

Assignment 1: Essay on a dissertation

Why are corporate scandals forgotten so easily? This question connects the four essays that form the doctoral dissertation of Jukka Rintamäki published in 2016, titled “Collective memory and corporate irresponsibility - A collection of essays”. The thesis examines corporate irresponsibility, namely the forgetting of corporate sustainability scandals, arguing that organizations tend to attempt influencing the perceptions of their past especially when it comes to corporate irresponsibility transgressions.

The thesis comprises of two theoretical essays and two empirical ones, centered around the main research question of *how acts and events of corporate irresponsibility are forgotten by the society*. The first theory paper draws on social memory studies and proposes a model for a collective forgetting process conceptualized as ‘forgetting work’ that corporations engage in after irresponsibility scandals (Mena et al., 2015). In a similar vein, the second unpublished theoretical essay focuses on corporate irresponsibility and memory work strategies, critically examining how corporations may manipulate perceptions of their past transgressions by either (re-)narrativizing the past, disconnecting the past from the present or (re-)mobilizing the past. The two empirical papers, building on the literature on collective memory and the aforementioned theoretical lenses that highlight the intentionality and active authoring of forgetting by the corporations engaged in irresponsibility, qualitatively examine an IT-startup widely deemed as irresponsible. The case study focuses on the collective memory struggles and the implications of such to the employees’ occupational identity.

The thesis is successful in offering both empirical and theoretical insights on a societally-relevant phenomenon while also contributing to the literature on forgetting work in corporate irresponsibility. The work is clearly structured and the phenomenon linked to the wider debates in the key literatures. The exceptionally lengthy Kappa section connects the four essays by providing a comprehensive conceptual and historical overview on corporate irresponsibility and collective memory, beyond the scope of what a focused essay permits. From my reading of the thesis and the discussions with the author and the main supervisor of the work, Professor Andre Spicer, the key attributes that seem to characterize the successful completion of the thesis include a comprehensive reading of organization theory, building an international network of scholars and staying true to one’s personal interests.

The thesis work started as a part of an EU project focused on CSR and sustainability, examining outcomes of corporate sustainability actions. Despite of the relevance and topicality of the project, after roughly two years of working on the thesis under the project umbrella, Jukka felt that the scope of the EU project was not aligned enough with his personal research interests. Immersing himself in the wider organization theory literature, he developed an interest towards critical management theory and an increasingly critical stance on the sustainability issues. The critically oriented reading took him to the literature on irresponsibility, and the question of why corporate irresponsibility scandals keep repeating themselves? This was a turning point in the thesis project that resulted in Jukka changing his thesis topic after pitching the initial idea of the first theory paper to a prominent professor in the field of collective memory. They showed excitement for the idea, declaring “this is an AMR paper”, a prediction that later turned out to be true.

First, an interest in the wider organization theory enabled Jukka to develop a novel theoretical angle to a topical issue and connect the phenomenon of irresponsibility with the key debates in the literature. Despite the thesis work evidently including a narrow in-depth reading on one's own niche, sufficiently reading other organization theory outside the immediate literature seemed important in Jukka's path in order to identify an interesting phenomenon that had both practical and theoretical relevance and that resulted in a contribution in the literature. Developing sound arguments requires plenty of reading, and in order to write well, reading non-academic texts in addition to journal articles is helpful.

Second, staying true to one's personal research interests seems to have shaped Jukka's thesis work. Despite of lack of encouragement from the department scholars and supervisors of that time, Jukka decided to pursue a new topic almost halfway into the doctoral thesis path as the research setup he was engaged with did not feel right. This seemed risky from the supervisor's point of view, but was ultimately beneficial in terms of finding one's own voice and successfully completing the thesis. It might be feasible to assume that there is a better likelihood of successful thesis completion when the work is grounded on intrinsic motivation instead of extrinsic one. The genuine interest on the phenomenon that goes beyond intellectual curiosity seems important in terms of Jukka's work.

Third, a belief in his vision in terms of the research topic ultimately led to Jukka connecting with scholars sharing similar interests in irresponsibility in corporations in conferences, connections which later developed into research visits and finally turned into a co-authored paper in an FT50 journal, published when he was still finishing his doctoral studies. He had gotten to know some scholars in Cass Business School in conferences and reached out to them in order to ask for an opportunity for a research visit, which resulted in them co-writing the theory paper draft, accepted for publication in AMR, in a matter of weeks. Today, the co-authors are friends, and connecting with people with similar research interests within the academia internationally proved to be meaningful both professionally and socially. The central role of social and professional networks is evident in Jukka's thesis path, and many of the turning points and key events, such as deciding on a new research focus and establishing collective memory as a theoretical lens to his phenomenon took place while having a beer with a colleague in an informal setting. "All that is good comes from conferences", as Jukka phrased it.

Finally, Jukka's thesis path also shows how pragmatic considerations are important in terms of finishing the thesis work successfully. The empirical case company was selected as it illustrated well the theoretical model that was developed, but also because it served as a feasible empirical context from which data was fairly easy to gather and the company was sufficiently small, making it easier to grasp. At that time, tech companies were fashionable and interesting in management research, and this particular case was a counter-intuitive shocking extreme case, identifying the empirical context by "thinking like a journalist" as the supervisor described. The data consists of interviews and archival data that are analyzed using a narrative approach, serving as a good fit in regard to the contribution on the literature on collective memory. The case company fitted well with the theoretical framework and provided an opportunity to explore the research question in sufficient depth, but it was also well suited for the practical time-pressure in that phase of the thesis. This comes across in the thesis that is more centered around the

theoretical development while the empirical study is more like a pilot case for highlighting aspects of the theoretical frameworks developed.

The main research question guiding the essays is how the irresponsibility scandals are forgotten by the society. The thesis argues convincingly how corporate irresponsibility scandals have multifaceted societal consequences, due to e.g. forgetting work causing inability to learn from past mistakes. More specifically, the empirical essays highlight the implications of irresponsibility on the employees and management of the company as salient stakeholders engaging in memory work, and the theoretical essays illustrate how forgetting work may have implications to the wider context of the company deemed irresponsible, e.g. in regard to competitors, customers or suppliers. In my reading, I did not, however, grasp the notion of the society per se as the active “rememberer” or “forgetter”. In this regard, I doubt whether the thesis answers the question of how the scandals are forgotten by the society, but instead was convinced of the thesis in providing insight for the wider societal implications that corporate wrongdoings may have, namely how employees, managers, customers and the general public, for instance, engage in the forgetting work.

To summarize, what made the thesis successful? The ability to connect with wider debates on the field, engaging with with a phenomenon that was topical, grounding the phenomenon and the related debates on selected literatures, as well as the ability to empirically explore the topic with interesting data and standard methods seem important elements. Building on both theory development as well as on empirical insights located Jukka to important international scholarly networks, supported by active relationship building and comprehensive reading of organizational theory. Being open minded in terms of people, literatures and the international reach enabled successful completion of the thesis and supported Jukka in embarking on an academic career after completion. To add, one cannot deny the role of social encounters during the journey, both professionally and for the pure sake of the friendships.

REFERENCES

Mena, S.; Rintamäki, J.; Spicer, A.; Fleming, P. 2015. On the forgetting of corporate irresponsibility. *Academy of Management Review*, 41(4), 720-738.

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