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A Multi-Layered Approach to Surfacing and Analysing Organisational Narratives: Increasing Representational Authenticity

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Abstract: This paper presents an integrated, multi-layered approach to narrative inquiry, elucidating the evolving story of organisational culture through its members and their physical, textual, linguistic and visual dialogue. A dynamic joint venture scenario within the UK hi-technology sector was explored to advance understanding of the impact of transformation level change, specifically its influence on shared belief systems, values and behavioural norms. STRIKE – *STructured Interpretation of the Knowledge Environment* is introduced as an innovative technique to support narrative inquiry, providing a structured, unobtrusive framework to observe, record, evaluate and articulate the organisational setting. A manifestation of narrative in physical dialogue is illuminated from which the underlying emotional narrative can be surfaced.

Focus groups were conducted alongside STRIKE to acquire a first order retrospective and contemporaneous narrative of culture and enable cross-method triangulation. Attention was given to non-verbal signals such as Chronemic, Paralinguistic, Kinesic and Proxemic communication and participants were also afforded opportunities to develop creative output in order to optimise engagement. Photography was employed to enrich STRIKE observation and document focus group output, affording high evidential value whilst providing a frame of reference for reflection.

These tools enable a multiplicity of perspectives on narrative as part of methological bricolage. Rich, nuanced and multi-textured understanding is developed, as well as the identification of connections, timbre and subjugated knowledge. A highly emotional and nostalgic context was established with actors' sense of self strongly aligned with the pre-joint venture organisation and its brand values, norms and expectations. Credibility and authenticity of findings is enhanced through data triangulation indicating traceability across methods, and from the contextual preservation attained through STRIKE.

The multi-layered approach presented can facilitate researcher reflexivity and sense-making, while for the audience, it may be employed to help communicate and connect research findings. In particular, STRIKE demonstrates utility, quality and efficacy as a design artefact following ex-post evaluation. This systematic method of narrative inquiry is suitable for standardisation and alongside a diagnostic/prescriptive capacity, affords both researcher and practictioner value in its application.

Keywords:
Narrative, Interpretive Processes, Authenticity, Voice, Reflexive Practice, Joint Venture Outcomes

1. Introduction: Truth and Authenticity in Narrative Inquiry

Narrative is ubiquitous, natural and diverse in form (Barthes 1977), affording "*sequentiality"* (Bruner 1990, p43) and providing an organising framework of temporality. An increasing number of studies may be described as narrative, but as a broad and nebulous term these vary significantly (Riessman 2008). But what is *the truth* of narrative inquiry? This may be considered from different dimensions: a correspondence with the actuality of the world, the consensus of experienced viewpoints, coherence to an integrated belief system, and a pragmatic perspective embodying truth with practical utility (Kirkham 1995). Verisimilitude or the appearance of reality may be considered a criterion of a narrative way of knowing (Rorty 1979).

This mode of representation is not without critique. White (1990, p26) argues that qualities coveted for research benefits, namely naturalness and familiarity actually make it suspect for use in "*any field of study aspiring to the status of science".* Narrative inquiry challenges modernist, traditional perspectives on truth and reality, the nature of knowledge, ways of knowing and the essence of self. Lived experience is emphasised as a catalyst for the social creation and construction of narrative knowledge through shared stories and their associated meanings (Bruner 1990).

This paper considers narrative from the perspective of both multi-dimensional means of elucidation and as the lived–through phenomenon of participants. Aligning with a paradigm shift from realism

towards constructivism and additionally, a postmodernist cultural shift (Huttunen, Heikkinen and Syrjälä 2002), this approach is considered germane to advance understanding of the intersection between culture, experience and change (Clandinin and Connelly 2000).

Narrative *authenticity* is also debated (Verhesschen 1999) but may be addressed in consideration of the inherent relationships between the artefacts, people and places which underpin it (Jones 2010). A multidimensional phenomenon, authenticity impacts across the research process: from researcher role and processes of reflection, to data collection, evaluation and representation. Guidance was drawn from Winter's (2002) principle of dialectics with attention afforded to *polyphony* or the means in which different voices may be heard. A creative range of techniques were employed to optimise actor engagement, data richness and sense-making, while facilitating researcher critical self-reflection.

