

## Project narratives: directions for research

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Book Chapter

# **PROJECT NARRATIVES: DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Projects are peopled at all levels, and people make sense of their lives via narrative thought as the temporal and dramatic dimension of human existence is emphasized in them. Narratives organize people's lived experiences and create order out of random incidents and events. Such an order can help them understand the passage of events and even guide action. Narratives such as the need for the project, sustainability of the project, innovation in the project can be crafted and maintained in different ways. In this chapter we discuss how different organizational theories such as sensemaking, social identity theory, and organizational power can help understand the narrative practices in project settings. We review studies in project settings that apply narratives to shape the project vision, identity, and image to improve the project management practice.

## **KEYWORDS**

Project Narratives, Vision, Identity, Image, Crafting narratives

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Projects are peopled at all levels. Scholars have argued that project management is about people who make decisions that enable action (Morris & Pinto, 2010; Volker, 2019). Hence, the actions, practices and behaviors of the project management participants are to be explained by their motivations and human needs. Afterall, decision making is a social behavior even when nobody else is present, as the decision maker can anticipate how others will react and factor it into their decision (Beach & Connolly, 2005). Constructs such as vision, identities, and image at the individual and the collective levels are social constructions often created by discourses and narratives (Gioia, Schultz & Corley, 2000; Humphreys & Brown, 2002). Projects can be better understood as continuously reconstructed entities with narratives driving experiences through dramatizing trajectories of practice (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002; Carlsen, 2006).

Organizational narratives as defined by Vaara et al. (2016) are the temporal and discursive constructions that provide a means for individual, social, and organizational sensemaking and sensegiving. In a broad sense, a narrative is anything told or recounted by an individual, groups of individuals, or an organization (Ninan & Sergeeva, 2021; Veenswijk & Berendse, 2008). Narratives are present everywhere and can be oral, written or filmed, fictional or nonfictional (Verduijn, 2007). Polkinghorne (1991) recorded that people make sense of their lives via narrative thought as the temporal and dramatic dimension of human existence is emphasized in them. He highlighted that the way people organize is dependent on the cues emanating from external perpetual senses and cognitive memories; and narratives are one of the main cognitive organizing processes which shapes temporal events around people. Narratives can be treated as a ‘cognitive instrument’ as they impact subject’s thinking and emotional life (Rappaport, 2000). Strategically,

policymakers employ plotted, plausible and repeated narratives to shape the reaction of people to the changes occurring around them (Abolafia, 2010).

Narratives help make sense of practices in project settings. For example, the change process in projects can be understood through narratives as a process of negotiated meaning and can enable researchers to comprehend different voices (Ninan & Sergeeva, 2021; Veenswijk & Berendse, 2008). The innovation process in projects can be understood through the ways in which project leaders speak, communicate, and converse about innovation in the context of everyday practical activities (Sergeeva, 2017). Establishing an identity, brand positioning, and packaging projects as innovative have become important strategies for many project-based organizations. Even the role of different actors in the evolution of projects can be studied by considering narratives as devices that capture, interpret, construct, and change organizational time (Vaara et al., 2016). Narratives can make sense of the process of sustaining change in organizations by enhancing self-legitimization (Sergeeva, 2014).

This chapter is organized as follows. First, we provide a brief overview of narratives in project settings and record some project narratives from the High Speed Two megaproject in the UK. In the next section, we highlight why narratives are important in project settings and record some organizational theories that can help make sense of narratives. Following this, we suggest some ways to craft and maintain project narratives. Finally, we suggest some directions for future research in project narratives by highlighting the data sources, methods of investigation and some additional suggestions of theories that can make sense of and provide insights to manage narratives in project settings.

