



Inquiring into arresting moments over time: Towards an understanding of stability within change



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 5 May 2015

Received in revised form 15 April 2016

Accepted 7 June 2016

Available online xxx

Keywords:

Arresting moments

Dialogue

Bakhtin

Collaborative research

Forces

Stability

ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to contribute to current knowledge about special moments – what is referred to as “arresting moments” – when something unexpected spontaneously occurs, by exploring how such moments are part of a dialogic flow taking place over time. Based on a collaborative study that has been going on for 15 years and Bakhtin’s work on dialogic forces, the paper contributes with a conceptualization of “stability within change,” which shows how arresting moments not only create newness but also a sense of stability; a strong feeling of knowing how to meet the future and thereby how to move on here and now. Thus, it is not a question of stability or change, but rather an intertwined manifold of opposing forces of stability within change. Implications for practice and research are elaborated upon.

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1. Introduction

When we start to inquire into the living character of the present moment, it is possible to notice how no two moments are the same. Contrary to what is often taken for granted in studies of organization, there is a difference between moments as they unfold (Hernes, Simpson, & Söderlund, 2013). One strand of research that has contributed to an understanding of how the present matters is the literature on “arresting moments” (Shotter & Katz, 1999). Arresting moments have been conceptualized as one-off special moments where “something utterly extraordinary, utterly new and unique, spontaneously occurs” (Shotter & Katz, 1999; p. 88). These are moments when people all of a sudden can make new connections, look upon troublesome issues in new ways, or unexpectedly find out how to engage with some current concerns. To continue to inquire into the generative possibilities of such arresting moments is of significance because “[a]s much as organizations are about systems, material artefacts, and technologies, they are also about living moments where reality gets to be lived, defined, changed or continued” (Hernes, 2014; p. 82).

The aim of this paper is to contribute to current knowledge on arresting moments and to highlight that a greater understanding of

arresting moments can offer novel insights into organization and management studies. Towards that aim, we explore how arresting moments are part of a dialogic flow taking place over time. While current literature has largely studied arresting moments as singular events, we investigate how these special moments are part of a larger context of on-going conversations involving several arresting moments. Hence, our focus is not primarily on arresting moments per se, but rather the relationship between different arresting moments as they unfold over time.

To do this we draw upon a collaborative study that Catherine Smith (a pseudonym), one of the co-authors of this paper, and Marjorie Thomas (a pseudonym), the CEO of a French logistics company, have carried out during the last 15 years. During their collaboration they experienced several arresting moments together, which gives us an unusual opportunity to learn more about the experience of encountering different arresting moments over time. We elaborate on these moments using Bakhtin’s (1984, 1986) work on dialogic forces: what he refers to as centripetal and centrifugal forces. Centripetal forces create stability; centrifugal forces impose novelty. Importantly, these forces do not end up in some sort of equilibrium because there is an on-going interplay between them.

Although current studies have found that arresting moments are special moments where novelty occurs, the contribution of studying arresting moments over time is the acknowledgement of how the lived experience of such moments can be understood as a simultaneous process of creating novelty and stability. Through the conceptualization of what we call “stability within change,” we

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illustrate that arresting moments not only create newness but also a sense of stability; a strong feeling of knowing how to meet the future and thereby how to move on here and now. Thus, it is not a question of stability or change, but rather an intertwined manifold of opposing forces of stability within change.

This finding contributes to current discussions about the need to overcome the dichotomy between stability and change in organization studies. This dichotomized view has been questioned because it has led to a situation where “there is a lack of explanation of the underlying dynamics of both stability and novelty in organizational becoming” (Hussenot & Missionier, 2016, p. 524). Consequently, there have been calls to overcome this dichotomized view because organizational life is characterized by an “on-going tension and contestation between and immanent tendency towards repetition and a centrifugal drive towards novelty and otherness” (Chia, 2003; p. 130).

This paper is structured as follows. We first introduce current literature on arresting moments. We then present Bakhtin’s (1986) work on dialogic forces. From that follows a section on the collaborative and longitudinal methodology that underpins this research and a field account that offers a greater understanding of how arresting moments can unfold over time. After a discussion section, we close our paper with a conclusion and note implications for practice and research.