1.1 Exploring Organisational Narratives

Continually framed, styled and shaped in consideration of audience and purpose, an organisational narrative may afford intent to persuade to action, to re-tell, to educate or to inspire. Unique, temporal and closely aligned to identity, it necessitates a level of congruence and controllability to communicate espoused values and core business activity. It can also form a bridge between historical roots and future direction. Organisational narratives may be identified under alternate names: the *spin* associated with public relations management, the *legends* of corporate history (Gabriel 2000) and the powerful *brand story* that binds community affiliation, exemplified by Apple (Muniz and Schau 2005).

The association between narrative and the construction or deconstruction of identity (Riessman 2008) can be profound and merits evaluation from an actor perspective, post significant organisational change. Along with social foundations, it is argued that narrative as identity may also be considered an inherently aesthetic phenomenon: deeply felt, embodied and capable of being accessed and interpreted through different presentational forms.

1.2 The Human Story of Transformational Change

A multi-faceted narrative lens affords depth and breadth of inquiry into the sometimes congruent but often conflicting layers of individual, collective and organisational story. The knowledge intensive UK Communications industry provides the contextual background. This dynamic environment faces complex challenges including evolving consumer behaviour, context-based services and converging data architecture (Accenture 2012). Described as *"the new core competency"* (Ross 2009), joint venture agreements are increasingly utilised to provide financial, economic and operational synergies.

Buy-in to both the legitimacy of integration processes and the new organisational form is acknowledged as core to successful partnering outcomes (Gole and Morris 2007). It is therefore critical to enhance understanding of the affect of transformation on the organisational actors required to accept, legitimise and actualise change, notably the means in which individuals internalise and rationalise the *new* narratives. This study addresses a lacuna of empirical research in this area.

2. Research Methodology

Complex evaluations of *real-world* scenarios frequently necessitate robust consideration of situated actions and problems (Cresswell 2009), and a combination of different, flexible approaches to investigation. To develop nuanced contextual understanding, a qualitative approach is adopted, informed by pragmatism (Dewey 1988) alongside interactive constructivism (Neubert 2001). This affords full consideration of experience, habit and communications embedded in context and awareness of the researchers' perspective as both self and distant-observers.

Data collection is informed by the "*preunderstanding*" (Gummesson 2000, p57) of the principal investigator as an insider-researcher. This enables enhanced acceptance and capacity to acquire understanding in praxis, specifically an emic awareness of internal cultural dynamics including symbolism. It is acknowledged that issues have been raised regarding *"the relativity of insider status"* (Hockey 1993, p199) but these are balanced by the non-insider, etic position of the co-author.

Narrative inquiry is selected as the most appropriate means to explore the experiential life-world of actors whilst affording researcher self-reflexivity. From an ontological perspective, a narrative inquiry considers organisational life as a storied reality. Epistemologically, knowledge is constructed within this reality and expressed through language conveyed in varying forms that can be difficult to elucidate.

2.1 Research Setting, Data Collection and Analysis

A synopsis of company background is provided with identity anonymised for confidentiality. Communications Firm A has operated in the UK hi-technology sector for 20 years and following commencement of a 50:50% joint-venture with less established competitor Firm B, embarked on a major restructuring and rebranding programme in Q2 2012. The alliance strategy centres on cost leadership through optimisation synergies, cost reduction and consolidation. The joint venture is referred to as Firm-JV and consideration of previous culture relates to Firm A - the regional headquarter site studied being populated by its former employees. Research was conducted in Q3 2012 using the original observational framework STRIKE in conjunction with focus groups. Method detail and rationale are now fully explicated.

