Department of Sociology

Their different perspectives:

A narrative analysis of a UN agency's work

with young people

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Abstract

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Problem/background: 'Young people' have for long been the focus of international development cooperation efforts, and has taken many forms: youth development, youth engagement, youth participation, and youth leadership to name but a few concepts. However, a recent UN report concludes that while over 75 years has passed since youth first entered the global agenda, the UN as not yet been successful in integrating youth and youth perspectives into international policy discourse and decision making processes.

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to explore what narratives about the organization's work with young people exist among staff, to gain a better understanding of the challenges of involving youth in the United Nation's work.

Short description: This paper is a case-study of a specialized UN agency based in Geneva, Switzerland, based on 14 in-depth interviews with key staff members at different levels in the organization working on its youth agenda. This paper adopts a narrative approach to organizational studies and theory of organizational culture. It uses narrative analysis as a way to understand and interpret organizational culture.

Conclusion: There are contrasting narratives in the UN agency among the interviewees as regard to how young people should be understood and approached, and whether or not the organization is ready to further involve young people in its work. These contrasting narratives could be interpreted as potentially hindering the organization's involvement of young people in its work, since there are many different interpretations and directions associated with the youth agenda. One explanation for this could be that the organization lacks a clear policy or guidelines on working with young people, above and beyond seeing them as a key population that is vulnerable in its sector.

Keywords: Young people, United Nations, narrative analysis, organizational studies

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1.   Introduction

In July 2011, the United Nations General Assembly held a High Level Meeting on Youth, Members States were joined by civil society organizations and youth to "enhance dialogue and mutual understanding among youth worldwide, to promote youth participation at all levels, and to increase the commitment and investment from Governments and the international community in addressing the challenges that hinder youth" (A/65/L.63).

According to the United Nations (here after *the UN*) working with young people[1] is essential, both in terms of ensuring their health and rights as well as involving them in the organization's work (General Assembly 2011:1ff). The UN also asserts that youth can act as a communication channel between the UN and other young people, and their greater involvement in decision making is called for (General Assembly 2011:3f). Many official documents communicate a positive and uncomplicated relationship between 'young people' and the UN (UN-habitat 2012).

'Young people' have for long been the focus of international development cooperation efforts, and has taken many forms: youth development, youth engagement, youth participation, and youth leadership to name but a few concepts. Working with young people in international cooperation stretches even beyond the United Nations, to the First League of Nations World Youth Congress held in Geneva, Switzerland in 1936. However, as the recent report *Youth 21: Building an Architecture for Youth Engagement in the UN System* concludes, while over 75 years has passed since youth first entered the global agenda, the UN has not yet been successful in "bringing youth and youth perspectives more effectively into international policy discourse and decision making processes" (UN-Habitat 2012).

1.1.   Problem formulation, purpose of study and research questions

While resolutions, declarations, reports, and policies on youth participation in the UN, together with an explicit ambition to foster youth leadership and work closer with young people themselves, exist, successful examples to date seem few. The question, then, is why has it been difficult for the United Nations to involve young people in its own work?

To gain a better understanding of the challenges of involving young people in the United Nation's work a case study of a specialized UN agency based in Geneva, Switzerland (here after *the*

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[1] For statistical purposes the United Nations defines young people as 15-24, however for the purpose of the project that this data was collected for, a broader definition of 15-29 was used.

Organization) has been undertaken to explore how staff members who work on the youth agenda perceive young people in general and their work vis-a-vis young people in particular. The Organization does not currently have a specific youth policy or guidelines, but is in the process of developing a strategy for youth leadership.

The data for this study (14 in-depth interviews) was gathered as part of a project documenting the challenges and opportunities to working with young people and fostering youth leadership within this specialized agency, with the purpose of developing the above mentioned strategy on youth leadership for the Organization. The name of *the Organization* will not be disclosed, as per the contract between the Organization and the author, and to ensure confidentiality of the interviewees[2].

This paper draws on primarily three theoretical perspectives. Firstly, a narrative approach to organizational studies, specifically focusing on staff's own narratives in organizations; secondly, theory on organizational culture and sub-cultures is used and, finally, theory on social constructionism.

The purpose of this study is to explore what narratives about the Organization's work with young people exist among staff, to gain a better understanding of the challenges of involving youth in the United Nation's work. The following two research questions will guide the analysis of narratives about young people in the Organization:

- What narratives about young people exist within the Organization?
- What narratives exist about the Organization's involvement of young people in its work?

1.2.   Limitations

As mentioned, the interviews that form the data for this paper were conducted by the author as part of a project to develop a strategy on youth leadership and engagement for the Organization. This means that some of the questions in the interview-guide were formulated in a way that may not necessarily be in accordance with a narrative approach. However, as will be discussed in the theory chapter, by using a broad definition of narrative it is still possible to understand the data collected via the in-depth interviews as 'narratives.'

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[2] The current author was hired as a qualitative research consultant in the above mentioned project. A letter of agreement between the author and *The Organization* was put in place allowing the author to use the data gathered as part of his BA thesis in Sociology, at Lund University. Letter of Agreement on file with author.

Given that the study is qualitative, the findings are not generalizable. However, since the aim of the study is to explore the narratives about young people within the Organization to gain a more in-depth and nuanced understanding, a qualitative approach was deemed appropriate.

1.3. Overview

Following this introduction, **chapter two** provides a short overview of the emergence of the youth agenda in the United Nations, as well as a summary analysis of how young people are described in a sample of key UN documents. The **third chapter** presents and discusses the theoretical framework applied in this paper. The **fourth chapter** outlines the methodology used for data collection and analysis, followed by a **fifth chapter** which presents the findings. The sixth and **concluding chapter** discusses the findings in relation to the theoretical framework, provides conclusions and some suggestions for further research.

2.   Background

Firstly, this section gives a short description of the literature review conducted to find prior narrative studies on youth involvement in the United Nations. Secondly, it provides a brief description of how the youth agenda has emerged within the UN system, as well as a summary of how young people are described in key UN documents relating to youth involvement.