2. Arresting moments

Not only in organization and management research, but also in everyday life we generally do not pay attention to the present moment and how it unfolds into the yet-to-come. But sometimes, something happens, such as an unexpected question or comment which makes us perceive things differently. Many of us have experienced such enriching moments when it feels as if everything stops for a while because we are so “moved” by what we hear/feel/see that we can see things anew. During these times we have no option but to pay attention to what is happening in the here and now. These kinds of moments have been acknowledged in the literature as “arresting moments” (Shotter & Katz, 1999) or “striking moments.” Shotter (2008a, p. 131) suggested that they are significant because “in our lived experience of them, they unfold in such a way as to accommodate novelty or to resolve a difficulty.” These moments “also arrest us, and produce a delay between the moment of perception and the moment of action. And in that moment of delay, they can produce a special kind of experience where, seemingly, everything-of-relevance is present to us all-at-once” (Shotter, 2008a; p. 144).

When we experience arresting moments they give us a feeling of presence – of co-being – in the here and now. Bakhtin (1993) referred to these moments as “once-occurrent events of being” and he suggested they are essential for the capacity of creating the feeling of an “us.” Moreover, the lived experience of such co-being makes it possible to feel a kind of “open wholeness” in the moment (Bakhtin, 1993). Inherent in these moments are “vitality effects” that emerge as the moment unfolds and these vitality effects can bring about change for people experiencing them, which can be explained as “shared feeling voyages” (Stern, 2004; p. 172). They are like a transformational force that touches those present; a unique transformation co-created among people. These moments can thereby create new resources and new possibilities among those who are present.

In this profound way of creating novelty, arresting moments can help us to notice that which is otherwise taken for granted. Greig, Gilmore, Patrick, and Beech (2012, p. 3) in their study about relational research methods, found how the unfolding of an arresting moment can help people notice something new in their everyday work practice: “seemingly new possibilities for future

practice may suddenly appear visible to them.” Arresting moments can thereby be understood as important in the process of constructing new knowledge “as they bring the background, taken-for-granted aspects of practice to the fore” (Greig et al., 2012; p. 13). It is in such temporal breakdowns that we can become aware and think differently of everyday mundane activities (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011).

In summarizing his understanding of arresting moments, Shotter (2008a) noted that even though these moments are often short-lived there is still a story that unfolds – a directly experienced story. That is why such moments are memorable and thereby long-lived in that they can be recalled again and again: “Indeed, it is just this quality of such moments – that they can be recalled time and time again and are amenable to innumerable verbal formulation” that make these moments special (Shotter, 2008a; p. 130). Cunliffe (2001) also emphasized the enduring quality of these moments since they can produce commitments to the practical flow of living. What Shotter (2008a) and Cunliffe (2001) both point towards is a temporal dimension; an arresting moment does not only have significance for us in the moment as it unfolds, but also over time. However, a temporal perspective, in which arresting moments are explored as a “temporal relationality” (Ericson, 2014) over time has not been explored in the current literature on arresting moments. While existing literature has contributed greatly to the understanding of how an arresting moment can be initiated and what it can do in the present, the understanding of what it means to experience several arresting moments together over time is still to be explored. We will therefore continue to develop a framework that helps to locate arresting moments in an on-going conversational flow.

3. Dialogic forces and unfinalizability

The Russian philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975) has been acknowledged in organization studies for his work on dialogue (e.g., Belova, King, & Sliwa, 2008). Central to Bakhtin’s view on dialogue is that when two or more people meet in a dialogic moment, something unique is created: a collective life pointing towards the future in its own distinctive way. This collective, yet never totally shared, life is played out through people’s offering of each other’s unique otherness – “the surplus of seeing” – to each other. Bakhtin (1990, pp. 22–23) explains it as when I am with someone, at any given time, in any given place:

our concrete, actually experienced horizons do not coincide. For at each given moment, regardless of the position and the proximity to me of this other human being whom I am contemplating, I shall always see and know something that he, from his place outside and over against me, cannot see himself: parts of his body that are inaccessible to his own gaze (his head, his face and its expression), the whole world behind his back, and a whole series of objects and relations, to which in any of our mutual relations are accessible to me but not to him. As we gaze at each other, two different worlds are reflected in the pupils of our eyes.

Thus, these different worlds and the excess of seeing, knowing, feeling, and hearing in relation to the other are founded in the uniqueness of our positions. It is because of this uniqueness – and our excess of seeing – that we need each other for a richer understanding of the world.

