



The dynamic nature of social accounts: An examination of how interpretive processes impact on account effectiveness[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Social accounts are a powerful tool in influencing the behavior of organizational members during major change. Examination of their effectiveness has largely focused on the design of accounts to influence behavioral and affective responses. However, when used in real life practice, more individualized, interpretive and agentic responses to social accounts have been found to influence effectiveness. Using an example of large-scale organizational change, moving from one hospital facility to another, we explore the dynamic and contextual interpretation of social accounts over time. Our findings expand social account theory by examining how potentially successful change communications are derailed by the relevance of the account in relation to an individual's past, by the individuals' ability to express agency and by temporality; how over time, lived experience can alter the perceived truthfulness of an account and alter its potency.

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1. Introduction

Organizational theory tells us that effective change can be achieved by altering the mind set of organizational members so that their behaviors align with organizational goals and routines (Rouleau, 2005). Social accounts¹ are a particularly effective way of achieving this change (Cobb & Wooten, 1998; Shaw, Wild, & Colquitt, 2003; Tucker, Yeow, & Viki, 2013), in seeking to alter and contradict any initial response derived from rumor or speculation, and transform behavior to the advantage of the organization. Providers of social accounts consciously use this communication tool to explain, to control (Cobb, Stephens, & Watson, 2001), or to change and mitigate behaviors which might undermine

change efforts (Rousseau & Tijoriwala, 1999). The social account specifically explains the actions of decision-makers, with the strategic aim of influencing the employment experience of organizational members (Bies, 1987; Cobb & Wooten, 1998; Folger & Cropanzano, 2001; Shaw et al., 2003). In giving a social account, the employer intentionally directs employee understanding towards a politically driven direction (Cobb et al., 2001). The aim is to create alignment between account giver and receiver (Cobb & Wooten, 1998:75), with the giver influencing the receiver's affective reactions and behavior (Bies, 1987; De Cremer, van Dijk, & Pilluda, 2010; Folger & Cropanzano, 2001).

Research has found that what information the account needs to contain (Bies, 1987; Cobb & Wooten, 1998; Frey & Cobb, 2010), and what the ideal recipient characteristics would be (Van Dijke & De Cremer, 2011) are important for accounts to successfully achieve their intended strategic outcome and change employee view-points. Theory is much less developed when we consider how social accounts get interpreted, specifically; the *recipient's active role* in this process and the influence of *time and context*. An issue we aim to address.

In social accounts literature it is often assumed that only top-down communications have the power to shape change, often conveniently separating the content of a social account from more complex human aspects of change. Social accounts are unlike other forms of communication because they are specifically given by the employer (often a

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¹ In the context of this study 'social accounts' differ from 'social accounting', which relates to the reporting and auditing of an organization's economic actions under the guise of corporate social responsibility, in that they represent explanations for organizational decisions which impact organizational members and their employment experience. The social account literature referred to in this paper focuses on the relationship between account givers and receivers within the organizational context.

manager) to the employee for the purpose of achieving a specific strategic outcome (i.e. reframing a change, putting a positive spin on the consequences of an action, or so attempting to legitimize an action by appealing to a shared goal valued by everyone). Hence, achievement of the desired strategic outcome (in relation to this initial intent) is integral to this form of communication.

We know from theories which take a more processual view of communication that members actively interpret information from a variety of sources, and in a variety of ways (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010; Rouleau, 2005), reinterpreting available information by drawing on the messy intertwining 'of time, agency, structure, context and emergence and development' (Pettigrew, 1997:337). The complexity of this process, within social account theory has largely been ignored.

In our attempt to remedy this theoretical gap we draw on theories of organizational storytelling (Boje, 1991; Gabriel, 2000), sensemaking (Abolafia, 2010; Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Weick, 1995) and narratives (Brown & Rhodes, 2005; Dailey & Browning, 2014); these theories provide insights into how members interpret information and pay attention to how the meanings can evolve, over time and across contexts. Unlike social accounts literature, these theories do not focus on the manufactured nature of the communication; whether processes of interpretation impact on the achievement of a desired strategic intent (for example getting staff to change their working practices). So here we are studying social accounts as specific examples of explanations, constructed with the purpose of manipulating others, with strategic intent and for political gain. By taking into account more processual perspectives, and considering how social accounts evolve and interact with the context within which they are presented, we aim to build a more comprehensive theory of how to design the 'perfect account,' in terms of getting that strategic outcome.

Social accounts literature is criticized for its neglect of contextual factors (Frey & Cobb, 2010; Tucker et al., 2013), especially when discussing the behavior of organizational members in context sensitive situations. Traditionally, social accounts have been often studied in laboratory-based experiments, with little consideration of the influence of the organizational landscape. In this paper we address this issue by studying account giving and receiving in a real-life context, over real-time. Taking a longitudinal processual approach we examine why the same account can be both successful and ineffective; examining how the reality of organizational life can impact on strategically intended outcomes. We explore: 1) How are social accounts interpreted? 2) How do they evolve? and 3) How do these processes impact on strategic effectiveness?

