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Little less conversation, little more action: Musical intervention as aesthetic material communication

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ABSTRACT

While interest in art-based interventions is growing rapidly, little is known about the aesthetic, material, and interpersonal mechanisms by which art interventions, and musical interventions in particular, operate. We address this gap by drawing from an in-depth case study of a musical intervention in a professional ice-hockey team in Finland. At the time of the study, the organization faced a serious crisis, having lost 11 sequential games, leading its managers to search for “alternative” means for promoting social cohesion, and subsequently engaging in an arts-based musical intervention. Our findings examine how material objects and collective synchronization rhythms grounded the interpersonal interactions of team members and mediated members' attempts to transform personal subjective experiences into collective collaboration. We draw out the conceptual implications of our findings for understanding, on the one hand, the collective nature of aesthetic processes, and on the other hand, the materially mediated processes of communication. In terms of practical implication, we contribute to understanding the social dynamics and transformative organizational possibilities of artistic interventions that generate value for the organization and its members.

1. Introduction

Music, deeply affecting experience, can communicate beyond words; embodied and intimate, it can be used to elicit responses and turn “apathy to action” (Adler & Ippolito, 2016: 23). Both immediately perceivable and intangible, music simultaneously reflects “material conditions and social relations” (Styhre, 2008: xvii). Melodies elicit a broad spectrum of experience, constituting articulation points between individual and collective experience and embodying the rhythms of collective work (Korczynski, Pickering, & Robertson, 2008). Organizational scholarship has acknowledged the power of music (e.g. Nissley, 2002; Prichard, Korczynski, & Elmes, 2007) including its direct effects on work (e.g., El-Sawad & Korczynski, 2007; Jones & Schumacher, 1992) and the role of musical performance by workers (Korczynski, 2003; Korczynski, Robertson, Pickering, & Jones, 2005; Nissley, 2002). The latter notes music's transformative power for social bonds and community-building, resonating with what Mattern (1998) terms ‘acting in concert’, a metaphor emphasizing community-based political action through music.

As part of a larger trend towards artistic projects and artful interventions in organizations (e.g. Berthoin Antal, 2013; Berthoin Antal,

Taylor, & Ladkin, 2014; Meisiek & Hatch, 2008), musical interventions highlight empowerment, engagement, and exploration (Adler & Ippolito, 2016; Small, 1998). While interest in arts-based interventions is growing rapidly among both scholars and practitioners (Schiuma, 2011), little is known about the aesthetic, material, and interpersonal mechanisms by which art interventions operate. Some argue that ‘bringing art to work’ provides organizational members with unusual experiences to initiate and facilitate organizational learning and change (Berthoin Antal & Strauss, 2014; Taylor & Ladkin, 2009), while studies of arts-based knowing (e.g. Barry & Meisiek, 2010; Schiuma, 2011) link aesthetic experience in art to organizational practice. In their review, Meisiek and Barry (2014) conclude that empirical illustrations of artistic interventions are mostly anecdotal, calling for more thorough theoretical and empirical research to understand the effects of such interventions.

We address this call by examining the interface of aesthetic experience and collective interaction in musical interventions. Taking a communication-based perspective, we address the problem of how deeply personal aesthetic experiences can support team interaction and ground collective phenomena. Specifically, our research question asks *how musical interventions mobilize embodied and aesthetic experiences to*

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support collective communication processes.

Empirically, we draw from an in-depth case study of a musical intervention in a professional ice-hockey team in Finland. At the time of the study, the organization faced a serious crisis, having lost 11 sequential games, leading its managers to search for “alternative” means to promote cohesion, and they decided to engage in an arts-based musical intervention. We followed the team through the intervention process by collecting video-recorded real-time data, interviews and discourse from an online forum. Our findings trace the musical intervention process to illustrate a.) The team's difficulty in articulating its coordination process in traditional forms, b.) The uses of material instruments and artefacts to provide channels of aesthetic experience and expression, and c.) The synchronization processes that supported interpersonal communication among team members. Team interactions were supported by material (*human-instrument relation*) and collective (*interpersonal synchronization*) processes that mutually supported each other. We propose that the aesthetic, material, and interpersonal aspects were entangled in a process we refer to as *embodied communication*, a concept mobilized to explain arts-based interventions' ability to promote new forms of experience and organizing.

