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Performative narcissism: When organizations are made successful, admirable and unique through narcissistic work

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Abstract

Dramatic stories of corporate crises appear in newspapers and magazines all over the world; one explanation offered by scholars has been that the affected organization suffered (literally) from narcissism. As responsible, ethical, non-narcissistic behavior is claimed to be crucial for management, the purpose of this paper is to advance our knowledge about narcissism in organizations by developing an understanding of which organizational work enacts organizations as successful, admired and unique. The dominant use of narcissism as a pathological condition limits the possibility to learn about organizing processes since it provides simplistic explanations. By introducing the notion of performative narcissism, we re-focus attention from the pathological condition of organizations to potentially pervasive organizational practices. Thus, we see that narcissistic work is a sociomaterial process not limited to organizational borders, but connecting and enrolling people, artifacts, animals and places into mutually dependent, shifting and composite assemblages that emerge through practices reproducing the organization as successful and unique.

Introduction

Vivid descriptions of corporate crises appear from time to time in newspapers and magazines all over the world, and the latest financial crises have sparked an intense debate on how risk-taking, hubris, corruption, and irrationality endanger our societies. One of the explanations offered by scholars for such dramatic events has been that the organizations suffered from narcissism (Hatch and Schultz, 2002). Stemming from the Ancient Greek myth of Narcissus, narcissism refers to the regulation of self-esteem, something that is thought to assume a pathological character for some people. Organizations appear self-absorbed, affected by hubris and unable to behave ethically when they are understood to be narcissistic (Duchon and Drake, 2009; Stein, 2003). As responsible, ethical, non-narcissistic behavior is generally claimed to be of high importance, the purpose of this paper is to advance our knowledge about narcissism in organizations by developing an understanding of which organizational work enacts organizations as successful, admired and unique.

Much of the literature on organizational narcissism builds on Brown's seminal work from 1997. Often, researchers analyze printed material and interviews performed post-crisis with the purpose of retrospectively reconstructing how failing organizations have developed pathological narcissism. Examples of organizations that have been said to be narcissistic are NASA, General Motors, the American hedge fund Long Term Capital Management (LTCM), the Enron Corporation, and Royal Dutch Shell (Stein, 2003; Duchon and Burns, 2008; Duchon and Drake, 2009; Schwartz, 1991; Hatch and Schultz, 2002). Although this kind of research sheds light on how organizations may become dysfunctional, narcissism is only portrayed as a pathological condition that leads to some sort of major crisis. Brown's (1997) seminal work enables us to do more, though, since narcissism does not need to be considered a pathological condition but can be understood as an ongoing process of regulating self-esteem, a process in

which all individuals and organizations are involved (ibid). Hence, the concept of narcissism could prove useful to understanding processes taking place in organizations that have not yet suffered a major crisis (Ganesh, 2003) by paying attention to processes through which organizations are constructed as admirable and legitimate.

While Brown's (1997) framework rests on the assumption that organizations may be treated as entities, we draw on the 'turn to performativity' in management and organization studies (Diedrich et al., 2013) which means that organizations are seen as continuously enacted (cf. Ashcraft et al., 2009, Czarniawska, 2004b, Lucarelli and Hallin, 2015). Defining performative narcissism as organizational work, we focus on how an organization, CleanTech, is enacted as successful and admirable.

We maintain that the dominant use of narcissism is limiting both researchers' and practitioners' possibility to learn about processes of organizing since it provides overly simplistic explanations for important crises, often resulting in blaming individuals. We argue that with our conceptualization where we re-frame a concept borrowed from psychoanalysis by drawing on performativity, we re-focus the attention from narcissism as a pathological condition of organizations to potentially pervasive organizational practices.

The article is structured as follows. After having introduced the concept of organizational narcissism, its origin and how it has been used, we explain how understanding performative narcissism as organizational work may expand the way narcissism is used in order to produce knowledge about organizations. We then present our methodological considerations and the case we focus on: CleanTech, an apparently successful small organization, which is frequently and vividly constructed as successful and unique. This organization is then analyzed building on Brown's framework (1997), but with the ontological starting point of performativity, leading us to compare our analysis with the examples Brown provides, and to discuss what we can learn

about contemporary organizing by re-conceptualizing organizational narcissism to performative narcissism.

Organizational narcissism

The concept of narcissism has found its way into management and organization studies as a means of understanding the behavior of individuals (e.g. Kets de Vries and Miller, 1985; Hochwarter and Thompson, 2012) and as a means to produce knowledge about organizations and the need of collective entities to maintain a positive sense of the self (Brown, 1997). The concept stems from the myth of Narcissus, a young man who, upon seeing his own image in the mirror of water, fell madly in love with it and eventually perished. In psychoanalysis, the term narcissism has been used to depict the capacity for self-esteem regulation and is often characterized as an extreme form of egocentrism denoting an individual who views himself/herself as ‘the influencing machine’; the omnipotent center of the universe (Kohut, 1971). Patients with a narcissistic personality present an unusual degree of self-reference in their interactions (Kernberg, 1975).

When studying organizations, narcissism is accordingly mostly used in order to characterize a pathological situation, referring to a dysfunction of the self-absorbed, often large, organization, characterized by organizational identity constructions relying on reflecting and expressing the organizational culture, rather than taking in other external images (Hatch and Schultz, 2002). Major crises are attributed to organizational narcissism. It has, for example, been argued that the near collapse of the American hedge fund Long Term Capital Management (LTCM), in September 1998, was caused by irrational behavior stemming from LTCM being a narcissistic organization (Stein, 2003). In the same manner, the Challenger disaster, the decay of General Motors, the bankruptcy in 2001 of the Enron Corporation and the demise of its auditing firm Arthur Andersen, as well as the ignorance of Royal Dutch Shell when dumping an oil rig in the

North Sea have also been attributed to ‘narcissistic’ behavior (Duchon and Burns, 2008; Duchon and Drake, 2009; Schwartz, 1991; Hatch and Schultz, 2002).

