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Ahead of the curve in the MBA bubble: Institutional narcissism and the narrative reconstruction of moral agency

Abstract: Academic criticism of institutional narcissism in business schools is well established. But little scholarly attention has been devoted to insider critics of business schools. Filling this research gap – from an interdisciplinary narrative perspective – is the aim of this article. It draws attention to one of the many autobiographical narratives that have recently been published by MBA graduates. Narcissism here appears as an important theme, both on an institutional and a personal level. What role does narration play for coping with narcissism? To explore this question, this paper offers a close reading of *Ahead of the curve: Two years at Harvard Business School* (2008) by Philip Delves Broughton. After a brief introduction to institutional narcissism and organizational narrative studies, the article illustrates how narrative functions as a sense-making tool for understanding institutional narcissism and as a means to reconstruct individual moral agency. The study pushes the frontiers of narrative studies by providing an innovative blend of empirical organizational research and literary studies, while also touching upon genre, interdisciplinarity, and the ethical responsibility of business in society.

Keywords: institutional narcissism, narrative organization studies, business schools, autobiography, business ethics

1 Introduction

Academic criticism of institutional narcissism in business schools is well established. But little scholarly attention has been devoted to insider critics of business schools. Filling this research gap – from an interdisciplinary narrative perspective – is the aim of this article. It draws attention to one of the many autobiographical narratives that have recently been published by MBA graduates. Narcis-

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sism here appears as an important theme, both on an institutional and a personal level. What role does narration play for coping with narcissism? To explore this question, this paper offers a close reading of *Ahead of the curve: Two years at Harvard Business School* (2008) by Philip Delves Broughton.

After a brief introduction to institutional narcissism and organizational narrative studies, I illustrate how personal narrative functions as a sense-making tool for understanding narcissism on two levels: On an institutional level, it reveals traits and narrative practices that mark narcissism as a historical identity trait of business schools. On the personal level, the narrative helps reconstruct moral agency by allowing room for authorial distance and reflection. The study pushes the frontiers of narrative studies by providing an innovative blend of empirical organizational research and literary studies, while also touching upon genre, interdisciplinarity, and the ethical responsibility of business in society.

2 The narrative relationship between organizational and individual narcissism

Can an institution be narcissistic? When exploring the concept of narcissism, all roads lead back to Greek mythology and the famous story of Narcissus. He fell in love with his own image, reflected in a pool of water, and drowned as a consequence of unlimited self-admiration (cf. Eichler 2013; Engelen et al. 2016; Gabriel 2008; Glück 1998). Sigmund Freud and Erich Fromm were struck by the story and became the major figures in psycho-analytics to theorize narcissism as a pathological dysfunction (cf. Becker 1973). In contemporary organizational psychology, narcissism in its broadest terms is understood as having a "grandiose, yet vulnerable self-concept" (Morf and Rhodewalt 2001: 178). It can express itself in various ways, including "excessive preoccupation with self-image and beauty" (Gabriel 2008: 193), the constant need to be "the center of attention" (Bergman et al. 2010: 123), and uncontrolled aggression and even sadism (cf. Lunbeck 2014).

In the context of individual leadership behavior research, narcissism is associated with attention-drawing actions, extensive risk-taking, the inability to listen to subordinates, a lack of empathy, hyper-sensitivity to face critique, poor listening skills, entitlement claims, aggressiveness, and an inclination to display heroic charisma (cf. Bergman et al. 2010; Maccoby 2000; Morf and Rhodewalt 2001). These traits can be structured along the following four dimensions: exploitativeness/entitlement, leadership/authority, superiority/arrogance, and self-absorption/self-admiration (cf. Emmons 1987). These dimensions are helpful for any textual approach to narcissism because they point to key binaries that constantly

reappear in observations of narcissistic behavior and underline its paradoxical nature (cf. Elliot and Thrash 2001; Lunbeck 2014; Morf and Rhodewalt 2001).

