To Text or Context? Endotextual, Exotextual, and Multi-textual Approaches to Narrative and Discursive Organizational Studies

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Abstract

Organizational researchers doing narrative and discursive research have three choices in how they approach a text: an ‘endotextual’ approach where the researcher works within a text, an ‘exotextual’ approach where the researcher works outward from a text to its context(s), or a combined exo/endotextual approach which embeds a textual analysis within contextual inquiry. Although all three methods are now widely used in mainstream organizational research, the merits of combining, sequencing, or separating them have never been systematically considered. After reviewing the advantages and limitations of each perspective, we discuss an experiment in which endo and exo methods were applied to a skit co-written by management and a communications company specializing in organizational theater. The finding that using one approach creates multiple, subtle blind spots towards the other, and even more significantly affects a researcher’s capacity to effectively adopt a combined method, is used to construct an alternative ‘diatextual’ framework. This is used to frame a discussion of how multi-method textual studies of organizations might be conducted in the future.

Keywords: narrative, discourse, research methods, textual methods, organizational theater

The relationship between a text and its context is fundamental to how we understand narrative and discursive organizational research; how we fashion this relationship profoundly affects not only what we see, but what we should and shouldn’t say. Here, we systematically evaluate two generic approaches that privilege either the text (which we term endotextual), or the context (which we term exotextual), and then examine the increasing tendency to combine both in a multi-method approach. The endotextual approach works within the text (and its relations with other texts) and typically uses techniques from literary theory. The exotextual seeks to place the text within its context(s) and typically works with ethnographic, production/reception, and/or socio-cultural-political readings. Multi-method approaches try to do both by embedding a detailed textual reading within an exploration of contextual influences. Current multi-method approaches are sequential and aggregational in design (i.e. they move quite consciously from endo to exotextual or vice versa, successively embedding earlier readings in later ones).

Our overall intent is to examine more closely the relationship between endo and exo methods and consequently determine how we as organizational
researchers can better utilize and move between them. While the discursive/narrative researcher in any discipline is faced with choices around how they approach text(s) and context(s), we contend that these choices are especially relevant for organizational scholars. Though organizations are discursive, symbolic, and relational entities, they also have a distinctively concrete, material, and spatial dimension — there is an palpable immediacy about the textual and the contextual sides of organizational life that makes the ‘to text or context’ question a foundational one.

Asking ‘to text or context?’ raises a number of other questions: How easy is it for the same researcher to become proficient, reflexive, and comfortable in both endo and exo approaches? Should the methods be combined and if so, what happens when different combinations are used? How does each method act on us as analysts, on our respondents, and on our intended readers? If they are combined then how does one move, with integrity, from one to the other?

A tendency in multi-method approaches to either neglect one of the approaches, or blithely jump from one approach to the other, has also raised questions and concerns in the organizational literature (Alvesson and Karreman 2000a; Alvesson and Karreman 2000b; Hardy 2001) and in the general discourse literature (Widdowson 1995a; Widdowson 1995b; Blommaert and Bulcaen 2000). Yet there remains little specific direction as to how to bring text and context together more effectively.

In the sections that follow, we first elaborate each singular position and then focus on the increased popularity of combined endo/exo textual approaches, asking how successful these actually are in bringing the different methods into one integrated framework. We then recount a comparative reading exercise where we separately analyzed an organizational theater script, two of us using endotextual methods and the other an exotextual one. The results of this are used to develop a ‘diatextual’ reading method that emphasizes juxtaposition and dialogue. This in turn is used to frame a discussion of methodological and analytical implications for future narrative and discursive research in organizational settings.

The Endotextual Tradition

What we have chosen to term the endotextual are approaches that confine themselves to consciously working with the text without recourse to what is outside that text — including authorship, authorial intention, and writing/production processes. For an endotextualist, the text itself is the point of analytic focus and it is the complexities of working with the text (reading and interpretation) that are most important. If we go back to the advent of modern literature (around the 16th century) where positivism (Jefferson et al. 1982), expressive realism (Belsey 1980), and later on romanticism privileged everything from the correspondence of authors to historical texts in ‘deciphering’ text, then we can look to the Russian Formalists and the New Critics for the first significant moves to exclude the non-literary as a means of understanding
the literary (cf. Ransom 1948). Instead of using vast amounts of biographical, historical, or extraneous detail to further their analysis, critics were urged to establish meaning through textual exegesis.

It was originally Barthes who pronounced the author ‘dead’ (1977) and Derrida (1976) who claimed there was no ‘outside-text’. Important trends were set in motion here, including the idea that texts do not represent some ‘greater’ reality beyond, and that textual/literary analytic methods are effective far beyond their traditional application to a narrow range of literary texts. They argued that focusing on authorship detracts from readership — instead of trying to deduce how others might want us to read a text, they suggest we think of reading as a kind of re-writing of the text, an active assembling of meaning that has more to do with who we are than with processes of authorship. As De Cock (2000: 590) asserts, ‘whatever else we may be as researchers and scholars, we are at the core a profession of text writers’.