Since Bakhtin emphasizes that dialogue is about developing and sharing differences between people, he steers away from an idealized view of dialogue as a specific kind of harmonious communication that can be described as the opposite to monologue (Holquist, 2002). Instead, he understands dialogue to be an on-going interplay between people’s otherness to each

other. This otherness can be understood as a continuous dynamic tension between so-called “centripetal” forces (those that unify, tending towards the center) and “centrifugal” forces (those that disturb, tending to flee the center). When someone is saying to the other: “I agree, let’s do like you suggest”, that is to communicate with a centripetal move. Since centripetal forces aim at centralizing and unifying meaning, they are needed for sharing social life. On the other hand, if someone says “that is not the case, I think we should do otherwise”, that is to bring centrifugal forces into the communication. Thus, the centrifugal forces incline towards multiplicity and fragmentation. Importantly, centripetal and centrifugal forces do not end up in equilibrium; they are rather like the ebb and flow of the ocean, creating on-going flux and movement in life (Steyaert, 2004). In short, the dialogic interplay is “unfinalizable” (Bakhtin, 1984). Based on this understanding of how dialogue is on-going through an unfinalizable interplay of different forces, where differences and commonalities are understood as constitutive of people’s encounters, we will next turn to a collaborative study that has been going on for more than 15 years, in which several arresting moments have been experienced over time.

4. Research methodology

4.1. Process ontology

This research project resonates with process ontology which “directs attention towards a world in a continuous state of flow” (Hernes, 2014; p. 1) and implies a focus on “things in the making” rather than on how something is or has been at a specific point in time since it never “is” in a fixed way (Helin, Hernes, Hjorth, & Holt, 2014). This ontology calls for research methods that allow the researcher to “experience reality directly” by being positioned “at the center of an unfolding phenomenon” in order to grasp processes of becoming (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002).

Based on this process ontology, the living conversations and relationships between people are important arenas of study (Cunliffe, Helin, & Luhman, 2014). In particular, what happens “in-between” people in specific moments and in specific places, and what is created when a particular person says this particular thing, or raises this particular question, is favored rather than attempting to make the conversations look objective and distanced.

4.2. The empirical context

The empirical material of the research stems from a collaborative study that was initiated in 1998 and is still on-going. The study is carried out in the context of a medium-sized road transportation services company, BI (a pseudonym). BI was founded in 1957 and the current CEO, Marjorie Thomas (a pseudonym), is the founder’s daughter. Marjorie joined BI in 1983 and she has been the CEO since 1991.

Marjorie and Catherine met in February 1998 at a conference for top managers on the topic of “Management and Complexity.” At this conference, Marjorie presented how she had designed and implemented a new management system for her company to deal with business complexity. Later, Catherine presented a conceptualization of a generic way of strategizing that is adapted to business complexity. As they were listening to each other’s presentations, they became interested in continuing the conversations. Marjorie explained that she kept experimenting with various unconventional ways of doing strategy and she offered Catherine an opportunity to study these *in vivo* experiments and to help her to reflect on the management practices at BI. Catherine saw this as a wonderful opportunity for carrying out studies with Marjorie and

her employees. That is how their relationship started in 1998 and is still on-going.

4.3. The research process

During these years, they have employed various ways of inquiring into the company and into their joint research topics. These include open interviews with employees and managers (more than 75 interviews); extensive e-mail conversations (more than 200 e-mails received from people in the top management team); Catherine’s field notes from on-site observations and participation in the company’s strategy meetings since 2003; reflective notes; internal company documents such as strategy texts, commercial offers to prospects, and copies of e-mail exchanges between Marjorie and BI’s employees. All these modes of engagement have created a rich understanding about the everyday life in the company and strong relationships between Catherine and various people in the company: members of the top management team, managers, as well as employees of various services.

In addition, three to four times a year, Catherine and Marjorie meet for a six to eight hours meeting between the two of them. During these meetings they discuss the advancement of their current research projects in the light of the feedback of the *in vivo* pragmatic experimentations carried out at BI, as well as new issues of mutual interest to each other that may have emerged in the meantime. They evaluate whether their current joint projects can continue on the same line or if they need to be reoriented. They also make decisions on the next steps to be taken, particularly what would be important to experiment on in practice. Large parts of these meetings are recorded and transcribed.

Catherine considers that during these meetings she has experienced several “arresting moments” (Shotter & Katz, 1999; Cunliffe, 2001). While she did not think of them in those terms when she first encountered these moments (she did not even know the term at those points in time), when she read the literature on arresting moments she found that this notion resonated with what she had experienced several times during her encounters with Marjorie.

In this paper we explore the relationships between arresting moments during three meetings where Marjorie and Catherine participated. Catherine experienced what she would call an arresting moment during two of these meetings. However, in our inquiry into arresting moments over time, we considered the third meeting (a meeting that took place between the other two) to be of importance to how the conversations unfolded, which is why this meeting is also included in the account below.