Obviously, narcissism, at least on a non-pathological level, is not entirely negative and even necessary for "positive self-regard" (Bergman et al. 2010: 119). The paradox of healthy narcissism often leading to unhealthy consequences is especially relevant for the business arena. While narcissism in general has been found to hurt corporate performance, there are several positive side effects (cf. Gladwell 2002). In the case of CEOs, usually negative traits such as competitiveness and risk-taking can raise positive feedback as they can drive innovative and visionary leadership (cf. Engelen et al. 2016; Lunbeck 2014). Prominent examples of these "productive narcissists" include the former General Electric CEO Jack Welch, Apple's Steve Jobs, and Microsoft's Bill Gates, and also historical figures like Andrew Carnegie and Henry Ford (Maccoby 2000: 70). They come closest to society's "collective image of great leaders" (Maccoby 2000: 71).

Individual narcissism in different social and cultural contexts has been widely explored in fields like cultural studies (cf. Grubner in this issue). But research on organizational narcissism only started to gain prominence in organizational research in the 1990s, and has so far not been recognized in the humanities. The underlying thesis is that organizations "have identities," as the business ethics scholars Dennis Duchon and Brian Drake (2009: 301) state. Just like individuals, organizations thus hold moral agency. The authors define moral agency as the capacity "(1) to make judgments about the goodness and badness of organizational behavior and (2) to take actions that comport with moral standards" (Duchon and Drake 2009: 301). Immoral actions, however are not necessarily the result of "bad intentions or faulty judgments" on the part of the organization, as the authors clarify, but a "consequence of a corporation's self-concept; a consequence of how it defines itself" (Duchon and Drake 2009: 301). This organizational identity is reflected in the culture of organizations and their everyday practices. Organizational culture thus contributes to a sense of self-esteem. If it is threatened, the organization displays "ego-defensive behaviors" (Duchon and Drake 2009: 302).

This defensive mode is particularly prevalent in narcissistic organizations. Like narcissistic individuals, their identities are fragile. Their behavior therefore focuses on protecting their collective identities by means of exaggerated overconfidence that undermines moral decision-making (cf. Duchon and Drake 2009). In his theory of organizational narcissism, Mark Stein identifies the following key characteristics for narcissistic organizations: (1) Members of a narcissistic organization glorify the institution in an exaggerated and distorted way. (2) The organization claims a sense of entitlement and "imperialism" (Stein 2003: 529), and to be the sole center of anything of value. (3) The organization presupposes omnis-

cience and access to internal and external information. (4) Due to its narcissism, other organizations and their members, are treated with "triumphant contempt" (Stein 2003: 530). (5) All these characteristics are so "pervasive" (Stein 2003: 532) that they drive all organizational action.

These definitions of identity and self-definition, in connection with their relevance for moral agency, illustrate the complex entanglement of individual and organizational narcissism. Counter to the assumption that narcissistic individuals in an organization shape its narcissistic culture, narcissistic institutions can also affect individual character traits. These twofold paths of influence were highlighted by Alasdair MacIntyre in his book *After virtue* (2007 [1981]), in which he showed that the identity of an individual, or other (id-)entity, determines the ability to act morally. Identity and action are always subject to contextual influences (cf. Duchon and Drake 2009). On the level of the individual in an organization, this means that the moral character of an institution has immediate effects on the ethical conduct of individuals.

In a narcissistic organization lacking moral agency, ethical behavior will thus hardly develop on the level of individuals. This is particularly the case in organizations that show "extreme" narcissism (Duchon and Drake 2009: 303). These organizations have been found to ignore or even deny information about their identities via spokespeople, reports, myths, and other communication tools to buttress their sense of their grandiose selves (cf. Duchon and Drake 2009). This can also lead them to implement questionable ethics programs, designed to enhance the institution's reputation moral greatness, while in fact serving as tools to protect and conceal its narcissism and possible moral misconduct (cf. Duchon and Drake 2009).

