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'Changing the Course of a Super Tanker': A Study of Senior and Junior Managers' Enactments of a Transition Narrative

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how a mnemonic community of a senior and junior generation of frontline managers, respectively with first-hand and second-hand memories of the organizational past, enact a shared historical transition narrative as part of their everyday practice of change management in a Scandinavian telecommunications company. The study shows the importance of actors' individual trajectories and generational memberships for the understanding of collective memory in organizations. Based on the construct narrative habitus, the paper offers, as its primary theoretical contribution, a practice-theoretical framework for the study of mnemonic socialization and cross-generational dynamics of organizational mnemonic communities.

MAD statement

This article aims to Make A Difference (MAD) by providing an analysis of junior and senior managers' use of a historical transition narrative during temporally prolonged organizational change. The article offers new perspectives on the use of historical narratives and collective memory to manage change by showing that junior and senior generations of managers are habitually dispositioned to enact shared narratives in different ways. While extant research has shown collective memory to be an effective change management tool, our analysis draws attention to cross–generational dynamics as a particularly influential yet overlooked factor in shaping managerial enactments of shared historical narratives.

Introduction

'There should be no doubt regarding the importance to any organization of its ability to identify where it needs to be in the future, and how to manage the changes required getting there' (Todnem By, 2005, p. 369). As this statement illustrates, the management of change has long been explicitly recognized as a highly important managerial skill (Burnes,

2011) while the inescapable relationship of change to time and temporality has been a more implicit feature (Dawson, 2014; Karlsen, 2023; Noss, 2002; Van de Ven & Poole, 2005). However, since the turn of the millennium, organizational studies have increasingly embraced the temporal lens as a workable and conceivable way of understanding processes of organizational change (Koll & Ernst, 2022; Koll & Jensen, 2023). In particular, the relationship of the past to processes of organizational change has received increasing attention (Reinecke et al., 2020; Suddaby & Foster, 2017). The research stream known as the 'uses of the past' approach concerned with 'how organizational actors … produce and use history for purposes in the present' (Wadhwani et al., 2018, p. 1664) has been particularly important in demonstrating how actors' interpretations of the past shape their perception of what is at stake in the present and of possible strategic routes to the future (e.g. Bansal et al., 2022; Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013; Suddaby et al., 2023). A salient construct in this line of work has been 'rhetorical history', which is defined as the 'strategic use of the past as a persuasive strategy to manage key stakeholders of the firm' (Suddaby et al., 2010, p. 157). Studies of rhetorical history have drawn attention to the strategic value of historical narratives to organizations (Wadhwani et al., 2018) and 'the ability of its managers to skilfully develop historical narratives that create a strategic advantage' by producing or adapting to change (Foster et al., 2017, p. 1176). In this paper, we argue that the shown importance of the past to organizations as a resource for managing strategic change by embedding historical narratives into an organization's collective memory (Wadhwani et al., 2018) warrants more critical examination of the processes through which historical narratives may or may not become collective memory (Ravasi et al., 2019). Given the emphasis of current literature on the strategic dimension of collective memory, current literature may entice us to think about the collective memory of an organization as something that can be managed solely through strategic, skilful persuasion. Consequently, little attention has been given to the more emergent and habitual ways in which historical narratives become embedded into organizational memory through the everyday practices of organizational actors (Koll & Jensen, 2020; Thomassen & Ødegård, 2022; Wadhwani et al., 2018). Despite a burgeoning scholarly interest in organizational memory (Foroughi et al., 2020; Rowlinson et al., 2010), we still lack further studies of how organizational actors remember their pasts as members of groups, also known as mnemonic communities (Misztal, 2003; Zerubavel, 1996), – for example, on how mnemonic communities are influenced by cross-generational dynamics (Coraiola et al., 2023). As new hires enter a firm and others retire, or move on to other firms, the trajectories of actors within any organization rarely align with one another. It follows that an organization's past will always be known by some actors through first-hand memories and by other actors through second-hand memories that are passed down from senior to junior generations. Cross-generational dynamics are thus an important aspect for understanding the use of historical narratives and the collective memory of mnemonic communities in organizations.

In this paper, we address this research gap by adding to the uses of the past research stream a study of everyday use of historical narratives by a cross-generational mnemonic community of frontline managers in the operations department of a Scandinavian telecommunications company, Telco. The study is based on interviews with frontline managers, their immediate superior, and subordinates, conducted from 2016 to 2018 during temporally extended organizational change in the wake of the company's privatization in the early 1990s. The group of frontline managers consisted of a senior generation who had served with the company for multiple decades, thus having first-hand memories of the

organization's pre-privatization era, and a junior generation who were new to the management role or to the company altogether, thus having only second-hand memories of this era. Our study showed how the use of a shared narrative of a prolonged transition phase, involving the persistent presence of the past in the present, became a significant part of managerial practice, both as a way to make sense of the current state of affairs, and as a way of dealing with day-to-day problems related to change implementation. However, while the narrative of prolonged transition was shared by junior and senior managers, we noticed that junior managers generally viewed the past in a negative light altogether, whereas senior managers were more inclined to position themselves in a more pragmatic role, trying to mediate between the past and the demands of the present (see also Ernst & Koll, 2024; Koll & Jensen, 2020).