2.1.   Prior research

The literature review was conducted through Lund University's search tool Summon. First, the search words "united nations", as well as the name of the Organization, were used in different combinations with the search words "youth", "young people" and "youth involvement". Using these search words, there were no relevant hits. Secondly, the search words above were combined with the search term "narrative". This gave one relevant hit - an article by Cagri Topal, titled "A narrative construction of the organization by an external party: The nongovernmental organization narrative by the United Nations" (Topal 2008). No other relevant prior studies were found.

Topal's material consists of "20 speeches of the 54th annual conference (2001) titled as 'NGOs today: Diversity of the Volunteer Experience' at the UN headquarters." (Topal 2008:111). In the UN narrative of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), Topal identifies "volunteerism" as the main theme (Topal 2008:116). One of the important components and sub-themes to this main narrative theme is "youth involvement" (Topal 2008:118). In the UN narrative of NGOs, youth "emerges as the most important pool to make volunteers" (Topal 2008:118). In a quote used to exemplify this, it is stated young people are the "ideal candidates" and that they "have the time, the energy and the urge to make a difference. Their emotions are raw and their spirit has not been subdued by the complacencies of the world" (Topal 2008:118).

Though not elaborating further on the sub-theme of youth involvement, and while focusing specifically on youth as part of the nongovernmental sector, Topal's analysis is relevant for this paper. The three main components of a UN public narrative on young people as elaborated below are in line with the descriptions of young people Topal highlights - the role of young people as natural change agents in society, the importance of their involvement, and the sense of a consensus of values and norms between young people and the UN. These themes exist in both the public speeches analysed by Topal, and the public UN documents reviewed for this paper, and strengthens the case of a UN public narrative of youth that include these three main, though broad, components.

2.2. An emerging youth agenda at the United Nations

According to the recent UN report, *Youth 21: Building an Architecture for Youth Engagement in the UN System* (UN-Habitat 2012), which chronicles the emergence of a 'youth agenda' within the UN, the first UN document that stressed the importance of youth engagement was the *Declaration on the Promotion among Youth of the Ideals of Peace, Mutual Respect and Understanding between Peoples*, endorsed by the UN General Assembly (UNGA) in 1965.

In 1985, the UNGA for the first time observed an International Year of Youth. While symbolically important, the first breakthrough for real youth participation and engagement in the UN's work came in 1992, with the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, where *Agenda 21* was adopted. *Agenda 21* was a key UN document that called for youth involvement in the UN's own decision-making structures (UN-Habitat 2012:11). *Agenda 21* states that "each country and the United Nations should support the promotion and creation of mechanisms to involve youth representation in all United Nations processes in order to influence those processes" (Agenda 21 as cited in UN-Habitat 2012:11).

Following this landmark event, the UN adopted the *World Programme of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and Beyond* in 1995. While widely celebrated as a milestone for youth involvement in the UN system, the UN-Habitat report states that the *World Programme of Action* only led to a few changes in the UN system in terms of real youth engagement in policy development and discussion (2012). Since 2000, the United Nations celebrates International Youth Day every year on the 12 of August, and has produced four key reports on youth development.

In 2009, the General Assembly adopted a resolution proclaiming the *International Year of Youth: Dialogue and Mutual Understanding* (64/1349*)*, to be held from 2010/2011. At the end of the International Year of Youth, a High Level Meeting on Youth was held in July 2011, where an outcome document was adopted by the General Assembly, which, again, called for the greater inclusion of young people in decision-making.

However, according to the UN-Habitat report, dated 2012, "there are no mechanisms with the UN system that allow youth to meet and work on policy questions and other key decisions that affect their future" (UN-Habitat 2012: 23). The report rather sombrely concludes:

> "For over 75 years the international community has discussed how youth can be better engaged at the international level. [While]… these efforts look promising on paper ... they

have not been successful in bringing youth and youth perspectives more effectively into international policy discourse and decision making processes" (UN-Habitat 2012).

In sum, while there have been many events, resolutions, declarations and reports that all highlight the importance of youth engagement in the UN's own process, there seems to be limited's evidence of any form of concrete youth participation in its structures.

2.3. 'Young people' according to the United Nations

'Young people' have for long been the focus of international development cooperation efforts, and has taken many forms: youth development, youth engagement, and youth participation to name but a few of the approaches adopted. While these are to an extent overlapping and sometimes unclear in definition, the most recent 'buzz word´ in international organization is youth leadership (personal communication with youth coordinator at a United Nations specialized agency 2011-10-16). To get a better understanding of how young people are perceived by the United Nations, a brief summary analysis of key global documents, as well as a selected number of documents from the Organization, will be presented. Since a more comprehensive analysis of the public narrative of 'youth' in the UN is outside the scope of this paper, a sample of key documents have been selected:

- The World Programme of Action on Youth (2010)
- The Outcome document of the High-level Meeting of the General Assembly on Youth: Dialogue and Mutual Understanding (2011)
- The Secretary-General's Five-year Action Agenda (2012)

In these documents, two themes have been identified as particularly important for the public narrative on youth: young people's inherent energy at a personal level and youth as a transformative force for change in the broader society.

Young people are described as having 'good' ideals and some kind of energy – an energy that needs to be 'harnessed'. Youth are also seen as potential "instigators of democratic reform". The word instigators communicate a view of youth as not only energetic and idealistic, but as a group that takes initiatives. Further, even though not claiming that this is true for *all* young people, it is stated that: "Young people in all parts of the world, living in countries at different stages of development and in different socio-economic settings, aspire to full participation in the life of society." (Economic & Social affairs 2010). Youth are seen as a group that not only wants to live and manage their own lives, but seeks something that is referred to as a full participation in the life of society.

Secondly, youth are described as a transformative force that can make change happen in society, and more importantly, it is assumed that this change would be 'positive'. According to the World Programme of Action on Youth (2010), young people are not seen as a resource amongst others, but rather as crucial partners towards an overall positive societal change to achieve social development:

> "Any efforts and proposed actions in the other priority areas considered in this programme are, in a certain way, conditioned by enabling the economic, social and political participation of youth, as a matter of critical importance" (World Programme of Action on Youth 2010)

As such, youth's involvement in the UN structure overall is seen as important, and youth representatives are described as an important link between the UN and young people outside of the organization. That some young people would perhaps not be interested in making this positive change is not acknowledged, or that they might have different views between themselves on what kind of change is considered positive. This can further be interpreted as there being a 'taken for granted' view on what type of change is considered to be 'positive' – implied, whatever the UN deems positive is positive. In this way, the relationship between the UN and young people is communicated as based on a consensus of values and norms.