This close entanglement of ethics, narcissism, and communication tools to justify greatness provides the methodological link to narrative organization studies. The field emerged in the context of the narrative turn in the social sciences (cf. Czarniawska 1999). One of the most notable contributions was *Storytelling organizations* (2008) by David M. Boje, which showed "how people and organizations make sense of the world via narrative and story" (Boje 2008: 4). This process of sense-making was already described in Barbara Czarniawska's *Writing management* (1999). As she explains, sense-making "basically consists of attempts to integrate a new event into a plot, whereby it becomes understandable in relation to the context of what has happened" (Czarniawska 1999: 17). Boje differentiates between narrative and story. While narratives are usually backward looking, linear, and carried by a plot, stories are more fractured and lack cohesion (cf. Boje 2008). Czarniawska adds: "The plot is the basic means by which specific events, otherwise represented as lists or chronicles, are put into one meaningful whole" (Czarniawska 1999: 14). In organizations as storytelling entities, both storytelling

and narrative together contribute to the construction of self in narration. This process reflects Paul John Eakin's notion of storytelling as self-creation whereby "narrative identity" (Eakin 2008: 2) emerges. While autobiographical writing also exists in organizations in the form of company reports and chronicles, storytelling can take any form, including oral, textual, and visual means (cf. Boje 2008). The field of narrative organization studies also includes the genre of scholarly management literature, whereby the concept of genre as a classification device remains challenged (cf. Czarniawska 1999).

Narrative organization study thus offer a helpful tool to approach the study of narcissism in organizations and the individual. Since narcissistic organizations rely on self-affirming narratives to reinforce their sense of greatness, it is likely that stories about narcissistic organizations can offer illuminating insights into the workings of narcissism on multiple narrative levels. Because identity construction in narrative relies heavily on past experiences, it is necessary to examine the historical legacy of narcissism in education and in business schools as potentially narcissistic institutions.

3 The MBA bubble as narcissistic institution

Concerns about narcissism in education reach back more than a century. The education pioneer John Dewey put much emphasis on the "social function" of education when he wrote his manifesto *Democracy and education* in 1916: "When the acquiring of information and of technical intellectual skill do not influence the formation of a social disposition, ordinary vital experience fails to gain in meaning, while schooling, in so far, creates only 'sharps' in learning – that is, egoistic specialists" (Dewey 2001: 13). Contemporary cultural critics like Martha Nussbaum have drawn on Dewey's philosophy and found many "egoistic specialists" in today's education system. In her manifesto *Not for profit: Why the humanities are not for sale* (2010), Nussbaum draws attention to the increase of self-centeredness in the academy and capitalist society at large. She repeatedly warns of the "narcissistic dependence on others" (Nussbaum 2010: 96) that emerges among the student generation. Nussbaum stresses the larger social implications of this trend: "If the real clash of civilizations is, as I believe, a clash within the individual soul, as greed and narcissism contend against respect and love, all modern societies are rapidly losing the battle, as they feed the forces that lead to violence and dehumanization and fail to feed the forces that lead to cultures of equality and respect" (Nussbaum 2010: 143).

These philosophical opinions about modern attitudes are bolstered by empirical findings. In her study *Generation me* (2006), the behavioral psychologist

Jean Twenge finds that those born in the 1970s, '80s, and '90s showed higher levels of narcissism than people born before that. Her title alludes to Tom Wolfe's 1970s manifesto, "The 'me' decade," which led to that decade being considered the "age of narcissism" (cf. Emmons 1987; Lunbeck 2014; Wolfe 1976). Interestingly, Twenge also finds a direct relationship between educational institutions and narcissistic predispositions. She sees a "self-esteem movement" at work even in elementary schools that promote an "all about me" philosophy via comic books and the practice of praising children without setting any performance standards (Twenge 2006: 225). More importantly, Twenge identifies business schools as the place where high expectations, high self-esteem, and low social skills converge. These findings are in line with other empirical studies on business students in the U.S. and their attitudes and narcissistic traits – including immoral social behavior, a sense of entitlement, cheating in exams, a lack of moral reasoning with respect to noticing and supporting the interests of others (cf. Bergman et al. 2010; Traiser and Eighmy 2011).