This emergent pattern of distinction led us to investigate a) How senior and junior managers, respectively, with first-hand and second-hand memories of the organizational past, enacted a shared narrative of prolonged transition in their practice of change management; and b) how their enactment of the shared narrative was influenced by their respective trajectories in the organization.

In order to increase our understanding of the cross-generational dynamics of collective memory, we draw on theories of social memory (Misztal, 2003; Olick & Robbins, 1998; Zerubavel, 1996) and base our theoretical framework on two important assumptions. First, we adopt Feldman and Feldman's (2006) reconceptualization of collective memory into *social practices of remembering* enacted by members of mnemonic communities in specific cultural and historical contexts (Feldman & Feldman, 2006; Olick, 1999). Second, we adopt the concept *mnemonic socialization* (Misztal, 2003; Zerubavel, 1996), which has been defined as 'the acquisition of collective memory as one's own' (Ravasi et al., 2019, p. 1525). The concept implies that what organizational actors remember includes more than what they have personally experienced. Mnemonic socialization connects practices of remembering to processes of socialization (Misztal, 2003; Zerubavel, 1996), through which narratives – and social rules attached to their appropriation – are passed down from generation to generation (Coraiola et al., 2021; Eyerman & Turner, 1998). In order to shed light on both actors' subjective experience of remembering and the social and historical context in which remembering takes place, we extend the concepts of remembering as practice and mnemonic socialization with the construct *narrative habitus* (Ernst & Jensen Schleiter, 2021; Fleetwood, 2016; Frank, 2010; Koll & Jensen, 2023), which draws together Bourdieu's (1990) concept of habitus with a perspective on narratives as socially and historically embedded (Cunliffe et al., 2004; Ricoeur, 1980).

Our paper is structured as follows: Next, we explain the guiding assumptions of the uses of the past literature and the research gap we are addressing. Then, we unfold our theoretical framework and methodological approach before turning to the results of our study. Lastly, following a discussion of our findings, we round off our paper with a conclusion.

Literature Review: The use of Historical Narratives to Manage Collective Memory

Since the emergence of a 'historic turn' (Clark & Rowlinson, 2004) in organizational scholarship, a growing number of studies have begun to explore how history is used to manage processes of strategic change (Koll, 2021; Suddaby et al., 2022; Suddaby &

Foster, 2017). The guiding assumptions of this line of work can be traced to a special issue of *Journal of Organizational Change management* (Carroll, 2002) in which the notion of the past as a resource pool that can be appropriated to purposefully shape organizational futures was introduced. A significant contribution to this issue was Gioia et al.'s (2002) argument that change, as a prospective, future-oriented process, is often predicated on the ability of an organization to intentionally revise its history, and to align its past with the way in which it sees itself in the present, and how it wants to see itself in the future. Adding to this, Ooi (2002, p. 607) argued that revisions of organizational history are seldomly aimed at presenting 'facts'; rather, they are used 'to persuade and convince audiences' and, thereby, strategically mobilize various stakeholders in the organization. In a more recent study, Brunninge (2009) showed how managers in four different Swedish companies used reconstructions of history to legitimize or delegitimize possible strategic routes to the future. The study concludes that the purposeful use of history can be a powerful tool for managers to influence processes of strategic change. Subsequently, a relatively large body of work, situated under the labels of uses of the past and rhetorical history, has shown how history can be selectively and strategically deployed by managers to fit their strategic agendas for change or continuity in the present and future (Suddaby et al., 2022; Wadhwani et al., 2018). Included in this body of work are multiple studies focusing on the interpretive agency and skills of managers to leverage historical narratives (e.g. Hamilton & D'Ippolito, 2022; Maclean et al., 2014; Ravasi & Phillips, 2011; Suddaby & Foster, 2017; Ybema, 2014). In general, these studies have emphasized the power and skill of managers in controlling the historical narrative and persuading their audiences (Lubinski, 2018). In this sense, a considerable amount of this literature has treated organizational memory as a manageable resource, implying that what an organization remembers or forgets to a large degree is decided by management's mastery of rhetorical history.

