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# CREATIVE SENSE-MAKING PRACTICES IN ORGANIZATIONS WITH RIGID SETS OF NORMS AND PREDETERMINED SHARED MEANINGS

## INTRODUCTION

As we see more and more organizations performing global or local strategic reorientations, I wondered: “Is it possible to realize a reflexive process that is highly creative and developmental in organizations where members are constrained by rigid organizational norms, and share a strong core of values and truth claims”? Which practices foster creativity and exploration in collective sense-making (Boyce, 1995, p.109)? Which practices tend to hinder creativity? This questioning, which is both theoretical and empirical, is what led to this explorative case study.

## ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTIFICATION, SHARING OF INTERESTS AND COLLECTIVE SENSE-MAKING

In their 2006 article regarding boundary dynamics between self and organizational identity, Kreiner et al. state that some people might feel a “craving for deeper meaning” that can be expressed by “a desire to affiliate with an organization that can complete a sense of identity, vision, or purpose that may be missing from [their] life” (p.1329). Thus, organizational affiliation can be conceived as a response to an inner yearning for a deeper sense of purpose in one’s life. This is particularly true with spiritual and/or non-profits organizations, where the main objective of members is not financial, but is to serve others by providing help and care for those in need, or in the case of churches to help people and communities grow spiritually and socially.

However, it is possible to see the need for identification as something other than an individual desire to embrace a bigger vision. Indeed, Kenneth Burke states that such identification, which he calls consubstantiality, is fundamental to cooperation itself to take place. Identity, for Burke, is a matter of sharing of substance, which emerges within acting together, in the performance of acting towards a perceived shared interest. As Cheney states, consubstantiality is the product of an identification process that leads the individual to adopt the perspective of the person he or she identifies with (1983b, p.146). Thus, identification, in Burke’s thought, is sharing perspectives and goals through collective action. It is made in cooperation, hence Burke’s famous quote: “Identification is compensatory to division” (1950, p.22). Organizational identification through sharing of common interests and goals, then, is not only something that occurs to fulfill an individual’s desire to adhere to a greater purpose, it also has a profound social function; it is fundamental to any cooperative endeavour, and is sustained by it.

Deliberately determining a main objective together is thus a way to create this sharing of interests among members of an organization. In order to define and fix the motivations and objectives of the organization, members must join in what Boyce calls “co-creative sense-making”. She describes it as “the process whereby groups interactively create social reality, which becomes the organizational reality” (1995, p.109). Thus embracing a constructionist perspective, Boyce organized two occasions for members of the non-profit spiritual organization she observed to meet and share stories about their experience in the organization. Boyce first believed that creating occasions for co-creative sense-making would open the way for new interpretations of organizational reality (1995, p. 109), she thought the participants’ stories would serve to develop a shared purpose that would be new and somewhat creative. This is not what happened, because, the author explains, members telling divergent stories were excluded, and stories of experiences that do not support the main point of view of the organization were not told (1995, p.129). Furthermore, the core shared beliefs and norms of the organization were not seen as one that could be changed based on the experiences of members. Consequently, the context did not favour co-creative sense-making, and resulted in what Brown (2006) calls “a form of reflexivity that is self-confirmatory and self-satisfied” (p. 738). Moreover, organization members do not see their organization as socially co-constructed, but unsurprisingly they take it for granted, as well as their belief system and norms, as a source of motives and objectives. What about, then, churches and church conventions that organize their own sense-making activities, that aim to draw from individuals’ experiences to “refocus” their churches? Indeed, in the last twenty years or so, Christian churches have felt the need to redefine and re-orient themselves as groups and as spiritual communities (Murray, 2004). Are those processes doomed to failure because of a strong set of norms and predetermined beliefs? What can foster creative and developmental sensemaking practices and defining of objectives within organizations with constraining norms and a strong shared belief system?

## SENSEMAKING AND CREATIVITY IN ACTION

In order to answer these questions we need to go further theoretically regarding sensemaking and creativity in action. First, let us take seriously Burke’s stance that consubstantiality is acting together, which implies that the perception of shared interests happens in action. This is congruent with Weick’s conceptualization of sensemaking as something that occurs in the day-to-day reality of the organization, as an ongoing process of reducing equivocality while dealing with the “constant flow of experience” (Weick et al., 2005, p.410). Sensemaking is thus a way to collectively deal with uncertainty (p.414) and literally produces the organization, which is “talked into existence” through collective action (p.409). Hence, collective action gives rise to shared meaning, or at least complementary meaning in terms of interests. Therefore, Weick’s definition of sensemaking has a high heuristic value for understanding how daily interactions between members contribute to the definition of situations and shared interest, and to the enactment of the environment that makes the organization. It allows us to see sensemaking as produced

in action, whether it is in deciding what to do in quotidian situations in organizations, or in interacting in deliberate events of re-orienting or refocusing. Whether the sensemaking is planned or not does not matter; it will happen when members of the organization act together, as in Boyce's study (1995), or with the refocusing process currently going on at my church and in my church association.