It is to be noted that in its original domain, psychoanalysis, narcissism is not necessarily treated as a pathological condition. Freud describes narcissism in the early stages of life as the process by which a self that we identify with, and love, is born (Tyler, 2007). During the 1970s, the focus shifted towards pathological forms and to egoistic, self-boosted personalities, craving for admiration (Kohut, 1971; Kernberg, 1975). These are the descriptions that have mostly impacted organization studies. Lash ([1979] 1991) even extended the use of the term to characterize an entire culture and his work is often cited when describing the context for contemporary organizations. Lash’ analysis has, however, been criticized for leading to the stigmatization of certain groups involved with identity politics, such as women and people of color, since these when participating in processes of ‘reclaiming identities’ become characterized as ‘self-interested narcissistic’ subjects (Tyler, 2007). Narcissism is thus a term to be reflexively handled.

Brown recognizes some of the ambiguities of the concept of narcissism and condenses several psychoanalytical studies into six characteristics, or ego-defense mechanisms, that are crucial for self-esteem regulation (1997). This way, he builds a framework in which different aspects of organizational activities are integrated (e.g. office building architecture, annual reports, humor), including issues of legitimacy and individuals’ identification with groups and organizations. The framework depicts narcissism as a ‘natural’ phenomenon characterized by Denial, Rationalization, Self-aggrandizement, Attributional egotism, Sense of entitlement, and Anxiety (Brown, 1997).

Denial can be explained as a method of coping with intolerable conflict, anxiety and emotional distress through the denial of difference between the ideal and the actual self, for example

through myth-making, the denial of market demands or resource constraints. *Rationalization* is about justifying unacceptable behavior or feelings; the attempt ‘to develop plausible and acceptable justifications for motives or actions [...] in an attempt to maintain sense of self’ (Brown, 1997: 655). *Self-aggrandizement* can be explained as the overestimation of one’s abilities and accomplishments; as an extreme self-absorption and exhibitionism, expressed through claims to uniqueness and a sense of invulnerability, whereas *Attributional egotism* can be traced through self-serving, hedonic explanations, favoring one’s own actions when explaining positive results, and blaming others for negative results. Narcissism also entails *Sense of entitlement* to success, power, and acclaim, and a right to exploit others.

In addition to these five ego-defense mechanisms, i.e. mechanisms that come into play in order to defend the identity of the self from external threats, Browns adds *Anxiety*, which is no characteristic, but what the other characteristics seek to ameliorate. (Brown, 1997) In his work, Brown provides examples of how the characteristics become manifest in modern organizations on the individual, group and organizational levels by referring to a number of studies (ibid). This overview brings together disparate aspects of organizing, but not much is learned about the practices that sustain the six characteristics.

From organizational narcissism to the enactment of narcissistic work

While organizational narcissism has been deployed to analyze crises based on an ostensive understanding of organizations (Strum and Latour, 1987), i.e. by understanding organization as entities that literally suffer from narcissism, Brown’s framework can be expanded by switching to an ontology of performativity. Rather than defining the organization as an entity, an ontology of performativity ascribes no essence to organizations (cf Hernes, 2008; Latour, 1986). Organizations are what actions continuously make and re-make them (Czarniawska, 2008). Hence, the focus is not on the nature of entities but on the actions taken and their consequences (Ashcraft et al., 2009, Diedrich et al., 2013). Research according to this ontology does not center

on establishing serial temporal causal relations to explain current entities, but on understanding spatio-temporal processes always in the making.

In his framework, Brown (1997) distinguishes among three types of entities: the individual, the group and the organization. All of them provide interesting lenses for looking at different aspects – how individuals behave, how groups work, and what organizations produce – but the framework also disconnects the three levels from each other. With an ontology of performativity, such disconnection is made impossible since organizations are what they are made into when people and objects act in their name (cf. Vásquez and Cooren, 2013). With an ontology of performativity it is thus possible to explore narcissism by looking at what is done in practice: how narcissistic characteristics are enacted, and what kind of work this entails.

A shift from ‘the narcissistic organization’ to ‘performative narcissism’ is not just a shift in words, it also implies a different way of producing knowledge about the phenomenon studied. Rather than trying to establish the ‘condition’ of an organization (which an ostensive study would), the performative study involves following actions over time and analyzing how they continuously produce and reproduce ‘the organization’.

In this paper, we define narcissistic work as the work that reconstructs ‘the organization’ as unique and above-average successful; as the work that produces a positive sense of self-esteem (Brown, 1997) by adapting to and reproducing sociocultural ideals of what an admired organization should be (cf. Tyler, 2007; Kohut, 1971). Building on Brown (1997) and moving to an ontology of performativity, a study of narcissistic work thus focuses on how organizational work enacts the processes of denial, rationalization, self-aggrandizement, egoistic attributional work, producing of sense of entitlement, and producing anxiety.

Method

The empirical study focuses on CleanTech, an organization that has not yet been afflicted by crisis. We have followed actions and interactions across time and space, with the purpose of gathering as much context as we could obtain (Cooren et al., 2008). The organization was chosen since one of the authors had read about their celebrated work with shared leadership. The company responded positively to participating in a research project (which, in itself could be interpreted as empirical evidence of what we in the analysis will label “mobilizing success”). The fieldwork lasted for approximately one year (2007) and consisted of observations, interactions and the collecting of written material (see table 1 for an overview). The research was designed to come as close to the organizational practices as possible (Schwartzman, 1993). A diary was compiled to keep track of impressions, important interactions, and emerging analytical constructs. It should be noted that in our reading of the empirical material, interviews are ‘not [seen as] a window on social reality but [...] a sample of that reality’ (Czarniawska, 2004a, 49), which means that we also regard them as sites for the social construction of reality.