Such thinking has made a huge impact on organization studies. Ontology, epistemology, and methodology from the humanities, literary spheres, and narrative studies have challenged our notions of being a science (Czarniawska 1997; Phillips 1995; Zald 1993). Traditional boundaries between narrative fiction and social science have become ‘porous surfaces of contact’ (Phillips 1995: 626) and steadily greater numbers of organizational theorists are using readings of narrative fiction to explicate organizational realities (Czarniawska-Joerges 1995; Knights and Willmott 1999; De Cock 2000; Patient, Lawrence and Maitlis 2003), ‘fictionalize’ organizational processes like strategy (Barry and Elmes 1997), change (Barry, 1997), and public sector development (Czarniawska-Joerges and Jacobsson 1995), and apply essentially literary analytic methods to organizational research (Boje 2001; Monin, Barry and Monin, 2003).

An example of how the endotextual approach plays out in organization studies is provided by Ellen O’Connor’s ‘Paradoxes of participation: Textual analysis and organizational change’ (O’Connor 1995). O’Connor’s article is striking in the lengths the researcher went to to avoid any contextual contamination of her research texts. In her own words she ‘stopped by one day and picked up the texts; and about three months later, I stopped by and dropped off a paper’. She stresses that no ‘interviews, surveys, nor informal conversations were conducted with members of the organization’ (1995: 775). O’Connor investigated a process of major organizational change solely through the organization’s documentation of it. She used a methodology combining rhetorical, narrative, and metaphor analysis that she describes as directing attention ‘to the role of language, symbols and sign systems and the process of their interpretation’ (1995: 773). Using this approach, she found a rhetoric of teamwork, inclusiveness, and self-empowerment betrayed by a language of authority, discipline, and resistance management. So provocative was her reading that it was labeled ‘outrageous’, denied by management, and resulted in a termination of the research relationship.

These outcomes, while extreme, are likely not unique and raise serious questions about endotextualist methods. Pragmatically, highly critical readings may leave research fields scorched and incapable of supporting future
studies. More broadly, such approaches can unwittingly create a kind of tyrannical vacuum, one where authors and audiences are made all the more noticeable by their absence.

At the same time, the endotextual orientation has its virtues. Though it is not represented in empirically oriented work to the extent that both exo and multi-method approaches are, it has clearly brought new vigor and insight into organization studies. It has led to multiple modes of representation, helped refocus attention on the subjective, affective, constitutive, critical, and reflexive, and continually reminds us, as in O’Connor’s work above, ‘that organizations do not do what they pretend to do’ (De Cock 2000: 593).

The Exotextual Tradition

In direct contrast to endotextualism’s ‘death of the author’, exotextualism heeds Clegg and Hardy’s (1996: 697) call to ‘resuscitate the subject, breathe life back into those stilled lips, disturb the somnolent and death-like state, shatter metaphorical bottles of analytic formaldehyde’. Several streams of thought have influenced this approach. In a reversal of literary criticism’s history, where texts came to be stripped of their authors, ethnography gained popularity in the 1950s as a way of bringing authors back in. A somewhat different approach to exotextual reading developed in discourse studies, one which can be seen increasingly operating in contemporary organizational research (Lawrence et al. 1999; Hardy et al. 2000; Hardy and Phillips 1999). As with ethnography, discourse analysis attends to settings where conversational and ideational exchange occurs. Unlike ethnography, however, there is more emphasis on treating these conversations as texts to be read.

Exotextual postmodern readings help researchers get at what has been silenced in the text alone but which is nevertheless manifested in a particular context. Out of this comes a concern for author and stakeholder intent in narrative construction. Organizations are viewed as sites of struggle where different groups participate in joint construction (Hardy et al. 2000; Hardy and Phillips 1999), and compete to shape the social reality of organizations in ways that serve their own interests (Mumby and Clair 1997). Organizational texts are ongoing constructions of meaning, constantly changing from one situation to another, from one participant to another, and one context to another. From this perspective, narratives do not ‘possess’ a meaning represented in a text; instead, their meanings are supported and contested through the production and reproduction (performance) of texts within a context.

A good example of exotextual organizational research is the office-supply firm study by David Boje (1991). In contrast to O’Conner’s (1995) research, Boje’s work is an overt attempt to right the wrong of studying stories ‘wrenched from their natural performance contexts and treated as objectified social facts and mere texts’ (Boje 1991: 106). Boje collected stories as they occurred in day-to-day life, trying to capture ‘how the story occurs in discourse’ (1991: 112). His findings focus as much on what is left out of a story as what is left in — he points out that most verbally told stories in
organizations are greatly truncated, ‘tersely told’ versions that serve to define who is ‘in the know’ and who is not. The cumulative implications of this work are significant, suggesting that the producing and telling (vs the writing) of a story is another story in itself, one which is necessarily concerned with the paralinguistic and the political. Given that organizations are intrinsically concerned with collectively generated meaning, it is not surprising that many narrative and discursive organization researchers try to interpret texts in light of knowledge about intention and production (e.g. Czarniawska 1997; Martin 1990; Phillips and Brown 1993).

