



Inquiring into arresting moments over time: Towards an understanding of stability within change



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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to contribute to current knowledge about special moments – what is referred to as “arresting moments” – when something unexpected spontaneously occurs, by exploring how such moments are part of a dialogic flow taking place over time. Based on a collaborative study that has been going on for 15 years and Bakhtin’s work on dialogic forces, the paper contributes with a conceptualization of “stability within change,” which shows how arresting moments not only create newness but also a sense of stability; a strong feeling of knowing how to meet the future and thereby how to move on here and now. Thus, it is not a question of stability or change, but rather an intertwined manifold of opposing forces of stability within change. Implications for practice and research are elaborated upon.

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1. Introduction

When we start to inquire into the living character of the present moment, it is possible to notice how no two moments are the same. Contrary to what is often taken for granted in studies of organization, there is a difference between moments as they unfold (Hernes, Simpson, & Söderlund, 2013). One strand of research that has contributed to an understanding of how the present matters is the literature on “arresting moments” (Shotter & Katz, 1999). Arresting moments have been conceptualized as one-off special moments where “something utterly extraordinary, utterly new and unique, spontaneously occurs” (Shotter & Katz, 1999; p. 88). These are moments when people all of a sudden can make new connections, look upon troublesome issues in new ways, or unexpectedly find out how to engage with some current concerns. To continue to inquire into the generative possibilities of such arresting moments is of significance because “[a]s much as organizations are about systems, material artefacts, and technologies, they are also about living moments where reality gets to be lived, defined, changed or continued” (Hernes, 2014; p. 82).

The aim of this paper is to contribute to current knowledge on arresting moments and to highlight that a greater understanding of

arresting moments can offer novel insights into organization and management studies. Towards that aim, we explore how arresting moments are part of a dialogic flow taking place over time. While current literature has largely studied arresting moments as singular events, we investigate how these special moments are part of a larger context of on-going conversations involving several arresting moments. Hence, our focus is not primarily on arresting moments per se, but rather the relationship between different arresting moments as they unfold over time.

To do this we draw upon a collaborative study that Catherine Smith (a pseudonym), one of the co-authors of this paper, and Marjorie Thomas (a pseudonym), the CEO of a French logistics company, have carried out during the last 15 years. During their collaboration they experienced several arresting moments together, which gives us an unusual opportunity to learn more about the experience of encountering different arresting moments over time. We elaborate on these moments using Bakhtin’s (1984, 1986) work on dialogic forces: what he refers to as centripetal and centrifugal forces. Centripetal forces create stability; centrifugal forces impose novelty. Importantly, these forces do not end up in some sort of equilibrium because there is an on-going interplay between them.

Although current studies have found that arresting moments are special moments where novelty occurs, the contribution of studying arresting moments over time is the acknowledgement of how the lived experience of such moments can be understood as a simultaneous process of creating novelty and stability. Through the conceptualization of what we call “stability within change,” we

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illustrate that arresting moments not only create newness but also a sense of stability; a strong feeling of knowing how to meet the future and thereby how to move on here and now. Thus, it is not a question of stability or change, but rather an intertwined manifold of opposing forces of stability within change.

This finding contributes to current discussions about the need to overcome the dichotomy between stability and change in organization studies. This dichotomized view has been questioned because it has led to a situation where “there is a lack of explanation of the underlying dynamics of both stability and novelty in organizational becoming” (Hussenot & Missionier, 2016, p. 524). Consequently, there have been calls to overcome this dichotomized view because organizational life is characterized by an “on-going tension and contestation between and immanent tendency towards repetition and a centrifugal drive towards novelty and otherness” (Chia, 2003; p. 130).

This paper is structured as follows. We first introduce current literature on arresting moments. We then present Bakhtin’s (1986) work on dialogic forces. From that follows a section on the collaborative and longitudinal methodology that underpins this research and a field account that offers a greater understanding of how arresting moments can unfold over time. After a discussion section, we close our paper with a conclusion and note implications for practice and research.