[Insert table 1 here]

The fieldwork was originally not designed in order to study organizational narcissism, but after this was completed and once a first phase of inductive coding aided by the software Nvivo was carried out (Van Maanen, 1979), narcissism emerged as a concept that could be relevant to understanding the empirical material. The analysis that followed involved an oscillation between our reading of studies of narcissism in organization studies and re-reading the empirical material. This allowed for a ‘systematic combining’ (Dubois and Gadde, 2002:553) of theory and various aspects in the empirical material that puzzled us, such as the use of the knight metaphor in the organization and the way in which the organization was made to be a role model in different contexts. Hence, although the theoretical framework in this article is presented first and the analysis of the empirical material produced in the study comes thereafter,

the research process has proceeded in an abductive interplay of literature reading, empirical material re-reading and analysis (Dubois and Gadde, 2002; 2014; Wodack, 2004).

Introducing the organization: CleanTech

CleanTech is a Swedish engineering company based in a small town in the south of Sweden. The atmosphere at the company is relaxed and informal. All employees, the CEO included, sit in a large, open-plan office. CleanTech has 23 employees, four of whom are the owners. Karin, one of the owners and the retired founder's daughter, is the CEO. At the time of the study, CleanTech was often portrayed as a successful organization to be admired, and, according to the employees, the foundation for such success was laid some years before through an extensive teambuilding initiative which aimed at creating a strong organizational culture.

The CEO is very active in networking, something that she considers vital for gaining in influence, given that the company is small. Several newspapers and journals have published stories about CleanTech, and Karin has been a member of a committee working for the government providing advice on certain kinds of policies. Telling others about their 'new way of working' has become a way of gaining access to different networks and arenas for CleanTech. The company has participated in several competitions and has received a number of prizes and awards, on local as well as national level, such as the Royal Grant for Good Ambassadorship for Swedish Environmental Technology and Kalmar County's Progress Award. A Swedish occupational pension company that organized the competition *Sweden's Best Workplace* for several years also nominated CleanTech for such an award (along with some other companies) one year.

The enactment of narcissistic characteristics at CleanTech

Below, we analyze how each of the six characteristics is enacted at CleanTech.

Enacting denial

As described above, CleanTech invested heavily in teambuilding at the turn of the century. According to the official statements, they put one year's profit into such activities and the success story of CleanTech was re-told in various settings, for example in local newspaper articles, in a case study performed by Jönköping University, in a report produced by the Swedish Federation of Business Owners, in a national business newspaper, in oral presentations in different business conferences, and in various meetings organized by networks of companies aimed at knowledge-transfer and experience-sharing. The story was also confirmed by the prizes and awards that the company won over the years.

As the narrative about the company was enacted in various contexts over time, some elements emerged and were re-produced as key features of the organization. In particular, what was stated and re-stated, thus becoming the 'truth', was that the company valued the employees' wellbeing and empowerment more than other organizations, a truth supported by arguments such as the employees having unusually low sick-leave rates; that for each employee a specific amount of money (higher than what is common among Swedish companies) is reserved for competence development and health promoting initiatives; and that the company is outstanding in practicing shared leadership (the CEO transferred her role to a management team).

When observing daily work practices, a different and more nuanced picture emerged, however. The 'truths' of the success story did not always correspond to what was going on daily. The competence development money, for instance, was also used for networking initiatives, and certain decisions were taken by the owners without involving the management team. Such contradictions gave rise to ongoing re-constructions about the meaning of 'competence' and 'shared leadership'. Our interpretation is that since a lot of investments had been made to produce the organization as unique and above-average successful, other, painfully contradictory 'truths' about the organization were concealed by re-constructing the meaning of, for example

‘competence’ and ‘shared leadership’, since such alternative truths otherwise would have prevented the re-enactment of a virtuous organization.

Denial was also enacted by the re-constructing of meaning in statements made by the CEO in different situations. For instance, in the report produced by the Swedish Federation of Business Owners, the CEO tells the story of how Clare (accountant at CleanTech), when having a baby, was given the CEO’s room since this was the only room where the door could be closed. Since Clare chose to work part-time and to bring her daughter to work, this was more convenient for her. This may, however, be interpreted as denying the employees parental leave and thus as an example of not taking good care of the employees. This way, denial is enacted by the CEO when framing the company as a generous organization (where the CEO gives up her room) with committed employees (Clare is eager to work), rather than as a company that supports Clare as a parent. Since commitment to work is constructed as more important than the dedication to the baby, the story also re-produces the masculinity of the universal and disembodied worker – a construction on which the organization of work has traditionally been based (Acker, 1990). At the same time, Clare also refers to this story when talking about how the organizational culture at the company is influenced by the fact that the CEO is a woman. In her view, this allows for arrangements that would not be possible in other companies:

I had the possibility with my first child to take him with me to work [...] so I swapped office with Karin so I got an office where I could close the door... and, I mean, maybe a man would not have acted in the same way. [Clare, accountant]

The two examples above show the enactment of denial through the re-constructions of meaning that are produced in order to sustain the construction of CleanTech as a unique and particularly successful company. When such ‘truths’ are threatened, important elements of the construction are re-framed. Generally, CleanTech’s employees seem to deal with these reconstructions and

sustain them by re-telling stories supporting them, but there are also expressions of frustration when specific actions are hindered by such reconstructions. One such situation occurred when there was no money left for some of the staff to attend a course. This frustration, however, never added up to a counter-narrative strong enough to threaten the enactment of the virtuous organization.

Enacting rationalization

An example of rationalization is that the people at CleanTech construct their company as an exceptionally good company. Potentially negative aspects or episodes are interpreted in the light of this. When talking about their teambuilding effort and empowerment processes, people at the company refer to the organization's own version of the FIRO model¹, a model for group dynamics introduced by a coach and applied in the company teambuilding program that is reproduced not only in conversations, but also on the website and in a small book entitled "Healthy and wealthy" (our translation) where the company way of working is described. According to their own assessment of how mature they are as a group, the organization should now work in solidarity, the last phase of the group development process, and a phase in which, according to their description, people work together in harmony after having resolved conflicts. But at the company there are actually conflicts, some of which date back a long time. As the following statement highlights, such contradictions are resolved by re-constructing the meaning of the phases in the model:

When you are in 'solidarity' you are always creative, 'cause things always move forward; we face crisis and conflicts and we grow [...] we don't want a bunch of yes-men here. [Karin, CEO]

¹ The Firo model (Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation) is a theory of interpersonal relations that explains group dynamics proposed by Schutz, 1958.