From these three meetings, we will follow conversations between Marjorie and Catherine around a particular theme: business model evolution. To follow a particular theme offers a way to better understand the role of arresting moments during these conversations. Business model evolution is a topic of high relevance and interest for both Marjorie and Catherine. The background to this interest is that since the 1990s, the European freight transportation industry has gone through tremendous changes that have led to very harsh competition between transport firms. In addition, radical changes in industrial firms’ purchase practices have negatively impacted BI since the early 2000s. On top of that, the economic downturn of 2008 rendered BI’s economic situation very difficult and the firm made significant losses in 2011. So in 2011, BI’s immediate challenge was to obtain as many new clients as possible in this tough competitive context.

4.4. Analysis

There is currently a discussion on how to analyze qualitative data, in which the main challenge working with process-based

studies is that every study is unique and context-dependent which means that “there is no recipe for this kind of analysis” (St Pierre & Jackson, 2014, p. 717). Our analysis has been carried out in a process in which we have read, reread, and reread again the excerpts, and then discussed our interpretations, conceptualizations, and tentative writings during regular Skype exchanges (Yanow, 2006).

5. Arresting moments during meetings

These three meetings took place at Marjorie’s home in Paris. They always sat at the same place, at one end of a long table, facing each other. Furthermore, they always made sure they had at least half a day for these meetings so that they could explore the topics they discussed in depth.

5.1. January meeting—the establishment of an empathetic connection

The goal that Marjorie and Catherine had decided upon for the January meeting was to find out whether Catherine’s theoretical conception of complex business model evolution made sense to Marjorie and whether it corresponded to how she had made the business model of her company evolve in recent years. The meeting started with some small talk about what had happened in the company lately. Then, in order to get a good overview of BI’s business model evolution over the years, they talked about the main innovations that had taken place in the company since they started their joint research collaborations in 1998. After half an hour Marjorie explained a big change that occurred in the company in 2005–2006. This led them to discuss whether this was associated with a change of the firm’s business model, particularly of its value proposition.

It was during this conversation that something unusual happened. Whereas Marjorie usually expresses herself as a self-confident person who gives the impression that she has good control over what is going on in her company, was, for the first time, not so sure. She said:

My worry, if you want, is that I don’t see how I can revise my value proposition as much as that. Well, maybe I don’t have the good ideas, but I don’t see for the time being . . . I could be wrong. . . . All that I believe in my firm, maybe, it is because I am not capable of believing something else.

In this moment, Catherine felt surprised, touched and even somewhat embarrassed by the fact that Marjorie openly expressed herself in this way and she did not know exactly how to respond. However, Marjorie’s exposure of her vulnerability only lasted for a short moment. Then she quickly moved back to her usual confident way of expressing herself.

Even though this only lasted for a moment, that she had let her guard fall was of significance to their relationship and an “empathetic connection” (Greig et al., 2012; p. 282) was created between them which made a difference in the continuation of the meeting and of their relationship. What happened next is that Marjorie changed the subject and started to talk about one of the core notions in Catherine’s conceptualization of the evolution of business models, that of “internal consistency.” Again, Marjorie talked very openly about how she looks upon things:

It’s true that it [consistency] is a real strength of this company, but I could be wrong. It is because I always think in terms of systems. When I was young it was already like that, I wanted to build urban systems. It was the same, the consistency of the system, i.e. how the system functions, how it adapts, how it lives. I’m obsessed by that somehow. It’s strange but when I think about my company, I always see volumes. I don’t know how to explain it, I’m always with sorts of circles that are

intertwined and I have things a little bit like these drawings I’m doing . . . I’m always in 3-D in my head, always, always, always, and there are things that move. The issue is how these things can keep on functioning without exploding. Though, consistency needs to be pulled, because the problem with consistency is that it can be, it will be dull, won’t it?

During this conversation, Catherine had the feeling that, for the first time during their 15 years of collaboration, Marjorie was revealing things that were fundamental to an understanding of how she thinks and acts. Personally, Catherine does not think the way Marjorie does, but through the explanations Marjorie gave she felt that she could directly grasp what Marjorie meant and almost experienced it, without having to explicitly think of it or cognitively try to make sense of it.

From this opening talk they continued to have in-depth conversations about the main idea Catherine wanted to discuss with Marjorie at this particular meeting, namely the importance of thinking about business model evolution as being aimed at continually maintaining both “external relevance” and “internal consistency” of the company. Marjorie agreed that this is important for long-term profitability. In continuing along this path, Marjorie talked about these notions in terms of yin and yang, and in so doing she explained how, in fact, these two notions can dynamically feed each other, and she concluded: “So consistency and relevance are indeed the two main sources that feed the process of business model evolution.”