Given the evidence of narcissism in business schools gathered by different academic disciplines, it is little wonder that business scholars have also critically addressed the issue. An outstanding figure among them is Henry Mintzberg, who in his widely cited publication *Managers, not MBAs* (2003), called for a reform of business education. This was based on the major finding that management is a practice, not a profession like medicine or law that can lay claim to unique practical skills and ethical codes. Even if integrated into the university system, business schools should focus on training managers to be ready for practical management tasks. Mintzberg considers management a craft and an art, not merely a science, and demands that future managers be trained in the necessary "soft skills" (Mintzberg 2003: 40) and ethics. Mintzberg warns that misconceived management training programs have a far-reaching impact on society:

> This seemingly innocent degree, to prepare people for the practice of management, actually does no such thing and in fact has a corrupting effect where it does have influence. This begins in the educational process and passes into the practice of managing and the organizations where that happens. Now I shall discuss where it ends and where these effects may be the most destructive: in society at large. (Mintzberg 2003: 142)

Read alongside the definitions of narcissism, such statements provide strong evidence for the narcissistic nature of management training institutions. In past decades, business schools have gone through a process of professionalization, coming to focus on the transfer of "defensible knowledge" (Khurana 2007: 10) and, mostly, technical analytical skills. The axiomatic nature of these rational models has been found to shape the institutions' character beyond the classrooms – by entering the minds of the students as "deeply felt beliefs" (Khurana

2007: 322). This echoes Mintzberg's equation: "Confidence + Competence = Arrogance" (2003: 74). The link between institutional ideology and individual learning highlights the historical legacy of narcissism. It is a common identity scheme of the "aggressive loner" in those narcissistic institutions, business schools (Mintzberg 2003: 103).

4 *Ahead of the curve*: Competing as a rocket scientist

> I did not go to Harvard Business School planning to write a book about the experience. In fact, after ten years as a journalist, I went there to recover from writing, to stop looking at the world around me as a source of potential stories. I wanted to learn about business in order to gain control of my own financial fate and, more important, my time. [...] I say this only to make clear that this book was never intended as an inside raid. In many ways, I loved my two years at Harvard. [...] This book is my attempt to describe my experience and that of my classmates in this cauldron of capitalism. (Broughton 2008: 5)

These lines from the preface of Philip Delves Broughton's MBA account *Ahead of the curve: Two years at Harvard Business School* immediately tell the reader that the author seeks to provide a multi-faceted account of his personal experience, not a blunt critique. The fact that the book was never intended to be written suggests that the events Broughton is about to describe spurred his decision to relate them. It also suggests that he seeks to portray not only his own perspective but also the stories of his classmates. Broughton is careful about possible generalizations – "this book is just one person's view. No single MBA could ever be representative of the nine hundred students in the Harvard Business School class of 2006" (Broughton 2008: 6).

Still, he insists that this is not going to be a fictional work. "Everything in this book occurred as I describe it," he emphasizes (Broughton 2008: 6). This suggests that he regards his book as a truthful autobiographical reflection, not a journalistically crafted story. As the narrative unfolds, the reader learns that a large part of this truth relates to the narcissistic culture of business school, the author's attempts to keep a distance, and to preserve his individual moral agency in a world where competition rules. "I had been warned about the HBS bubble, in which even the most trivial tasks assumed the most absurd proportions, and it was absolutely true," Broughton says (2008: 18).

The concept of proportion is a good starting point for a close reading of Broughton's MBA narrative. *The American heritage college dictionary* defines the concept as a "part or amount considered in relation to a whole" (2004: 1117). The business school and its students share the same aim – to get "ahead of the

curve" by competing against others and competing against their own values and needs. Once they get ahead of the curve by gaining admission, the real performance curve Broughton refers to in his title awaits the students. "We would be graded on a forced curve, based on our performance against one another. At the top of the curve would be the academic cream," he says (Broughton 2008: 18). Performance was dependent not only on exam results, but also on endless hours spent in small study groups cracking case studies. These case studies do not have a right or wrong answer. "The only thing that matters is how you think about the problems, how you deal with the paucity of information, the uncertainty" (Broughton 2008: 9).