2.2 STRIKE - *STRuctured Interpretation of the Knowledge Environment*

The physical environment is recognised to illuminate organisational practices and norms (Davenport 1997). It is proposed that attention to this dimension is also revelatory of the individual and collective narratives of the actors within, and is congruent with the "*visual turn"* in narrative inquiry (Riessman 2008, p181). To advance this, STRIKE is afforded as an augmentation to the system analysis observational framework STROBE (Kendall and Kendall 1984), with originality demonstrated in terms of scope, breadth and flexibility of design, and data acquisition and evaluation methods. A notable change is a move away from focussing on the environment of a particular executive level decision-maker, to consider the wider office situation experienced by the majority of actors: those who are required to actualise transformational change in praxis.

Tool development was influenced by researcher concern that methodological reliance on direct participant story-telling may result in increased potential for misinterpretation. Story articulation can be subject to high levels of distortion (Tversky 2004) and within focus groups; issues of groupthink or emotional contagion (Goleman 2005) may be influential. Additionally, with issues of power relations between researcher and researched a critical concern (Clandinin and Connelly 2000), the neutral and unobtrusive nature of this narrative approach can counteract against this problem. It is opined therefore, that STRIKE affords a path that can avoid attenuation of the data captured, so that as much of the characteristics of the system in focus as possible can be presented to the interpretive activity. The inter-relationships between actor and environment are preserved.

Prior to this work, drawing on the Design Science Research Method (Heje, Baskerville and Venable 2012), a descriptive ex-ante evaluation of the tool was undertaken by iteration during a pilot study in a comparative naturalistic setting. Focus was given to the environmental elements to be included for observation as it is posited that the physical narrative expressed in these dimensions can surface cultural nuances and the timbre of emotional stories. Face validity analysis was undertaken following an approach to Dr Gordon Rugg from Keele University, a knowledge elicitation expert.

To enact the resultant method, walk-through sessions were conducted to systematically observe explicit environmental elements: office design, aesthetics, workspace decoration, supporting equipment, knowledge sources, clothing, branding and exterior presentation. Photography was used to provide an additional layer of documentation of the research setting (Banks 2007), enrich observation, aid reflection and support researcher neutrality with the intent to achieve a third-person shot (Monaco 2009). Findings were compared with focus group data to aid confirmation or negation of interpretations and facilitate triangulation, identifying areas of narrative dissonance if present.

2.3 Focus Groups

Johnson and Scholes' (1999) cultural web framework aided examination of organisational culture and the deeper level assumptions, beliefs and shared artefacts of the actors within (Schein 2010). The target audience for sessions was middle management whose beliefs are notably influential in turbulent conditions (Coltman, Devinney and Midgley 2008). This provides an alternative means of surfacing narrative alongside STRIKE to achieve more complete understanding.

Four sessions were undertaken over 12 days: two contemporaneous in orientation and two retrospective, comprising 10 actors of equivalent position per group (N=40). Focus groups were selected for their capacity to observe collective sensemaking in praxis (Boje 2008), notably the relational action of storytelling which could not be achieved through individual interviews. A semi-structured topic guide was used with informed consent obtained for audio recording and the use of output material. To optimise conduits for expression, participants were provided with artistic materials

and ArtPad (2013), a self-directional web 2.0 drawing application. Attention was given to semantics, semiotics and the potential impact of memory bias. Thematic analysis and radar charting supported flexible data evaluation with possible subjectivity issues addressed by expert, non-participant review.

2.4 Reflexivity

A research diary was used to record feelings, hunches and events which can add to data assemblage and its evaluation (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). Further, participant evaluation of the focus group sessions was obtained on an anonymous, voluntary basis via a web-link survey. This supports reflexive action, foregrounding information that can aid authentic interpretation.

3. The Assemblage and Evaluation of Narrative

Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three-dimensional narrative inquiry space provides an appropriate scaffold to introduce and assess situated findings, affording continuity by progressing through the dimensions of the past, present and future whilst considering the interaction between personal and social elements. Salient fragments of narrative are presented and evaluated across the range of methods utilised, demonstrating multi-layered narrative interpretation in praxis.