According to theories of social memory, however, there are other factors to consider when trying to understand the dynamics of organizational remembering. In particular, these theories point to the links between collective memory and processes of mnemonic socialization, where collective memory refers to 'the shared interpretations of the past held by a social entity' (Suddaby et al., 2022, p. 6), i.e. the mnemonic community. While history has a clear author and is the product of purposeful looking back at the past from the present, collective memory is emergent, has no clear author and evolves in unpredictable and uncertain ways, (Coraiola et al., 2021). Contextual factors, such as the traditions and beliefs of a mnemonic community (i.e. the group, the workplace), or interactions between generations (Coraiola et al., 2023), thus play an important part in shaping what is remembered and forgotten (Misztal, 2003; Zerubavel, 1996). However, the heavy emphasis on change leaders' strategic use of history has tended to push other important dimensions of mnemonic socialization, such as social and historical context and actors' individual trajectories, into the background (Anteby & Molnar, 2012; Koll & Jensen, 2020; Lubinski, 2018). In other words, little attention has been devoted by the uses of the past literature to how actors' use of history is enabled and constrained by contextual factors, including cross-generational dynamics (Coraiola et al., 2023), embedded in the social practices in which the actors are socialized and invested (Lubinski, 2018).

By adopting a practice-based approach to remembering (Bourdieu, 1990; Feldman & Feldman, 2006) coupled with the construct narrative habitus (Koll & Jensen, 2023), we

extend the concepts of remembering and mnemonic socialization as we aim to put forward a more contextualized account of how shared interpretations of the past are enacted in the everyday practices of change managers in cross-generational mnemonic communities. We unfold our theoretical framework below.

Theoretical Framework: Remembering as a Social Practice

Theories of social memory deal specifically with the social aspects of remembering and underscore the extent to which the social environment of actors affects the way in which they remember the past (Rowlinson et al., 2010). Mnemonic socialization adds a normative dimension to practices of remembering by stressing that what is remembered and forgotten by a particular group is a process of social construction anchored around social rules of remembrance that reflect the parts of the past that are considered important to the group at a particular point in time (Zerubavel, 1996). In other words, the common representation of the past held by a mnemonic community is viewed as socially maintained. Accordingly, socialization is central to this maintenance because the strength of the community – that is, its cohesion and collective identity – to a large extent is defined by the agreed-upon representation of the past (Ravasi et al., 2019). Consequently, the ability of actors to acquire past events of a group as if they were part of actors' own past is a prerequisite for attaining group membership and to gain access to the resources of the group (Zerubavel, 1996).

By emphasizing the socially constructed nature of remembering, mnemonic socialization implies that the past is continuously re-interpreted and that much of what actors remember is filtered through processes of interpretation that affect not only the facts actors recall but also the light in which they recall them (Foroughi et al., 2020). Therefore, a given generation of managers might pass down to the next generation both a certain narrative about the past as well as a so-called 'mnemonic lens' through which the narrative is re-interpreted, re-told and re-enacted (Zerubavel, 1996, p. 285). In this sense, the construct of mnemonic socialization directs attention to the interactions through which interested actors acquire, sustain, redirect, or in any way try to influence shared understandings of the past (Foroughi et al., 2020).

According to Misztal (2003), mnemonic socialization provides members of mnemonic communities with dispositions to act that are unique to that group in a particular field of practice at a given point in time. Remembering, thus, assumes a very formative role in sustaining dispositions and practices of mnemonic communities over time. Described as a set of durable, transposable dispositions, and active presence of past socialization, or of the contextual conditions, that apply to specific practices (Bourdieu, 1981), *habitus* extends the concept of mnemonic socialization (Eyerman & Turner, 1998; Misztal, 2003). As a product of past experience, habitus organizes the ways in which individuals see the world and act in it (Bourdieu, 1990). As interested actors participate in a particular practice, or 'play the game', they acquire dispositions that provide them with a sense of place and belonging to a group and a sense of the place of others (Bourdieu, 1985). In other words, habitus can be seen as the internalization of one's position in the field of practice in which one is invested. It follows that *narrative habitus* is the internalization of the narratives pertaining to the field, including the prevailing narrative of the past (Fleetwood, 2016; Koll & Jensen, 2023). The construct narrative habitus emphasizes the central role

of historical narratives in shaping actors' sense of place and belonging and, thus, their collective memory. However, while the use of historical narratives actively shapes actors' remembrance of the past (Adorisio, 2014), the construct of narrative habitus also implies that the use of historical narratives is enabled and constrained by historically acquired dispositions (Frank, 2010; Koll & Jensen, 2023).

In this sense, a narrative habitus-based conceptualization of remembering rests on a relational ontology of the past and a performative approach to memory where memory is viewed as the ongoing enactment of the past (Foroughi et al., 2020). From this follows that we do not understand narratives as just retrospective accounts of past events; rather, they involve active attempts to shape the present and the future (Koll & Jensen, 2020). Yet, while the past on the one hand is performed through narrative practices of remembering and forgetting, the construct of narrative habitus implies a duality of the past by emphasizing on the other hand that such narrative practices are shaped by actors' lived experience and the dispositions acquired through involvement in specific socially and historically embedded practices over time (Koll & Jensen, 2023). Historical context and trajectories, thereby, intrinsically become important dimensions for understanding how practices of organizational remembering are accomplished. As we look specifically to further our understanding of the cross-generational dynamics of organizational mnemonic communities, we adopt Eyerman and Turner's (1998, p. 91) definition of generations as: 'a cohort of persons passing through time who come to share a common habitus, … a function of which is to provide them with a collective memory that serves to integrate the cohort over a finite period of time'. Put differently, what characterizes a generation is their shared habitus and collective memory of certain events that are perceived as central at a given point in time.