The way of thinking that Broughton brings to Harvard does not give him in the best starting position in the race to become one of the top performers heading the curve. As an experienced journalist, he has the advantage of age and life experience, but he lacks the analytical mindset required for case studies. In his two years at Harvard, he learns the financial and analytical models that form the corpus of technical management knowledge, and make it appear to be "rocket science" (Broughton 2008: 222). This mastery eases his personal feeling of insecurity, many other students already having finance and management knowledge from their undergraduate degrees. As his mastery of business knowledge increases, he learns to handle the "uncertainty" (Broughton 2008: 17) of complex cases better. But the more secure he feels about the number games, the more insecure he becomes with respect to the meaning and value behind the numbers. After only a few months, he becomes aware of "the tyranny of numbers" (Broughton 2008: 55) – how a professional tool is becoming a mindset, with far-reaching implications for identity questions.

5 Lost agency: Insecure overachievers, underachieving personalities

Analytics are not only used to measure financial data, they become deeply intertwined with personal questions. Broughton notices this when, at the beginning of the first year, he takes the Myers Briggs Type Indicator Test (MBTI). It measures personalities along various dimensions such as introversion, analytical thinking, communication patterns, personal interaction styles, etc. "I thought that these tests took the rich tapestry of human character and reduced it to a sterile batch of letters. More fundamentally, I did not trust what I thought was an attempt to quantify the unquantifiable," Broughton (2008: 65–66) says. This questioning of identity in connection with the autocracy of rational agency serves

as a catalyst for tracing the relationship between institutional culture and personal insecurities.

The question "Who am I?" (Broughton 2008: 61) keeps resonating in Broughton's mind. He starts discussing the issue with other older students with non-business backgrounds similar to his own. One of them, Cedric from West Africa, struggles with the American love for quantification. "We're so into putting values or numbers on things, that if we can't value something, we just sweep it away. How do you compare the value of a healthy relationship with one's child when the alternative has a distinct value, say, a million-dollar bonus," (Broughton 2008: 97) he provocatively asks Broughton. Both have been taught that "priceless" in business means "impossible to price and therefore not worth arguing about" (Broughton 2008: 97–98).

Stories and opinions shared by Broughton's classmates form a major element in his account. The stories and voices Broughton uses help him to make sense of his own experience in the bubble that is HBS. Input also comes from speakers that come to HBS on a regular basis to talk about their careers. Broughton listens and notices that a recurring piece of advice is for each student to keep their "ego in check" (Broughton 2008: 146) – to not end up a broken character with a big bank account but no family, friends, or personal life. He also hears that "the problem in hiring HBS MBAs was that they thought they were smarter than they were" (Broughton 2008: 230).

Unfortunately, thinking oneself smarter than the competition while secretly nursing a lack of self-esteem prove fraught. Broughton uses the term "insecure overachievers" (Broughton 2008: 110) to describe the personality of many HBS students, a label that describes the paradoxical nature of narcissists. Broughton learns from the campus newspaper what can happen to narcissistic "rocket scientists" when they refuse to go one living that paradox. Under the headline "Being depressed at HBS," a female student, who struggled with severe depression, shares her story of losing faith and any sense of purpose in life. Broughton quotes from her article:

> I started hating myself for ever applying to HBS... and then one day I just didn't get out of bed. I stayed in bed all day and just cried and cried. Then a strange calmness came over me. "Everything would be alright if I just killed myself," I thought. "Then it would all go away." So I made my way to the bridge and stood there for nearly an hour. But I couldn't jump off. (Broughton 2008: 111–112)