In explaining how these two notions can dynamically feed each other as yin and yang, Marjorie offered Catherine what Bakhtin (1986) would call a “surplus of seeing” since Marjorie said things that made Catherine look upon these notions in new ways. In all, this moment was characterized by possibilities of seeing and understanding new things together and to Catherine it felt like an arresting moment. Indeed, Catherine was strongly relieved to get positive feedback from Marjorie about the practical soundness of this conceptualization, and was very happy with the new insights and the important step forward offered by Marjorie in this conceptualization. She was also delighted about their connection and how they had talked about these important things in new ways.

In looking upon this meeting as a whole it can be understood in terms of what Bakhtin (1986) would call a meeting of by and large centrifugal forces, where new ideas previously not addressed were brought to the table, which Marjorie did in both these two excerpts above. First when she moved away from answering the question of which transformation of BI’s value proposition was associated with BI’s change, to reflecting on limits in her capacity to envision revisions of her company’s value proposition. And second, when she turned from the notion of “internal consistency” to reflect more widely on her way of thinking. In between these two moments, Marjorie’s short refocus on the notion of internal consistency corresponds to a centripetal force directed towards the meeting’s subject.

5.2. March meeting—centripetal forces of clarifying things

The March meeting started on a Friday evening and continued the next morning because that was the only opportunity for them to meet at length during Catherine’s stay in Paris. On Friday they had a lengthy discussion about the way large firms’ purchasing practices have evolved over the last 10 years: changes in the purchasing practices of BI’s clients have considerable implications for BI. When they rounded off on Friday night they decided to talk about two things the next morning: (1) to revisit the conception of business model evolution that they had discussed at length at the previous meeting, and (2) raise the question of whether BI’s

strategic positioning is still relevant or whether it would need to change given the way the market has changed.

On Saturday, when they started to talk about business model evolution, Catherine was very surprised because she had expected their conversation to continue from where the January meeting had ended, on the discussion about relevance and consistency as yin and yang, but Marjorie seemed to have forgotten it all. This time, she had difficulties in even understanding these two notions. She seemed to be annoyed that these notions did not speak to her anymore; it was as if they had not been embodied and she only had a vague intellectual grasp of them:

I'd like you to explain these terms . . . I'd like you to write for me all that you know on one notion and all that you know on the other one . . . So far, it is something really intellectual for me . . . Every time I read one of your texts on this, I have to go back to my notes and say, wait, what does she mean? And I think I only capture half of it . . .

After explaining these terms again, Catherine wanted to challenge Marjorie about the relevance of her company's strategic positioning given the ways its context had changed. She was very nervous about doing this because she thought it could possibly be a disturbing question for Marjorie. Besides, she was not sure it was the right time to challenge Marjorie on this topic, given Marjorie's worries about BI's tough economic situation. At the same time, Catherine thought it would be very helpful for the future of the company if Marjorie started to reflect and work on the current and future relevance of her firm's strategic positioning. Finally, Catherine decided to raise the question, she did it several times – that is, in Bakhtin's terms, she tried to activate centripetal forces – but every time Marjorie avoided answering directly and even got slightly irritated:

Come on. Relevance . . . For a firm, if it is not profitable and does not ensure its financial durability, I'm sorry but this means that it is wrong. For very good reasons, for bad reasons, but it does not work. So, you earn money, you continue; you don't earn money, you disappear. That's the way it is, that's the rule of the game.

Catherine experienced this meeting very differently from the previous one. Far from being an arresting moment for her, like she had experienced in their January meeting, she was disappointed that they had not “reached” each other. Catherine could also clearly see how deeply concerned Marjorie was about the economic situation in her company, and that this strong short-term concern probably prevented Marjorie from discussing the long-term crucial issue of BI's strategic positioning.

When looking upon this meeting in retrospect it was more like a step back – in Bakhtin's (1986) terminology strong overall centripetal forces were imposed – as if they needed to pause and bring some stability and clarity to their conversation. In retrospect we can see that this particular exchange prepared for the arresting moment that took place subsequently.

5.3. *July meeting—weaving together a new way of seeing which enabled novel actions to emerge*

Before the next meeting Marjorie sent Catherine an e-mail saying: “Revenues are nothing special. Very honestly, the economic crisis is really here, and presidential elections make matters even worse. The financial situation is truly bad.” (e-mail, June 12, 2012). And finally, the day before their July meeting, Marjorie had a negotiation meeting with another company in which they discussed whether this company would possibly be interested in buying BI and under what conditions.

One of the things Catherine wanted to do during this meeting was to go back to the delicate issue of the relevance of BI's strategic positioning, which was a theme that Marjorie had avoided at the previous meeting. However, given the importance of the negotiation that had taken place the day before, they started the conversation around that. Marjorie explained in great detail the topics that were discussed, the conditions the other company was offering, and the date at which they would give their decision.