As we are conceptualizing sensemaking as rooted in action, let us draw from a theory of action to see what can be the role of creativity in it. Hans Joas, in his book *The Creativity of Action* (1996), provides an interesting stance on the matter. Contesting traditional assumptions and theories stating that action is guided mainly by previously determined motivations<sup>23</sup>, Joas proposes a conceptualization of action as being essentially creative rather than teleologically oriented. His model is not in total opposition with the traditional models of rational action and normatively oriented action; it is a model that is presented as overarching the two others (1996, p.4). His goal is to present the inherent creative aspect of all human action, a component of action not adequately expressed in other models (Joas, 1996, p.4). In order to do so, he presents action as being guided by the situation in which it takes place (which serves to determine practical goals and motivations), as well as by prereflexive dispositions of the body (which is the individual's link with the concrete situation) (1996, p. 160). Joas explains that motivations are never the cause of the act itself, but are one of its phases, meaning that motivations are established as the action unfolds, in relation with the situation (p.162). The situation precedes the action, calls for it, but the goals and the situation are interdependent from the beginning, in a quasi-dialogical manner (p.161). Also involved in this process is the body itself, which conditions the possibilities of the action and is the interface of the individual's relation with the situation. These prereflexive conditions of the body guide the action, which in turn is the condition for the discovery of our values and needs, in a concrete situation (p.163). This is where creativity lies; as we discover what we need and what we want in action, we become someone new and the world acquires new significations for us (p.163). Thus, creativity is involved in action itself, as we set goals in the core of action, discover our needs and actualize our values.

This way of conceiving creativity in action can also be found, although in different terms, in Eisenberg's definition of "jamming"<sup>24</sup> as an experience that fosters closeness and improvisation in coordinated action (1990, p.139). In fact, Eisenberg, citing Holquist (1983), states that meaning is co-constructed in social interaction and has an intersubjective aspect (1990, p.141). Thus, in order to avoid an individual bias to understanding of sensemaking, he proposes jamming as an experience of joint action that encourages both cooperation and individuation (p.146), and as a good occasion for improvisation and creativity to occur. Jamming is presented as a way to "balance autonomy and interdependence in organizing" (p.139) and happens in specific contexts of surrender and freedom. Relying on a set of basic rules and complementary skills, "each player sets up interesting possibilities for the others and keeps the action going" (p.154). Creativity occurs through these new possibilities produced in joint action, possibilities that cannot be previously expected or planned as such. As in Joas' view, creativity in action is conditioned and encouraged by the specificity of the situation, as well as by body dispositions of the players. Goals, values and needs are determined in action. However, Eisenberg explains that in order for jamming to happen, a specific context is needed, a context that can be more or less planned: "To facilitate jamming experiences, an organization must create a structure for surrender, within which risk is rewarded, not punished, and work groups are kept sufficiently autonomous to ensure the development and survival of novel ideas" (1990, p.158).

Finally, creativity, in scientific literature, is often a term that is taken for granted, as the main occupation of a specific type of workers: "creative workers" (Gotsi et al., 2010; Elsbach, 2009). Creativity has also been used as an indicator of an organization's effectiveness and productivity (Crosby, 1972; Dauw, 1971). Creativity being a hard term to conceptualize (Sawyer, 2006), I will rely, for the purposes of this paper, on definitions derived from Joas and Eisenberg, with some reference to organizational and management studies. Neither Joas nor Eisenberg defines the concept of creativity, but in their thinking, creativity refers to the discovery of new inclinations and the performance of new actions (by improvising). Similarly, creativity in organizational studies often refers to "something new", meaning new ideas or actions, not driven or informed by, and not taken from, past experiences (see for instance Heath, 2007, p.154, 157). Creativity can also refer to imagining new contexts or domains of application for successful ideas (Hargadon and Sutton, 2000, cited by Ford, 2002, p. 643), or basically the art of making new combinations (Hafaele (1962), Aznar (1971), Kneller (1965) cited by de Schietère, 1977).

The theoretical implications we can draw upon for our analysis are that creativity, understood as having new ideas or making new combinations of ideas related to values, need and interests, is both the product of and the condition for collective action, and thus sensemaking. Favourable context or situation is crucial to foster greater improvisation and creative sensemaking. I therefore propose the following research question: "Which features of the situation, in terms of experiences and performance, can foster creativity in sensemaking exercises?"