3.1 The Past

Focus group artistic output was revelatory of the strength of former culture, as illustrated in Figure 1.

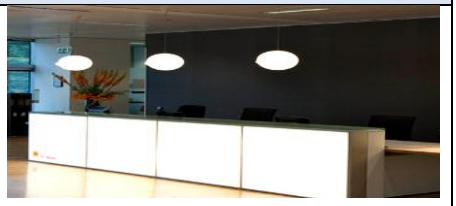
Figure 1: Group Retrospective Perspective of Firm A Culture By Free-Hand Drawing

A passionate response and evidence of the important historic and symbolic cultural context is afforded. The vibrant colour and imagery observed in the output material echoes the creativity and enthusiasm collectively exhibited, a confidence that anything is possible under *"visionary"* leadership. The principal-investigators' research diary is revelatory of empathy with this position. *"I felt I'd made it"* is an annotated response to recounting the start of their career with Firm A.

3.2 The Present

Three core dimensions emergent from the STRIKE assessment are presented in Table 1. Differences in the interpretation of narrative meaning are observed in the aesthetical juxtaposition between personal and public spaces, tension between defunct and current branding, and personal rather than organisational knowledge management. The surfacing of emotional narrative from physical dialogue is also illustrated. This approach conforms to Wittgenstein's (2001) picture theory of meaning affording a pictorial, representational and logical level.

Table 1: Salient Narratives Elucidated via STRIKE Evaluation

Environmental Element	Description	Supporting Photography
Office Aesthetics	Disconnect is observed between public and office areas. The clean lines, precision and subtle branding of public spaces contrasts with the vibrant personalisation of workspaces which display Firm A branded artefacts.	

Branding	New Firm-JV posters and internal magazines lack characterisation and communication of values. There is minimal observation of actors wearing newly rebranded clothing. This "faceless" approach is a distinct contrast with the highly personalised, fun, visual and value-laden imagery previously employed. This remains prominent in many workspaces.	
Workspace Decoration	Personalisation of desks with objects (mugs, coasters) and team-building memorabilia associated with Firm A heritage and *officially* defunct branding. This implies nostalgia, reflects pride and is revelatory of the importance of identity expression.	

The demonstration of Firm A branded artefacts indicates strong cultural internalisation and is considered an example of representation and reification, aligned to organisational memory. It is opined that actor legitimisation is built upon this shared physical dialogue (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Despite the contemporaneous focus and unobtrusive observational perspective of STRIKE, the narrative of the past remains omnipresent.

This cultural dissonance aligns with focus group findings. The four cultural webs produced were evaluated to establish central themes, aided by radar chart comparison. Figure 2 is an innovative presentation of the aggregated data. This is a complementary, supportive tool rather than directly part of STRIKE itself, designed to provide synthesis and optimise communicability. It was created through a percentage conversation of participants individually instantiating a particular element of the cultural web whereby 100% equates to everyone agreeing to its importance. The order of the dimensions around the diagram is not significant: all aspects are equally weighted. 100% is positioned centrally to represent the convergence point of the dimensions of culture, facilitating awareness of the element(s) which most contribute to the underlying organisational paradigm.

