as 'anything goes' (Feyerabend, 1993) but a logical recognition of science as a social undertaking and the limits of the language we have at our disposal. We see the former to be the dominant form of B2B case studies, and we will argue for the latter approach to enable more critical contemplation about the knowledge we create.

What is it that these accounts are produced with – stories and storytelling

What exactly *is* the data we produce in the interview settings? As accounts of past events, managers tell us their construction of a their past realities that (post)rationalize their actions (and the actions of others) at the time. They tell us 'facts', yet these facts are their own – narrative accounts that amount into storytelling. Thus, along with growing interest in the use of stories in marketing literature (Grayson, 1997; Thompson, 1997; Hopkinson and Hogarth-Scott, 2001; Deighton and Narayandas, 2004; Hopkinson and Hogg, 2006), we will now focus on an interpretivist perspective to stories and the act of generating them – storytelling.

> "So, what is a story? […] The positivist may answer that the story reflects events in the social world, it represents a truth 'out there' and gives access to nomothetic understanding of the world. For the interpretivist the story may represent experiences as understood by the storyteller

and relate primarily to the idiographic […] the research endeavour is itself an act of storymaking and storytelling" (Hopkinson and Hogg, 2006: 158)

Additionally, Gummesson (2003: 484) directs us to recognize, that it is language, which is the prerequisite of social life, making the interpretation of its meaning part of our daily routine. Therefore we argue for a novel epistemic consideration of *the importance of stories themselves*, not the vague notions of underlying realities somehow hidden beneath, waiting to be uncovered. Understanding the *nature of humans as storytellers* can have a fundamental impact on how data is produced from the field (whatever the field may consist of) and further written down by researcher to be disseminated to the scholars in one's field and beyond. This idea is at odds with the positivist notion of searching for the truth, which makes stories into externalities of uncertainty that should be dismissed from the final study (as is the case in strategy research, see for example Lounsbury and Glynn [2001] or in positivist-oriented case study methodologies, see Yin, 2003). We wish to show from an interpretivist perspective how stories actually go on to constitute our subjective realities themselves through the teleological structure (although transcendent) of myths that the act of making narratives (storytelling) negotiates and reproduces.

Stories have been conceptualized in multiple ways, but for our purposes we wish to adopt the view from the paradigm of consumer research, namely the one of Hopkinson and Hogarth-Scott who construct the concept as "Firstly, story is a factual report of events. Secondly, story is myth; a myth describes the storyteller's readily construed version of events. Finally, story is narrative, and narrative means of coming to understand events and constructing their reality" (2001: 27). If the notion of managerial storytelling can be taken as a way to gain empirical insight in case studies, then certainly its treatment as a 'factual report' has been the prevalent position in B2B research, or as Denny puts it "that [reductionistically external] thing that needs decoding" (2006: 431). Certainly, the story is a constructed fact for its utterer, however as it connects to cultural myths through a narrative (uttered using subjective notions of language) they are tools of personal postrationalization. They become sense-making devices that establish the world we live in for us, giving purpose and making outcomes intelligible, establishing a sense of rational causality (Levy, 1981; Thompson 1997; Hopkinson and Hogarth-Scott, 2001; Lounsbury and Glynn, 2001; Holt and Thompson, 2004; Belk and Tumbat 2005; Giesler 2008) that allows us the notion of being in control.

In line with interpretative frameworks, we simply take the concept of stories as mythical 'truth establishing' constructs forward in B2B research to consist of central underlying epistemological value *in themselves*. For us, this epistemology is about the storyteller's vision that rationalizes past action and projects to the imagined future. Thus the researcher interprets, in a hermeneutical spiral, both him/herself, the research context and his/her representation (journal article) becomes interpreted by the audience (Gummesson, 2003, 2005; Hopkinson and Hogg, 2006). This understanding of the hermeneutical circle and the 'fusion of horizons' (Gadamer, 1976) has compelled interpretivist researchers to provide narratives of themselves in the research – rather to display some of their biases than hide them under the veil of objectivity to allow for more in-depth interpretation (e.g. Gummesson, 2005; Joy et al., 2006). In addition, rather than the forced objectification of the constructs to adhere to the empirical data advocated by positivist perspectives (cf. Eisenhardt, 1989), the interpretivist would rather see reflexive takes on possible realities by critically and reflexively considering alternative positions (Gummesson, 2003).