Before we explain our approach to data collection and analysis, we begin our method section with a brief outline of the study context. The method section is followed by the results and discussion sections.

Method Section

Study Context

When in 1992 the EU decided to liberalize the telecommunications market and open it up to international competition, the decision was followed almost immediately in the Scandinavian countries by privatization of all former state-owned, state-funded telecommunication companies (Greve & Andersen, 2001; Jordfald & Murhem, 2003). The transition from state-owned monopoly to being owned by shareholders and having to make money in a hypercompetitive international market heralded new organizational imperatives. Favourable terms and conditions of the traditional civil servant employment schemes made way for short-term employment and performance-based salaries. Ways of organizing and managing, which had been done in accordance with the principles of the *Nordic model* – characterized by a regulated workplace, collective bargaining, cooperation at the firm level and a strong presence of trade unions (Jordfald & Murhem, 2003) – were challenged. In Telco, a comprehensive system of performance management was implemented. For example, GPS tracking on all utility vehicles enabled managers to monitor and track the work of technicians, while quantifiable

measurements in the form of so-called KPI's (Key Performance Indicators) were intro-duced to systematically evaluate the performance of individual employees. Frontline managers thus assumed a more interventive and performance-oriented role, and the continual pursuit of productivity-increases and operational efficiency gradually came to permeate day-to-day work in the company. Approximately two years prior to this study, executive management explored the possibility of outsourcing the operations department if performance levels were not raised significantly within four years. The outsourcing threat added pressure on the technicians to submit to the new work culture and on the frontline managers to bring about the desired organizational change and deliver ever-improving performance results (see also Ernst & Koll, 2024; Koll & Ernst, 2022).

Data Collection

The interview data presented here is part of a larger study conducted by the first author between 2016 and 2018. The study included 25 interviews divided between the regional director (3), technicians (6), and frontline managers (16). Of the team of 20 frontline man-agers, 15 were interviewed. Additionally, the study included approximately 185 hours of participant observation and archival studies. The author observed frontline managers in every aspect of their work, including management meetings, team meetings, lunches and breaks. An employee access card allowed the first author to move freely in and out of the department and divide observations across different locations, different week-days and different times of the day. Fieldnotes were taken during observations and written up in more coherent accounts at the end of each day. The archival study included various department documents such as e-mails, performance scorecards, PowerPoints, KPI reports, and meeting minutes.

Our contextual understanding of Telco as a field of practice in which the mnemonic community of frontline managers were invested and socialized, as well as our understand-ing of the company's embeddedness in the wider field of telecommunications in Scandi-navia, rests on the entire data set. Provided by the focus of this article on how senior and junior frontline managers enacted their shared narrative of organizational transition, the analysis presented here is primarily based on the 16 interviews conducted with the front-line managers. However, as outlined above, the interviews did not stand alone as they were complementary to long-term immersion in the field.

At the beginning of each interview, the frontline managers were asked to tell their pro-fessional life stories (Rouleau, 2010) to get an idea of the temporal schemas they used to make sense of their own trajectories. In addition to the biographical element, the inter-views followed a semi-structured template, inspired by the approach outlined by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), to inquire about the actors' experiences of organizational tran-sition. The interviews were conducted in a Scandinavian language, audio recorded and transcribed before relevant parts were translated into English during data analysis.

Data Analysis

Drawing on Saldaña (2015), our primary analysis technique was coding. In the first coding cycle, using an inductive approach, we noticed the frequent use of historical

Table 1. Trajectories of junior and senior managers.

	Years in current position	Years with Telco
Juniors		
Mads	1	6 (former technician)
Thomas	1	11 (former technician)
Søren	1	1
Anders	1	1
Seniors		
Gunvald	22	38 (former technician)
Arne	12	30 (former technician)
Hanne	19	29 (various positions)
Ingvar	19	36 (former technician)
Thorkild	16	39 (former technician)
Karl	10	16 (former technician)

narratives by the managers. Inspired by the literature on uses of the past, we used a second coding cycle to note more systematically all instances of narratively evoking the past. Then, we looked for common denominators between these accounts and identified the contours of a shared interpretation that was constructed as a narrative of a prolonged transition phase and the tension arising as a consequence of the continued separation between the past and the present, narrated as 'back then' and 'now'. The finding of a shared narrative among the managers enabled us to connect the management team to the concept of mnemonic community and the idea of mnemonic socialization. In a third coding cycle, we looked for ways in which the shared narrative of 'back then' and 'now' was enacted; that is, how different managers positioned themselves within the shared narrative, and how the different narrative positionings, according to the managers' own accounts, were performed in their day-to-day practice. Finally, in a fourth coding cycle, we linked the enactments of the shared narrative to the trajectories of each manager. By applying the concept of narrative habitus, we developed an understanding of remembering both as a medium and outcome of the socially and historically configured practice in which the managers were invested. Based on this understanding, a pattern of distinction emerged that showed a connection between the managers' trajectories in the organization and how they enacted the different positions within the shared narrative. Hence, we developed the two analytical categories of 'juniors' and 'seniors' as illustrated in Table 1..