2.4.   'Young people' according to the Organization

To understand how young people are perceived by the Organization, the following documents have been reviewed:
- The Organization's strategy 2011-2015;
- The key UN resolution guiding and providing mandate for the organization's work from 2011; and,
- The key technical documents on young people and the sector the organization works in.

In these documents, three themes have been identified as particularly important for the Organization's work with young people: 1) the need for young people as active leaders of social change, 2) the sense of a value consensus between young people and the Organization and 3) the need for the involvement of young people to improve programmes and policies. In line with the perspective that youth leadership is the new buzz word in the youth development agenda, the key documents of the organization all refer to the importance of working with existing youth leaders in its sector. In this view:

Young people's key role as partners in the sector must not be forgotten, and platforms for their participation and strengthened leadership need to be expanded and safeguarded. (Original quote paraphrased[3] by author)

Similar to the UN broader discourse, young people are seen as having an inherent energy that will strive for 'positive' social change. This gives the impression of there being a value consensus between young people and the Organization, instead of allowing for reflections and understanding of the real diversity of young people including political ideals, socio-economic status, gender and socio-cultural context:

Supporting young people as a force for positive social and behavioural change at community level is crucial. (Original quote paraphrased by author)

Further, young people are seen as a key resource in the development of better policies and programmes:

The development of effective programming and policy efforts depend on the participation of young people. However, at the same time, there is little data on the involvement of youth in this regard. For the time being, there are no routine mechanisms in place for reporting on youth involvement in this area. (Original quote paraphrased by author)

However, again, while the importance of youth engagement and involvement in the Organization's sector is repeatedly stressed in the above documents, the 2011 technical document on young people concludes that, just as in the broader UN youth agenda, there is:

still room for improvement regarding the involvement of youth in policy processes, as well as in decisions on the distribution of resources. (Original quote paraphrased by author)

After reading these documents, three main components of a public narrative on young people in the UN have been identified: 1) young people are seen as having a key role in, and being natural agents of, social change; 2) there is a sense of a consensus of values and norms between young people and the UN; and, 3) the importance of involving young people in the work of the UN.

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[3] The original quotes have been paraphrased by the author in order not to disclose the Organization.

3.   Theoretical framework

This section discusses the theoretical framework adopted for this paper. This includes theory on social constructionism, a narrative approach to organizational studies and finally theory of organizational culture.

3.1.   Social construction of reality

Social constructionism, in contrast to a more positivist epistemological perspective, is a term for a theoretical school of thought that focuses its interests on the construction of people's own understandings and perceptions of reality, rather than studying any form of 'actual' reality that exists outside of peoples understanding of it (Shadish 19995b as cited in Patton 2002:96). The social constructions of reality are what people perceive as being real, and are therefore what people base their actions and beliefs on (Patton 2002:96). Reality, in this way, can never be accessed unmediated by this socially created web of meaning. In this perspective there is not one true perception of reality, but several different constructs of reality that are all being created through human interactions and language in different cultural, political and social settings (Haraway 1988 as cited in Johansson 2011:26). In addition social constructions are constantly re-negotiated through social interaction and human language, and as such vary over time (Johansson 2011:18).

3.2.   Narrative theory in social sciences

In social science, a narrative approach can either be thought of as an ontological claim or a methodological approach (Johansson 2011). The ontological claim in essence means that social reality is fundamentally constructed through narratives, that reality takes its form through story-telling. Without narratives, the foundation needed to build cohesive individual or collective identities would be lost (Johansson 2011:18f). A methodological approach to narrative theory, on the other hand, sees the narrative as one among many different forms of gaining knowledge and understanding of the social reality, where the narrative is a specific form of speech-act, which follows a certain structure (Johansson 2011). This paper follows sociologist Anna Johansson's approach which adopts the ontological approach to narrative analysis, but uses elements of the more narrow methodological approach in empirical studies (2011).

According to narrative theory it is through stories, both telling and listening, that people come to understand themselves and the world (Borgström and Boréus 2005:220f). Narratives function as frameworks for interpretation, something that can be used to organize and make sense of events and

experiences (Larsson 2002:23 as cited in Borgström and Boréus 2005:224). Narratives are not only used to organize our understanding of the past and the present, but also the future: narratives existing in people's social and cultural environments become starting points and frameworks for thinking and planning ahead (Somers 1994:614 as cited in Borgström and Boréus 2005:224f).

Different narratives exists in different social and cultural contexts and are social products created through social interaction; narratives become a gateway for studying the relationship between individual and collective sense-making and the creation of individual and collective narratives (Bruner 1991:20 as cited by Borgström and Boréus 2005:225f).

What exactly is a narrative then? In the literature, there are many definitions of a narrative – and they vary greatly depending on if it is the ontological or methodological perspective that is adopted. At its most basic level and as shown above, a narrative can be said to be a kind of story. According to Johansson, for a text to be a story, it should fulfill two criteria: temporality and causality. The different parts forged together into a story, should display a logical sequence in time in such a way that it would not be possible to change the order of the parts without altering the story and the perception of its timeline. The parts should also have a causal connection in such a way that the story has a clear direction, moving from a beginning to an end to make it a narrative. (Johansson 2011:122ff)

In a similar manner, Barbara Czarniawska, one of the leading scholars using narrative approaches in organizational studies, argues that a story, in order to become a narrative, should have three steps, "an original state of affairs, an action or an event, and the consequent state of affairs" in order for the parts of a story to make up a "meaningful whole" (Czarniawska 1998:2). This means that the story should contain a "*logic of transformation*" – through stories people explain processes of change by showing what they think are relevant parts of and consequences of these processes (Todorov 1978 as cited in Czarniawska 2000:15). Czarniawska use the term "plot" to describe this way of adding meaning to a story (2000:15). By adding a plot, the story becomes a chain of different parts that reflect how the teller of the story interpret and make sense of an experienced reality and specific parts of it. Narratives in this perspective do not reflect one true reality, but rather the way that storytellers understand and make sense of their own subjective reality.