The idea of a firm consisting of reproduced constructions of stories has not received interest in B2B research where the common implicit focus has been on what is *the reality* – than what *it is* that is *what constitutes reality for people*. Moreover, research in the IMP paradigm often

takes as its level of analysis the single firm as a collective function, not as organizations consisting of people with diverse views and personal histories (cf. Ford and Håkansson, 2006).

Similarly, while positivist accounts deem the act of storytelling to be nothing but a entertaining ingredient to keep the reader interested as the truth becomes uncovered through rigor and logic (Eisenhardt, 1991), what we write up as research is, in and of itself just another story of informative subjective interpretations (Gummesson, 2003; Joy et al., 2006). It is a narrative within a paradigmatic frame equally laden with our personal histories as any account we produce simultaneously with ourselves and informants (Dyer and Wilkins, 1991; Joy et al., 2006). As stated by Deighton and Narayandas, "…telling stories, whose verisimilitude is the primary "fact" that theory is called to account for, is not how marketing literature usually operates […yet…] marketing scholars may find that offering stories to one another to repudiate claims about the meaning of a sequence of events is a useful way to perform scholarship" (2004: 19). Indeed, according to Gummesson (2005), if we come to understand the process of writing up our research as a form a storytelling, we could avoid the fragmentation emerging from forcefully breaking down our understanding to construct-based categories and abstract concepts.

Instead of aiming for the elusive truth, the idea of doing research as the act of storytelling from 'storytold' data sets opens up new possibilities for utilizing reflexivity (e.g. Anderson, 1986; Marcus and Fischer, 1986; Joy et al., 2006) and criticality (e.g. Hopkinson and Hogg, 2006) in ones research as one goes through hermeneutical fusion of horizons in one's work. Reflexivity means the constant mirroring of one's understanding of the ongoing research situation and a constant critical questioning of one's interpretations. To reflexively interpret the stories of others, researchers must have sufficient background knowledge to understand their rich textures and deep meanings (Thompson, 1997). Such understanding calls for holistic ethnographic methodology (even as many case study guides have elements of these, their explicit impact on the way we understand and construct research is largely ignored in the more positivistically oriented qualitative B2B case studies) to uncover compelling interpretations of the meanings of the stories told to us. To do ethnography in a context one should become empathically invested in it (e.g. Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Goodall, 2000; Sherry and Schouten, 2002). Certainly much of the positivistically oriented case studies have not embraced this notion – indeed, wouldn't empathy only cloud the search of the truth further? But as will be discussed further, even interpretation and the ethnographic method must be understood as a shift in ontology, not a way to amass more detailed data to again get toward another universal truth.

To be reflexive in the act of writing up one's research, one should display criticality and provide multiple interpretations to further allow the audience to understand one's line of reasoning (Gummesson, 2005; Joy et al., 2006). The impetus of criticality does not stop here, however, as an interpretivist perspective could also open new opportunities for critical research (Hopkinson and Hogg, 2006; Scott, 2007) in B2B marketing. In a Foucauldean sense, one should also understand that every act making one's speech (or story, be it the informant's or the researchers) heard is an act of power. Therefore, we must also understand the pragmatic and political nature of whose stories we listen to and what types of stories do we then choose to construct from them (Hopkinson and Hogg, 2006). To be able to make and interpretation requires a great deal of understanding, and understanding especially in an empathically invested sense requires in-depth ethnographic approaches to the field and conscious attempts of reflexive thinking. Near to the social phenomena we can produce academic stories from the stories told to us, and our storytelling can be more informed and

nuanced as we can thus 1) attempt to interpret the meanings of the past 'reality' people construct for themselves through the acts of storytelling, and 2) give our stories more contextual depth by understanding (and even feeling) the sites themselves. Why is 'better' storytelling important?

In line with interpretivist frameworks we agree, that as the 'rigor' of the research methodology is a construction in itself, there will be no universal 'right' method, as there can be no direct access to reality itself. Reality is constructed through language and these constructions are constantly negotiated. Therefore, it is logical to conclude, that the only criterion that remains is if the story told can compel the reader (Holt, 1991). This reader to be compelled is the construction of a research paradigm at any given time – making it pragmatic to publish academic stories in accordance to certain requests of rigor. An these constructions of rigor are what are constantly negotiated not excluding this current work – our contestation mere is that lately we have not seen enough of it and too much uncritical acceptance of rules set up by various "cults of criteriology" (Sherry and Schouten, 2002: 220).