## METHODOLOGY

To conduct this case study, I used three methods of data gathering. First, as I was currently involved in the refocusing process occurring at my church, I started to take notes on my previous experiences with the process, as well as during the last sessions I attended as a participant. I thus used a participant observer method as a first means of collecting data from the field. I was an active observer, as I participated in the process of refocusing. Second, I collected documents from the field, such as notebooks from participants, and documentation about the process itself. Third, I conducted an interview with the process's moderator, who is not a member of the church but is a pastor from another congregation of the same church association. The aim of this interview

<sup>23</sup> As stated in the rational model of action, abundantly developed by Talcott Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action* (1937)

<sup>24</sup> Eisenberg borrows the term from music and sports, and describes it as "instances of fluid behavioural coordination that occur without detailed knowledge of personality" (1990, p.139).

was to gain insight on the rationale for the way he conducted the process. This method of data collecting allowed me not only to observe the group dynamic and the moderator's situated practices on the field, but also to comprehend how the moderator understood his role as such and what his goals were in the process.

Moreover, as a participant observer I contributed to the unfolding of events during the process. With this high degree of participation, the researcher's subjectivity is fully tainted by the experience. However, being a full participant in the process allows a better intimacy with the context and a close understanding of unfolding events. Already knowing the people involved in the process allowed me to have a comprehensive interpretation of discourse and action, as I had a previous and in-depth knowledge of the group and its dynamics.

## DESCRIPTION OF THE PROCESS

The "refocusing process" used in the church I studied is something that can be considered as a tool to fulfill their need for re-orienting. The process has been followed by many churches from this specific convention for 15 to 20 years now. The moderator defines it as "strategic planning adapted for churches". While the process can be applied to groups of various sizes, it is always subdivided with subgroups of six individuals. Each individual has a guiding notebook that contains instructions as well as spaces for writing (taking notes and doing the exercises). The moderator leads the sessions, with the help of several coaches, one of whom is assigned to each subgroup. The process consists of two main phases. The first one is dedicated to the refocusing of individuals, the second to the refocusing of the group. Each phase consists of three or four events, where people gather together to do exercises and exchange ideas. The first phase consists of exercises whereby participants build their life stories by identifying and ordering major events, persons and circumstances. Further exercises serve to analyse the life stories thus constructed and redefine the participants' personal values, goals, life objectives and the concrete means to achieve them. Similar steps are used for the second phase, during which the church as a collective is the focus. The data for this paper is drawn from the first phase of the process.

## ANALYSIS

I identified three features of the refocusing process as it occurred in the case I observed that seem to have fostered creative and developmental sensemaking. These three features are: 1) the enactment of the process itself (how the guidelines were applied by the moderator and coaches, and how the participants responded); 2) the multiplicity and diversity of symbolic resources available to the participants; 3) the group dynamic (marked by productive minority dissent.).

### *1) Enactment of the process*

The refocusing process is well structured and organized. Participants have steps to follow, questions to answer, and the moderator makes sure that everything goes according to the plan. At the same time, the process allows for some flexibility in its application, and gives a wide liberty for participants to fill in with what they want. In other words, participants are invited to answer open questions, without any explicit expectations in terms of what they can or should answer. For instance, the first step of the process is to put together the life story of the participants, in a conceptual and textual form. Participants identify persons, events, and circumstances that they feel have marked their lives. Participants are free to change elements of the process if they do not feel these elements are suitable or useful to them. For instance, one could choose to identify only life circumstances, arguing that "persons" and "events" are included within them.

Participants are also not pressured to include a pre-conceived turning point one could expect from a Christian perspective, such as "conversion". Participants are free to put anything they want in their notebooks. They can also choose what or how much they want to share with others. The process is thus proposing a coherent set of steps to follow, but is flexible in terms of content and enactment. People can make counter-suggestions, in response to which the moderator will sometimes adjust the process according to what the participants want. This is consistent with some of the features that Eisenberg identifies as important in situations that encourage jamming and novelty: letting go of control, and autonomy of the participants (1990, p.158).