At the same time, this approach also raises serious questions, including whether we can render our respondents’ voices with anything like fidelity, and, assuming that fidelity is possible, whether our attempts to capture and render intention, production, and reception of respondents’ texts do not in some way bias our interpretations of those texts towards intention, production, and reception. With respect to the first point, some would regard even our best attempts to represent others’ voiced intentions as ‘a ventriloquist’s act’ (Czarniawska-Joerges 1995: 27). With respect to the second point, our reading of the literature suggests that organizational narrative and discursive researchers have generally assumed that with sufficient training, one could employ the endotextual, exotextual, or both to good and possibly comparable effect. And yet, the endotextualist arguments presented earlier suggest that knowledge of textual authorship automatically conditions how a text is read, leading readers to variously champion or cheapen it, read more deeply or shallowly, and attend to some facets of the text more than others — a point which, not insignificantly, is acknowledged in the blind review practices of academic journals.

Combining the Endo and Exo Traditions

The problems inherent in using solely one approach or the other have led to a variety of multi-method efforts. Here we focus on three that, in our opinion, acknowledge the importance of keeping the endo and exo intact (at least initially): Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1989, 1992, 1995), Alvesson and Karreman’s discourse laddering (Alvesson and Karreman 2000b), and Phillips and Brown’s critical hermeneutics (Phillips and Brown 1993).

Probably the best-known and most utilized approach to date is Norman Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis which combines micro, meso, and macro-level interpretation (cf. Fairclough 1989). At the micro-level, the analyst considers the text’s syntax, metaphoric structure, and certain rhetorical devices. Fairclough’s meso-level involves studying the text’s production and consumption, focusing on how power relations are enacted. At the macro-level, analysis is concerned with intertextual understanding, trying to understand the broad, societal currents that are affecting the text being studied. As such the researcher moves steadily beyond grappling with the intricacies of text to contextualizing it in situational, institutional, and socio-cultural ways.
Alvesson and Karreman’s recent identity work functions in a similar way. They construct the idea of a ‘ladder of discourse’ (Alvesson and Karreman 2000b: 1139) where, put simply, one goes from discourse to Discourse. In their example they begin at a micro-discursive level where they ‘read the account as a text’ (2000b: 1143), then move to a meso-discourse level ‘to look for slightly broader and more general themes (2000b: 1143), and end on a mega-discourse level where the account is read as a discourse of ‘anti-managerialism, discontent and subtle protests against its domination and moral problems’ (2000b: 1143).

A more formal combinatorial system is presented in Phillips and Brown’s work on critical hermeneutics. They distinguish between five aspects of text (the intentional, referential, contextual, conventional, and structural) which are explored through three separate analytic phases (the social, textual, and interpretive). In an illustrative study, they analyze ‘complex social texts [in this case an ad campaign] produced by an actor [corporate management] in an effort to manage the understandings of an important constituent’ (Phillips and Brown 1993: 1553). They begin with a social-historical analysis, which essentially explores the production, transmission, and reception of the text, followed by what is termed ‘the formal moment’ (1993: 1559) where ‘an objectifying technique’ (1993: 1559) (in their case semiotics) is used to formally analyze the text. These are then brought together in a ‘moment of interpretation-reinterpretation’ (1993: 1562). The result is a multi-layered, in-depth discussion of the ad campaign which explores how management presented their activities, the myths that were evoked, the dimensions of their activities that were excluded, and the audience that was being targeted through the particular framing of the texts.

The attractiveness and popularity of such multi-method approaches are easy to understand. As Stuart Hall characterizes it, they recognize difference or heterogeneity while still emphasizing connection: ‘while each of the moments in articulation is necessary to the circuit as a whole, no one moment can fully guarantee the next moment with which it is articulated’ (Hall 1993: 91). Conrad (2004) essentially argues that the shortcomings of endo and exo (he uses Alvesson’s close-range versus long-range terminology) can be avoided ‘through moving from level to level, which entails a shift from one perspective to another’. Finally, combined approaches build on two notions of text which are hard to negate: that texts are intricate, complex, and rich artifacts that demand we pay full attention to strategies of reading and interpretation, and secondly that texts, as Hall puts it, are contested constructions bound into ‘distinctive moments — production, circulation, distribution/consumption, reproduction’ (1993: 90). Being able to move both inward to the text and outward from it is being increasingly prized in organizational narrative/discourse research for what seem to be very good reasons.

Such appeal notwithstanding, we believe the consequences of combining approaches have been insufficiently studied — partiality, order effects, and trade-offs involved with various combinations are but a few of the issues that require more attention. With respect to partiality, Widdowson reminds us firstly that analysts always ‘preconceive’ (1995b: 63) textual data and
secondly that any interpretation is subject to ‘partiality’ (1995b: 67). Analysts enter a combined endo/exo textual analysis with certain paradigmatic and methodological preferences, expertise, and expectations, and few of us are equally committed to and experienced in both endo and exo methods. While it may seem preferable to synthesize different readings of ‘partiality’ together, this in itself does not guarantee richer or more insightfu textual readings.