Borgström and Boréus suggest further tools for thinking about what components make up a narrative. Here, a narrative is comprised of two main parts: 1) *histoire*, or simply story, which refers to the content of a story and 2) *discourse*, which refers to how a story is told – what structure does

the story have? (Chatman 1987:19 as cited in Borgström and Boréus 2005:230). In this paper, it is the content, the histoire, which is the primary focus. The themes that are presented in the analysis, then, have been identified through focused readings of the content - what is said - and not through analyzing the structures, or, in other words, how it is said.

According to Åkerblom, most stories that are studied in organizational studies have a different format than the strict methodological approach to narrative analysis suggests. In her doctoral thesis *Leadership, power and feeling: a narrative analysis of youth leadership*, Åkerblom includes both what could be thought of as a stricter definition of a narrative, text with plot, as well as other forms of statements as narratives, in so far as that they are told by the interviewee to the interviewer within the context of the interview (2011:24f. *My translation*). This paper adopts a similar approach.

3.3. Understanding organizational culture and sub-cultures through narratives

Narrative analysis and approaches have seen a rapid expansion in organization studies (Rhodes and Brown 2005). In this section I will show the connection between organizational narratives and organizational culture and sub-cultures, to offer explanations as to why narratives in organizations sometimes differ, and the implications this may have.

Narrative approaches to organizational studies - In relation to organizational theory, narratives can be understood as existing on different levels: "Ontological", "public", "meta" and "conceptual". Ontological narratives are used to construct our individual identities. Public narratives are those of organizations which function as frameworks for collective meaning-making and understanding. Meta-narratives refer to the idea of grander stories as institutionalized historical discourses, such as stories about political ideas or religions. The conceptual narratives refer to stories that give authority to well established terms and concepts often found in academic terminology (Somers and Gibson 1994, as cited in Johansson 2011:96ff). In this paper, it is the public narratives that are of interest to understand the collective sense-making around the Organization's work with young people, which are contrasted and compared to narratives based on 'tales of the field,' further expanded on below.

Another term closely related to public narratives is "organizational identity narratives" (Czarniawska 2000:27), which can be found in organizational documents as well as among the members of a given organization. Such narratives, according to Czarniawska, can be used to form a collective understanding of an organization among its members (Czarniawska 2000:27). The

concepts of public narrative and organizational identity narrative can be seen as very closely related, as they both are thought to be interwoven with and reflecting organizational culture.

Organizational culture can be defined as that which allows for "shared meaning, interpretations, values and norms" within a group of people (Alvesson and Sveningsson 2008:36). While organizational culture is not static but socially constructed, it can still be difficult to change. An organizational culture offers the group of people in it a framework for interpreting and understanding reality, as well as a framework for action and behaviour (Alvesson and Sveningsson 2008:36). According to the narrative perspective in organizational studies, beliefs, values and ideas are expressed through stories in organizations, and can be used to "give clues about how to think and act in various circumstances" (Alvesson and Sveningsson 2008:37).

Collecting stories to learn about organizational cultures - As shown above, the degree to which one unifying organizational culture and narrative exists within any given organization on any particular theme, for example the youth agenda, is of great interest in organizational studies. An organization with a cohesive organizational culture, expressed through narratives, will enable staff members to act in a more concerted manner, providing them with the same framework for interpretation, meaning making and action. However, in most organizations there are several different organizational cultures within one organization, so called sub-cultures (Alvesson and Sveningsson 2008:38). These can be seen as created in the same way, and have the same functions, as the more encompassing cultures. Sub-cultures can be created over time since different people in organizations often have different work tasks, different supervisors and colleagues, are placed in different locations, or at different levels on the hierarchical ladder. Also, staff member's age, social background, education and profession can affect what sub-cultures are created in different parts of organizations. The co-existence of different sub-cultures means that there can also be different frameworks for interpretation, values, norms and ideas within organizations at the same time (Alvesson and Sveningsson 2008:38f).

Since organizational cultures are socially constructed, through interaction and narratives, it can be argued that organizational narratives and stories reflect organizational cultures. In this way, it is reasonable to believe that different sub-cultures should also be able to give rise to different organizational stories. By studying the spread and occurrences of different organizational narratives one can learn about different organizational cultures (Czarniawska 1998 as cited in Borgström and Boréus 2005:234).

Organizational narratives are created, but also changed, by human actions through history, and function as "scripts and staging instructions for future performances" (Czarniawska 1998:20). In line with this, Johansson states that organizations can be seen as socially constructed through the acts of storytelling between people (2011:18). Especially the above view that narratives are not only created, but also changed through social interaction, inspires this paper's approach to the transcriptions and the narratives identified in the analysis. In this approach, a text can bee seen as "a material trace of a conversation that was or is taking place" (Czarniawska 2000:31). Based on this view, I will understand the narratives in the analysis as neither static nor final, but as narratives that most likely has changed over the course of time, and will continue to change, together with the organization they are a part of.

According to Czarniawska, getting and analyzing stories from members of organizations is one of four main ways of using a narrative approach in organization studies – it is called "tales of the field" (Czarniawska 1998:13ff). By interviewing staff members and analyzing the transcriptions with a narrative approach, this paper has a 'tales of the field' approach.

In this paper, the theoretical framework outlined above will be used in the following way: The narratives based on the tales of the field will be compared to the three main components of the UN public narrative outlined in this paper's background chapter. Through this comparison, I will identify similarities and differences between them. Drawing on the theoretical framework, I will discuss how this might be connected to the challenges of involving young people in the Organization's work. In doing this, it is primarily the functions of narratives and organizational cultures as frameworks for mutual interpretation and action that is of interest.

4.   Material and Method

This section describes the empirical data and the method of data collection and analysis. This qualitative study is based on 14 in-depth interviews with key staff members working on the youth agenda in the Organization.

4.1.   Sampling strategy

The Organization is a UN specialized agency with its headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland, and field offices in some 80 low- and middle income countries. The Organization has roughly 900 staff members, of which one third are located at the headquarters and two thirds in the field. Young people are defined as a population group that is vulnerable and at risk within its sector of work.