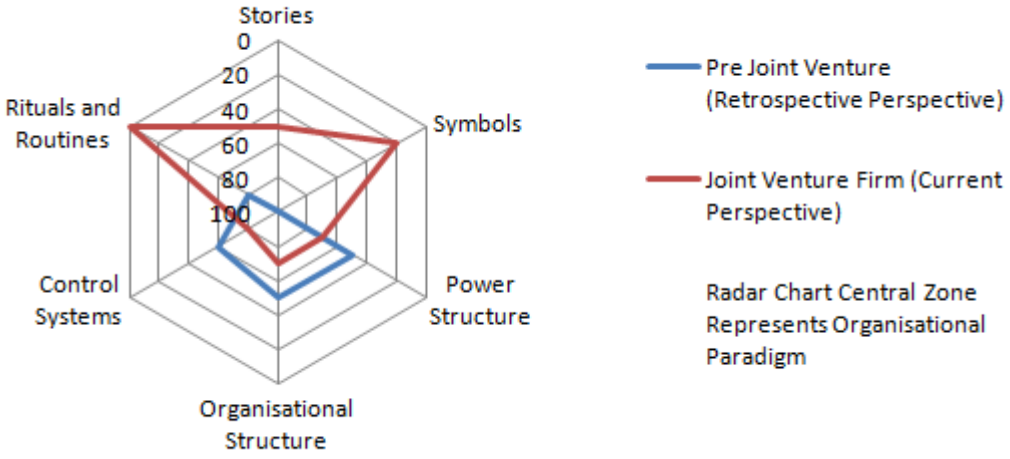


Figure 2: Radar Chart Comparison of Cultural Webs

This perspective foregrounds the importance of Stories and Symbols to the pre-joint venture life-world as cited by 100% of participants. Such highly valued dimensions are disassociated from the new organisation as exemplified by the comment, *"the only new stories are communication gaffs - a case of least said ...."*. It is past sticky stories that are positively shared as a form of cultural continuation, as supported by the prominence of cultural artefacts observed using STRIKE.

3.3. The Future?

Focus group ArtPad output provided consistently powerful interpretations of Firm-JV's future, as illustrated by one actor's contribution in Figure 3.

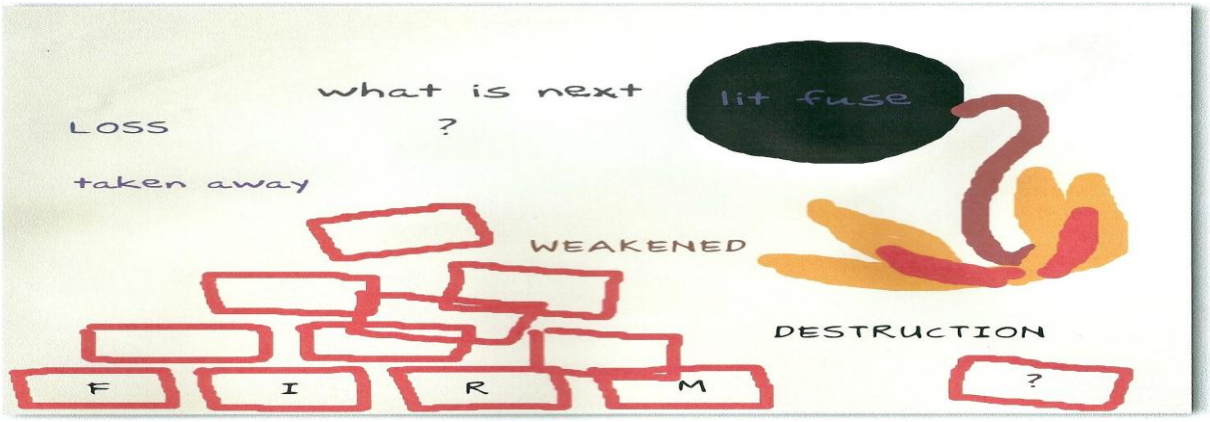


Figure 3: Actor Perspective of Firm-JV's Future Using ArtPad

Elements of destruction, loss and a weakened position are emphasised as well as ambiguity towards the future. From the evocative imagery a metaphor of DNA destruction is inferred: the building blocks of the organisation are being taken apart. This interpretation is supported by concerns raised in group discussion, exemplified by the comment *"I feel like I am fighting to hold on to our heritage",* alongside the nostalgic symbolism identified during STRIKE evaluation.