But through our academic storytelling we also wish to go further. We must be pragmatic in as much as we wish to compel the readers of any particular current paradigm. But we want to do more to push the negotiation of our paradigm(s) with every piece of research. We must compel, but we must also surprise to create resonance and new relations in the research community. Focusing on stories on various levels of analysis can be of assistance here, as 1) a constructed meanings of respondents' worlds and 2) how we negotiate the construction of our research paradigms through our academic storytelling. As Dyer and Wilkins note "stories are often more persuasive and memorable than statistical demonstrations of ideas and claims" (1991: 617).

And how should our research surprise and to sensitize our readers to the negotiation of our research paradigms? As stated, through empathy and reflexivity we have new potential for the insight into meanings that make sense for their utterers, even if they do not give us access to facts in a positivist 'true' sense. Through these approaches research should be able to surprise and thus cause new relations and new opportunities for negotiation and research. We are reminded here of Goodall (2000) who asks the reader to ponder what was the last time s/he was truly surprised and inspired by a work of qualitative research. Other things than attempts to (often implicitly) confirm predetermined hypothesis could be done, instead attempting to find new stories through in-depth ethnography described above. As Dyer and Wilkins note about compelling academic storytelling "More than once we had an 'aha' experience when reading such studies because the rich descriptions have unveiled the dynamics of the phenomena and have helped us identify similar dynamics in our own research or in our daily lives" (1991: 617)

EXAMPLES IN AN ETHNOGRAPIC SENSE

"'I should very much like to know how are they getting on with the cloth,' thought the emperor. But he felt rather uneasy when he remembered that he who was not fit for his office could not see it"

Thomas Kuhn talks about producing exemplars and their role in healthy progress of science in the second edition of The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (1970). Exemplars are the solutions to puzzles in the field that one should know when studying their own field. In the field of qualitative B2B research, these exemplars are tainted by a focus on success of

management. One could argue that this results in a perspective of the empowerment of management. We wish to provide a set of examples ourselves to highlight the shades of gray in the interview based research. Our intention is, especially, to highlight the difference of what is said on tape and what is not. These examples were gathered during a number of empirical research endeavors. The main problem with these examples is always that the truthfulness of the 'official' truth can only be verified from the interview tapes and the unofficial statements are buried and denied.

Where the epistemic focus on stories emerged

> "The poor old minister tried his very best, but he could see nothing, for there was nothing to be seen. 'Oh dear,' he thought, 'can I be so stupid? I should have never thought so, and nobody must know it! Is it possible that I am not fit for my office? No, no, I cannot say that I was unable to see the cloth.'"

Even as many qualitative B2B case studies do utilize various forms of both primary (e.g. visits to firm locale) and secondary data (e.g. news articles, archival records) the bulk of the data usually consists of a number of managerial interviews. From the more positivistic perspectives, the interview questions should be made in unbiased manner to reveal unbiased factual information about the case (Yin, 2003).

In their time, the first two authors tried qualitative interviews according to the prevalent norms, yet we continuously seemed to arrive into situations that cast doubt on our views of objective data gathering. Different interview settings seemed to have a profound impact on the content of the interviews. Yet it often seemed that the simple dichotomy of true/false was not sufficient to describe the data produced in the interviews. When prompted, the managers being interviewed did not feel like blatantly lying (not many people can effectively keep such activity up for long), but rather that the nature of the interview situation seemed to construct the 'truths' chosen to fit the circumstances. We found there to be the 1) the 'recorded truth' versus the 'hidden truth' and 2) the 'official truth' versus the 'unofficial truth'. In both cases, the former seemed to describe settings where the manager felt to represent the firm's holistic perspective and thus the organizational 'truth' and the latter where s/he felt to represent his/her own view of the situation and thus a personal notion of the 'truth'. Even as often the implied reasons for specific outcomes were quite different, there seemed to be no deeply felt cognitive dissonance. Rather, the storytelling was utilized as a fluid set of tools created strategically to suit the particular situation (Swidler, 1986). In the perspective of our framework, both representations are an account of a different type of truth – a different *story* to make the same situation intelligible from the managers' perspective. Let us now provide some illustrative examples.