‘Solidarity’ is actually the stage in the group development model to which Karin refers where initial conflicts should have been resolved and where people should be able to work in harmony. Therefore, something that threatens the construction of the company as being in ‘Solidarity’ is re-constructed as evidence of a creative climate. At the same time, a situation free of crisis and conflicts (‘Solidarity’ according to the model) is reconstructed in negative terms by referring to ‘a bunch of yes-men’. We do not argue that it is rationalization to claim that it is possible to balance solidarity and conflict. But in this particular organization ‘Solidarity’ is a specific stage in a group development model that precedes another phase marked by creativity. In (the phase of) ‘Solidarity’ there should be no conflicts. Conflicts are typical of an earlier stage where the group is less mature, according to the model. Hence, according to the framework of the model, solidarity and conflicts cannot co-exist, which gives rise to a need for rationalization.

While models can always be said to be abstractions not corresponding to practice, what is interesting in this case is that the model has been mobilized in the construction of the organization as modern and successful both regarding its internal and its external communication. Following the model is thus even more crucial than if it had been only an internal change initiative. Rationalization is thus enacted as those actions that are discrepant with regard to the construction of success and are re-constructed as part of the very construction of success. As for denial, saying that rationalization was enacted is not the same as saying that conflicts were only productive and positively met. Rather, the ongoing presence of more or less serious conflicts was a constant source of tension and was what sparked the need for this kind of rationalization.

Enacting self-aggrandizement

The often claimed uniqueness of CleanTech and the morality attached to actions performed in the name of the company can be seen as enactments of self-aggrandizement.

An example of this is the development and use of the ‘knight’ metaphor in the company. This metaphor was developed together with a PR consultant early in the process of reconstructing the company. It was seen as suitable for several reasons:

We think this knight idea is good, because the knight has a historical connection, and we do too; [...] a knight without an awareness of what happens in the world risks getting stabbed in the back and if he doesn’t take care of his most important resource, his horse, he won’t get anywhere. We don’t have horses but employees. And without competence it is difficult to beat the enemy. And best of all; the water that the knight gave his horse in the Middle Ages, this is the water that we clean for the benefit of our children. So we thought that this thing with the knight was really nice. What we did was that the employees all got a charter when the team training was completed, we must have some fun too and have symbols, so everybody got a charter where it says ‘To, for example Kalle Pettersson, for displaying virtue, courage and bravery in battle [...] And everyone was dubbed and when you have worked for us about a year we have a knights’ party where you are dubbed... [Karin, CEO]

The knight metaphor has become a central part of several organizational practices and is inscribed in a number of artifacts and ceremonies in the company. The production of a sense of mission and of the employees as knights fighting for a better world is particularly telling. In one of the company leaflets one can, for example, read: ‘We are knights fighting under the CleanTech banner in the struggle against evil to ensure the survival of Mother Earth’. Such a bold statement is also reinforced by the use of images featuring a knight (the vice-CEO), his sword and shield (borrowed from a museum), and his horse, in all the PR material (see figure 1-3).

[insert figure 1-3 here]

All new employees go through a dubbing ceremony after some time at the company and are given a charter. All the charters of the ‘knights’ (the employees) are hanging on the wall of the main conference room (see figure 4), in a row, with the following text:

We are knights. Our sword is our knowledge and competence. Our spear is our commitment. Our shield and helmet are our trust and belief. Our relations to the customers and co-workers are the horse bearing us. In the present lies the fight for the future. [our translation]

[insert figure 4]

Furthermore, the knight metaphor is often referred to. It is a metaphor that leads to a certain kind of language about what the company works with and how: battle, enemy, virtue, courage, bravery, dubbing, and so on, and a certain kind of imagery to be found in different artifacts (see figure 5).

[insert figure 5 here]

The knight metaphor has assumed important significance at an emotional level for some people and seems to be genuinely felt. Patrik, one of the owners and a project manager at CleanTech, recalls with strong emotion the episode when the knight metaphor was created:

it was perfect, the knight thing; people just looked at each other, the hair on the back of my neck stood on end, damn, it was awesome, ‘this is the way it is’, it was absolutely perfect [...] everyone sat around the table and there was nothing to discuss – it was done. [Patrik, project manager and owner]

When thinking back on the situation he appears genuinely excited and moved.

We see these examples as illustrations of the enactment of self-aggrandizement. Presenting themselves as knights, the people at CleanTech also produce claims of morality and superiority regarding what they do. The company is constructed as successful and unique by connecting the knight metaphor to organizational practices, artifacts and places. Such enactments involve

all employees, but some more often than others, because of their positions or commitment. The less involved employees are in such enactments, the more tensions appear in terms of disenchanted or dismissing constructions of the knight-related practices, for instance when they are re-produced as ‘no real ceremony, just something we do to have some fun’.

The symbols and images connected to the ‘knight’ deserve an analysis of their own, particularly with regard to gender constructions (cf Gherardi, 1994). Here there is only space for sketching such an analysis. Considering that the CEO is a woman and that three of the five top managers are also women, which is rather exceptional in an engineering company in Sweden, promoting in brochures, on the web, in interviews the company in terms of a knight (the vice-CEO) with a large sword, framing the company activities as a battle, and so forth, could also be interpreted as narcissistic work. In gendered terms, although CleanTech’s employees like to talk of themselves as unique, they also re-construct the one aspect that could actually make them rather unique as an engineering company in a male-dominated industry: the widespread presence of women and their influencing everyday operations as well as strategic decisions. Even though the organization is often presented as a modern company in which women have the same opportunities as men, the organization is not enacted around a feminine core metaphor, but rather, by constructing employees as knights, femininity is concealed and the organization as gendered re-constructed in masculine terms. Moreover, dubbing the employees is a symbolic way of making the employees swear loyalty to the company and its ‘quest’, and speaking of the relations with the co-workers in terms of the relation between the knight and his horse also means producing an instrumental and paternalistic construction of relations. In the use of the knight metaphor, power is thus enacted.