To reach the staff with experience in working with young people and young people issues, in other words information-rich interviewees, a purposeful sampling strategy was adopted. In this strategy, interviewees are chosen based on the possibility to gain a deeper understanding in a specific area of research and context, rather than a random sample needed for generalizeable results (Patton 2002:230). There are several ways to sample purposefully, and for this paper a mix of snowballing and criterion sampling was used. Snowballing allows for interviewees and key informants to suggest other people with good knowledge and experience in the themes of research, while criterion based sampling means that interviewees must fulfill certain criteria to become part of the final selection (Patton 2002:237f). The inclusion criteria were: direct experience in working with young people or young people issues, preferably being a key staff member in this area in their respective offices or departments.

The snowballing process started before the first interview. A gatekeeper was used in this process to collect suggestions in headquarters, as well as through regional offices in order to find suitable interviewees in country offices. The lists of suggestions were compared to see what names came up the most times. Patton speaks of lists first growing when names are added, later "converging" to lists of reoccurring candidates (2002:236). The most reoccurring candidates were contacted by the gatekeeper through email. About half of the candidates were chosen from different parts of headquarters, the other half from different country offices. This was in order to have interviewees working in different parts and contexts in the organization, as this was though to influence their perspectives and experiences. As regards to sample size in qualitative research, Patton highlights that there are no strict guidelines in terms of numbers, rather a need to balance the purpose of the

study against an adherence to time and resources, information richness of interviewees, quality of analysis and an understanding of the extent to which results are context bound (2002:244ff). Given the timeframe, fourteen interviews were deemed adequate.

4.2.   In-depth interviews

14 in-depth interviews with key staff members working on the youth-agenda in the Organization were conducted. An open open-ended and semi structured approach was adopted. In open-ended interviews, the interviewees have the possibility to describe their own worldviews and understandings in their own words (Patton 2002:348). This is the opposite of interviews based on closed questions, where the possible answers are predetermined (Patton 2002:348). Before the interviews, an interview guide was developed. An interview guide outlines the topics and themes that are of interest to the interviewer, but without dictating the structure of the interview too much – it gives flexibility to the interviewer by leaving space for spontaneous questions and probing (Patton 2002:343). An interview guide can vary from just a list of overarching themes written out as single words to detailed questions if there is a need to ensure that certain information is asked for (Patton 2002:344).

Since it is staff's own stories about youth involvement that is the focus for this paper, open-ended interviews were suitable. The interview guide developed had a number of detailed questions, however the questions were used to guide the interviewer, and were not asked word by word, nor in the order they appeared in the guide. As such, a great deal of flexibility was adopted by the interviewer in the interview situation, moving from different sections and themes as they naturally emerged in the conversation.

Interviews were recorded with a Dictaphone for verbatim transcription, and verbal informed consent to participate in the interviews was sought from all participants, and recoded with the Dictaphone before the interviews started. Interviews were conducted in November and December 2011, some face to face and some via phone. Interviews over the phone with staff in country offices have sometimes had bad phone lines resulting in lower sound quality recordings, which presented a challenge in the transcription phase. On average, the interviews lasted about 60 minutes.

All but one interview were transcribed verbatim following a standardized transcription protocol. 13 transcripts together with notes from the 14th interview make up the material for this analysis. Each interview was given a unique code made up of IDI (in-depth interview) and a number. All data was safely stored on the author's computer with a back-up on an external hard drive.

4.3. Method of analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data. This type of analysis focuses on the *content* of narratives, rather than *how they are told and shaped*. In a thematic analysis, "investigators collect many stories and inductively create conceptual groupings from the data. A typology of narratives organised by theme is the typical representational strategy" (Riessman 2005:2). To operationalize the research questions, four sub-questions have been posed to the data to guide the reading, and themes were identified that correspond to the operational questions.

Research questions	Operational questions
What narratives about young people exist within the Organization?	o What characteristics are attributed to young people? o What stories are told about what young people can contribute/add to the Organization?
What narratives exist about the Organization's involvement of young people in its work?	o Is working with young people described as a priority? o What are the perceived challenges in working with young people?

The analysis represents a "novel reading" of the data, which means "an interpretation by a person who is not socialized into the same system of meaning as the narrator, but is familiar enough with it to recognize it as such." (De Vault 1990 as cited by Czarniawska 2000:18). The analysis aimed to highlight multiple narratives in the data. Here, I am inspired by what is called a "multivoiced story", where different perspectives are brought forth without judging which is the 'truest one', and without attempting to forge the different narratives into one single 'true' narrative (Czarniawska 2000:19). But as Czarniawska emphasizes, even a multivoiced story does not exist in the data prior to the analysis. When highlighting different narratives in search of a nuanced understanding, this is done on the researcher's or analyst's own terms, by choosing what narratives to use, and how to use them when presenting the findings: "It is never a question of "authenticity"; it is always a question of creating an impression of authenticity, of recontextualization that is interesting ("novel"), credible and respectful." (Czarniawska 2000:19).

4.4. Reflections on the interview context

I will use the concept "micropolitical situation" (Keesing 1985 as cited in Johansson 2011:260. *My translation*), to reflect on the situation in which the interviewee and the interviewer meet, and the power relations that exist between the two (Johansson 2011:260).

The first reflection is that in one of the interviews, the interviewee made it explicit that he saw the

interviewer as a 'young person'. If this was the case in one interview, it might have been the case in others. Since staff's perceptions of 'young people' are a central part of the interviews, the interviewer, if seen as representing 'young people', might have effected how the interviewees expressed themselves and what they shared with regards to their views on young people. In addition, every interviewee has a higher degree of education than the interviewer, and some of the interviewees are also members of the senior management. If these are facts that interviewees actively reflect on, it could for example mean that interviewees might 'dumb down' their answers to make the interviewer understand easier. Both these points could results in interview bias, where the interviewee gives answers he or she thinks the interviewer wants to hear.

Finally, the Organization in which the interviews have been conducted has often been described by the gatekeeper and other staff members that the interviewer has spoken to as a very 'political environment' into which the interviewer has not been socialized, which means that certain themes or topics might be highly controversial to the interviewees without the interviewer knowing.

5.   Findings

In this section, I will outline the main findings of the thematic analysis to explore the narratives that exist among staff about the Organization's work with young people. The themes have been developed in response to the four operational questions posed to the data as outlined in the chapter above. Based on this paper's theoretical framework, the quotes used in this chapter should be seen as parts and exemplifications of the histoire, the content, of narratives used by the interviewees. It is through the coding and analysis of the content that the themes presented in this chapter have been identified. These themes, in their turn, are here used to interpret and describe what narratives about young people and their involvement in the Organization's work exist among the interviewees.