With respect to order effects, Alvesson and Karreman (2000a) note that decisions about how to approach text are made usually made a priori or very early on in the research inquiry. This is inevitable, especially if one is going to attempt to capture the context within which a text is produced, distributed, and received. Thus combined endo/exo readings generally take place sequentially where one is known before the other. As Widdowson again reminds us, ‘there will always be differences in the direction of enquiry which will inevitably privilege one perspective over the other’ (1995a: 159). In other words, being in possession of either the endo or exo data will to some extent determine how we read the other. Hardy (2001: 33) makes the point that at the very least this is going to demand even greater levels of reflexivity than we generally see today.

Relative to trade-offs, Alvesson and Karreman (2000a: 1134) argue that one must pragmatically decide between rigour (focusing on the details of a text) and social relevance or significance (focusing instead on larger, broader themes and entities). In pursuing the former one risks myopia and lack of relevance; with the latter one can be prone to carelessness and insensitivity to actual language use. Hence there exists a trade-off between what Alvesson and Karreman (2000a: 1145) term ‘linguistic reductionism’ and ‘a too grandiose and too muscular view on discourse’. This balance is so hard to get right that they caution ‘to regard any actual relationship between the levels as an open question’ (Alvesson and Karreman 2000b: 10).

An Exploratory Comparison

The above concerns do not rule out using combinatorial methods, but they certainly argue that we pay more attention to how we compare and move between narrative/discourse approaches. Accordingly, we engaged in an experiment aimed at investigating each analyst’s relationship with (1) her/his particular form of reading and (2) the ‘open question’ that emerges as the readings are put together. The opportunity for doing so was serendipitous as author C (Hans) had just completed an extended ethnography of a company that wrote, produced, directed, and acted customised theatrical presentations for organizations. Authors A (David) and B (Brigid) began the exercise by selecting a skit from a group of five. Though A and B knew the skit was commercially produced by a theater company for a client, they had no knowledge of skit’s specific authorship, production, or reception. Conversely, C knew a great deal about these factors. Therefore we were able to construct a situation where two of the authors read the text without prior contextual knowledge, while the third (present for the whole of the text production) followed the reverse pattern of knowing context before text.
A and B did a generic literary close reading, focusing on structural, syntactical, metaphoric, thematic, and rhetorical elements. C worked closely from his field notes and took a more critical discursive line of inquiry by exploring issues of voice, positioning, power, status, and contestation. Once the different analyses were completed and exchanged, we had an extensive (and at times uncomfortable) discussion about the similarities and differences. In the next sections, we present abbreviated excerpts from both the script and our analyses of it (full versions are available from the authors).

The Script

TITLE: LET’S ALL PLAY NICE

SETTING: A special guest is brought in to help facilitate the transition of having the members of the IT team work with Big Pharm employees from the three different divisions: Commercial, Operations, and R&D. He is dressed in a lab coat, glasses, a pipe and is holding a file folder.

DR BRUMM: Good evening ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to ‘Let’s All Play Nice’. This is the portion of the evening where we help you get to know each other and yourselves a little bit better. I am Dr M. L. Brumm and, yes, I am a licensed Scientist. Currently, and in the future, you will all combine to form an über team of IT professionals. That means you’ll be forced to assist someone from a division that you may not be too familiar with. We are now going to help you recognize employees from the three divisions and walk you through the difficult task of assisting them for the first time. Let’s take a look at an IT professional dealing with a random Big Pharm employee.

TWO ACTORS ENTER THE STAGE.

COMMERCIAL: (talks quickly, kind of Mamet style) Hey pal how you doing. Yeah. Great, great. Yeah, yeah listen friend I got this question... Excuse me, that’s my phone. Hey Paul you old son of a... Yeah kiss my...

DR BRUMM: (stops the action by interrupting the two) OK. For those of you who’ve worked exclusively with the R&D or Operations people, this person here is a member of the Commercial Division... If you are having a hard time communicating with a Commercial member, suggested topics of conversation include sports, hair care products, the trouble with cell phones, the movie ‘Glen Gary Glen Ross’, and star of stage and screen Mr Gene Hackman. Let’s see the conversation topics in action.

COMMERCIAL: So anyway, that is what I’m looking for. What do you say pal, are we I.B.T. (pause) in bed together?

IT: Do you like Gene Hackman?
COMMERCIAL: Like isn’t a strong enough word my new best friend.

IT: I feel the same way. Let us go get a drink and talk sports and hair gel and then watch a David Mamet movie.

COMMERCIAL: Indeed.

DR BRUMM: Let’s take a look at this IT person in action with this other Big Pharm employee.

ANOTHER ACTOR ENTERS. COMMERCIAL EXITS

OPERATIONS: Please miss, if you could — if it’s not too much trouble — I could use some help. I am meek and humble and do not have much in terms of finance.

DR BRUMM: This sad sack is a member of the Operations Division. You can always spot an Operations person by their meager demeanor. Some things that you can talk about with Operations people include the novel Oliver Twist, the Broadway musical ‘Annie’, small third world countries, and the talented Mr Gene Hackman.

OPERATIONS: I’m sorry I’m such a pest. I wish I could pay you for our time together, but I don’t have enough money for writing utensils. I have to write with my saliva.

IT: That’s gross. Tell me, do you like Gene Hackman?