This conversation took the entire morning; immediately after lunch, Catherine suggested that they could go through the PowerPoint presentation she had given at an academic conference in June. This would also lead her to the issue of the relevance of BI's strategic positioning. She was quite nervous about raising this question again because of the way the discussions had developed during the previous meeting. The fact that Catherine was initially nervous and embarrassed about raising this potentially disruptive question made her clumsy in the way she expressed herself. Marjorie probably felt Catherine's unusual state of nervousness because she responded in supportive ways which made Catherine feel less uncomfortable. Then Catherine offered to move from her usual position of facing Marjorie to one of sitting next to her instead, which would enable them to go through the PowerPoint presentation together. As they watched the presentation on the laptop screen, they discussed what they saw page by page. When they came to a slide that highlighted the core role of “external relevance” and “internal consistency” in regards to business model evolution, which leads to questioning BI's strategic positioning in the market today, Marjorie said:

It's funny, isn't it? Indeed . . . I don't know why but I love this couple of expressions. However, every time I have to re-focus on them to capture their value. . . . I understand very well, but every time, I have to take a pause and then I think that this is brilliant.

Thereafter, unlike the previous time, Marjorie and Catherine explored the issue of BI's strategic positioning deeply. Marjorie connected it to the viability of her company and spoke in emotional ways about the future of the company where they will either “stay alive” or “have to close tomorrow.”

To Catherine, it seemed to be an arresting moment in which they reflected deeply on the relevance of BI's positioning, which opened up avenues of thoughts and ideas that had been unavailable to them before. That this meeting was of significance to both of them was later confirmed by Marjorie's actions. Immediately after the meeting, Marjorie continued to explore BI's positioning in the market in various ways. She initiated a series of meetings with key people within BI to discuss these matters and invited Catherine to discuss those elaborations with her.

During 2013, Marjorie started to regularly mobilize the notions of “internal consistency” and “external relevance” for reflecting on the evolution BI's business model. She became convinced of the importance of maintaining the attention given to these two stakes in some kind of dynamic equilibrium. More precisely, she explained that developing too much “internal consistency” rigidifies the company, whereas developing too much “external relevance” leads to launching certain actions that are not mutually consistent. At the beginning of 2014 she realized that, at BI, too much importance was given to “internal consistency” relative to “external relevance”, so she started to take corrective actions aimed at developing more “external relevance”.

During these three meetings, where we have followed Marjorie and Catherine's discussion around complex business models evolution, we can see how the two arresting moments, as well as the meeting in-between, made a difference to the emergence of new possibilities of managerial actions. We have also seen how this

contributed to further reflections and actions that Marjorie carried out within the BI top management team.

6. Discussion: a continual interplay of opposing forces

Current research has argued that arresting moments can be significant for long-lived profound change. We see more precisely in this case how these moments seem to have functioned as a vitality effect and created new insights from where a number of unexpected, but highly valuable, initiatives became possible. But what was it that made this happen?

In connecting the experience of these arresting moments to the notion of dialogic forces introduced earlier we can see two different kinds of opposing dialogic forces inherent in their conversations that seem to be important for understanding what happened during these meetings: the forces of flow and disruption, as well as the forces of sharedness and difference.

6.1. Forces of flow and disruption

One core element in the conversations between Marjorie and Catherine is their on-goingness—their dialogic flow. They are, in Bakhtin's (1986) terminology, *unfinalizable*. However, as we can see, this is far from a harmonious process that just unfolds smoothly. When making sense of the three meetings, and the experience of the two arresting moments, we can see that their conversations are more like a roller coaster ride, characterized by unexpected disruptions in the dialogic flow. Disruption to the dialogic flow is central to the experience of the living moment because “for something to be experienced as change, there has to be a feeling of difference”, and hence, without disruption, “there would be merely the passage of events” (Hernes, 2014; p. 145). Cunliffe (2002, p. 140) reached a similar conclusion as she found that “not only resonance plays a role in arresting moments, the potentiality might as well be initiated by discomfort” and “the potency may not be based only on resonance and connection but also disconnection as we may be repulsed by the image and react with ‘Oh no! That can't possibly be!’—a process of contestation/contradiction.”

What we can notice in this interplay between flow and disruption is that the disruptions made them take one step back and ponder over things yet another time. By this we mean that issues and themes were returned to over and over again until some satisfactory and temporarily shared understanding of how to move on was reached.

At the same time, something new was happening every time they returned to the same issue. Hence, even though they returned to the same subject, they started from another shared experience of having talked about this issue before, which made it possible for them to move on in a manner that was not linear. What is particularly interesting when they return to the same subject is that the subsequent conversations allowed them to move on, and get further, in their inquiries.