5.1.   Characteristics attributed to young people

Three main themes have been identified in the coding process of the data that show what characteristics are attributed to young people by the interviewees.

Energetic and creative - Many of the interviewees portray young people as having a special kind of energy, passion and inspiration. Creativity is another word that is often used to describe young people. One interviewee calls it the potential of young people to cut through the grass, an expression that represents the idea that young people are more likely to try new ways of working and doing things, even though it might mean that it is difficult to foresee the results or consequences. Another expression for a similar view is thinking "out of the box":

> "So I think that they have more inspiration, they might be more optimistic, they might be more creative and might have better ideas with new technology and new concepts. And so make things a little bit more inspirational and, and different. Thinking out of the box a bit more." (IDI02:841)

At the centre of rapid social change - Interviewees talk about young people as being part of social changes, making them important partners to the Organization. Also, many interviewees have a perception that society is not only changing, but changing fast, and that young people are at centre of those changes. From this perspective, working with young people will enable the Organization to be more in tune with new ways of social organizing and communication in a fast changing world:

> "The nature of geopolitics, communications will all have changed. [...] the people who are involved, who are going to be both leading but also involved in being part of that change,

they would also be involved in organisational leadership. Because otherwise the organisational leadership won't be able to keep up with them" (IDI03:355).

Young people—a diverse group - At the same time as many interviewees describe young people as energetic and part of social change, it is also often emphasised that young people are all very different, and that it is important to try to understand as many of these different perspectives as possible in order to make sure that the Organization does not develop a too simplified understanding of young people and their worldviews. This was described as an important part of the Organization's work with young people. However, there were also interviewees that stated that the Organization's approach to young people is still problematic, even though youth are being acknowledged as diverse:

> "To create [...] a uniformed group of these people I think that you're setting yourself up for failure...And that's often the role that we wanted them to play for us that's very convenient for us […] They're young people […] and we need to see them as such we can't create a group around them and build an activism around them that doesn't exist just because it serves a purpose for our agenda. (IDI08:596)

In summary, the characteristics attributed to young people by interviewees include being energetic and creative and at the centre of social change. However, interviewees also emphasized that the idea of young people as a homogeneous group is problematic, and that their involvement in social change is not a given. It is interesting to note that these contrasting and sometimes contradicting themes can be expressed by one and the same interviewee - first describing young people as energetic and part of social change, and then later on questioning this view by explaining that it is not really possible to generalize about young people in this way. I interpret this as there being two contrasting narratives about young people in the Organization, that were often used in parallel to each other.

5.2.   Young people's value to the Organization

Three main themes have been identified in the coding process to reflect what interviewees think young people can add to the Organization.

Understanding the perspectives of youth - The most common theme in this area among interviewees was that the involvement of young people in the Organization's work is crucial in order for the Organization to better understand the perspectives of young people themselves. This, for example, in order to improve the design of services and interventions targeting young people. By taking

young people's own perspectives and experiences into consideration, and listening to what young people want and need, those needs can be better met:

> "we can't try to fit youth representation and youth issues into our preconceived models. I think we need to start first, you know, what are the life issues and that's actually gonna take us to knowing where we need to shift things to respond better." (IDI06:417)

Another interviewee also highlighted the need to work more closely with young people, but in a way that makes the argument more general, and not only about designing programmes or interventions.

> "we can't make decisions for young people. I mean we just can't decide for somebody we don't understand necessarily […] I have vague memories when I was a young person (laughing) and my parents would tell me things I mean they just didn't understand what my world looked like. You know, they didn't understand what it meant to me so I mean and I think we're in that same place in a sense" (IDI01:350)

Youth and organizational change - Another common perception among interviewees was that young people could challenge organizational patterns and ways of working if they were further involved in the Organization's work. In this way, many interviewees link the involvement of young people to a perceived need for organizational change.

> "And I think that that's where young people can play a key role because I think that they haven't been so institutionalized they have less vested interests and I think if given the opportunity they also can be more courageous to challenge some of those existing fundamentals which are not good traditions but just the ones that...that keep the organization from accelerating change" (IDI08:751)

Diversity in staff - Finally, the importance of involving young people is expressed as part of a broader theme on the need for greater diversity among staff in general. Interviewee's hold that older and younger people can contribute with different perspectives. The interviewees talk about a need for a mix between experience, which older staff is perceived to have, and new perspectives, which young people are perceived to have.

In summary, working with young people is seen as having an added value to interviewees. Young people are described as having perspectives and worldviews that are different from older staff members in the Organization - worldviews that are sometimes also not known to staff. Further, young people are seen as those who could bring innovation and help the Organization break out of old ways of working and create organizational change. I interpret this as a narrative about young people in which they are again understood as change agents, but in an organizational context rather

than a broader social context. In this narrative, a story emerges of young people in contrast to the Organization, which is perceived as currently made up of primarily adults and in need of organizational change. Young people are seen as those who can bring new perspectives and make change happen, which does not seem possible to achieve by the more 'institutionalized' adults that are already inside of the Organization. Another important part of this narrative is that unless young people are further involved in the Organization's work, it is difficult to know what young people's worldviews look like. Therefore, I also interpret this as a narrative that speaks about a gap between young people and the Organization, in terms of understanding (or lack there of) of each others worldviews.

5.3. Working with young people: a priority?

All interviewees agree that the involvement of young people in the Organization's work is of great importance. The main reasons why this is seen as important were outlined in the previous section. But, in addition, some interviewees also thought that may not be the case for other people working in the Organization. Here, interviewees talked about both the present and the past, saying that a broader involvement of young people is not seen as a priority in the Organization.

> "the first thing I told the executive director at that time when he met me on my appointment when he said what do we need? And I said we needed a [youth] movement. This we were very technically focused at that point of time, we were more obsessed with indicators, we were more obsessed with ah best practices […] Ahm at that time the thought of a movement was laughed off" (IDI10:432)

Another interviewee explains that even today, discussions between some staff regarding how to reach common goals can be difficult because they have differing viewpoints as a result of having different academic backgrounds, for example social scientific backgrounds versus more 'technically focused' backgrounds. Here, like in the above quote, a tension between more and less technically focused views is emphasised, and that this can be challenging when discussing new ways of working with young people.