3.4 Narrative Authenticity

A sensemaking perspective was employed to reflect on observations, participant response, researcher reaction and the belief systems inherent in these. This included consideration of intentional or unintentional distortion and the potential to develop inaccurate narrative perceptions. This is explored through the recurring contextual theme of nostalgia: this "*pervasive*" phenomenon can dominate outlook (Gabriel 1993, p119) and is typically highly idealised, selective and imbued with symbolism. The dynamics of interaction within focus groups can create conditions for *"Emotion contagion"* (Goleman 2005, p104), a subtle tacit exchange whereby moods may be synchronised and moreover, unintentionally influenced through researcher dialogue. The resultant potential for over-interpreting narrative significance is balanced by the use of STRIKE which is indirect not interactive, and combined with photography, enables increased neutrality and transparency of observation.

In this case, nostalgia is interpreted as revelatory of the strength of affiliation retained towards former culture and brand. This may be as equally illustrative of current *"discontents"* (Gabriel 1993, p137) as the expressed past. The validity of this interpretation is supported by the tangible, omnipresent artefacts associated with previous organisational heritage observed through STRIKE: authenticity is preserved and not impacted by researcher-participant or cross-participant influences. Attention to word selection, specifically the cumulative effect of choices such as *"loss"*, *"recall"*, *"longing"* and *"mourning*" was also confirmatory. The credibility and self-awareness of participants was noted in their adept use of linguistic devices including expressive sounds, and by kinesic communication through purposeful body language. This echoes the dialogic/performance narrative dimension described by Riessman (2008).

3.5 Triangulation of Narrative Methods of Inquiry

STRIKE findings were evaluated against those from the focus groups to explore whether narratives are confirmed, reversed, modified, supplemented or would benefit from additional inquiry (Kendall and Kendall 1984). In this research, a high degree of congruence is observed as demonstrated in Table 2, through the core emergent stories of acculturative stress and personal knowledge management.

Table 2: Matrix Triangulation of Primary Narratives

STRIKE Analysis	Focus Groups: Evaluation Across Conduits
Story 1: Personal Knowledge Management	
Maintenance of personal libraries and individual subscriptions to professional bodies which may indicate hoarding norms. No sharing activity published on internal notice boards or evidence of team resource libraries. Availability of desk based rather than communal storage areas.	Participants discuss personal rather than organisational knowledge ownership and make sharing decisions based on value perceptions. *"I don't feel at all comfortable sharing my knowledge - Its mine and I use it where it will deliver maximum personal impact".* *"My sharing activity has reduced…things change so fast, I have to make a judgement call regarding what could be valuable in the future".*
Story 2: Acculturative Stress	
Juxtaposition between: The prominence of artefacts associated with cultural heritage, reflecting pride and identity. Alongside the continuation of Firm A branded dress code, these ritualistic behaviours may be considered evidence of *mimesis* (Potolsky 2006). Desk space is highly personalised with demonstrations of individual eclectic dimensions: typically nostalgic, bold and blazoned in colour. *and:* The monomorphic, aesthetic design style of the new joint venture entity which is neutral and non distinct as exemplified by corporate posters which lack character and personalisation. Visual identity, established as an important element of pre-joint venture culture, is perceived as at threat.	Social comparisons concern less favourable organisational circumstances as opposed to the past, a potential indicator of acculturative stress (Vaara 2000). ArtPad output in Figure 3 is highly evocative of this condition, as exemplified by the *"what is next?"* statement and *lit fuse* imagery. It is also supported by focus group commentary: *"It feels too soon, I am mourning what we did before".* Juxtaposition is perceived between personal and social identity. In Firm A social identity is strong: *"…it made you feel like you belonged; proud, confident and excited"* By contrast, identification with Firm-JV is currently perceived as an embarrassment: *"Communication gaffs are becoming legendary now… it's embarrassing."*

4. Discussion of Findings

As "*cornerstones of understanding"* (Remenyi 2005, p138) stories create knowledge and in this study, their nuanced identification is revelatory of a joint venture firm held in tension. The approved rhetoric for change delivered through authorised texts such as new branding and physical demonstration through office aesthetics, is observed to be in counterpoint to the internal rhetoric proliferated by actors across their physical, textual, linguistic and visual dialogue.