## 2. PROJECT NARRATIVES

There are different narratives in project settings. For example, in the case of High Speed Two (HS2) rail megaproject in the UK there were multiple narratives such as the narrative of the need for the project, narrative of the consultation process, narrative of the sustainability of the project, etc. The HS2 megaproject was proposed in 2009 to connect London and Birmingham in 45 min through trains travelling at speeds of 225 mph. During the early stages of the project, the transport secretary created a narrative of the need for project by highlighting that it will transform transport in the country and provide numerous benefits. The secretary claimed,

*“I am excited about the possibilities that HSR [High Speed Rail 2] has to transform transport in this country for the better - providing environmental benefits, encouraging investment and boosting business and jobs”* (Quoted from the news article ‘High speed rail must have Easytrain prices says Transport Secretary’ dated 30 December 2009)

While there are narratives of the need for project, there are also narratives that the project is not needed. For instance, projects are highlighted as a ‘white elephant’ (Winch, 2010) or as ‘eye-wateringly expensive’ (Ninan & Sergeeva, 2021) by the protesters to create an alternative narrative.

Similarly, during the consultation phase of the HS2 project, a narrative of ‘one of the largest consultations ever’ was created by the spokesperson of the Department of Transport, UK to show the inclusive nature of the consultation. The spokesperson claimed,

*“This was one of the largest consultations ever undertaken by a government with over 30 events along the line of route attended by tens of thousands of people”* (Quoted from the

news article ‘Home-owners booted make room rail link Buckinghamshire’ dated 13 November 2011)

Additionally, a narrative of sustainability was also established, and the project was promoted as a low-carbon and environmentally sustainable transport solution. The Chief Executive of Network Rail recorded that,

*“It [the HS2 project] is the low-carbon, sustainable transport of the future”* (Quoted from the news article ‘High-speed rail plans announced by government’ dated 11 March 2010)

In project settings, there are other narratives such as narrative of innovation in the project (Enninga & van der Lugt, 2016; Sergeeva & Winch, 2020), narrative of quality (Chinyamurindi, 2017), narrative of safety (Ninan, 2021), narratives of performance, etc. These narratives influence and shape actors’ vision, identity, image and consequently their social practices (Heracleous, 2006). In the next section, we proceed to highlight how narratives influence and shape actors’ interpretations and actions.

### **3. VISION, IDENTITY, IMAGE, AND PROJECT NARRATIVES**

Narratives can be applied in project setting to shape the vision, identity, and image of the project, which can result in an improved project performance.

A credible vision for the project can help address the blame-culture, lack of trust and fragmentation in project settings. Globally, projects experience deficiencies due to the segregation which result in adversarial relationships, confrontational attitudes, poor tendering practices, a blame-culture and a lack of trust and cooperation (Bresnen & Marshall, 2000). The root cause of

these problems in project settings is that all active actors do not have the same interests or interpretation of the proposed initiatives (Cicmil & Hodgson, 2006). Most of the challenges project face are managerial often in the integration of different disciplines (Sergeeva & Winch, 2021). Narratives can organize people's lived experiences and create order out of random incidents and events. Such an order can help project participants understand the passage of events and even guide cooperative action. A vision is critical for temporary organizations as it seeks to bring all stakeholders together to achieve the common goal. Theories such as sensemaking can ascertain how project practitioners make sense of their daily routine (Weick et al., 2010). It is necessary to understand narratives emergent from retrospect, present experiences and presumptions about the future in order to make sense of the different practices throughout the project lifecycle (Sergeeva, 2014). Thus, effective project narratives need to be crafted for defining the project mission and vision, which in turn help the project get necessary approvals as well as improve cooperation and trust (Sergeeva & Winch, 2021).

Identity is a social and cultural phenomenon that encompass macrolevel categories, temporary and interactionally specific stances, and cultural positions (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). Organizational identity can commonly be understood as an 'organization's members' collective understanding of the features presumed to be central and relatively permanent, which distinguish the organization from other organizations (Gioia et al., 2000). For example, the stakeholders from whom land was acquired in the case of the HS2 project, came together as they resonated with the identity of being against the project, as quoted below,

*“In some ways the issue has brought the village closer together, as there's been this sort of 'our backs are against the wall' situation, but there is also a higher level of depression*