In summary, this short section has shown that the involvement of young people is of great importance to the interviewees. However, there also seems to be another view, namely that not everyone in the Organization might subscribe to the idea that involving young people is important.

5.4. Perceived challenges in working with young people

Interviewees were asked to speak about what they considered to be some of the most important challenges when trying to involve young people in the Organization's work. Among these challenges four main themes has been identified.

A risk aversive culture - One common theme is about difficulties in changing the Organization's culture to be more open for new ways of working with young people, and also to allow young people more space to lead. One concept that interviewees have brought up in relation to this is the concept of "risk". Many interviewees describe the Organization as being risk-aversive. Many interviewees express that work often proceed according to routine and that new ways of working, especially where the outcome can less easily be foreseen, or where young people have more decision making power, are often not encouraged. A risk-aversive culture, within the context of working with young people, is particularly problematic given the above mentioned staff perspective that the added value of working with young people is actually their ability to bring creativity and new ideas.

> "when it comes to doing things differently to the way we have been taught or we have learnt to do it's very, very difficult and even when you have the mind-openness to, okay, I'm going to take the risk to do something different, do something, you know, as against current and get a young people in the driver's seat [it's very difficult]" (IDI05:92)

Staff has mentioned several obstacles to trying new ways of working, in particular a combination of a high workload and focus on specific deliverables and producing results at a high pace. This can make the work-environment inflexible to adopting new ideas of how things could be done differently. The issue is not staff members objecting to new ideas that young people are thought to potentially bring, but rather that there is simply no time for the processes that new ways of working would require, including the risk that the new way of working might fail since it is untried.

Different leadership styles and attitudes towards the involvement of young people - Another theme is about different leadership styles of team leaders and managers in the Organization, and that their attitudes towards young people sometimes differ. Most of the interviewees perceived the senior management as being positive towards and advocating for the importance of youth involvement. Yet there is also a contrasting perspective: some interviewees said that the leadership styles of some senior managers are excluding rather than inclusive of young people. For example, some senior managers were perceived as unwilling to allow young staff members more influence if it means that they will get less credit for the work. In addition, even though some senior managers advocate for

the inclusion of young people, they do not put in place the required structures and mechanisms that will safe-guard younger people's influence. In sum, interviewees see young staff members' status in different departments, divisions, and teams of the Organization as a result of the leadership style of their respective line-managers.

Some interviewees say that there is also a difference between colleagues in general with regards to their attitudes towards involving young people in their work. While some colleagues are perceived to feel strongly about involving young people, others are perceived to not make this a priority. In relation to this, some interviewees mentioned the need for clearer guidelines on working with young people in order for there to be a more unified organizational approach:

> "We are taught to work with politicians and parliamentarians we have to work with young people in a special way. We have guidelines on working with politicians we don't have guidelines on working with young people. We need to have it" (IDI11:718)

Unclear role of the Organization in relation to partner agencies - Another theme on challenges is about uncertainties regarding the role and mandate of the Organization in relation to its partner organizations. Here, two components are brought up. The first concerns how youth issues are to be understood and defined. This can be seen as a broader discussion about under which organizational mandates and objectives the youth agenda can potentially be placed.

> "what's our role in terms of providing the support, the resources? I'm not quite sure how that would look. (IDI01:408)

The second component is much related to the first one. This one is about which UN agency can have ownership over the youth agenda. Some interviewees say that it would be difficult for the Organization to fully profile itself as an organization being an expert on youth issues, in relation to some of its partnering organizations that are claiming the same expertise. This indicates that the Organization's work on youth and young people issues, especially if becoming more of a priority in the future, could potentially be seen as an overstepping of an already agreed upon division of work between the various UN agencies.

How to measure the results of youth involvement? – Involvement vs. Change - A final theme identified, though more rare then the prior ones in this section, is about challenges in measuring young people's involvement.

> "I think they're involved in a certain extent. Ah maybe they give their input into the things

but they're not sure of the outcome because for me to be involved is that you should see the outcome of those things […] But when I don't see the outcome, you know, it becomes a bit tricky for me to say, yes they are involved." (IDI07:376)

In this perspective, the quality of youth involvement cannot be understood by looking at whether or not young people are being involved in various processes, but requires an understanding of how their individual inputs influence the outcomes of any specific process. It is interesting that only a few interviewees touched on this topic. The interviewee who most clearly stressed this point, argued that since it is often unclear what the results and outcomes of different processes where young people are represented are, it is difficult to say if they are involved, even if they are physically there as a representatives of other young people. Here, the inputs and their effects are seen as inseparable from each other, which in turn can be related back to the question of what meaningful youth involvement actually is. Consider the above perspective, while reading the below quote from another interviewee:

"We can find space for young people to meaningfully participate...in each one of these [processes]. And I think we do make an attempt, whether we whether it's consulted I don't know. [But] how will you make sure that that participation actually leads to change? That we might be able to guarantee, [or] we might not be able." (IDI10:719)

The difference between the two quotes is quite striking, as the second quote outlines that meaningful youth engagement is not necessarily dependent on whether the engagement leads to an actual change, while the before discussed perspective states that it is important that the participation has an actual impact, which can be interpreted as a stronger focus on participation leading to change.

In summary, in this section it is showed that there are different themes regarding the challenges of involving young people in the Organization's work. Firstly, as shown in the previous section, some interviewees highlight that different staff members have different views as a result of different academic backgrounds, and that these views are not always fully compatible. Secondly, the low level of youth involvement is often explained by the culture being risk-aversive and therefore not open to innovative ways of working – something which is very much connected to the idea of young people as agents of change. In other words, the theme about a risk-aversive culture as a challenge to involving young people would not have made as much sense if young people were not seen as natural agents of change. Thirdly, the theme about leadership styles and attitudes towards youth involvement show that many interviewees do not think that the Organization as a whole is interested in involving young people. The fourth theme was the unclear role of the Organization in

relation to the other partner agencies. In this theme, the UN is not understood as unified around the youth issue, but instead there is an unclear division of work in this area, and the 'ownership' of the youth agenda is seen as sensitive. The last theme shows that it is uncertain how youth involvement can be measured, or if it can be guaranteed to lead to change at all.

