



Review

A post-social conceptual framework for exploring object narratives in sport organisations



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ABSTRACT

In this article we propose a theoretical framework for narrative analysis that gives voice to objects in sport organisations. Despite considerable interest in the symbolic and mnemonic potency of some sporting objects – most notably memorabilia – many organisational objects go unnoticed, whilst little attention has been paid to methods for gathering stories from inanimate objects. We suggest that material objects in sport organisations participate in narrative production and therefore constitute a rich investigative site. We adopt a post-social approach to narrative methodology where objects are recognised as non-human actors in organisational sense-making, not as narrative repositories that ‘contain’ stories and memories. A three-domain research framework is developed recommending an approach to eliciting an object narrative within a sport organisation. First, object materiality exposes the significant networks of forces, materials and people – and therefore episodes and actors – that engage with and through objects. Second, since people and objects are enmeshed in sequenced, workplace activities, object practice allows organisational agents to define what stories objects can tell whilst objects reciprocally bound the scope of human performance. Third, object biography provides a strategy to map the connections and transitions that occur over the lifecourse of an object, which reveals a changing web of organisational relations.

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1. Introduction

Visiting any sporting organisation means encountering a multitude of objects. Some seem innocuous like furniture and coffee mugs, while others leap to attention, such as trophies, flags, and logos. Some items represent sporting objects of intuitive meaning, defined by the heavy hand of post-glory narrative (Borish & Phillips, 2012). Material objects are socio-cultural carriers of value, beliefs and attitudes, yet remain an underdeveloped source of data in organisational analysis (Borish & Phillips, 2012). This article seeks to redress the gap identified by Borish and Phillips (2012) by proposing that objects participate in narrative production within sporting organisations. The discussion draws upon a post-social theoretical frame to inform narrative methodology within a sport context. A post-social view removes the human actor from the pivot-point of analysis and recognises the impact of a range of non-human actors. It pursues an “analytical break” from dualistic thinking where the social and object worlds are perceived as independent (Contractor, Monge & Leonardi, 2011, p. 141).

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Under a post-social paradigm, material objects receive attention alongside human actors. As Albers (1961, p. 30) commented, “We often look for the underlying meaning of things while the thing itself is the meaning.”

In organisational narrative research, objects are understood to confer meaning to action, augment the story, and sometimes offer sites for triangulation (e.g. Boje, 2001; Czarniawska, 2011; Gabriel, 2004; Hardy, Lawrence, & Grant, 2005; Nissley & Casey, 2002; Rowlinson, Booth, Clark, Delahaye, & Procter, 2010; Sheridan & Chamberlain, 2011). This article proposes that objects can be more than accessories to a narrative. It introduces a methodological stance in sport management narrative analysis privileging a post-social orientation, where objects are active agents in narrative production. The article does not prescribe method – the techniques employed by researchers, including data collection and analysis – but discusses methodology, “the analysis of the assumptions that lie behind the methods” (Bryman, 2008, p. 161). It outlines a conceptual framework for use as an organising and analytical tool (Shields & Rangarajan, 2013). The framework comprises theory, assumptions and domains informing an approach to object narrative research, focussing on the members or stakeholders associated with sport organisations, the latter defined as goal directed, structured and bounded social entities involved in the sport industry (Slack & Parent, 2006).

This article centres upon the way objects co-construct meaning with their users through narratives. A post-social approach proposes that people work with and on objects, and objects work with and on people. The post-social lens therefore aligns with epistemological constructivism where organisational sensemaking constitutes a construction rather than an objective perception of reality (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002). Object narratives allow for the possibility that non-human actors also participate in sensemaking.

Within narratives, objects should be seen as *agents*, or entities with the capacity to *do* something; to make some difference (Latour, 2007) by telling stories and actively participating in narrative construction. Implying that an object can ‘act’ and ‘talk’ does not mean that they possess physical intentionality. A football, for example, does not kick itself any more than a keyboard can type. However, post-social theory identifies objects as more than passive accoutrements. A keyboard might not type, but it ‘affords’ typing (Harré, 2002), just as a football enables a unique choreography of physical activity.

A post-social position acknowledges that purposeful, goal-orientated behaviour within organisations affects, and is affected by, material objects (Parmiggiani & Mikalsen, 2013). Of course, an object cannot literally ‘talk’ or reveal an objective organisational truth. As Harman (2002, 2011a) observed, objects are not independent from, or directly accessible to us, yet “. . . not because of a specifically *human* failure to reach them” (Harman, 2011b, p. 172). Instead, “. . . relations *in general* fail to gasp their relata” (Harman, 2011b, p. 172). The proposed framework draws two critical implications from Harman’s position. First, it assumes that objects are more than vessels for human experiences. Second, it expects that object narratives can reveal a social rather than an independent ‘reality’. The proposed framework addresses three domains. First, *object materiality* asks what the physical constitution of objects implies? Second, *object practice* asks what is revealed through the intra- and inter-action of objects and people during use? Third, *object biography* asks what is communicated through the life stories of objects via narratives?

The following five sections outline a framework for collecting object narratives within sport management research. Section two, next, foreshadows the post-social theoretical assumptions relevant to object narratives. Section three locates object narratives within sport management research. Section four examines the post-social approach within organisational studies and proposes a three domain framework for collecting data and interpreting objects in narratives: object materiality, object practices, and object biography. The fifth section highlights some methodological considerations relevant to the proposed conceptual framework, while the sixth section summarises and considers the implications for theory and object-narrative practice for sport organisational research.

2. Theoretical foundations: why object narratives?

This section addresses why object narratives are important sport management research methodology, in so doing introducing several pivotal post-social premises. This work reflects the appetite for more diverse methodological and theoretical perspectives in sport management research, reflecting the transition towards polyphonic and individually contextualised data (McGarry, 2010). Since narratives comprise structured, personal accounts of situations, people, places, and artefacts (Bruner, 1986; Polkinghorne, 1988), their analysis can provide researchers with an understanding of how organisational members share knowledge, solve problems, internalise goals, and coordinate action (Garund, Dunbar, & Bartel, 2010). Narrative inquiry provides a counterweight to the dominance of positivistic design (Smith & Sparkes, 2009), giving greater emphasis to the “temporal, emotional, contextual, and situated nature” of storied lives (Smith, 2010, p. 88). Visual and tactile data can yield “more vivid and more lucid” interpretations of the personal meanings embedded in physical culture (Phoenix, 2010, p. 94).

A first premise declares that object narratives provide a research tool for better understanding how sensemaking transpires (Bruner, 1991; Polkinghorne, 1988). Through ‘sensemaking’, organisational members are able to “use the raw materials of narrative to construct new ‘organizational sense’” (Fleming, 2001, p. 34). Sensemaking research has made use of the personal narrative to uncover the attitudes, context, and values of respondents through their stories (Oliver, 1998). According to Rinehart (2005), personal narratives include a focus on the self within a value-laden context, in-so-doing accepting the dialogical and personal voice as sovereign over the researcher’s imported interpretations. Similarly, Smith and Sparkes (2009) emphasised the relational, personal, social, contextual, temporal, and meaning-making dimensions of storied observations.

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