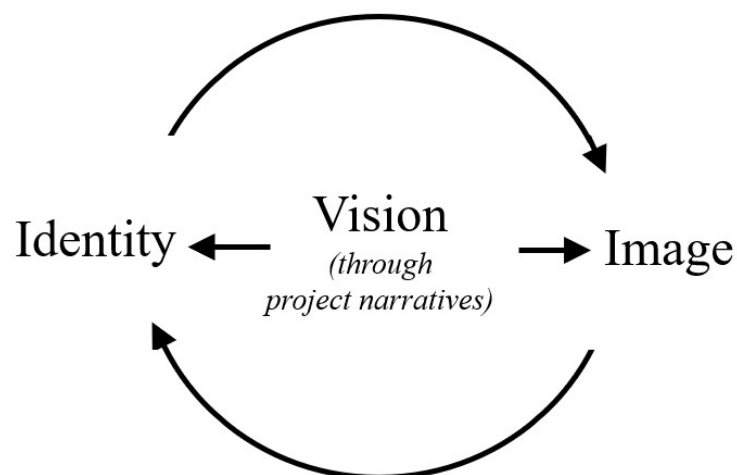
*and a lot less smiles”* (Quoted from the news article ‘the Chron look at what it will mean to Northamptonshire if the HS2 is created’ dated 16 January 2012)

Project identities at all levels, be it at industry level, organizational level, project level, group level, or individual level, can be considered as a social construction and they are subject to multiple interpretations and crafted by narratives (Stets & Burke, 2000). Fiol (2002) theorizes that narratives reflect and produce processes of identification in discourse. Narratives help employees to dis-identify with the old and re-identify with the new identity. Theories such as social identity theory helps to understand how narratives employed by practitioners are used to identify projects, for example as innovative (Sergeeva, 2017). Project leaders consider it important to construct a coherent and consistent narrative, which in turn establishes a project identity which is instrumental for maintaining stability in the context of the ever-dynamic project environment (Sergeeva & Winch, 2021).

Image is the perception of the organizational purpose, aims, and values and the resulting general impression in the mind of all stakeholders (Gregory, 2004). A positive organizational image can create trust and commitment in the members and help achieve a sustainable structure for the organization (Kalkan et al., 2020). During the initial stages of the HS2 project, the transport secretary stated how the project’s purpose is to develop the country, as quoted below,

*“I want Britain to be a pioneer in low-cost, mass-market high-speed rail”* (Quoted from the news article ‘High speed rail must have Easytrain prices says Transport Secretary’ dated 30 December 2009)

The image of the project as one meant to develop the country helps garner support from the wider community. Sergeeva and Winch (2021) note that image narratives are crafted during the shaping phase of a project to get approval and support from external stakeholders about intended project outputs and outcomes, and in contrast, identity narratives are crafted during the delivery phase of a project to bring internal stakeholders together for achieving the project output. Narratives can be mobilized for creating a collective brand image at the levels of the firm and sector as a whole (Duman et al., 2018). Theories such as organizational power can help understand image narratives. For example, using Foucault's governmentality theory, Ninan et al. (2019) studied the branding practices of a megaproject. The megaproject used narratives through social media to create a brand image of the project as beneficial for the community resulting in support for the project. For example, the branding effect of narratives can lead to community support for construction activities and insensitivity towards traffic diversions and other inconveniences caused due to the construction activities.



**Figure 1:** Interaction between vision, identity, and image through project narratives

The interaction between vision, identity and image through project narratives is shown in Figure 1. Project narratives can shape the vision of a project, such as on sustainability or innovation. Sergeeva and Winch (2021) highlight that such a vision becomes formalized and are communicated to different stakeholders thereby shaping the identity and image of the project organization. The vision can shape an individual's identity and affect the decisions internal stakeholders take regarding the project, helping the project achieve its objective. The vision can also shape the image of the project and can lead to community and external stakeholder support. Ninan et al. (2021) argue that a positive image of the project can not only affect the external stakeholders, but also shape the identity of the internal stakeholders such as the project team. For example, the authors note from the case of a metro rail project in India, an image narrative of the project as an 'urgent infrastructure asset' led the project team to take decisions prioritizing a reduction in the construction time of the project, sometimes at the expense of cost and quality. Thus, as Vaara et al. (2016) argue, a focus on narratives allows for understanding how even the seemingly personal growth of an individual is nonetheless deeply intertwined with broader organizational and even societal narratives that produce common, stable paths out of the unique experiences and choices people make.