Enacting attributional egotism

One example of how attributional egotism is enacted at CleanTech is when explaining the low rate of sick leave among staff.

At the moment we have four mothers and fathers off from time to time, that is, it is flexible; people can work one day or two days, be on maternity or paternity leave the rest of the time. We have sixteen babies or children under the age of three and as you know, with small children at home there are lots of colds and so on. Despite this, we have a very low sick-leave rate. And this is not due to people not taking sick leave [...] people take care of their sick children, but I believe that by working this way, people build up good immune systems, so they don't catch all those colds... [Karin, CEO]

As seen above, the healthiness and good immune system of the CleanTech people is attributed to the company's sound culture, despite the potentially 'harmful' presence of so many children. Such statements construct children as potential problems for the smooth working of the company. Given the few days of sick leave and the statement that people are at home when ill, the particularly sound workplace has made not only the parents, but also the children healthier – otherwise such a large number of children in a small company would result in higher sick-leave rates. By attributing the good health of entire families to how the workplace functions is enacting the attribution of positive outcomes to one's own merits, downplaying other possible explanations.

Another example is provided by the story of a project initiated by the Swedish Association of Technical Companies for developing clean and environmental technology-related business. The Association is presented as a very conservative organization, with the board dominated by old black-suited men lacking orientation toward the future. CleanTech's CEO is one of the few women participating in their meetings and the only one wearing colorful clothes. The project initiated thus catches people's attention and in the story of the project CleanTech's CEO and a speech she gave is assigned a pivotal role in sparking these people's interest and motivation, helping the Association meet future challenges.

Both examples can be interpreted as enactments of attributional egotism since the effects of the company success and uniqueness are expanded by being constructed as the cause of the success of external actors, success achieved despite potentially harmful circumstances (the children and the conservative men). As we did not interact with these external actors, we have no information of whether tensions arise when these actors relate to such enactments.

Producing a sense of entitlement

CleanTech is a small company and what became particularly evident during the fieldwork was how it was enacted as a small but successful and unique company, thus entitled to both teaching others and influencing the industry as well as society, to a much larger degree than its size normally would allow. CleanTech has produced a booklet about how to be both “Healthy and wealthy” and this is distributed in a variety of contexts. Here, the CleanTech-way of working is outlined, for others to imitate. The organization is involved in different research projects and is described as a ‘good example’ for researchers to study and learn for example about how to successfully combine work and parenting or how to achieve shared leadership. People from the company are active in different business networks, on local (e.g. competence development projects) as well as national level (e.g. various associations and national working groups). In these networks, CleanTech’s representatives both produce narratives of how a successful company should work and influence the agenda regarding research funding and national policies. The company website describes the journey that the company has made, stating that ‘we are happy to share our experience’ encouraging anyone interested in learning to get in touch. This is unusual for an engineering company, and above all a small one, in Sweden. CleanTech’s employees proudly claim that their voice is heard despite their limited size – and they actually often refer to themselves as representatives for all small businesses in places where only very powerful people are allowed to enter. They also make jokes about these

powerful people never having met representatives from small businesses. Furthermore, the CEO is involved in the public political discussion (and was made into county governor after the end of the fieldwork) and at the local level the company success is mobilized in relation to various political issues. People from the company meet students both from secondary school- and university-level to talk about how to organize and lead a successful company. Hence, through claims of being successful, the entitlement to be inspirational and to teach and influence other companies, large and small, as well as politics and science, in areas such as the conditions of SME:s and shared leadership, is enacted.

An example of one such enactment took place in a one-day meeting to which one of the authors was invited to present her research about shared leadership. The meeting took place shortly after the last day of fieldwork and was part of a knowledge-sharing project organized by the Royal Swedish Academy of Engineering Sciences. The author did not know beforehand that a representative from CleanTech had also been invited to talk on the same topic. In her presentation, she did not mention CleanTech specifically but referred to her empirical study at the company in order to illustrate the challenges of shared leadership. During the day, the author's presentation as well as the fact the author's university had conducted research at the company was, however, 'hijacked' by the person from CleanTech, who referred to this several times as a way of supporting the claim that CleanTech should be seen as a role model of an organization where shared leadership works well. The Chair of the meeting as well as other participants supported this mobilization. The author felt strong discomfort with how the meeting developed and tried to resist the one-sided construction of CleanTech, but was not supported in such a process.

The story illustrates how through establishing relations with other actors, people from the company mobilize company success and people/objects reproducing it, affecting other actors' actions in a way that is favorable to the organization, either because the agenda enacted by the

company representative is advanced, or because other actors are enrolled in reproducing the success of the company as they ‘learn’ from how the company works.

Anxiety

The last characteristic is *anxiety*. Here, Brown (1997) does not expand on the organizational dimension, but provides mainly psychological examples of how anxiety plays an important role in organizations with a focus on individuals – and actually, as mentioned, anxiety is not really a characteristic. The enactment of anxiety may be conceived as taking place when organizational members interact with each other or with people outside the organization, and confirm that the organization is successful and unique. As this is not a characteristic in the same way as the others, we provide a brief analysis of how this played out at CleanTech.

The strong focus on core values - openness, respect and consideration - in the company could be understood in terms of enacting anxiety, as if the organization would become less real and less successful if these were not continuously re-stated. The core values were agreed upon during the teambuilding project and are often referred to by the employees. Sometimes the core values are mobilized to suffocate dissent, since respect and consideration may be re-constructed as meaning that disagreement is the same as disrespect, and since openness means that matters are handled publicly, making it more difficult for single individuals to express a different opinion. Also, on the company’s website, it is almost easier to find information about the company values and organization than about which products they offer. The production of the booklet “Healthy and Wealthy” also shows the attention paid to the core values. Moreover, people at CleanTech often speak about the necessity of ‘maintaining’ the work done during the teambuilding process by organizing regular team activities and by involving a coach on a regular basis. The coach comes to the company several times a year and is available for private consultation, but also helps different constellations of employees to feel confident in what they are working on and assists in various development processes.