OPERATIONS: Like is not a strong enough word my new best friend.

IT: I feel the same way. Perhaps we should leave and go visit some orphanages? It is a shame about that third world country, them not getting any needed supplies and all.

DR BRUMM: And now, let’s look at yet another interaction between the IT professional and this Big Pharm employee.

NEW ACTOR ENTERS AS THE OPERATIONS PERSON LEAVES.

R&D: I say good person; I need your help. There is really no deadline on this and whatever resources you need I say do it.

DR BRUMM: Well here we see the always exciting R&D member. You know this man is R&D all the way. He has no real sense of accountability. If you need something to talk about with an R&D person talk about the wonderful Gene Hackman or just pull out a dollar bill, set it on fire, and then light their cigar with that dollar bill.

IT: Excuse me, do you...

R&D: Like Gene Hackman?

IT: Yes! But how did you know?

R&D: I work in R&D. I know all.

BLACKOUT
Endotextual Reading by A and B

We have collapsed A and B’s readings to save space. It is worth noting however that while A and B’s readings differed (see below), there was no difficulty or tension in accepting the validity of each other’s reading and producing a combined effort. Difficulties did arise however when A and B encountered C’s reading.

Our first emotional response to the skit was one of bemused flatness; we found much cleverness, but it left us feeling oddly sad and ill-at-ease. This reaction began with the title of the skit — ‘Let’s All Play Nice’. Here we see a particular message about how things should be done. ‘Let’s’ at first appears to be a call for togetherness or bonding. Yet the banality of the word ‘Nice’ gives the phrase a certain edginess. The whole phrase is like being chided by a parent or teacher, something the word ‘play’ reinforces. One would only be admonished to ‘play nice’ if one had been doing anything but.

There are at least two narrative engines at work, producing various tensions that drive the skit. One tension simply revolves around the question of whether the ‘difficult task of assisting them’ can be accomplished. Yet we quickly discover that there are no difficulties here — help is quickly and easily, if insincerely, proffered. A second engine revolves around the humor that is used. A and B initially characterized this humor in different ways. A thought the play revolved around charlatanism, while B thought the play was driven by irony (e.g. Brumm’s undermining of the essentially scientific character of the IT endeavor). Both agreed however that the skit as a whole is driven by the expectation that each organizational type will be mocked somehow. In this sense, the skit becomes a comic tragedy — all the characters are unlikable and are made only more so through derision. What ostensibly begins as a journey of understanding ends as it started, with the four departments (including IT) paying lip service to one another, not having developed any understanding of one another’s deeper motives.

The entire skit seems calculated to divert us from serious engagement with either the characters or their issues. Though presumably modeled after real people, the characters feel like throwaway stereotypes, cardboard caricatures that conform transactionally, but are unable to develop. The overall sense we have is one of stereotyped people playing superficial games in which intimacies are idly exchanged and quickly forgotten, making any deeper engagement impossible. Whether the writing of the skit this way is an actual reflection of the situation being portrayed, a projection of the authors’ misgivings about the client, or some combination of both, we cannot know from this type of reading. Nevertheless, we would find this an unsafe and unsatisfying working environment as it is represented here.

Exotextual Reading by C

To provide the social context for my analysis of ‘Let’s All Play Nice’, I have relied on my observational notes, my interviews related to this show/client,
and my transcripts of tape-recorded meetings and conference calls. The script was one of over 200 that I saw variously discussed, produced, and performed over the course of a year.

In terms of authorship, production, and intended audience, ‘Let’s All Play Nice’ was written by scriptwriters working for the Second City Communications company (SCC), a wholly owned subsidiary of the US-based Second City, a well known improvisation and sketch comedy theater group that has launched many comedic actors (e.g. Alan Arkin, Alan Alda, Dan Aykroyd, John Belushi, Bill Murray).

There are two things I should say about the script ‘Let’s All Play Nice’. First, the scene was actually quite representative of much of the work at Second City Communications. Many of their narratives seem to follow a simplified variation of either the epic Hero’s Journey (Campbell 1973) or romanticist form (Jeffcutt 1994), where, if everyone in the company pulls together the company will emerge victorious with increased market share, profits, and job security. Second, this script was never performed in front of the intended company audience. It was the most debated, most stressful, and dubious scene of my entire engagement at Second City. On top of this, the client ended up ‘pulling’ (canceling) it less than a week before show time, sending SCC into an uproar.

Looking at the process overall, I see several issues unfolding. One is the question of voice and who ‘owns’ the script. On the one hand, the SCC staff believed that as authors they owned the script, at least in principle. As such, they were unwilling to change the text or their beliefs about what constitutes ‘good’ construction, which in turn caused them to try and educate their ‘dumb’ clients about what works and doesn’t work in a script. On the other hand, the Big Pharm representatives believed the script was theirs — as consumers, they thought they were entitled to edit or veto sections they disagreed with. While they offered all of the information needed to build characterizations, they did not like the characters as they came to life. Not surprisingly, this question of ‘Who controls what?’ mirrored control issues taking place within Big Pharm, as Big Pharm’s management used devices like the show to turn a fragmented or differentiated culture (Martin 1992) into an integrated one. For them, purchasing professional humor was a way of creating ‘buy-in’ for their decisions.