Of the 15 frontline managers that were interviewed, 10 fell into either of the two categories that make up the focal point of our analysis.

Results

A Collective Memory of Change: The Shared Narrative of Seniors and Juniors

In our interviews, the members of the senior generation, whose tenure in Telco reaches all the way back to the pre-privatization days, narrate the transformation in an almost unanimous way. The move from being a state-owned monopoly to being a shareholder-owned competitor introduced a marked temporal separation between the past and the present (repeatedly narrated as 'back then' and 'now'). Gunvald's formulation in the excerpt below is typical:

> When we had the monopoly, it was a different time, I'd say. There wasn't the same focus on the customers because they could only go to one place. We had all the customers, so we could take it a bit easier. I'd say, efficiency was not great back then and we took things more leisurely […] Then, when we were sold to the Americans in the mid-1990s, we became a real private company and started to feel this efficiency focus […]. (Interview)

Telco's transformation altered the responsibilities of the frontline managers to something hardly recognizable. 'There's no comparison,' says Ingvar, another senior, 'the technical aspects, and the way the whole thing is run: It's like day and night'. Thorkild, the longest-tenured manager, elaborates as he explains how the frontline manager role has evolved into a more interventive one as new technologies have enabled managers to hold technicians individually accountable for their performance:

> Focus on productivity and profitability has changed dramatically. When I started as frontline manager, we had a ground rule that an employee was supposed to complete three to four tasks in a day and then that's fine. And then we got the performance management system and gradually as we were able to extract more and more data from the system, you could start to say: 'This guy is good, and this guy is not so good'. (Interview)

In this change narrative, the thrust towards productivity and performance management is seen as an inexorable process, but the seniority of the workforce posits a challenge to the managers' ability to implement changes in the expected manner and tempo. A considerable number of Telco's technicians were employed when the company was state-owned. They still carry a civil servant habitus and continue to display foot-dragging habits and attitudes of the past which come at odds with the demands of the present (Koll, 2021). Thus, 25 years after privatization the department is at conflict between two work cultures, or, indeed, temporalities. As Hanne, tenured for 30 years in Telco, explains:

> Seen from an operations perspective, we have conducted continuous streamlining and regardless of which organizational changes we have done, they have all followed the same guiding star; that is, to do away with these old civil servants and change-resistant employees …

Despite these efforts, Hanne insists, 'we are still at it today'. History is simply not easily done away with. The challenges posed by lingering practices of the past among the old technicians are also pointed to by Arne:

> I mean, nobody likes it if I tell them: 'You have to do your job properly' or 'don't sit at the warehouse drinking coffee in the afternoon when you should be working'. These are the things they remember because they've been doing it for 35 years. […] the fact that young, new forces have come in, who have a different worldview than the ones born into the old culture, has contributed to changing some things. But there's still a culture ingrained in the old employees to feel like everything [about the current workplace] is just crap.

If current results are disappointing, this should therefore not come as a surprise, according to Gunvald, who explains that major transformations taking time is to be expected:

> […] it's a super tanker that we're on. It doesn't easily change its course. We need time to do it. Even though we have become a more modern corporation than we used to be […] It takes time to change the culture, but it's a journey we're on and we're on our way. We'll get there eventually, but it takes a while when people have been here, as I usually say, in 'the good old days', for 30, 35 and 40 odd years.

The union holds a key place in this narration. When reflecting on the obstacles to performance, the seniors repeatedly point to the continued influence of the union, personified in the presence in every team of a shop steward, whose word 'often carries more weight in a group than the words of the frontline manager' (Ingvar). While the union may have lost power over time, it is nevertheless 'still present in running things', according to Hanne. The recurrent use of the adverb 'still' is telling of the temporal structure of the seniors' narrative: the aspired separation of 'back then' and 'now' is blurred by the persistent presence of the past: the 'still' incarnated by the union and the monopolistic work culture of the old technicians.