Narcissistic work: a sociomaterial process

Having illustrated how the six characteristics identified by Brown (1997) are enacted at CleanTech, we now analyze which elements are contributing to these enactments in order to understand how narcissism is performed. A first conclusion that may be drawn from such an analysis is that narcissistic work is a sociomaterial process (cf Orlikowski and Scott, 2008).

Table 2 provides an overview of which elements are mobilized through different practices when narcissistic work is enacted at CleanTech. The aim of the table is not to be exhaustive, but to provide illustrations from the empirical case.

[Insert Table 2 here.]

As seen in table 2, the practices of narcissistic work at CleanTech are about connecting and enrolling (Latour, 1986) people, artifacts, animals and places to reproduce the organization as successful, admired and unique. For instance, through the practices of self-aggrandizement, various knight attributes such as shields, swords and helmets are mobilized, as are horses and landscapes such as forests, lakes and rivers, as well as the company conference rooms and offices. Drawn into the practices of self-aggrandizement of creating, performing and telling about the dubbing ceremony, these elements support and build the overestimation of the company, exhibiting CleanTech's claim of uniqueness.

Narcissistic work can thus be seen as a sociomaterial process through which people, artifacts, animals and places are enrolled to mutually dependent, shifting and composite assemblages emerging through practices (Ashcraft et al., 2009). It is relational and draws on the social as well as on the material: two dimensions that are intrinsically entangled (Jarzabkowski and Pinch, 2013) and present in everyday relations and activities (Suchman, 2007). Acknowledging that work practices are simultaneously material and social prevents us from developing

simplifying logics that limit the understanding of the organizing of work (Carlile et al., 2013; Orlikowski and Scott, 2008).

Narcissistic work: not limited to organizational borders

A second conclusion that may be drawn from the analysis of which elements are mobilized through the practices of narcissistic work is that the elements that are mobilized not only come from within the formal boundaries of the organization but also outside of these. In the practices that produce a sense of entitlement, for example, researchers, people from other companies, politicians, representatives from industry, academia and lobby organizations are mobilized through practices of participating in research projects and networking with business and politics.

Narcissistic work is thus not limited to practices that mobilize elements from within an organization, as other accounts of narcissistic organizations would claim (Hatch and Schultz, 2002), but also connects people, artifacts, animals and places outside the formal boundaries of the organization in different practices and in such a way that the organization is reproduced as successful, admired and unique. In this way, narcissistic work may be described as an action-net: collective actions knotted together in a network, constructing ‘actors’ of whatever people, artifacts, animals or place that take action (Lindberg and Walter, 2013). Understanding narcissistic work as such an assembling process of various elements also outside of the formal organization enhances our understanding of the processual nature of this kind of work, thus helping us to move beyond a-priori taken-for-granted assumptions about the organization (Czarniawska, 2004b).

Narcissistic organizations versus performative narcissism

If we compare our analysis to that of Brown (1997) we see that Brown’s ostensive ontology in explaining narcissism in organizations differs from understanding narcissistic work based on an ontology of performativity. When understanding narcissism as based on an ontology of

performativity, we can add to Brown (1997) by foregrounding different kinds of practices needed in order to re-produce the organization as successful, admirable and unique (see table 3).

[Insert Table 3 here.]

Table 3 is not meant to be an exhaustive compilation of the kinds of enactments that are needed to perform the different practices of narcissistic work but are illustrations from the fieldwork. Looking at other contexts, different enactments may be found. The relevance of the table lies in showing the difference in focus depending on how narcissism is understood: as ostensive or performative.

As seen from table 3, Brown's approach sheds light on how organizations are produced as successful and unique. Although he is cautious on whether this is the result of conscious or unconscious processes, the studies he refers to are often critical of how people, most often managers, act, and of how structures (such as the capitalist system) lead to certain constructions. We use the word 'fabricated' to express what Brown's overview foregrounds, that is, how narcissism in organizations is about fabricating the organizations as successful and unique. Some of the studies cited follow processes over time or shed light on practices.

Claiming that Brown's conceptualization is based on an ostensive ontology is therefore not the same as claiming that it provides a static, non-processual view. Rather, it means that also when looking at how reality is socially constructed, Brown assumes, and produces, a distinction between the *representation* of reality and the *construction* of it. Accordingly, narcissism following Brown is about fabricating representations that do not correspond to the actual nature of the organization. Even though Brown also speaks about the actions or processes that lead to narcissism, his ontological position leads him to differentiate between representation and reality and to thus treat actions, such as the production of annual reports, not as an integral part of

reality construction and of the constitution of organizations, but as part of separate representation practices. Narcissism occurs when such practices lead to representations that do not match the true reality of the organization. The cause of such processes is either to be found in the agency of individuals, whether consciously or not, or in the 'real' structures, such as capitalism.

Brown's approach does not, however, aid us in understanding *how* the narcissistic characteristics are enacted, i.e. *how* people and objects re-produce a successful, admirable and unique organization through their daily work. By understanding narcissism as performative rather than ostensive, it is possible to shed light on this. Performative narcissism takes place in a set of related practices – attention is brought to how performativity works and to what kind of work is done to enact an admired organization.

Narcissistic work entails a series of practices taking place in daily work that together but in different ways construct the organization as successful, admirable and unique. Denial, for example, involves constructing the organization as successful over and over again, when central constructs, for example related to work and leadership, are mobilized and re-constructed in practice in such a way that the organization is produced as successful. Similarly, rationalization takes place every time actions that are discrepant from the narrative of the organization's success in practice are re-interpreted in light of company success, rather than as failures.

Whereas describing an organization as 'narcissistic' is about making sense of the organization, most often after a crisis, in order to explain what happened by finding the right label, the construct of 'performative narcissism' may be seen to be a way of capturing the assembling and re-assembling of meaning that constantly takes place in organizations. These assembling processes happen in three different ways: *mobilizing* success, *qualifying* success and *sustaining* success.