Big Pharm’s cancellation of ‘Let’s All Play Nice’ had the effect of silencing the very thing they had spent so much time trying to develop: a forum where multiple, contested voices would be heard. In the end, ‘Let’s All Play Nice’ was replaced by a much more elaborate organizational script that might better be called ‘Let’s All Play Dumb’. The irony did not escape me that all this occurred in a process that I had theorized (and optimistically hoped) would give voice to the voiceless and power to the powerless. Through participating in scripting their organizational lives, at least in a protected liminal (Turner 1986) setting, I imagined that the alternate reality created by Big Pharm employees might bleed into the more dominant organizational reality.
Discussion

A cursory examination of our two readings reveals several divides. The two methods not only focused on different things, but resulted in different forms of presentation and positioning (see Table 1). Overall we could characterize the relationship in cinematic terms. While endotextual readers start with a momentary snapshot and end up with another more densely pixilated one, for exotextualists that snapshot becomes just one of many frames that are strung together to form a movie, one where overall movement takes precedence over any given moment.

While these differences are important, they are not all that surprising given our previous discussion. What was surprising however were our various reactions to the readings — reactions which have caused us to fundamentally question the value and wisdom of trying to combine methods. On the one hand the legitimacy and value of each other’s readings were never in doubt for any of the three authors in this paper. A and B were interested in the contestation of the skit and intrigued by the ownership dynamics it engendered. Likewise C accepted A’s and B’s reading, commenting, ‘Even though I’ve spent a great deal of time around the skit, I never saw the things you did, even though in hindsight your conclusions now seem obvious.’ All authors felt their understanding of the narrative was greatly enhanced by combining the readings.

The difficulties emerged when trying to move on from this point. C still found the story or ethnography of the script far more compelling and was only inclined to use the endo reading to further highlight the intricacies of its production. A and B were pleased to find that Big Pharm had corroborated their analyses through the pulling of the script. But they became concerned at C’s tendency to ‘lose’ the script in a mass of ethnographic detail, and in the tendency for C’s discussion to be more descriptive than analytic as a result. As we continued discussing the readings, we found ourselves becoming somewhat defensive, almost mirroring the territoriality dynamics taking place within the skit and between SCC and Big Pharm. C said, ‘I almost feel like I have to defend SCC’, while A and B remarked, ‘Do you think C has “gone native”?’ and ‘Maybe we shouldn’t be so hard on this skit — C might get offended’.

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<th>Endotextual Reading</th>
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<tr>
<td>Analytic focus</td>
<td>• Character, setting, and plotting of interdivisional politics at Big Pharm</td>
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<td>• Rhetorical devices</td>
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<td>• Authors A &amp; B’s reception of the script</td>
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<td>Analytic style/mode of representation</td>
<td>• Speculative, tentative, interpretive, thematically structured, metaphoric</td>
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<td>Researcher positioning</td>
<td>• Distant from text, critical</td>
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<td>• Asymmetries between consumer and client, managers and managed</td>
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<td>• Approval/disapproval of skit by client</td>
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<td>• Editing and pulling of skit</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Strongly narrative (exploring causal relationships), structured as a plot, ‘factual’ orientation, recounting of events</td>
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<td>• Both a character and narrator, involved</td>
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Table 1. A Comparison of Endo and Exotextual Readings
Though the specific design of our study probably increased this ‘ownership’ dimension, it nevertheless highlights that we as researchers become invested in ‘our’ readings in multiple ways. We had underestimated the strength of our paradigmatic and epistemological leanings, the impact of our previous discourse/narrative experiences, our discourse/narrative skills, the sequence of exposure to textual or contextual material, and even practical concerns such as where most of our time and focus was initially committed. Being able to acknowledge the validity of each other’s readings did not in itself enable us to move comfortably or skillfully between the endo and exo.

Both our review of the literature and our comparative reading experience suggest that these methods may not be commensurable, at least in the sense of one researcher being able to apply both simultaneously. While we hold no illusions that our exercise was in any way exhaustive or definitive, the extent of the differences we found causes us to suspect that when researchers adopt one of these paths, a subtle, self-sealing blindness towards the other arises — despite our best efforts to stay reflexive.

Ironically, reflexivity itself may play an undermining role in textual analysis, a view that parallels Weick’s (2002) recent critique of reflexive practices. Though reflexive inquiry is generally promoted as a way of uncovering one’s biases, we found that by closely examining our motives and values, our respective views became even more entrenched. Thus when endotextualist authors A and B spent time thinking about their views on power and mis-representation, they realized that these reflected important personal value orientations; they then re-emphasized these portions of the analysis accordingly. Similarly, C’s efforts to be reflexive resulted in a more determined effort to make the respondents’ voices heard. While one could argue that reflexivity did indeed alert the authors to their entrenched views (as is its purpose), it did not succeed in facilitating movement away from such entrenchment. This reflects Weick’s admonishment that ‘a moment of benign introspection’ may no longer suffice, and that efforts ‘to prolong and deepen those moments’ are urgently required (1999: 802).