The juniors in the managerial group obviously did not themselves experience the monopolistic 'back then'; nor were they part of the initial phases of organizational change. In our interviews, however, they appear to have fully appropriated the collective memory of the departmental past and the interpretations of the 'now' which it implies. Thus, when reflecting on current problematics they consistently draw on the same shared master narrative as the seniors. In the excerpt below, we see how Mads begins his narrative more than a decade before he even joined the company. His frequent use of the pronoun *we* signals his identification with the mnemonic community of the management team:

> The change we're trying to make, we've been at it for many years. Basically, it's going from monopoly to making our own money, from state-owned to private business. It started way back in the early 1990s, or whenever it was, when the company started selling off shares. It hasn't gone very well since […]. (Interview)

According to Mads' narrative, the heart of the problem lies with the 'culture among the employees', who fail to 'realize they are actually here to generate a revenue' (Interview). How exactly juniors are being integrated into the managerial mnemonic community – the actual processes of mnemonic socialization – is only hinted at in the interviews. Learning about the past primarily seems to happen through interaction and communication with fellow managers at meetings and through daily practice. Anders, a young manager, mentions how memories of privatization are also transmitted to new frontline managers by long-tenured technicians in their own teams (from a contrasting normative viewpoint, obviously), when they object to the new performance culture by evoking norms and practices of 'the good old days'. Appropriating the master narrative is seemingly made easier for juniors by the many homologies between this narrative and the dominant meta-narrative in wider society about necessary market liberalization. Mads specifically adopts the story of Telco and the lack of change readiness among employees by placing it in a wider narrative framework of privatization:

> That is also something one knows from other corporations [like] ALPHA, which has been state-owned and now has become privatized: this change from 'we survive' to 'we must provide for our survival ourselves'.

Acquiring a certain mnemonic lens through which the past is interpreted clearly constitutes an important part of the rules of the game in the managerial community, and just like the seniors, the juniors highlight the change resistance of the union as a particular obstacle to reaching the level of performance deemed necessary to avert outsourcing. In the excerpt below, Søren explicitly identifies the power of the union and the shop

stewards with an obsolete past, which should have been left behind, but which still persists in Telco:

> In society, maybe 50 years ago trade unions were a part of management decisions but in this company, they still are today. And it makes it difficult to get rid of the old culture because it comes from the union, you know. Back in the days, it was the union, the shop stewards who decided if you worked or not. […] a company run that way isn't change ready in any sense. (Interview)

On an overall level, the managerial group as a whole thus appears to constitute a genuine mnemonic community. However, when memory and narration are weaved into reports about everyday practice and the actual enactment of the change narrative, the dissimilar narrative habitus of the senior and junior generation of managers produce a more differentiated picture.

Remembering and Narrating Change in Everyday Practice – Seniors Versus Juniors

Starting with the seniors we see how this group occasionally colour the master narrative with critical reservations towards the new performance culture. The outsourcing threat and the constant exhortative speeches by the director at the Tuesday meetings in particular add pressure on the frontline managers, as expressed by Ingvar:

> A lot of us old-timers have discussed this […]: We're only human, right? So, slow down […] because this, holy moly, it's been the worst nightmare. I've never experienced [anything like] it with any other director. (Interview)

According to Ingvar, the extent of performance management has gone too far. He finds the KPI setup 'utterly insane' and for a moment finds himself reminiscing about a 'back then' without KPIs:

> Of course, you must have some KPIs. There's no getting around it, but it's way too much. And it's actually what the technicians are the most dissatisfied with […] that everything gets measured. It wears on them and oftentimes, I understand them. […] I've been here from the start, and we didn't have any KPIs when I first started. […] and it's actually quite liberating to reminisce about. (Interview)

Ingvar avoids using GPS to monitor his technicians' whereabouts during the day. While GPS might provide managers with an efficient monitoring tool, it also tends to provoke fear and aversion among the technicians, functioning, most of all, as a 'means of exerting pression' – or even, as this manager accidently, but rather tellingly, calls it in the interview, a 'means of depression' (Interview, Ingvar).

The same manager also admits to often being mentally absent and wilfully 'closing his ears' while attending what he bluntly refers to as the 'shitty' Tuesday meetings.

In regard to the actual monitoring of their technicians, the seniors generally report a large degree of pragmatism. Gunvald declares himself 'a devotee of trust' and explains how he relies on a kind of intuitive feel for when he actually needs to take action, rather than on constant surveillance:

> I'm a wee bit cautious with my KPI. I believe in the good in everybody […] Of course, I do check up on things, whether things are as they should be. [But] I don't bother to check up on things day after day, or week after week. (Interview)

Echoing Gunvald, his senior colleague, Arne states that 'numbers obviously matter, that's undeniable, but numbers don't define a good employee' (Interview).

Formal procedures (GPS surveillance, KPI reports, etc.) may thus be dismissed by seniors as not working in practice. Instead, they point to the value of acquired experience, the kind of practical sense for navigating that comes naturally from being immersed in the same practice through many years. Almost all the senior frontline managers started their own career at the shop floor level as technicians and had many years of experience under their belts before changing position. They thus share a history, and to some extent a habitus, with the old civil servant employees and consequently identify relatively easily with them. Rather than seeking to distance themselves from the technicians, they often express regrets not to have more direct contact with them: 'I think we spend too little time with the boys, we are becoming way too theoretical', says Ingvar. 'In our job we should take care not to spend too much time behind a desk or at meetings.'