6.2. Forces of sharedness and difference

There is also a continuous interplay between the forces of sharedness and difference in the meeting conversations. We have seen that Marjorie and Catherine were sharing the willingness to inquire into issues of particular interest to the other. They also share the inclination to try to understand each other as well as the willingness to “follow” the other in the dialogue.

At the same time it is possible to note the importance of not always understanding each other or knowing exactly what the other means because that can lead to further questioning and inquiring. This resonates with Belova (2009, p. 172), who

emphasized the need to better understand breakdowns in dialogue because “failures to agree can be seen as a valuable resource.” That is why shared understandings and shared worldviews would imply putting the dialogic transformation to an end because a “complete fusion (a dialectical *Aufhebung*), even where possible, would preclude the difference required by dialogue” (Clark & Holquist, 1984; p. 78).

Thus, in order to better understand the generative possibilities in dialogic moments there is a need to not only focus on shared views of what is going on (Lorino, Tricard, & Clot, 2011), or harmonious communication, but rather, that a dialogic process requires a balance between a common world and difference because that is how speaking partners can contribute with their “strangeness” to the conversations. That is why “misunderstandings deserve special attention as they give important clues to what is going on” (Belova, 2009; p. 172).

6.3. Stability within change

What these opposing forces provide (forces of flow and disruption, and forces of sharedness and difference), through the experience of arresting moments, is some sort of stability within change. Through the illustration we can see that arresting moments not only create newness but also a sense of stability; a strong feeling of knowing how to meet the future and thereby how to move on here and now. In the words of Shotter (2008b), arresting moments have the possibility of offering a feeling of “coming home”, which is a centripetal stabilizing force from which new centripetal action can emerge. When we experience novelty through arresting moments, it is not a question of stability or change, but rather an intertwined manifold of opposing forces of stability within change. Thus, rather than the traditional dichotomy between stability and change we can see that arresting moments over time enable one to understand how stability and change can simultaneously occur in practice.

In this stability within change, the dynamic interplay between the opposing dialogic forces can be understood as the energy that makes the arresting moments possible. If these opposing forces were to be stopped it would probably be difficult for the stability within change to continue developing. What is also possible to see is that even though there is a passing of clock time between the two arresting moments discussed here, what these moments do is to re-cast temporality in such a way that past and the future is “open” in the lived experience of the arresting moment. As Hernes (2014, p. 45) emphasizes by drawing upon the work of Deleuze, it is as if every arresting moment enables another way of experiencing temporality where “[p]ast and future are not temporal elements distinct from the present, but *dimensions* of the present experience” (emphasis in the original). This interplay between the experience of chronological time as well as the “open” time, we argue, is central to the understanding of how stability within change unfolds.

7. Conclusion

Thanks to a longitudinal collaborative field study and the work on dialogic forces by Bakhtin, this paper has expanded our current understanding of arresting moments over time. We found that opposing forces of flow and disruption as well as sharedness and difference enable arresting moments that can create stability within change. Thus, through the experience of several arresting moments participants can know how to go on, which can be understood as a grounded way of moving forward when we are dealing with that which is complex. This contributes to a greater understanding of how stability and change are two sides of the same coin, which means that “stability and novelty are not

different states of organization, but rather they are understood as a same act happening in a present moment” (Hussenot & Missionier, 2016, p. 543). This finding has implications for practice as well as research, which will be elaborated upon below.

First of all, in remembering that arresting moments are unplannable: How can we seize opportunities for such moments to occur? Even though arresting moments cannot be scripted or planned, we can still learn how to act wisely when we feel an arresting moment is rising. One such thing is to be aware of the rhythm and the speed in our conversations. What we have encountered during arresting moments is that the speed of the conversation is often reduced. This was the case both in the January and the July meetings: Marjorie’s talk slowed down; Catherine remained very quiet, listening carefully to Marjorie’s utterances to make sure she was fully grasping what Marjorie was saying in this particular exchange. This slowing down occurs as if people subconsciously know that what would be uttered next would make a significant difference. What we also have noted is that an arresting moment often evolves when someone acts surprisingly, such as Marjorie did in the first meeting when she showed her vulnerability. When someone opens up like that it seems to be of significance that we respond respectfully and seize the opportunity to break with routine ways of relating. What this question invites, accordingly, is an awareness of how we relate to each other and how we make room for arresting moments to occur.