Although the term narcissism is not used, it is obvious that the "competitive environment" described by the student – along with the pressure to appear overtly confident and self-determined – is exactly the type of institutional culture which characterizes narcissistic institutions. In order to maintain his own sanity

and a coherent sense of self, Broughton exchanges his thoughts about the HBS "freaks" (Broughton 2008: 78) with his wife and friends. Broughton learns how difficult this can be for others from his classmate Hasan, a student from the Middle East:

> I'm used to having two personalities, work Hasan and social Hasan, and they're very different...At work I'm very serious and professional, but socially I like to be really relaxed. Here I feel people are so obsessed with their place in the network, with their own personal brand, they never let go. You are expected to be the same person in every setting. I can't really blur my personalities ... People use very passive-aggressive methods ... to control behavior. They don't confront you, they're really politically correct about that, but their attitude is closed-minded. It's supposed to be an open environment, but I feel like everything you say or do is being scrutinized so they know where to put you on the curve. (Broughton 2008: 112)

Stories like this make Broughton see the dangers of trying to get ahead of the curve, of trying to manufacture self-assurance by belonging to the MBA "über-class" (Broughton 2008: 103). While other students compete for the best summer internships at prestigious firms after their first year at HBS, Broughton decides to retreat to his non-Harvard identity. "My own solution to the problem was to do something I had been trying to do for years. I retrieved a boxful of notes and books that I had kept in France and set to work on a novel" (Broughton 2008: 158). His trips to the library allow him to reflect on his experience. Just like his MBA narrative, the summer break he spends writing indicates how important writing is to him to makes sense of things. It is words and letters that make up his rationality, not the rational agency paradigm of number competition that the other students are proud of. This also suggests that students actually seek to buy more than a degree when entering business school. The desire to become part of the MBA bubble stands in direct relation to one's self-esteem. The price is high given the personal devaluation the students encounter.

6 The price of buying self-confidence

As Broughton knows from the outset, students do not usually go to HBS to gain an excellent education, the go for the "brand" (Broughton 2008: 102). The brand of a business school is determined by its position in the rankings – which also determines how much a school can charge for a degree. In places like Harvard and prestigious European schools, the degree can cost close to $100,000, Broughton calculates. The students are willing to pay this high price because they are convinced they are investing in their future – the rankings reflect the job prospects of graduates and, ultimately, potential incomes. The MBA degree has

turned into a commodity. Like a stock one can buy on Wall Street, the degree promises a positive 'return on investment' in the form of future salaries (cf. Zanetti 2013). The problem is that money neither brings fulfillment, nor does it work as a medicine to heal the narcissistic personality.

The capitalist logic of spending a lot of money on a degree to fulfill one's longing for special entitlement (including a lot of money) is called into question as the students' relation to the institution evolves. Broughton remembers a professor telling the class about a student in dispute with the HBS administration about some organizational issue. "Why are you treating me like this? I'm the customer, goddamnit," the student said. "No, you're not," the HBS employee replied. "You're the product" (Broughton 2008: 26). The professor who shares this story encourages Broughton and his classmates to consider themselves "somewhere in [??] between [...] Sometimes you're the customer, other times you'll feel like the product" (Broughton 2008: 26), he tells the amused class members. This incident speaks volumes about the evaluation of education and its careerist means-and-ends logic, and about the degradation the students' experience. Yet they are willing to sacrifice their sense of self-value to get the chance to have an outstanding career.

This applies just as much to students who have already gained painful personal business experience in the "cauldron of capitalism" (Broughton 2008: 5). In Broughton's cohort, several students spent years in financial services or investment banking, gaining first-hand insights into what servitude, exploitation, and greed can do to the human character in the "Wall Street mumbo jumbo" (Broughton 2008: 16). But even those who intended to use the MBA as a key to improving their highly paid professional misery forgot how "Wall Street tortured" (Broughton 2008: 122) them even as they smelled money inside the bubble. When the students apply for summer internships, it is the consulting and high-paying banking positions that attract most of them. They willingly go through endless rounds of interviews and work on nagging case studies. As Justin, one of Broughton's classmates, reports: "I met a guy the other day who spent his summer internship last year at Goldman Sachs. He said he spent sixty-seven straight days in the office. Basically he arrived on day one and never left" (Broughton 2008: 111).