Tension between competing logic is emergent (Brown, Ainsworth and Grant 2012). Individual and collective stories are striking for their emotion-evoking pathos: informed by history, established values and norms, and imbued with nostalgia. This contrasts with the logos or logic focussed rhetoric which underpins the new espoused organisational narrative, as demonstrated in functional aesthetics and attempts at acculturation. The organisational story has become dissonant from both individual and the socially constructed collective narrative of the actors within.

Actors reveal lives strongly defined by the corporate lived self. This was a positive, aspirational experience pre-joint venture as this life-world afforded a distinctive personality, strong values and visionary leadership. A sense of loss and concern for continuity is evident with the preservation of symbols of the former brand constituting a shared code of member-to-member communication, sustaining value homophily, behaviours and narrative memorialisation (Bell 2012). Problems are identified in terms of narrative relevancy, future orientation, and core competency as encapsulated in the brand and its actor ambassadors. It is often assumed that reactions to market conditions such as joint ventures cause creative destruction (Schumpeter 1942), but there remains a danger that competences which are core but hard to articulate are in fact unintentionally destroyed.

4.1 Methodological Benefits and the Contribution of STRIKE

The adoption of an inventive, integrated combination of data collection and analysis techniques allows the *semantic layer* to become more transparent. Increasingly granular understanding of how meanings are constructed, maintained and used by organisational actors becomes possible. In particular, STRIKE evaluation elucidates the importance of human interaction with the physical as well as the social environment to create meaning.

Authenticity is supported by reflexive research practices and the transparency of approaches such as STRIKE, whilst the creative range of techniques employed optimises the potential for participant engagement to encourage a depth, breadth and richness of data. Using a triangulation matrix, emergent narratives can be traced across methods to provide corroboration. This is equally utile for identifying points of dissonance as observed between actors as a collective and the narrative vision of the joint venture organisation. This overall methodology reduces the potential for the misinterpretation of narrative (Heje, Baskerville and Venable 2012).

Expansive assessment of a design artefact is *"critical"* (Hevner et al. 2004, p82), and it is argued that STRIKE demonstrates utility, quality and efficacy ex-post, aligning with its ex-ante naturalistic pilot evaluation. Fully combinable with interactive qualitative methods, STRIKE can confirm, negate or explicate findings as part of triangulation. Its systematic approach to data analysis and assessment mitigates criticisms of methodological rigour in observational research and affords standardisation potential appropriate for verification and longitudinal studies, with the potential to aid diagnosis and prescription regarding issues identified.

It is argued therefore that STRIKE presents particular value for bridging the frequent dissonance between theory and practice, with usability for researcher and practitioner. For an audience, the highly communicable and visual style allows *"the reader into the process"* (Dickie 2003, p51) of interpretation and analysis. Research will be extended to develop cross-case analysis and assess capability to perform in a variety of contextual circumstances.

5. Conclusions

This paper foregrounds the use of innovative multi-method, multi-layered narrative inquiry to surface and analyse the human impact of transformational change, affording a holistic perspective of the organisational cultural DNA. Narrative serves a function of identity construction (Riessman 2008) and moreover, identity preservation or memorialisation for the actors within: a developing disconnect between the authorised corporate and lived experience of narrative is richly interpreted. Findings also signpost the danger of competence destroying change, extending the joint venture research of Gilmore and Seitchik (2001).

The research supports the pictorial turn (Mitchell 2005) as a counterpoint to the widely recognised linguistic turn in business and management research: combining synchronic and diachronic elements of story to provide new means of seeing (Bell 2012), both for researcher and audience. STRIKE elucidates narrative from an original physical and visual perspective from which emotional nuances and underlying issues may be surfaced. This responds to the call for *"added diversity"* (Riessman 2008, p200) in the developing field of narrative methodology. The researched, the researcher and the research audience are all considered narrators. Utilisation of an overall approach encapsulating contextualised physical, textual, linguistic and visual dialogue can enhance authenticity of representation across this tripartite, hermeneutic circle of interpretation.

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