The 'recorded truth' versus 'unrecorded truth'

When the second author conducted research within the publishing industry, multiple instances occurred where the things that were recorded and the things that were not recorded differed substantially and portrayed quite different stories. In one instance before the interview the informant unveiled his feelings of his job and the latest sales figures while we walked from the lobby to a room to do the interview. These things were never caught on tape as quite a different story was unveiled on tape representing a different perspective. During

another instance, he interviewed one manager who openly unveiled the competitive landscape and the competitive actions that they have and are going to do in the future but remained quite silent of these issues during the taped interview (but told about these issues before and after the interview).

In another instance, the first two authors conducted a study of industrial marketing in a global setting and interviewed a former manager of the company in question. We were quite blatantly told that taping the interview would result in a different story than the one he would tell when the recorder was not on (the interview was therefore not taped) and that he only had half an hour to spend to talk to us. The person ended up giving 3 hour, in-depth, story of his career and its development in the company, simultaneously paralleling it with the development of the company. This story was accompanied by a side story, essentially a critique, of how the firm operated in general and why things ended up in a way they did. As an interesting curiosity, he told his story not only through his own voice but added the voices of his co-workers and bosses without informing the second author which voice was actually doing the talking. Nevertheless, all these voices fragments coalesced into a single narrative.

Getting to the core of the matter in B2B research usually requires using a non-disclosure agreement (NDA) to protect the participating companies/informants and oftentimes we seek to make such agreements in a belief to get better empirical data. While the general view towards using NDA is that it verifies our research in a sense that the informants are free to tell us the 'truth' as they are protected by the agreement, one should not take this as straightforwardly. This is due to the notion that the NDA institutionalizes the stories we are told and while the tone of the informants may change after such agreements are made, the stories they elicit are still of one viewpoint and by no means objective. Therefore, the biggest change is with regards to what the researcher views these accounts as representing truth. This notion was raised during a discussion of a currently ongoing research by the first two authors.

Additionally, according to Eisenhardt (1989) one tactic in collecting case evidence is to use teams and keep them separate, as to increase objectivity. However, such focus leads some members of the research team to distance themselves from the data and loose both contextuality and empathy with regards to the accounts of the informants. This, essentially, makes parts of the research team lose their understanding of the acts of storytelling, which give meaning to the actual story. In some situations this can lead to misunderstanding of the story that has been elicited by and informant but it can also lead the uninformed researcher to piece together the story elicited by an informant in a wholly different form.

The 'official truth' versus the 'hidden truth'

Most importantly, when doing research in the internationally operating project marketing firm in the Czech Republic, the first author became highly sensitized to the contextual nature of the interview. It seemed that depending on the interview setting, he was offered either the 'official (firm) truth' or the 'unofficial hidden (personal) truth'. In line with Dalton the first author, almost by complete accident was able to "develop closer relations with the managers during their periods of relaxation" (1959: 281, quoted in Dyer and Wilkins, 1991). This culminated in a more relaxed interview setting in a bar, where the managers came to tell him that they were glad I got good data from my interviews, but they also felt obligated to tell me what 'really' is happening in the company. These accounts of the managerial relations between the headquarters and the subsidiary they represented were almost polar opposites.

In addition, they told the first author that originally they thought he was a spy sent from the Finnish headquarters, but that they had come to feel they could open up to me in a frank manner from their perspective (a few rounds of beers seemed to add to this notion as well). Yet, when prompted, they did not feel that they had lied or been otherwise untruthful to me. In their opinion, the 'official truth' was the accurate account in terms of what they represented as employees and the 'hidden truth' was what they represented as thinking private individuals. For them, it seemed that interviews in the office space and working hours represented a different domain of *meaningful truth* than the relaxed bar setting. It did not seem to make a difference to follow more rigor in terms of interview conducting, rather the less rigorous contexts seemed to spark more in-depth perspectives and storytelling about the actual events so that they would make sense for the managers in their settings.

Through experience in these empirical settings, we became aware that the stories managers elicit are bound by the context in which they are given. Equally, they seemed to not consist of some description of the 'truth', but constituted subjective truths contextually as the manager elicited stories of past events in a narrative form to make outcomes intelligible and to justify their role in them.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

"The emperor marched in the procession under the beautiful canopy, and all who saw him in the street and out of the windows exclaimed: "Indeed, the emperor's new suit is incomparable! What a long train he has! How well it fits him!" Nobody wished to let other know he saw nothing, for then he would have been unfit for his office or too stupid. Never emperor's clothes were more admired."