#### **4. MANAGING NARRATIVES**

It should be noted that narratives are not one-sided. Narratives are interpreted, shared and challenged by various organizational actors in the 'game of managing meaning' (Granlund, 2002). It is important to consider the multi-authored process of narratives to understand practice (Buchanan & Dawson, 2007). For example, in the practice of the selection of a project, the promoters of a project, such as the government, contractors, and financiers are interested in

awarding the project, and the protesters of the project, such as project affected parties and opposition party of the government campaign to stall the project (Ninan & Sergeeva, 2021). Both promoters and protesters draw on narratives for their vested interests. Hence, there is a need to manage narratives for the successful completion of the project.

Veenswijk and Berendse (2008) in their study of a Dutch infrastructure project record how the project manager and local experts served as ‘editing’ actors by actively reshaping the narrative concerning the project. Narratives need to be crafted and maintained. Protesters’ narratives may need to be converted into promoters’ narratives. Riessman (2002) stresses the importance of tools and structures employed by the narrator and calls for research to uncover and track them. Stories, labels, and comparisons help in crafting narratives, while repeating, endorsing, humorizing, and actioning can help in maintaining the crafted narratives.

Stories are recorded as one of the main discourses used to craft narratives particularly in the works of Boje (2008). He highlights that there is a ‘story turn’ before the ‘narrative turn’ demonstrating the role of stories in creating a narrative. Storytelling is defined as an activity of telling or sharing stories about personal experiences, life events and situations (Sergeeva & Trifilova, 2018). Stories are more than descriptions and can be an avenue for emotional engagement with the audience (Gabriel, 2000; Sergeeva & Green, 2019). Such an emotional engagement can result in support or empathy and can create a strong narrative for or against the project. Another way to craft a narrative is through the use of labels. Logue and Clegg (2015) record that a label can be used as a political tool or a resource as it can build or reinforce systems of meaning. When organizations claim the label of a well-established category, it triggers

assumptions of its products and practices similar to the category it claimed (Pontikes, 2018). For example, the ‘green’ label was used in the case of the HS2 project, as below,

*“But virtually the whole of the developed world is now going ahead with high speed rail because it's the green solution to providing fast, high capacity connections between cities”*

(Quoted from the news article ‘High-speed rail campaigners gather for national meeting’ dated 19 February 2011)

Ninan and Sergeeva (2021) note the use of labels of people, project, and practice by the promoters and protesters to craft narratives. For example, the promoters called the project as ‘low-carbon,’ the protesters as ‘NIMBY (Not in my backyard activists)’ and the consultation practice as ‘transparent.’ Another way to craft a narrative is through the use of comparisons. Comparisons involve comparing oneself or other with others (Suls et al., 2002). In an intra-organizational context, Roberson (2006) highlights that comparison with peers in an organization can influence an individual’s justice perception. Within the project context, Ninan et al. (2019) record how a megaproject using comparisons and claiming that another project in a different city looks up to them resulted in a positive community sentiment and a favorable narrative for the project.

One of the ways to maintain a crafted narrative is by repeating the narrative. Stories are repeated in organizations whether over the water cooler or in a formal quarterly meeting (Dailey & Browning, 2014). Garud and Turunen (2018) argue how retelling stories is a way of reinforcing cultural norms and values. Ideas sink in only after they have been heard many times (Kotter, 2012). For example, the ‘green’ agenda of the HS2 was repeated multiple times, as quoted below,