At the beginning of the process, the moderator brought many nuances to his explication of the steps to follow, and gave a lot of latitude to participants. Participants were not constrained to following the process with precision. The moderator clearly explained that participants could choose to use whatever they felt would be helpful and useful for themselves. Also, during the interview, I learned that he considers his role as being one of a "facilitator", as prescribed by the process, instead of a moderator. He insists on the use of the word "facilitator", and describes it as: "the one who creates the best context for people to make their own discoveries. Thus, the facilitator does not tell people what they should do, what should be the content or how they should answer the questions, but it is the person who will create a favourable environment where people can exchange and, through performing exercises, make their own discoveries on their own". Interestingly, this idea of helping people make their own discoveries recalls Joas' take on creativity in action, where people make discoveries regarding motivations, needs and interests. We can also see that this is consistent with Eisenberg's idea of creating favourable contexts for jamming.

Nevertheless, I observed that the facilitator sometimes intervened in ways that hinder creative ideas or novelty by orienting the content of the participants' answers. For instance, he often gave several examples, sometimes even taken from his personal life. When the time came to write down one's own "purpose statement", all the examples given, though varying in length and in



vocabulary, could be reduced to two simple elements: “to love God and to love others”. Consequently, a great numbers of the participants’ stated reasons for living contained these two elements. Let us note, however, that these two elements are congruent with the two first commandments of the Bible, an important interpretative repertoire (Smith & Windes, 1997) for Christians. They are resumed in Luke 10:27 (NIV, 2010): “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind”; and, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’”. Here, the examples given by the facilitator reinforced the influence of the Christian norm and oriented the content of the participants’ purpose statements. This practice thus favours conformity among participants, though counterbalanced by the inherent creativity of action, which led to variations on the same theme, or led some people to discover that they either shared these life purposes (to love God and to love others) or didn’t. In some cases, even if they did share these life purposes, people would not frame their purpose statements to include these elements. For instance, let’s see this participant’s purpose statement, who chose not to include these two elements: “I exist to live the best life I can live, according to who I am with my own strengths and weaknesses; to be happy by doing what I can to contribute to the happiness of those around me”.

Nevertheless, and even if some participants did not reproduce the examples previously given, I found that giving examples would often lead a majority of participants to answer in a particular way, and can thus lead collective sensemaking to more conformity and less creativity, development and novelty. This was especially salient with the “purpose statement” example. Nonetheless, the influence of examples toward conformity can be counterbalanced by the inherent creativity of action, as well as letting go of control from the moderator, and some other features of the process that we will see in the two next sections of this analysis.

## 2) *The multiplicity and diversity of symbolic resources available to participants*

I observed that something that fostered creativity in the refocusing process was the previous access of participants to various symbolic resources. As the facilitator noted, people who had traveled around the world, or who were well informed about the various church’s practices in the world, had a tendency to be more creative in their propositions regarding “being a Christian” and “doing church”. Creativity here lies in the recycling of ideas to apply to one’s own context. Therefore, a wider variety of resources leads to greater creative possibilities for sensemaking. Thus, facilitating access to a wider variety of symbolic resources is a way to foster greater creativity in interpreting one’s situation and potentialities. People will seek new possibilities for themselves and for their church if they know many other ways of acting are used in other countries and regions. The facilitator also added that doing the exercises in groups is a way to encourage the sharing of this kind of knowledge and of new ideas among participants, which is consistent with the social aspect of sensemaking and action in Weick’s perspective (1995).

Also, evangelical Christians in the province of Quebec being in a minority situation, their cultural references are not limited to an evangelical culture. We could see a manifestation of this during the session concerning the spiritual temperaments<sup>25</sup>. In this session, the facilitator described a wide variety of spiritual temperaments, to show that devotion is not limited to our usual preconceived notions of it, such as reciting prayers, reading the Bible or singing praises with the assembly at church. Nine types of spiritual temperaments were describe to show the participants that there are many ways to adore or praise the Lord, such as serving others, engaging in activists work, stimulating one’s intellect by reading and learning about God, contemplating nature, etc. At one point, one of the participants shared one of his own ways of praising the Lord. He named it the “epicurean way”, saying that for him, to savour a good wine and a perfect meal with friends or family was a moment when he felt closer to God. Needless to say, this Ancient Greek tradition and way of life oriented toward pleasure is not traditionally congruent with Christian norms regarding lifestyle, which is often characterized by frugality and simplicity (in the Catholic tradition especially) or with restraint toward alcohol in general, but for it to be recuperated as a Christian way of praising God shows the diversity of cultural traditions mobilized by this participant in the sensemaking process<sup>26</sup>. This allowed him to make new combinations of values, thus demonstrating creativity in sensemaking.