Could there be opportunity to further advocate similar academic pluralism in B2B marketing that has received more attention in other paradigms? Does it mean that we need to increasingly question not only the criteria for rigor that stem from persistent positivist underpinning in case study research, and recognize that its clothes may not fit (or even exist) if we are to further our paradigm to embrace new ontological and epistemological ideas as well? And if it does, are we as a research community ready to take the possibility for such leaps seriously?

As Thompson (2002) has remarked, the type of research conducted tells as much about the phenomena under investigation as it does about the research community doing the researching. While there are many exceptions, what does the current state of affairs in the mainstream of the IMP group or the B2B paradigm reveal about its nature? Even though questions about the nature of the quest have been raised, why do we continue to see relatively little diversity ontologically and epistemologically? Why does case research continue to aim for universal truths in constantly transcendental contexts? Why does it often continue to focus on managers (and usually only managers) and why are their narratives commonly used as reflections of truth that are reported in a naïve realist manner to construct generalizable 'true' knowledge? As Brown has suggested in terms of marketing research in general (2003), do we lack academic respectability and the A* journals that would legitimize bold attempts for new ways of knowledge construction (unlike CCT and Organization Theory)? And is it because of this lack that there is an urge to 'do the mainstream' in aspirations of such clout?

A comparison can be made to the Organization Theory discourse, and while they certainly do have their mainstream as well, a plurality of different ontologies and epistomologies seem to still get a fair airing, for example in terms of critical research (e.g. Fenwick, 2005; Vaara and Tienari, 2008) and an epistemological shift into doings rather than retrospective sayings (e.g. Gherardi, 2000; Whittington, 2006; Barley and Kunda, 2001). Similar approaches abound in the CCT literature in marketing.

We must note that our goal was certainly not to eschew or denounce previous research, yet we want to continue the effort to further sensitize the researchers in the B2B marketing paradigm to the fundamental issues of ontology and epistemology, rather than trying to 'manufacture' more rigor and reality into their research through technical iterations in their methodological criteria. Thus (and in line with interpretivist ontology) we do not purport that more pluralistic methods will take us in any specific direction (be it truth or rigor or the like) – as we must understand (cf. Hunt, 1991; Eisenhardt, 1989) that any 'direction' in 'science' is certainly another fleeting construction in itself.

Rather, we wish to raise awareness in what we believe is an issue of importance in understanding what our research consists of. All research efforts, be they qualitative or quantitative, require vast amounts of interpretation – both intertwined with the phenomena and with the process of academic writing as well. As we have covered earlier, while the nature of storytelling, and its constitutive nature in our understanding and making intelligible a reality we need to construct our meaningful agency in, has received some interest in B2B literature, it continues to be treated as a superfluous construct that masks rather than reveals any notion of a reality that could be of interest (Yin, 1971, Eisenhardt, 1989, 1991; Lounsbury and Glynn, 2001). From our interpretivist position, we find that *the stories themselves* construct meaningful realities to their tellers and listeners – and from an empirical position we can also see how substantially any reality becomes altered with respect to the empirical setting.

Thus we will also do what others before us have also suggested (e.g. Gummesson, 2003, 2005; Bourghini, Cova and Carù, 2010; Visconti, 2010). We believe that embracing more in-depth qualitative methodologies such as reflexively guided ethnography (including autoethnogaphic research team members) could bring about new interpretations and compelling insights to the meanings of the stories through which managers make sense of their organizational agency. However, this suggestion comes bundled with another – for us ethnographic methodology does not constitute an add-on to the extant paradigm which seems to be the way it has become seen – as a provider of better and more in-depth access to contextual knowledge implicitly taken as more objective and of a 'truth'. As Denny has noted, the newly rediscovered acceptance of ethnographic research by many companies in the B2C field has done little more than become an additional approach to control for the cultural variable, and ethonography becomes embraced "because of its apparent transparency of method, not because it problematizes what one thinks one sees" (2006: 432). Ethnography does not produce new universal knowledge but interpretations of meaning that need to be considered and reported by the researcher (and the research team) in a transparent, reflexive and critical way. This will not be an avenue to any fixed 'truth', but a potential and splintering pathway for new, inspiring and compelling theory and forms of representing research.

A final thought of pragmatism and power in the writing up of research

As we have argued, the writing up of research can be seen as an act of storytelling, an informed fiction, and its compellingness can only be understood with relation to which ever happens to be the dominant paradigm we must ask what is its goal from the perspective of the interpretivist framework. We must ask, what is our paradigm today?