*“As someone who cares deeply about the environment, the opportunity to dramatically expand rail, a greener form of transport than aviation or road is very exciting indeed. This investment will help people to choose trains over cars, reduce carbon emissions and provide a rail system that is faster, more reliable and greener.”* (Quoted from the news article ‘Train service from Aylesbury via Winslow to Milton Keynes gets the green light’ dated 16 July 2012)

Another way to maintain a crafted narrative is by a prominent person endorsing the narrative. Lim et al. (2006) record how trust transference through associations with existing reputed people or organizations is instrumental in trust-building and stability. Thus, endorsing of the stories, labels, or comparisons by people who occupy eminent positions can enhance trust. Within megaprojects, publicizing the visit of regional leaders and celebrities to the construction site is discussed in Ninan et al. (2019) as a branding strategy effective in changing the project community to advocates of the project. Another way to maintain a crafted narrative is by humorizing the narrative. Humor can affirm an existing narrative in an organization (Jarzabkowski & Le, 2017). Discourses that have a sense of humor in them are clearly memorable and rendered more (Sergeeva & Green, 2019). Additionally, actioning wherein an action is allotted to a narrative can stabilize the narrative. Individuals reconstitute narratives through their actions (Vaara et al., 2016). As Weick (1988) notes, actions test provisional understanding generated through prior sensemaking and thereby strengthen existing narratives.

## **5. FUTURE DIRECTIONS OF RESEARCH**

The objective of this chapter is to emphasize the role of narratives in projects. Narratives are particularly important in project settings as they are temporary organizations, and it is critical to

bring multiple diverse stakeholders together to achieve the common goal. Some narratives in project settings such as narratives of the need for project, narratives of sustainability, and narratives of consultation process were discussed. We also highlight the interaction of vision, identity, and image through project narratives as shown in Figure 1. Narratives of the vision of a project can create an identity for the internal stakeholders which helps in collaboration and can create a positive image for external stakeholders which helps in garnering support for the project, both of which increase the likelihood of project success. Some of the ways to craft narratives such as stories, labels and comparisons, and some ways to maintain project narratives such as repeating, endorsing, humorizing, and actioning upon are also discussed. There is still more research work that needs to be done to understand the practice of managing and organizing projects through narratives. While some organizational theories such as sensemaking, social identity theory, and organizational power theories are considered in project settings, other theories such as attribution theory (Vaara, 2002), institutional theory (Skoldberg, 1994), practice theory (Carlsen, 2006), etc. can be employed to make sense of narratives in projects.

Some research methodologies that can aid researchers in investigating narratives include semi-structured or unstructured open-ended interviews, participant observations, and online naturalistic inquiry such as the study of social media, news articles, and project newsletters. While narratives in project studies are usually associated with written texts or spoken words, other forms of communication such as visual, audio and even actions can be considered. A study on video narratives can significantly inform project management practice since they have a richer ability to account for emotions in the form of changes in tones, calmness and anxiety (Huy, 2002). Many projects, such as the Tideway project in the UK upload short videos in YouTube to disperse their message to a wider audience. These short videos capture people's experiences of their everyday

work. Future research can study the role of these videos in project organizing and narratives. Of further interest is how posted videos of current projects by project leaders enable them to win next projects. Other avenues such as micro-stories by the project members of the work they do (Fenton & Langley, 2011) can significantly improve our understanding of the project management career.

To understand project management in the twenty first century, we also have to study the practice of projects in the online environment (Ninan, 2020). Many conversations relating to project happens on Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, WhatsApp, and news media articles. Social media provides an opportunity to the project community and empowers the marginalized by providing them with an audience for their stories (Vaara et al., 2016). In social media different forms of data such as text, picture, video, and so on are often interwoven (Ninan et al., 2019). The archive of digital media enables researchers to study narratives longitudinally. Even retrospective data relating to a project can be retrieved and analyzed for the role of narratives. Additionally, narratives in the real time can be studied to understand the convergence and divergence of meaning, such as in the case of project benefit realization (Mathur et al., 2021). Thus, to better understand the process of narrating in project organizing, more longitudinal, multi-methods, multi-theoretical research is called upon, which will in turn help us to understand and improve project management practice.

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