## 3) *Group dynamic*

The third feature that had great incidence on the reflexive process leading to creativity and development instead of re-affirmation was the group dynamic. In fact, the group dynamic I observed during the sessions was along the lines of what I would call “productive minority dissent”. Although at the beginning of the process people followed the steps with diligence and conformity, the further we got along the process, the more people seemed to feel free to express their disagreement with some aspects of it, or to propose alternatives. For instance, when the examples of “purpose statement” were presented, a young woman exclaimed: “Can’t we be more creative than that?!”, pointing out that all the examples provided contained more or less the same ideas. The facilitator answered yes, and everyone went on with the exercises. One of the participants decided to be more creative, as proposed by the young woman, and instead of writing a sentence, drew a wine amphora. She said it had a round form, “just like her”, and that it represented her being crafted by the Lord, as in the verse in Isaiah 64:8 “Yet you, Lord, are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand” (NIV, 2010). She also said it represented her being someone who is happy and joyful in her day-to-day life. We find here again the wine metaphor (but from a different participant) to describe the relationship with God, and we see someone using pictorial representation instead of words to complete an exercise of the process. The plea for creativity made by the young woman opened up new possibilities and combinations, both for herself and

<sup>25</sup> “Spiritual temperament” can be understood as the way one sustains and nourishes one’s relationship with God.

<sup>26</sup> We can also see here a trait of Quebec’s French culture, differing from an English tradition on that specific matter (the crucial important of wine and good food in social life).

for the other participants. Among them, this woman decided to be creative and to use drawing to define her “purpose statement”, yet drawing inspiration from a Bible verse to do so. She thus uses a common Christian interpretative repertoire, or package (Smith & Windes, 1997), to get inspired, but also to legitimize her “deviation” from the instructions. The use of the Bible as a symbolic resource shows the strong influence of the rigid core of shared beliefs and norms, but the innovation lies in the new combination made by the participant (using the amphora as a purpose statement) and, even more so, in the deviation from the process’s instructions (using a pictorial representation instead of words). This is different from the other participant we showed earlier (in section 1 of the analysis), who, refusing to conform, didn’t draw from the Bible at all to write her purpose statement, but instead referred to her own situation and personality. That participant says she was also inspired by the plea for creativity made by the young woman, and in writing her purpose statement in such a way, she re-actualized her own needs, values and motivations (Joas, 1996).

I call this dynamic “productive minority dissent”, drawing on Smith and Mackie’s (2000) interpretation of Moscovici’s famous study on the influence of minorities on majorities (pp. 365-366). According to these authors, Moscovici asserted that minorities can manage their dissent effectively as a way of gaining interest from the majority (2000, p.365). Smith and Mackie state that, according to Moscovici: “when minorities manage their dissent effectively, other group members are more likely to systematically process their argument. [...] Their plausible alternative creates uncertainty about reality and this stimulates thinking among majority members” (Smith and Mackie, 2000, p.365-366). Something similar could be observed more and more as the first phase of the process took place. Members gradually began expressing their concerns and thoughts about the process and its content, which fostered productive reflections and thinking among the group, leading to more creative sensemaking. Let us note, however, that this context did not lead to reformative or completely new sensemaking. Often we could see the participants follow the steps proposed by the refocusing process. Even the woman with the wine amphora picturing her purpose statement finally wrote a sentence to fit in with the group. The creativity here observed is more subtle, as in Joas’ take on inherent creativity of action, where action itself is the loci of new possibilities and discoveries to take place, and for the relation of the individual with the world to evolve.

## CONCLUSION

My analysis of a sensemaking exercise conducted at my church during the fall of 2010 showed that three elements of context could influence collective sensemaking positively, in terms of creativity and development. The first one was the way the reflexive process was enacted by the moderator and his colleagues as well as by the participants. In this case, the refocusing process has been flexible in terms of content and the following of directives. The moderator tried to limit to a minimum his control over the participants, and instead to encourage them to complete the exercises with their own thoughts and discoveries. Although he provided many examples that, as we observed, could hinder creativity, he tried to counterbalance this negative effect, which he considers important in relation to other matters, such as openness and liberty of sharing. The second contextual element that had a positive effect on creativity was access to multiplicity and diversity of symbolic resources to nourish reflections. This allowed participants to discover new possibilities and make new combinations of ideas to enact the environment. Finally, the third element that fostered creativity was the group dynamic, marked by what I called productive minority dissent. People seemed to feel free to express doubts and concerns about the process itself and its content, and at times a minority would lead the majority into creative and developmental thinking.

This explorative study has shown that there can be a certain amount of creativity in reflexive exercises conducted by organizations with rigid sets of norms and predetermined shared meaning. Indeed, because of the inherent creativity related to action and sensemaking, these sets of norms and shared meaning are constantly the subject of actualization, and specific practices and enactment can foster more creative and developmental actualization.

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