**Narrative framing of the (heroic and rebellious) actors in the struggle for organic food and farming**

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**Implications**

Collaborative projects for more sustainable food systems, including researchers and practitioners, would benefit from increased clarity regarding the ways the project has (or has not) reached its aims. This clarification is here suggested to lean on a meta-theoretical approach, which can relate the aims, activities, roles and positions of actors as well as their competences which they deploy for their goal attainment. This paper appreciates the well-known and insightful Dutch construct of transition management as a successful meta-theory for socio-economic and environmental change. However, the change, as a very complex phenomenon, could also be analyzed as rich, extensive and intensive as well as more unstable and open-ended process. Therefore, the paper proposes that research and innovation projects could benefit from the theoretical approach embedded in the narrative scheme particularly when the work is carried out by multiple actors, some of who are researchers and some practitioners. The paper proposes the narrative scheme (Greimas, 1966; Prince, 1987) as a valid meta-theory which links actors’ roles, positions, activities, competences and contradictory aims into the plot which makes the wonder of socio-economic and environmental change visible.

**Background and objectives**

Social change is an extremely important and challenging phenomenon to be understood. Obviously, due to its risks and benefits, its management would be highly desirable. The research of action for social change, understood as transformation of large socio-economic systems entailing environmental impacts, often means collaboration between research and practice. This research needs a ‘red thread’ for planning, communication, implementation and dissemination for successful delivery. This paper reads transition management theory as an excellent account about technological and industrial change, which knits well strategic planning, development of progressive policies and public as well as private funding (Vellema, 2011). To add more social richness and open-endedness, as well as contradictory features as “drama” (Buurma, 2011), this paper explains how narrative scheme would be a support for research and innovation projects with multi-level developments with very different actors and actor groups.

**Key results and discussion**

Transition management theory is deployed in several Dutch case studies as a basic meta-theoretical resource (Vellema, 2011). The theory depicts change through three levels. The uppermost level is the “landscape” reflecting global trade and its consequences for socio-economic activities. The middle level is the “regime” which depicts the ‘play of the game’ in the mainstream socio-economic activities. Finally, the “niche” represents the source for change through technological and socio-economic innovations, assumed to expand competitively within the mainstream developments of the regime. However, here the levels and their ‘roles’ are ‘pre-defined’, and the actors’ voices focused on innovation activities whereby other social aspects and actors seem somewhat damped. Buurma (2011) also notes how the weakness of the regime may enable changes to occur, rather than the niche only; furthermore, the author recognizes there is “drama” in the dynamics of change. These views suggest the whole meta-theoretical construct could be enriched by more flexible and nuanced ways.

This paper proposes the narrative scheme (Prince, 1987) as a generic and ‘dramatic’ theoretical approach which would more visibly connect the different levels with various actors’ simultaneous dealings across the levels in active pursuit of their goals, often stemming from contradictory interests and expectations.

The narrative scheme, initiated by Propp (1973) and elaborated by Greimas (1966) as actantial model presents a scenery whereby the subject has an object, the achieving of which is motivated by the sender; the plot builds around the subject’s efforts for the object while the opponent works to hinder the subject from achieving the object. Here both the subject and the opponent may have competences and helpers, agents, which support their efforts. Finally, if achieving the object, the subject is rewarded and if not, the opponent gets its way as a reward. The theory is flexible in the way that the same actor in the scenery may represent different actor-positions simultaneously; the position of the sender and the receiver are available for the subject, who is committed to the task and looks for reward. However, typically there are several actors on the scenery. Furthermore, actors may also present ambiguity towards the subject’s and the opponent’s efforts and aims.

The narrative framing emphasizes both the narrative structure and the narrative plot – the relation between actors, the events unfolding and the activities and competences by which the goal is attained. As it often seems, organic food and farming are in contradictory terms with conventional agriculture; thus, the narrative framing shows the struggle of the organic movement in proper ‘heroic and rebellious’ light as fits for the subject, the organic actors. As a trace from folktales, the farmers can adopt the heroic role of the subject as they struggle in the clutches of the establishment and its legal requirements in challenging conditions of global trade. Intriguingly, the narrative scheme can present the actors in more nuanced ways. They can be both self-serving (organic farmers interested in economic achievements) and broadly altruistic (showing the other regarding behavior). Thereby farmers may also contribute both to the sending role and receiving one too. Furthermore, actors can vacillate between the roles as they change sides, for instance by turning from conventional to organic agriculture and vice versa. In a useful role in the theory are the competences, which may range from technology to nature to legal devices to consumer campaigns in actors’ use. This helps to put on one plane very different matters such as technologies, biological features, legal documents, administrational bodies and social movements in support or resistance of the subject’s efforts. Finally, the conditions of the narrative scheme are as broad and deep as to accept other social scientific and technological (working) theories as well as practices (both quantitative and qualitative) to meet the needs of the project.

**How work was carried out?**

The work is a result of a long-term acquaintance with social scientific theoretical sources and exercises made in their application for several projects, both domestic, Nordic and Horizon 2020.

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