Second, since arresting moments unfold “in-between” people, how can we acknowledge this in-betweenness? One suggestion is to remember the importance of listening. Even though we all know how important listening is, we tend to forget to make room for listening during conversations. This is something Shotter (2009, p. 21) brought forward when he noted that we often listen for opportunities to break in and express ourselves since “we feel we have a right for our voice to be heard.” Yet, he continued, even if we manage to make our voice come through, we still do not know how our utterance lands among those to whom we are talking. For us to be able to touch each other, we have to tune in to the otherness offered to us to be able to respond from within the on-going conversation (Helin, 2013). This is the kind of response that makes people feel they have been heard. What this question invites, accordingly, is the need to focus not only on speech but also on listening, and how these dialogic activities inform each other during conversations. In practical terms, it is not enough to make sure everyone has a say in a conversation because it seems to be equally important that people have the possibility to listen to themselves as well as to others for new meanings to emerge.

Third, how can people’s otherness, “strangeness”, emerge? Even though we have emphasized that a feeling of “co-presence” can develop during arresting moments that does not necessarily mean that people experience this moment in the same way. We would rather say that one of the features of an arresting moment is that we all experience this moment differently, and in the conversations we can offer our unique differences to each other. Thus, in contrast to the idea that meetings in organizations are important because we can develop a shared view in such encounters, we will here emphasize the importance of not always developing shared views. For a meaningful conversation to take place there needs to be a shared assumption that people will understand each other (Garfinkel, 1967). However, that does not mean that people understand the utterances voiced in the same way. How would that be possible considering that dialogic meaning making is unfinalizable, always on the way and never fully completed (Shotter, 2008a). Or, in the words of Bakhtin (1986, p. 69), “[a]ll real and integral understanding is actively responsive, and constitutes nothing other than the initial preparatory stage of a response (in whatever form it may be actualized).” In this response, the listener does not duplicate the other’s understanding because we all, in

each and every arresting moment, operate from a unique position in time-space that makes us see (feel, experience) something that is not possible for others to see because of our “surplus of seeing” (Bakhtin, 1986). For instance, because Marjorie reflected as a CEO, from a practical perspective, on how the two drivers of business models evolution – namely external relevance and internal consistency – could work to foster a judicious evolution of her company’s business model, she could offer Catherine a surplus of seeing that this scholar could not envision because she had never been top executive of a company. What this brings to the fore is that the centripetal and centrifugal forces that people can offer each other in their responses are of great importance. It is when these forces meet each other, rub against each other without ever being transformed into a single voice, that movement can occur. Another way of phrasing it is to say that dialogic transformation evolves in the arresting moment “when two (or more) heterogeneous elements (each already multiple) come together and transform each other” (Clegg, Kornberger, & Rhodes, 2005 ; p. 159).

Implications for research can also be drawn from this study. From a methodological point of view, one conclusion is the need to not only focus on the arresting moment in itself but also what is happening in-between arresting moments including the breakdowns that are part of the dialogic interplay. By that we mean that there is a need to not only pay attention to the grandiose in regards to arresting moments but also to other moments that do not appear as grandiose when they happen; for instance, moments that maybe feel unpleasant as they happen. Indeed, those moments can be equally important for the collaboration over time. Since arresting moments emerge from an on-going interplay between different forces, both the flow and disruptions and the sharedness and difference are as important for the generative process to emerge and for stability within change to develop over time. During the succession of arresting moments explored here, for instance, no grandiose arresting moment was experienced during the second meeting but, nevertheless, what happened during the second meeting proved later on to be an important resource for the on-going conversations between Marjorie and Catherine. Along similar lines of reasoning, Kebbe (2012) wrote about “dialogue with delay” where she emphasized that “in-between-talk” is a great resource for dialogic transformation to occur over time.

Furthermore, while the crucial importance of longitudinal studies has been emphasized many times before, what can be learnt here is the importance of keeping a sensitive stance to each other during encounters. Catherine was always aware and thoughtful about how she positioned herself and she considered what would be the best time to push forward with difficult questions. Thus, she was feeling her way forward in an embodied way, where she was “dialogically listening” for what to do next (Helin, 2013). In relation to this, one of the challenges is how we can establish a relationship where people’s otherness – our “strangeness” – can flourish and make a difference, in research as well as in practice.

Acknowledgements

This article is the result of a thoroughly collaborative co-authoring process. We are especially grateful to Marielle Bloch-Dolande, CEO of Beauvais International (BI), for enabling this research. We are also thankful to Martin Fougère, associate editor of the *Scandinavian Journal of Management* and the two anonymous reviewers for the valuable comments and suggestions they provided us during the review process. Marie-José Avenier gratefully acknowledges that this research was conducted within the “Management stratégique des PMI et ETI de service aux

enterprises” program under the aegis of the Europlace Institute of Finance, a joint initiative by Beauvais International.

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