2. Arresting moments

Not only in organization and management research, but also in everyday life we generally do not pay attention to the present moment and how it unfolds into the yet-to-come. But sometimes, something happens, such as an unexpected question or comment which makes us perceive things differently. Many of us have experienced such enriching moments when it feels as if everything stops for a while because we are so “moved” by what we hear/feel/see that we can see things anew. During these times we have no option but to pay attention to what is happening in the here and now. These kinds of moments have been acknowledged in the literature as “arresting moments” (Shotter & Katz, 1999) or “striking moments.” Shotter (2008a, p. 131) suggested that they are significant because “in our lived experience of them, they unfold in such a way as to accommodate novelty or to resolve a difficulty.” These moments “also arrest us, and produce a delay between the moment of perception and the moment of action. And in that moment of delay, they can produce a special kind of experience where, seemingly, everything-of-relevance is present to us all-at-once” (Shotter, 2008a; p. 144).

When we experience arresting moments they give us a feeling of presence – of co-being – in the here and now. Bakhtin (1993) referred to these moments as “once-occurrent events of being” and he suggested they are essential for the capacity of creating the feeling of an “us.” Moreover, the lived experience of such co-being makes it possible to feel a kind of “open wholeness” in the moment (Bakhtin, 1993). Inherent in these moments are “vitality effects” that emerge as the moment unfolds and these vitality effects can bring about change for people experiencing them, which can be explained as “shared feeling voyages” (Stern, 2004; p. 172). They are like a transformational force that touches those present; a unique transformation co-created among people. These moments can thereby create new resources and new possibilities among those who are present.

In this profound way of creating novelty, arresting moments can help us to notice that which is otherwise taken for granted. Greig, Gilmore, Patrick, and Beech (2012, p. 3) in their study about relational research methods, found how the unfolding of an arresting moment can help people notice something new in their everyday work practice: “seemingly new possibilities for future

practice may suddenly appear visible to them.” Arresting moments can thereby be understood as important in the process of constructing new knowledge “as they bring the background, taken-for-granted aspects of practice to the fore” (Greig et al., 2012; p. 13). It is in such temporal breakdowns that we can become aware and think differently of everyday mundane activities (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011).

In summarizing his understanding of arresting moments, Shotter (2008a) noted that even though these moments are often short-lived there is still a story that unfolds – a directly experienced story. That is why such moments are memorable and thereby long-lived in that they can be recalled again and again: “Indeed, it is just this quality of such moments – that they can be recalled time and time again and are amenable to innumerable verbal formulation” that make these moments special (Shotter, 2008a; p. 130). Cunliffe (2001) also emphasized the enduring quality of these moments since they can produce commitments to the practical flow of living. What Shotter (2008a) and Cunliffe (2001) both point towards is a temporal dimension; an arresting moment does not only have significance for us in the moment as it unfolds, but also over time. However, a temporal perspective, in which arresting moments are explored as a “temporal relationality” (Ericson, 2014) over time has not been explored in the current literature on arresting moments. While existing literature has contributed greatly to the understanding of how an arresting moment can be initiated and what it can do in the present, the understanding of what it means to experience several arresting moments together over time is still to be explored. We will therefore continue to develop a framework that helps to locate arresting moments in an on-going conversational flow.

3. Dialogic forces and unfinalizability

The Russian philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975) has been acknowledged in organization studies for his work on dialogue (e.g., Belova, King, & Sliwa, 2008). Central to Bakhtin’s view on dialogue is that when two or more people meet in a dialogic moment, something unique is created: a collective life pointing towards the future in its own distinctive way. This collective, yet never totally shared, life is played out through people’s offering of each other’s unique otherness – “the surplus of seeing” – to each other. Bakhtin (1990, pp. 22–23) explains it as when I am with someone, at any given time, in any given place:

our concrete, actually experienced horizons do not coincide. For at each given moment, regardless of the position and the proximity to me of this other human being whom I am contemplating, I shall always see and know something that he, from his place outside and over against me, cannot see himself: parts of his body that are inaccessible to his own gaze (his head, his face and its expression), the whole world behind his back, and a whole series of objects and relations, to which in any of our mutual relations are accessible to me but not to him. As we gaze at each other, two different worlds are reflected in the pupils of our eyes.

Thus, these different worlds and the excess of seeing, knowing, feeling, and hearing in relation to the other are founded in the uniqueness of our positions. It is because of this uniqueness – and our excess of seeing – that we need each other for a richer understanding of the world.

Since Bakhtin emphasizes that dialogue is about developing and sharing differences between people, he steers away from an idealized view of dialogue as a specific kind of harmonious communication that can be described as the opposite to monologue (Holquist, 2002). Instead, he understands dialogue to be an on-going interplay between people’s otherness to each

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