Making life more livable by staying away from million-dollar jobs at Wall Street, however, does not seem to be the lesson most of Broughton's fellow students learn. Broughton lists the employment statistics of his cohort to confirm this: 42 per cent accept jobs in banking and financial services, 21 per cent join consulting. The share of students joining the non-profit and public sector runs at a meager 3 per cent (Broughton 2008: 226). Making money on the back of an expensive and supposedly profound education is not wrong per se, Broughton thinks. In fact, he admits that the luxury he encounters in the business world is

tempting (Broughton 2008: 183). But how can money become the only compass in life? How can one go through hours of degrading work and ruin one's mental health so that neither self-confidence nor public appraisal can serve as compensation? How does one learn "how much is enough" (Broughton 2008: 209) in the machine of capitalism? Broughton finally asks himself: "How can I succeed financially without losing my soul?" (Broughton 2008: 234). The only answers HBS seems able to provide to these existential questions are formulas.

7 Narration as the moral compass to agency

Broughton's struggle to understand the self-exploitative, money-driven mentality reaches a climax when he is confronted with a "change" model that puts his humanistic and non-material value system to the ultimate test. A professor presents a formula to the students that is supposed to explain how to initiate change in companies and life alike – "Change = f(d x m x p) + E." According to the formula, change is a function of the level of dissatisfaction (d), the new model being put in place (m), and the process by which this new model is being implemented (p). "Plus E (error)," Broughton (2008: 205) explains. But he rejects the formula: "I just don't find it meaningful," he openly states in class (Broughton 2008: 208). The only one who openly shares his view is a student who served in the Afghan War. This student agrees with Broughton: "This is a joke" (Broughton 2008: 208).

This negative evaluation of quantification earns Broughton his worst grade in his HBS career. But this can be read as a metaphor of his reawakened moral agency. Broughton has decided to speak up. And speaking up – also by means of later writing down his own story – becomes a helpful sense-making tool to deal with a "narcissistic class of spreadsheet makers and PowerPoint presenters" (Broughton 2008: 234). Unless people develop a healthy "moral compass," Broughton states, they is little hope navigating the maze of material temptation, insecure overconfidence, and peer-competition (Broughton 2008:219). A formula for life changes, such as the one he is shown as a typical rocket science approach, is clearly no instrument with which to solve the social ills ego-driven managers bring about. Despite the important role writing plays for Broughton to arrive at this conclusion, he realizes that he is not satisfied with personal strategies to preserve morality. The systemic problems of "capitalism at work" (Broughton 2008: 234) in and around the institution of the business school do not let him rest. Broughton ends his narrative by calling for structural changes to reduce the competitive drive among students, and include a political economic dimension to demonstrate to them the "proper scope" (Broughton 2008: 230) of business and

its impact on society. The most important change, as he underlines, targets the heart of the business school identity: "I would change the mission statement," he suggests (Broughton 2008: 232). "HBS does not need to promise to 'educate leaders who make a difference in the world.' It suggests that business, with its priorities and decision-making approach, has a right to impose its will on the world. But business needs to relearn its limits" (Broughton 2008: 232).

Elevating business leaders to leaders in society – the original aim of the business schools – does not reflect Broughton's learning experience. Business schools need to train people who can limit their own greed and claims of entitlement to develop a proper sense of moral agency. Still, Broughton's narrative ends with a series of open questions related to the moral hazards of business: "Can I live decently, honorably, and completely in a world which makes that so difficult?" he asks (Broughton 2008: 235). This seems to be a business case that no formula can solve yet. Maybe Broughton's narrative can serve as a helpful sense-making tool for this challenge.