I interpret the themes in section as there being three main narratives about the challenges of involving young people. In the first narrative, the Organization is understood as fragmented because not everyone want to make young people a priority, and that young people's perspectives, that are seen as different, will be hard to integrate into the current environment where little room is given for trying new ways of working. I interpret the second narrative to be one where the Organization is seen as a part of a larger UN context. Here, the challenges of involving young people are explained by an uncertain division of work between different UN agencies. Lastly, I interpret the theme about different academic backgrounds as a narrative about different perspectives among staff – perspectives that can be more or less 'technically focused'. In this narrative, the challenge of involving young people is explained by staff members seeing opportunities of working with young people differently because of different academic backgrounds.

6.   Discussion and conclusions

This section discusses the main findings of the analysis in relation to the key themes in the UN public narrative on youth as outlined in chapter two, namely 1) young people are seen as having a key role in, and being natural agents of, social change, 2) a consensus of values and norms between young people and the UN and 3) the importance of involving young people in the work of the UN. In subsequently draws some conclusions based on the study and discussion, and suggests areas for further research.

6.1.   Public narrative of the UN contrasted

The narrative on youth based on 'the tales of the field' is on the one hand very much in line with this first key theme in the UN public narrative, with young people perceived as having a key role in and being natural agents of social change. Indeed, interviewees often describe young people as being at the centre of social change. However, there is also a contrasting narrative among the interviewees that they use to problematize the first one. Through these two narratives, interviewees seem to shift their understanding of young people as energetic and at the centre of social change, and on the other hand explaining that one can't generalize about young people as a group in this way. Since narratives in organizations are frameworks for mutual understanding and action, these contrasting narratives can be seen as a tension in the Organization as to how young people should be understood and approached. While it could be said that the UN public narrative describes youth in a somewhat romanticized or idealized way, it is clear that many interviewees see this as a simplification, even though they themselves at times adhere to it.

Among interviewees, the most common narrative describes how young people's perspectives are somehow different to those of the adults in the Organization. This is seen as one of the main reasons why young people need to be involved in the Organization's work – this in order to better understand their worldviews and thereby better meet their wants and needs. This is a narrative that I interpret to be slightly contrasting the second theme of the UN public narrative, namely that there is a sense of consensus of values and norms between young people and the UN. In this narrative based on the tales of the field, young people's own worldviews are often seen as unknown. In this way, the UN public narrative's description of young people as perfect partners to the UN and its values can be questioned. In the tales of the field narrative, instead, there exists openness to the fact that young people and the UN might not share the same views, norms and values, and that it is important to

find out what these are to make the UN and the programmes or polices it develops more appropriate to young people. In this way, again, there exists contrasting narratives.

Further, there are also contrasts between this second theme in the UN public narrative, and the narrative about young people as those who can bring innovation and change to the Organization's ways of working. In the later, young people are not understood as those who necessarily want the same things as the UN, but as those who could help the Organization change. This narrative, then, instead implies that the Organization needs to change its ways and co-lead together with young people instead of setting the course on its own. So what consequences might these contrasts among narratives have? If the UN public narrative is hegemonic, it might be difficult to discuss internally that the Organization does not always know what young people want, and what their worldviews look like. Doing this could be seen as questioning the UN public narrative, in which young people are seen as the perfect partners to the UN. The contrasts between the different narratives can be interpreted as being connected to different social constructions, or understandings, of young people - one in which their worldviews and values are taken for granted, such as wanting progressive or 'good' social change, and one in which their worldviews and values are more acknowledged as unknown.

Even though all interviewees seem to agree with the UN public narrative that the involvement of youth is important, there are also narratives in which the situation is understood differently. In the first narrative based on the tales of the field in this area, the challenges of youth involvement are explained by a fragmented internal approach, where everyone does not want to make young people a priority. The work environment is also seen as not open enough for new ways of working, something which is strongly connected to young people. Again there are partly contrasting narratives – the UN public narrative which emphasises the importance of involving young people, and the narrative based on the tales of the field in which the Organization is understood as divided in this matter, and also not ready to involve youth and their new ideas. What consequences can this potentially have? If there is a perception that trying to involve young people is not a well established organizational priority, this might stop staff from being more proactive in their efforts to involve young people.

6.2.   Conclusions and suggestions for further research

Based on the analysis and discussion it is possible to draw the conclusion that there are contrasting narratives in the Organization in which young people are described differently. In the first one,

young people are perceived as in UN public documents, as energetic and part of social change. In the contrasting narrative, this previous description of young people is problematized by explaining that young people are a very heterogeneous group. In a second narrative among interviewees, young people's perspectives and worldviews are understood as unknown and different to those of staff in the Organization. This narrative is a contrast to UN public documents in which young people are described as perfect partners to the UN. Thirdly, there are narratives among staff in which the Organization is understood as not fully willing and ready to further involve young people, and the new ideas they are perceived to have, in its work. This is a contrasting narrative to public UN documents in which the involvement of young people is stressed as a priority.

In sum, these are different and sometimes contradicting narratives in the Organization among the interviewees as regard to how young people should be understood and approached, and whether or not the Organization is ready to further involve young people in its work. This thesis studied narratives in the Organization as a way to gain access to organizational culture. As such, the contrasting narratives are seen as an indication that there is no cohesive organizational culture on youth engagement in the Organization.

The theory of Organizational culture posits that a cohesive organizational culture, where cultures act as a framework for mutual interpretations, understandings and actions among staff, enables an organization to move in a concerted effort in a specific direction. Therefore the contrasting narratives could be interpreted as potentially hindering the Organization's involvement of young people in its work, since there are so many different interpretations and directions associated with the agenda. One explanation for this could be, as mentioned in the introduction, that the Organization lacks a clear policy or guidelines with regards to young people, above and beyond seeing them as a key population that is vulnerable in its sector.

To deeper explore challenges of involving young people in the UN, a suggestion for further research can be made based on the narrative about different academic backgrounds. According to the theory on organizational sub-cultures, different backgrounds among staff can be one reason as to why different organizational sub-cultures come about. Different organizational sub-cultures in their turn, I argued, should be able to give rise to different narratives in organizations. Further research could be conducted to examine in what way different educational backgrounds among staff effect their understanding of young people, and how this in its turn effect how UN organizations approach and seek to involve young people in their work.

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