Assuming the perspective of 'the boys', he explains how they need the managers to come out and see for themselves the challenges the technicians are faced with and that there is more to the job than what KPIs are able to reflect.

The senior managers' ability to identify with the work culture of the past also make them point out that when addressing the technicians, one needs to communicate in a different tone than when the director addresses the managers. 'The men need to feel appreciated; Instead of pointing your finger at them, they need a pat on the shoulder' (Interview, Gunvald). Among the seniors, the individualistic discourse of the new performance culture is thus translated into a past language, more familiar to the old technicians, of trust and group loyalty. Arne explains how he confronts an employee who has been drinking coffee at the warehouse rather than doing his job: 'In my world, that's a breach of trust towards his colleagues, who then have to work overtime' (Interview). 'The point is not whether the individual employee achieves the set performance targets, but whether the team does,' Arne explains. A good employee, therefore, must be a socially minded team player who supports his colleagues and contributes to forming a community (Interview, Arne).

Another senior, Gunvald, seeks to bridge the opposition between managers and technicians implied by the master narrative by likening his team to 'a family' (Interview) and stressing the inherent solidarity between frontline managers and employees in relation to the higher levels of management.

The cooperative attitude extends to the apparent conflict between management and the union. While narrating the privatization history in general terms, the seniors point to the union and the shop steward as remnants of the past – obstacles to change. Speaking about everyday practice, however, they tell a story of constructive working relationships, in which shop stewards function as necessary go-betweens and facilitators (Koll & Jensen, 2020). The seniors describe their shop stewards as 'co-players' and 'teammates' (Interviews). 'We have a fine understanding,' Gunvald explains. 'We agree that we are both fighting for the job security of the team – we fight for this little family by working together' (Interview). In the past, Ingvar recollects, shop stewards would decide when employees would collectively 'sit on their arses' – 'I've been doing that myself', he reminisces, momentarily projecting himself back into his own former position as a technician – but now cooperation between manager and shop steward has become a key to producing results:

> The shop stewards don't have that power anymore, but it pays to have them with you, not against you […] The teams, where things are working well between the shop steward and the manager, that's where it's much easier to achieve good results. (Interview)

Turning to the everyday accounts of the juniors, we find less reservations towards the implications of performance management. One manager, Søren, argues the necessity of KPIs by contrasting the past and present:

> In the old days, I've been told, it was like, when there was too little work to do, well, there was never too little work to do, you just slowed down the tempo to zero, then there was lots of work to do. And that's not a modern way to run a company. So you see, the KPIs are a necessary evil. (Interview)

For Søren's young colleague, Mads, the KPI setup is an 'insanely good guiding star' that inspires his own efforts to increase his team's productivity:

> It's just a great message to get every Monday: You're a success, you're a success, but clearly, for many of the older employees it's still a drag: why are we being measured?. (Interview)

In contrast to the seniors, the juniors share no lived history and thus no points of identification with the old technicians. Rather, the young managers stress the fundamentally different mindset of managers and employees, and express frustration over the lack of business sense among the technicians. The junior managers are also less inclined, in everyday communication, to seek out the technicians, as the seniors do, in their own environment (warehouses, utility vehicles). Except from the weekly team meetings, the juniors mostly manage their teams remotely, preferring to communicate by phone or email rather than face-to-face. As one manager, Anders, explains: 'They [the technicians] are the ones who are out there in the field. I can only initiate measures on the basis of how I imagine things can be or on the basis of a few experiences' (Interview).

Distance may sometimes be phrased as mistrust. Thus, Mads believes that 40 percent of the technicians 'simply don't understand how KPIs work', and based on surveillance data as well as his own experience as a young technician immediately prior to becoming a manager, he ascertains that 20 percent are cheating when reporting their whereabouts (Interview).

Finally, in regard to the union issue, the juniors also adhere more to the master narrative than the seniors do. They are more worried about the persistence of union power, and their relations with the shop stewards in their teams are often troubled. 'When I look at the employee side,' says Anders, 'with all this union thing and all, well, I must admit, I can't really see any cooperation. It's very much like: They have their agenda; the company has its agenda' (Interview). Anders therefore seeks to sidestep the shop steward when dealing with his team. Søren also finds his shop steward 'difficult' and akin to 'stirring things up' (Interview), while Mads reports about direct conflict with his shop steward, whom he labels 'an opponent' (Interview).