2. Interpretation of social accounts

Empirical research has focused on refining the design and delivery of accounts to maximize their likelihood of manipulating strategic outcomes (Cobb & Wooten, 1998; De Cremer et al., 2010; Frey & Cobb, 2010), for example by quelling anger (Bies, 1987, Shapiro 1991), or as an opportunity for impression management (Braaten, Cody, & DeTienne, 1993). The focus has been firmly on content (Bies, 1987; Cobb & Wooten, 1998; Sitkin & Bies, 1993), attributes (of the account giver in terms of status or expertise) (Frey & Cobb, 2010), style (e.g. specificity (Frey & Cobb, 2010), or apology versus denial (De Cremer et al., 2010; Van Dijke & De Cremer, 2011)). It is acknowledged that individual differences exist, but research has not employed methodological approaches which take into account the real-world context of account giving and receiving; complex situations with numerous, often conflicting, explanations (Cobb & Wooten, 1998). We only found two social account studies which actively sought to consider the recipient's interpretation. Tucker et al. (2013) measure the impact of the perceived content of accounts - rather than their intended design - on trust in management, whilst Van Dijke and De Cremer (2011) found that the recipient's stress responses to uncertainty had a moderating effect on effectiveness.

We propose that the use and effectiveness of social accounts in the real world is somewhat different to the dominant lab-based studies reviewed. Within the political context of organizations, various decisions and actions need accounting for. Take for example, a senior manager giving an explanation (account) for a decision to close down a department. The recipient would know the account giver and the decision to close the department would be complex - likely discussed and made in consultation with other members. The explanation given will likely influence behavior and attitudes for a prolonged period, as the implications of the decision for the recipient unfold. In each example we studied, the purpose of providing an explanation was to intentionally influence the reaction and associated behavior of organizational members. In some cases the strategic intent was to mitigate negative reactions, in others it was to generate support, but in all cases it was purposeful and deliberate, and given with the achievement of a specific strategic outcome in mind.

Research on social accounts has largely adopted a paradigm focused on designing explanations which are delivered by a single account giver (often a figure of authority) to a passive recipient (e.g. Bies, 1987). Knowing that there will be variation in recipients is little practical use when giving accounts to a large collective, diverse group. Although, originally focused on dyadic explanations, recent research has considered the accounts of individuals, as representatives, who explain the actions of the organization to others (for example, the announcement of a merger (e.g. Tucker et al., 2013), or downsizing (e.g. Brockner, Dewitt, Grover, & Reed, 1990). These studies still do not elaborate on how recipients came to these interpretations. Rousseau and Tijoriwala (1999) delve more by demonstrating that account recipients do actively process information and decide whether an account is accepted. Using motivated reasoning the authors explain that recipients form explanations, which do not always conform to those desired by management, with social accounts influenced by co-workers and relationships with the organization (Rousseau & Tijoriwala, 1999).

Drawing on communication literature that focuses on interpretative processes (rather than strategic effectiveness), we see the importance of agency in determining responses to management actions (Mantere, 2008) and how individuals (usually middle managers) subjectively shape and change messages (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Rouleau, 2005). This body of work portrays account recipients as agents, who are capable of reflecting on, transforming and influencing cues given by senior managers and that this process may impact on an accounts' effectiveness. Within this work employees are not merely passive recipients of instructions and influences of those who seek to guide or manipulate them, but are active in making their own deliberations (Mantere, 2008).

Nearly twenty years ago, Pettigrew (1997:337) argued that "in their theorizing and empiricism most social scientists do not appear to have given much time to time. For many, social sciences are still an exercise in comparative statics". This appears the case in social accounts literature. Cobb et al. (2001) theorize that issues of power may determine if an account will have a lasting impact, and their hermeneutic analysis of an anti-union video tape shows how managers used social accounts to attempt to produce a sustained shift in social reality, but they do not discuss how the account is interpreted by employees over time. To explore this issue we draw on literature that takes a more narrative, interpretative and processual view of communication (Dailey & Browning, 2014; Jarzabkowski, Sillince, & Shaw, 2010). Like social accounts, within this wider literature, there is concern with the functions of organizational communication (i.e. control) (Dailey & Browning, 2014). However, social accounts are uniquely concerned with the conscious intentional, giving of communications, in order to achieve a set strategic outcome, so unlike other approaches the effectiveness of social accounts is of paramount interest. This concern with effectiveness has led to a more singular focus on the content of an account. So we sought to theoretically add more processual and more agentic views of account giving and receiving (see Cornelissen & Durand, 2012); how social accounts evolve

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