Through the practices of producing a sense of entitlement and attributional egotism, organizational success is *mobilized* in such a way that success is seen as natural and obvious for the organization, and is thus used to perform actions, for example in advancing an agenda. The organization is positioned as successful vis-à-vis other organizations and relations are formed based upon this taken-for-granted point of view. Through self-aggrandizement, organizational success is *qualified* when that which the organization does is constructed as correct, not only from a business point of view, but from a moral point of view. This is achieved by establishing a relation between the company's success and a symbolic resource: the knight. And, finally, through the practices of denial, rationalization and anxiety, organizational success is *sustained* as possible evidence of problems/failures is re-constructed to support the success story and as the organization works hard at emphasizing 'our way of doing things'. This three-dimensional process is on-going and happens through daily work as described above.

As the case has illustrated, tensions also emerge when success is mobilized, qualified and sustained. Although the organization was mostly enacted as successful, unique and admirable, and although such enactments took place over time and across space, there were also other enactments that created tensions, as briefly illustrated when looking at the six characteristics and summarized in table 3. These tensions played out both within the formal boundaries of the organization and outside of them, in the action net of narcissistic work, and either emerged in narcissistic work, for instance when the enactment of denial constrains some employee's possibility for action, or were handled by narcissistic work, for example when a discrepancy between different construction of the organization emerges and is dealt with by means of the enactment of rationalization.

Narcissistic work – business as usual in the expressive organization?

In our study of CleanTech, we have taken Brown's six characteristics and looked at how each of them is enacted in practice. We have labeled such enactments 'narcissistic work', which

refers to the work needed in order to reconstruct the organization as unique and above-average successful. Such work goes on in every organization to some degree; it is not a 'deviation' to abhor, as both Brown and the psychoanalytic literature he builds on also to some extent claim (Brown, 1997). It is about conforming to societal expectations (Tyler, 2007). Hence, narcissistic work is not the consequence of individuals being pathologically narcissistic, nor of narcissistic group dynamics, but rather, it refers to the work done to constantly re-make the organization into a successful and admired one, which is in line with expectations of organizations in business contexts. Being based on an ontology of performativity, we do not ask whether narcissism assumes pathologic forms, as we do not uphold the distinction between representation and reality construction. Rather, we ask what kind of work is required to sustain and expand the enactment of a virtuous organization. As our analysis illustrates, sustaining the construction of success and admiration requires work. Such work is not about introspective self-absorption, that is, it not about an extreme focus on an organization's culture at the expense of taking other actors into consideration (Hatch and Schultz, 2002), but it is about enrolling (Latour, 1986) actors, objects, places and practices in producing the organization as successful. Narcissus' mirror is, in other words, a multitude of practices and relations.

In such practices and relations, power dynamics are enacted. In our analysis, we have touched upon gendered constructions and relations between different organizational positions. In several of the enactments presented in this paper, masculinity is produced (for example, commitment to work rather than taking care of a baby; the knight metaphor) in an organization where women have important positions, which is quite unique for a company in a male-dominated industry. In such a context, constructing an admired organization is achieved through re-producing masculinity. Power relations between employees are also shaped in the enactments analyzed, for instance when employees are treated as knights and dubbed, a

ceremony that constructs employees' loyalty to the company in terms of loyalty to a higher moral purpose.

Compared to the literature on organizational narcissism we have not offered a 'dramatic' account. On the contrary, we argue that such dramatic accounts are simplistic and not helpful in producing knowledge on how organizing and business take place. Nor do we provide moral judgments about how people behave (self-interested, egoistic, irrational) or about how organizations are designed (for exploiting). While such judgments may be justified, our contribution lies in unpacking what kind of work enacts a successful organization and what kind of practices emerge when an organization conforms to current norms about business success and uniqueness. As hinted above, tensions and power relations are inherent in such work and these need to be scrutinized further.

Hence, although narcissistic work may be common and pervasive, it is not necessarily unproblematic. Identifying the practices through which performative narcissism is enacted and reflecting on what kind of tensions arise (and in which sets of practices), in a specific context, may thus be central both for the wellbeing of the employees and for the development of the organization. For instance, what happens if too many actions are hindered? And what happens if the people/organizations enrolled in enacting the admired organization resist such enrollment? Our analysis of narcissistic work can thus be relevant for the development of the understanding of phenomena that have received great attention in management and organization studies and that are related to how an organization is enacted as a coherent and expressive one, for example branding, organizational culture and organizational identity, phenomena that have traditionally been studied departing from an ostensive ontology (with some exceptions, e.g. Vásquez et al., 2013; Lucarelli and Hallin, 2015).

In fact, the enactments described here are part of working practices at CleanTech, but they are also visible in other organizations. Google, for instance, is constantly referred to on questions of creativity and workplace (e.g. Coleman, 2016), and guided tours are given at this, as well as other, Silicon Valley companies². Organizations today feel a great need to work hard on expressing themselves and can thus be said to be expressive (Schultz, Hatch, & Larsen, 2000). To manage the core corporate story has become an important managerial tool (Larsen, 2000).

There are also business practices being increasingly used that may fuel narcissistic work. In the case of CleanTech, we have, for instance, seen the role played by consulting (teambuilding), coaching (the regular use of a corporate coach), prize/award-giving (CleanTech has won or been nominated for several awards/prizes). These practices contribute to mirroring the organization, to constructing success and reassurance, and are therefore practices relating to narcissistic work. CleanTech was not using social media, but many companies today do. As social media enact organizations in certain ways that contribute to producing them as successful and unique, their pervasive use and the fact that both employees and people not employed by companies (customers, the media, etc) are involved in producing content on them may make narcissistic work even more important to analyze (Siegert, 2015).