Overall, according to Mads, new managers face 'enormous challenges'. Referring to the adaptive pragmatism of certain senior colleagues ('they invent their own little rules'), he complains that: 'we never pull in the same direction as a management team' (Interview). In general, the junior managers also appear to rank low in the management team's internal hierarchy. In the interviews, their somewhat uncompromising attitudes towards foot-dragging employees are met with occasional criticism from their more senior colleagues (Interview, Mads), and both Mads and Søren admit to scoring low in

well-being assessments submitted by their subordinates. Mads even states that 'some of my technicians hate me like poison' (Interview). Nevertheless, the overall situation is difficult to change, according to Søren, because the baggage of the past has never really been left behind: 'I don't really think you can do much about it, because all this cultural baggage, it's bloody difficult to deal with, right?' (Interview).

Discussion

This study has investigated how a mnemonic community made up of two generations of frontline managers enacted a shared historical narrative in their everyday practice of change management. The managers represent a mnemonic community united by a common goal of raising the performance of their teams to meet new demands by implementing a more performance-oriented work culture. The study was conducted during a temporally prolonged change process following the company's privatization in the early 1990s and demonstrates how a shared narrative of the transition phase became a significant part of cross-generational managerial practice. The shared narrative constructed the transition phase as a complex temporal separation between 'back then' and 'now' with a persistent presence of the past in the present constituted by the powerful trade union and a strong work culture of the old technicians. However, when analysing the ways in which the shared narrative of 'back then' and 'now' is enacted in day-to-day managerial practice, we identified a clear distinction between the ways in which the two generations of managers position themselves. Generally, the junior managers want to abandon the past altogether and discard what they see as the wreckage of an obsolete work culture, while the senior managers are more inclined to connect with and accommodate elements of the past by limiting the uses of monitoring tools, collaborating with shop stewards and expressing empathy with their senior employees. In their everyday accounts, the juniors focus on what they perceive as insurmountable differences between managers and technicians, between the performance pressures of the present and a slow-paced pre-privatization era, which they have never experienced themselves but acquired as second-hand memories. In comparison, the seniors, almost all of whom are former technicians whose trajectories provide them with embodied practical experience and first-hand memories of the transition from a monopolistic past, tend to navigate more pragmatically, translating and mediating between the past and present.

Our data only show hints of *how* memories of the organizational past are passed down from one generation of managers to the next. However, what our study *does* show is that the junior generation in their change management practice clearly acquires and uses memories of a past they have not personally experienced. Yet, as the two generations of managers display different ways of enacting the shared transition narrative, the hitherto relatively unexplored question (Coraiola et al., 2023) becomes how we can understand and explain the workings of collective memory in cross-generational mnemonic communities in organizations.

We propose that adopting a view of collective memory as social practices of remembering, enacted by members of mnemonic communities in specific cultural and historical contexts, directs attention towards actors' mnemonic socialization, i.e. the processes through which new generations acquire second-hand memories and the social rules of remembrance attached to them. We argue that the construct narrative habitus has the

potential to further our understanding of these processes because it inherently adds to the practice-based view of collective memory a particular emphasis on actors' individual trajectories and generational memberships. The construct directs our attention toward how lived experience forms into different trajectories of participation in specific practices constituting different conditions for the formation of the narrative habitus. Accordingly, actors with similar trajectories are likely to develop a similar narrative habitus, collective memories and corresponding generational memberships. In other words, we argue that collective memory is habitually conditioned and, thus, cannot be viewed in isolation from the historical context in which the narrative habitus of organizational actors is formed.

Current literature on uses of the past in organizations has demonstrated the strategic value of historical narratives to organizations for change creation. Yet, our study enables us to argue that the instrumentalization of collective memory implied by the emphasis on historical narratives as a tool of persuasion tends to sideline important contextual factors for what is remembered and forgotten by members of mnemonic communities. Given the fact that, in general, most companies experience some level of employee turnover as seniors move on or retire and juniors enter, we see the cross-generational dynamic as a particularly influential, yet overlooked, contextual factor in shaping practices of remembering in organizations. Thus, we suggest that future studies of uses of the past in processes aiming at organizational change may beneficially include the habitual characteristics of different organizational generations in their explanations of how actors perceive, appropriate, or enact certain historical narratives. We argue that the theoretical framework proposed in this paper provides a relevant starting point for investigating questions about how practices of remembering are accomplished in cross-generational mnemonic communities in organizations.

Conclusion

This study illuminates the intricate interplay between individual trajectories, generational memberships, and the enactment of shared historical narratives in organizational change management. Through the lens of the narrative habitus construct, our research uncovers the nuanced ways junior and senior managers navigate the complexities of organizational transition and underscores the overlooked significance of cross-generational dynamics in shaping organizational practices of remembering. Our findings emphasize the habitual conditioning of collective memory, stressing its inseparability from the historical context in which organizational actors operate. We provide a practice-theoretical framework as a fertile starting point for future studies to include habitual characteristics of different generations in developing more comprehensive understandings of practices of remembering in change management processes.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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