8 Conclusion: bursting institutional bubbles at the frontiers of narrative studies

> As a business leader I recognize my role in society.
> My decisions affect the well-being of individuals inside and outside my enterprise.
> Therefore, I promise that:
> I will manage my enterprise with loyalty and care, and will not advance my personal interests at the expense of my enterprise or society.
> I will refrain from corruption, unfair competition, or business practices harmful to society.
> I will invest in developing myself and others, helping the management profession continue to advance and create sustainable and inclusive prosperity.
> I recognize that my behavior must set an example of integrity, eliciting trust and esteem.
> **This oath I make freely, and upon my honor.** (MBA oath, emphasis in the original)

Following such deep institutional and personal insights into the MBA bubble, reading this excerpt from the MBA oath raises more questions than answers. HBS students introduced the oath in 2009, just one year after Broughton's graduation from HBS, and the onset of global financial crisis. One student explains the motivation for the oath as follows: "My classmates and I are aware of the low opinion many people have of MBAs, especially in the wake of the financial crisis. We don't want to be known as the least respected profession in America" (Anderson 2009).

The present paper casts into doubt such professional and moral claims about management schools. Historical analyses of management provide sufficient evidence that business schools started with the goal of making management a well-

respected profession, with proper theoretical and methodological bases, as well as ethical codes. But evidence shows that the vision has not been achieved. As a result, schools have remained under attack and have responded by switching to a self-defensive survival mode – one that often lacks any relation to how business can really serve society. These and other narcissistic behavior patterns have largely contributed to business schools' becoming narcissistic institutions. In line with the theory on – and empirical evidence of – the impact of organizational narcissism on individuals, this culture has shaped the individual moral agency of its members. The negative effects of this mindset can be discerned in the newspapers every day. As a narrative reflection of life inside the MBA bubble, by using several different voices, *Ahead of the curve* brings valuable insights into narcissism in business. In doing so, it also reveals the power of narration as a means of making sense of one's own narcissistic environment, and provides a tool to preserve one's moral agency. This shows how being pushed to explore one's own identity and values in a narcissistic institution can expand the frontiers of personal storytelling.

Narratives describing the inside of the MBA bubble provide important answers to questions of business ethics and narcissistic institutions. But they also raise questions about narrative theory and its current boundaries – one of those being interdisciplinarity. As the example of narrative organization studies shows, the narrative turn has left its mark outside the humanities, including in the field of business studies. But what about influence moving the way? This article demonstrates that theories and empirical evidence from organization studies can provide a helpful analytical framework for reading autobiographical narratives. Still, crossing the border from humanities to social sciences borderline – and from humanities to empiricism – does not happen often.

There is much room for further engagement and it can only be hoped that the growing research into humanistic management studies not only attracts critical managers, but also cultural critics who are willing to engage with managerial storytelling (cf. Melé 2003). Storytelling is also key to the second major frontier that this reading has revealed – the question of genre. Broughton does not categorize his book, he does not refer to it as an autobiography. What kind of book is it? The reading has revealed many different potential classifications. It is an autobiographical reflection; it is written by a journalist and contains traces of modern-day muckraking; it is written to be read by those who might enter the bubble and so also fits into the genre of self-help books; structurally, it functions as a meta-narrative that consists of all the stories told by other MBA students. Is the book all of the above? Or none?

Perhaps this inability to classify the genre relating to organizational storytelling will motivate literary scholars. Perhaps they need to rethink their still largely classical notions – however much revised – of agency, narration, and

genre. Crucially, the unsolved puzzle of narrative genre leads back to the paradox of narcissism itself, with its many personality-related binaries like self-love versus self-loss. The latter, especially, forms personality pattern particularly common in business. It remains to be seen whether a global business oath can change this narcissistic problem. Clearly, narcissists themselves are unlikely to contribute to a solution. "We shouldn't be looking for heroes; we should be looking for good ideas," Zanetti urges (2013: 181). This is a reminder of a unique privilege narrative scholars enjoy: They can continue to look for both – the narrative heroes and the good ideas they might inspire.

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