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² <http://svicenter.com>

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	Variation	Documented through	Purpose
<i>Non-participant observations of meetings</i>	Monday-meeting with all employees and coaching meetings with only single employees and a coach.	Tape-recording and transcriptions. Photos.	Observe practices as they unfold. Document the material and the social aspects. (Schwartzman, 1993)
<i>Semi-structured interviews</i>	13 out of 23 employees, including the CEO as well as shop-floor employees. 1-2 h/interview. Most interviews performed in Q1-Q2, 2007.	Tape-recording and transcriptions.	Construct narratives about the organization. Construct understanding for the context. Observe how certain constructions are enacted. (Czarniawska, 2004a)
<i>Shadowing</i>	Of one employee	Notes and tape-recording.	Following activities through practices. (Czarniawska, 2007)
<i>Informal conversations</i>	With most employees	Notes.	Construct narratives about the organization. Construct understanding for the context. Observe how certain constructions are enacted. (Czarniawska, 2004a, Schwartzman, 1993)
<i>Texts (including photos, posters etc) about the CleanTech</i>	Texts produced by the organization (e.g. brochures) and texts produced by other actors (e.g. a case study performed by Jönköping University)	Digitally saved or paper copies.	Collects narratives about the organization. (Feldman et al. 2004)

Table 1: Fieldwork overview

	Practices	People	Artifacts/Animals	Places
Denial	Taking care of children; Working	An employee; A baby	Statistics about sick leave; Funding for competence development; Reports (from research projects and interest organizations); Newspapers articles; Presentations to business networks	The director's room; The lake; The cliffs
Rationalization	Developing groups, Fostering a creative climate; Allowing for dissent	The employees; A coach	The FIRO-model; CleanTech's booklet "Healthy and wealthy"	The website
Self-aggrandizement	Creating, performing and telling about the dubbing ceremony; Fighting metaphorically	The PR consultant; The employees; The vice-CEO; Journalists; Researchers	Knight equipment (shield, sword, clothes, helmet, banner); Images of a shield and a drop of water printed on several artifacts; The charters; The company leaflets and webpage; Written texts (by researchers, journalists, etc) reproducing "the knight"	Nature (forest, lakes, rivers); The main conference room; The open-plan office
Attributional egotism	Taking care of sick people; Being sick; Working	The employees; Their children	Statistics about sick leave	Employees' homes
Sense entitlement of	Participating in research projects; Networking with business and political actors	Researchers; People from other companies; Politicians; People from industry associations; Academies	The book "Healthy and wealthy"; Written material produced by other actors; Power-point presentations	Industry associations; Universities; Political institutions; The internet
Anxiety	Teambuilding; Coaching	The employees	Core values statements; The culture at the organization; Information material about the company	The website

Table 2: Sociomaterial aspects of the enactment of narcissistic work

	Narcissistic organization: The fabrication of successful organizations through the production of discrepancies between representation and reality	Performative narcissism: The on-going enactment of the organization as successful, unique and admired		Tensions arising from performative narcissism
Denial	Representation: narratives that portray an ideal organization through sophisticated textual and visual strategies – describing the organization as glamorous, entertaining; memorable “facts” are used. Reality: the actual organization is flawed, has limited resources and the information provided is contradictory.	Contradictions among narratives/practices are handled in practice so that the organization is re-enacted as an admired one.	<i>Sustaining success</i> – work necessary to protect the enactment of the admired organization	Tensions arising when sustaining success hinders certain actions. Tensions internal to the formal organization.
Rationalization	Representation: rational decisions and selected events are taken into account and labeled as “opportunities”, “threats”, etc. Reality: irrational, nonadaptive decisions ignore facts and evidence	Discrepancies in the success narrative are handled in practice so that the organization is re-enacted as an admired one.		Tensions give rise to the need for sustaining success. Tensions internal to the formal organization.
Self-aggrandizement	Representation: Claims to uniqueness that “often emphasize the prowess and accomplishments of the organization in ways that are palpably exhibitionistic and exaggerated” (Brown, 1997: 659) through stories, rituals, architecture, etc. Reality: organizations are ordinary and similar to each other, as are people in organizations and their actions.	The organization is re-enacted as an admired one by the intertwining of constructions of the organization with constructions that carry strong connotations in practice.	<i>Qualifying success</i> – work necessary to connote the enactment of the admired organization, to give it a specific character and nuance	Tensions among those people less involved in the qualification of success. Tensions internal to the formal organization and related to how involved people are in qualifying success
Attributional egotism	Representation: external actors/factors are blamed. Reality: organizations/actors are underperforming because of internal problems/shortcomings.	The success of the organization is used in practice to explain the success of other actors and re-enact the admired organization		No tensions observed. Possibly tensions among those enrolled in mobilizing success.
Sense of entitlement	Representation: organizations and their products/services are needed, hierarchies are “natural”, organizations have the right to be successful. Reality: bureaucratic organizations and the capitalist system exploit workers and the environment.	The success of the organization is used in practice to construct the space of action of the organization by relating other people’s/organization’s trajectories to the enactment of the admired organization.	<i>Mobilizing success</i> – work necessary to enroll more actors in the enactment of the admired organization	Tensions arising among those people whose trajectory is becoming related to the enactment of the admired organization in mobilizing success. Tensions external to the formal organization.
Anxiety	Representation: shared moral value, sense of common purpose, collaborative relationships. Reality: division of labor and alienation	The distinctiveness of the organization is in practice foregrounded in re-enacting the admired organization.		Sustaining success is a way of handling tensions. Tensions internal to the formal organization.

Table 3: Narcissistic organization vs Performative narcissism

Figure 1. Sketch of a picture used by CleanTech in its PR material, website, presentation. The picture shows the vice-CEO dressed as a knight giving some water to his horse.

Figure 2. Sketch of a picture used by CleanTech in its PR material, website, presentation. The picture shows the vice-CEO dressed as a knight holding a sword in his hands, standing on a cliff and looking ahead. On his chest the logo of CleanTech is represented.

Figure 3. Sketch of a picture used by CleanTech in its PR material, website, presentation. The picture shows a sword (actually a real historical sword). The sword surrounded by shallow water and some plants.

Figure 4. The charters hanging on the wall of the main conference room.

Figure 5. The knight shield symbol present in other artifacts at the organization.