Indeed, who do we represent in our research? What does our research as a work of academic storytelling entail? As noted by Hopkinson and Hogg (2006) and by many for example in the organization theory discourse in a Foucauldian sense, every act of speech is an act of power. While postmodern frameworks provide us tools to the critique of any stable truth, it does not eschew the pragmatic utility of science. No doubt, satellites stay in their orbits and cannonballs follow their predicted trajectories. This has not been the criticism of constructionists – this is not the nature of the 'anything goes' that the most entrenched positivistically oriented minds have thrown back at them.

Yet, behind the truth-value of this phenomena, there lies a notion of pragmatism. And behind pragmatism there looms the obvious question – pragmatic for whom? There is no speech made, no story uttered and no atom split without the pragmatic and thus political benefit for someone. The beguiling appeal of 'objectivity' through 'scientific rigor' of the positivist toolkit has fooled us from truly considering what our data sets in fact consist of. In B2B marketing we are doing academic research about human phenomena and meaning (Holt 1991; cf. Shankar and Patterson, 2001; Gummesson 2003, 2005), as these phenomena are always context dependent, shifting, and described by such an ephemeral construct as language. And this human phenomenon is always based on the pragmatism of power. Every story purported, whether our informants' or our academic version, speaks with a political voice for someone's pragmatic purpose.

To understand this is to become sensitized in our perspective into a world of pluralistic approaches of fleeting knowledge claims – all with underlying reasons for being told. As we have no stable logos of truth to achieve it will thus also be equally legitimate to do research through any philosophical framework, from positivism to postmodernism. What we wish, however, is that one does it through conscious reflexivity while understanding whose voice the research speaks as an academic work, and also, whose voices are included in the research. Is the philosophical paradigm of the mainstream or the marginal within the paradigm? If so, to what end? Is the chosen perspective adopted due to the lack of knowledge of other approaches or due to its potential to actually produce interesting and pragmatic (for someone) knowledge?

Furthermore, what do we owe the managers? Why are 'managerial implications' taken as axiological goal of our research? Wasn't 'science' supposed to be of objective nature? As researchers we could also be more reflexive about whose position we adhere to. And again, doing research to further a managerial cause is bona fide in its entirety, what could be reconsidered is its taken-for-granted nature.

And therefore, whose voices are included in our research? Is it only the one of 'winners' and 'success cases'? What about minority voices within the organization? What about industrial customers driven out of the market due to fierce competition by a dominant entrant? What about the voices of the people in the organization versus the organization as a 'being'? In a world of ever changing meanings and shifting paradigmatic relations, there is certainly no other truth or better research than what the stories our consensus accepts as describing such. To recognize that the emperor indeed has no clothes does not mean doing away with him or

his tailors, quite the contrary – it is merely a sincere encouragement to bring to the table more profound questions sometimes lost in the debate about the stitches on his gown.

And if these proverbial stitches are of all importance, where is the room for experimentation for new insights and to discover new theory of relevance? To adopt and paraphrase a question from Godall (2000), what has been the latest B2B publication that has really surprised you, gone after 'Big Questions', and influenced the development of new relations between you and the community? We call for pluralism in research approaches in B2B marketing so that such new thinking could emerge. From our position, we need new compelling stories to bring about new relations and development in the area marginal area centrifugal form the mainstream.

Thus, we posit a renewed interest in stories, narratives, or informed fictions as it seems that the generation of them are fundamental to how we both generate and write up empirical data for publication. In addition, we wish to strenuously reiterate the age old call for more pluralistic approaches to research in the field of B2B marketing studies – both in terms ontological and epistemological approaches. While some studies have raised these issues (e.g. Gummesson, 2003, 2005; Borghini, Cova, Carù, 2010; Visconti, 2010) their influence seems to have been relatively modest in the mainstream of the paradigm.

Even as one finds it excruciatingly difficult to relinquish the notion of truth and the linearity of how 'we will get there' – it is a leap one needs to make in order to begin the evaluation of the structures guiding our cognition and action in social settings (and B2B insomuch as it recognized the people behind the firm edifices need to be). As stated, this is not a call for 'anything goes' or any form of new theory. Rather it is an encouragement for free thinking and the establishing of new brave theoretical ideas and methodological approaches we sincerely wish for the paradigm of B2B scholarship to accept and embrace.

> ""But he has nothing on at all," said a little child at last. "Good heavens! Listen to the voice of an innocent child," said the father, and one whispered to the other what the child had said. "But he has nothing on at all," cried at last the whole people."

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