A Diatextual Reading

At this point, we are left face-to-face with Alvesson’s and Karreman’s (2000b: 10) ‘open question’ about whether endo and exo readings should be joined. More specifically, if researchers are to employ both methods at the same site, how might this best be done? As our previous discussion suggests, we need methods which go beyond simple aggregation, ones which deliberately address issues of ordering, partiality, and which bring the endo and exo together while leaving each intact.

One approach is suggested by Clegg and Hardy’s (1996) call for methodological conversations, where separately gathered interpretations are brought together in an intentionally dialogical way. This could potentially lead to ‘a space in which conversation between theoretically self-privileging discourses becomes an option that researchers can pursue reflexively, where theoretical
identities can be affirmed and differences can be negotiated’ (Clegg and Hardy 1996: 700). As Clegg and Hardy point out, such an approach exposes and foregrounds the rawness, tension, and discomfort of bringing different methodological approaches into the same space: ‘such conversations are not necessarily comfortable: they destabilize; they offer ambiguity and ambivalence, not coherence and closure. And they certainly make research a lot tougher to carry out’ (1996: 696). This is in direct contrast to the combined endo/exo methods discussed earlier in this paper which assume that a comfortable fit between readings can be obtained by aggregating readings and in effect moving steadily from text to context.

With this in mind, we began devising a method which promotes conversations from a juxtapositional, not aggregational, perspective. We have termed it ‘diatextual’ to reflect its dualistic, dialogical emphasis; at its core the method seeks a conversation between endo and exo that does not alternate or sequence, but continually questions the text from both perspectives. Such continual questioning is anchored in a refusal to allow either the exo or endo to become embedded in subsequent readings. Thus both are done separately to begin with and then brought together repeatedly to create new conversations about text and context.

Instead of just building an intertextual mosaic, diatextual researchers fashion a kaleidoscope, both in the derivational sense of a portal (scope) to beautiful (kalos) forms (eidos), and in the homophonic sense of a ‘collide-o-scope’, an illuminated chamber where eye-opening collisions occur. The colored glass or jewels in such a device are the textual elements that rearrange themselves in a multitude of ways through the twist of the scope (the ‘what if’ questions below). Figure 1 illustrates the three phases of this process: analytical, dialogical, and transitional.

While the diatextual approach is in essence still a combined method, the deliberate choice of a different term reflects its divergence from other methods discussed here. Within the analytic phase, one key difference centers on level and direction. Other multi-method approaches all tend to approach a text from

![Figure 1. The Diatextual Process](oss.sagepub.com)
multiple levels in some fashion, laddering vertically ‘up’ and ‘down’ a text (Alvesson and Karreman 2000b), going from micro to meso (Fairclough 1989, 1992, 1995). Comparatively, diatextualism has a more horizontal character, using ‘inside/outside’ movements as opposed to ‘up/down’ vertical movements. Another key difference centers on independence. To develop the possibility of alternative, previously unconsidered views, the analytical phase involves completing separate endo and exo analyses, preferably through dividing these tasks between two groups of researchers. Thus both text and contextual inquiry are not shaped by knowledge of one another. This has the result of creating a ‘champion’ for each approach; in turn, this helps ensure that both perspectives contribute equally to the overall reading.

In the dialogical phase each research camp reads and develops questions for the other’s analysis. These questions are intentionally speculative and non-judgmental, asking ‘what might happen if... ’ The questions are then exchanged with the intent of creating an exploratory dialogue. The resulting conversation is recorded and possibly transcribed, and the outcomes are used to reconsider the original analyses and formulate new research questions. This phase departs from other multi-textual approaches in its emphasis on using one another’s analyses to re-view previous positions and formulate new theoretical/conceptual directions rather than cumulate or sediment understanding. While we have only nominally drawn from what is a very complex domain, this phase could be developed further through employing a more comprehensive version of dialogical thinking — Bakhtinian dialogue in particular. Put very generally, in Bakhtin’s conception of dialogue, both parties not only listen to one another, but are open to being ‘sparked’ by each other’s views; the intent is to create possibilities for new viewpoints to emerge (cf. Bakhtin 1929/1984).

When we applied the diatextual method to the text at hand, C asked questions like:

- ‘What might happen if you (A & B) wrote the play to achieve the desired integration?’
- ‘If you were to re-read the text knowing the context as you do now, would different things stand out?’

A and B asked:

- ‘What if other non-parodying forms of writing were used with Big Pharm? What might these look like and what could their effects be?’
- ‘What if this same type of script were used with a different company — what might the effects be?’

A number of things arose during the ensuing discussion. In thinking about how the script could be re-written, the purpose of the skit came under scrutiny (i.e. Big Pharm’s intention of openly, yet safely acknowledging that the groups are going their own ways). We wondered whether parodying is helpful during an intervention process. Perhaps corporate parodying is on the upswing because in organizations professing to be less hierarchical and more employee-centered, parodying may be one of the few ways in which company
stakeholders can bring up issues while still maintaining a cooperative friendliness. From here, we speculated about other forms of engagement that could be used to surface issues in low-hierarchy organizations.

In the transition phase, one revises previous interpretations and, depending on the nature of the research project, builds new inquiry directions. The intention is to create interpretations and directions that are both endotextual and exotextual. Again, it differs from other multi-textual methods in its emphasis on alternative theorizing and futures. From an interpretive standpoint, A and B began examining inversions — where do stylistic shifts occur during the play and how might these be used to better effect? A and B also focused more heavily on points of contestation in the play, particularly phrases that had potential double meanings. C in turn re-examined his field notes from a parody perspective, looking for where parody increased or waned during the play’s construction. Several potential research questions emerged: How can company stakeholders build better narratives, ones where people feel they are represented in both accurate and desirable ways? What types of characterizations, plots, settings, and moralities would be needed? What are the long term effects of parody vs other genres in terms of organizational development?

One of the results of this endo/exo kaleidoscoping is a quality of reflexivity that we would not have necessarily predicted. The dialogical phase in particular facilitated a close examination of the researcher differences so clearly evident in the first two readings. C had to ask why he was disappointed by the eventual cancellation of ‘Let’s All Play Nice’ and even how he came to believe in the play’s validity. A and B had to ask whether this script could have fostered greater insight into organizational realities despite their discomfort with the play’s characters and construction. The important point here is that this reflexivity, rooted as it was in ‘what ifs’ and conversation, resulted in interpretations and research directions that would have been difficult if not impossible to achieve using solo introspection.

At this point it is important to acknowledge a possible limitation of our interpretive work. It could be argued that our diatextual reading of the skit was contaminated by having already carried out a conventional form of multi-method reading; if so, this reduces the validity of our specific interpretations. Though this is perhaps the case, our experience with the diatextual method itself suggests that it is a workable way of keeping the endo and exotextual in respectful and generative dialogue.

With this in mind, we believe the diatextual method might be usefully applied to a number of research situations. Increasingly it seems that narrative/discourse researchers are working in pairs or groups from the outset of their research inquiry; this method provides a creative and effective way to structure the mixing of analyses and voices. Where texts and contexts are potentially provocative, contested, or elaborate, such a method offers constructive and non-defensive ways to conduct the inquiry. It also seems appropriate for research sites where the research focus has not been previously agreed on and where multiple viewpoints might consequently emerge.
Conclusion

Over the last decade our research ‘ladders’ (Alvesson and Karreman 2000b) have increasingly moved away from specific texts to that which is broader, more dynamic, and more socially informed. Exotextualists chase their texts through production, distribution, and consumption channels, while endotextualists delve further into reader response and intertextual constructions of meaning. In other words, we seek to do more and more with text and approach it from more and more perspectives. Our paper has sought to highlight the assumptions underlying this trend and offer some alternative solutions to the tensions and problems that have already become visible when mixing interpretive methods.

In answering the question of whether to focus on text or context, we lodge a seemingly predictable ‘both’. However, we argue that instead of merely aggregating methods, researchers should place their findings in reflective juxtaposition and dialogue, engaging in a distinct methodology. In contrast to other multi-textual methods, the kaleidoscopic diatextual method presented here seeks to involve endo and exo approaches at every stage. Such a method offers three primary advantages over existing combinatorial methods. First, it removes the initial privileging of one method over the other, something we found surprisingly difficult to achieve during our experiment. Second, it provides a way of balancing the contribution of different methods to a single inquiry. Third, it embeds reflexivity in a collective, collegial, and relational context, facilitating insights that solo reflexive techniques can miss.

The textual analysis that has been at the core of this paper illustrates this. Readings that initially focused on the apparent dysfunction of the organization (the endotextual reading) and the contestation of the voice and script (the exotextual reading), moved to re-reading possibilities, and finally developed into questions about the uptake of corporate parodying and effective organizational change. Thus what began initially, as perhaps many discursive and narrative pieces do, with a very situated, localized reading of empirical data, ended up sparking new theoretical directions. Perhaps this could have happened within a conventional multi-method approach... and perhaps not. All we can attest to is the fact that our team of researchers found themselves far less able to advance collectively, constructively, and creatively without having an alternative framework of collegial questioning and reflexive support.

Beyond a research methods focus, this paper contributes to an ongoing call for ‘a different kind of engagement’ (Calás and Smircich 1999: 650), what Townley terms ‘a call for writing in friendship’ (1994: 28), and Weick’s (1999: 798) desire ‘to connect fragments, to spot continuities that enrich, and to make possible ... reflective conversations’ (1999: 798). As we have seen, these calls may particularly apply to researchers working in different textual camps. But to achieve these things, we believe researchers need to work and relate together differently so that these different kinds of conversations can happen. We propose that this different level of engagement must begin ‘in the field’ right at the point where researchers initiate their inquiry and begin working together. Our diatextual method, then, is one way this could happen.
In concluding, we return to the central actor in our discussion, the skit ‘Let’s All Play Nice’. Its title carries a piece of advice about how to conduct conversational reading and analysis, even as its body gives us pointers about how not to play nice. The irony of ‘Let’s All Play Nice’ is that it was meant to break down communication and organizational barriers, but only succeeded in cementing them. Narrative and discursive researchers all too often seem caught in a similar irony.

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