Our research contributes to understanding the social dynamics of collective interaction around aesthetics and materiality, with the ultimate goal of understanding the transformative possibilities of arts-based, and specifically musical, interventions within organizations. By exploring the effects of art we contribute to aesthetic understandings of art-based interventions (cf. Guillet de Monthoux & Statler, 2008). Moving from individual aesthetic experience to collective communicative processes, we argue, relates to diverse organizational and business contexts. Additionally, we contribute to the communicative constitution of organizations (CCO) perspective (e.g. Ashcraft, Kuhn, & Cooren, 2009; Cooren, Kuhn, Cornelissen, & Clark, 2011; Putnam & Nicotera, 2009) by linking aesthetics with communicative processes, a theoretical interface between aesthetics and communication that is underdeveloped in current literature.

The rest of the paper unfolds as follows: After synthesizing current work in artistic interventions from aesthetic and communicative lenses, we describe our empirical case as an organizational crisis involving difficulties in team coordination, as the background to our study. Next, outlining our methods and analytical approach we present our findings in terms of the difficulties in articulation as well as material and collective interactions constituting the intervention. Finally, we draw out the conclusions for understanding musical interventions in organizations, drawing implications for future research across diverse organizational contexts.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Aesthetic experiences in artistic interventions: from subjective experience to collective collaboration

Aesthetic experiences are constitutive for organizational functioning (Strati, 1992; Strati & Guillet de Montoux, 2002; Taylor & Hansen, 2005). Team coordination and dynamics, for example, have been shown to rely on shared aesthetic experiences among team members (Endrissat, Islam, & Noppeney, 2016; Ewenstein & Whyte, 2007). Aesthetic experience is both deeply personal, involving an embodied sense of meaning (Warren, 2008), but also constitutive of social norms and expectations, as members expect others to feel as they do (Martin, 2002).

Although aesthetic experience has a collective component and is essential to collective processes, it is notoriously difficult to express (Ewenstein & Whyte, 2007), and relies on particular communicative forms in its articulation (Toraldo, Islam, & Mangia, 2016). Difficult to put in words or concepts, it eludes logical formulation and is sensed rather than communicated. Aesthetic experience is closely linked to experiential knowing, informed by the immediacy of felt sense, through

empathy and resonance (Taylor & Hansen, 2005: 1212/1213). Organizations struggle to create conditions for shared aesthetic experience, encountering difficulty in articulating such experience that has been referred to as “aesthetic muteness” (Taylor, 2002).

The increasing attention to artistic interventions has arisen, in part, in response to the need for organizational members to explore aspects of organizing that are difficult to articulate in everyday discourse. Aesthetic experiences through artistic interventions and arts-based knowing (Schiuma, 2011) link to organizational practice by provoking, edifying or irritating long-held and often dysfunctional beliefs among organizational members (Barry & Meisiek, 2010: 1512). Artistic interventions enable ‘context shifting’ where the focus is on “experiencing aspects of the workplace through another medium”, such as theatre or music. Artistic interventions provide an embodied experience, a ‘felt sense’ of what is going wrong or what is needed on the collective level (Taylor & Ladkin, 2009). For example, improvisation exercises can help managers “to feel what it is like to listen deeply and be listened to deeply” (Ibid., p. 64). Insights like this provide anchors that help to address and change work practices and transform negative dynamics at the workplace.

Musical interventions seem particularly suitable to improve awareness of self and others (Blunt, 1994), which is essential for collaborative dialogue (Furu, 2012). Research in the field of organization and management studies has shown music's ability to establish relationships and to build communities (Korczyński, 2003; Korczyński et al., 2005). For example, organizational songs are both a sign and artefact of community and an “aid in the creation of community” (Nissley, 2002: 59). Through music, commonalities can be created and discovered to establish social bonds and community-building that allows people to ‘act in concert’ (Mattern, 1998 – cited in Nissley, 2002: 59). For instance, Adler and Ippolito (2016) examined how musical interventions can constitute what they call “poetic activism”, rebuilding community bonds in the face of collective trauma. Marotto, Roos, and Victor (2007) consider how individual aesthetic experiences translate into collective peak performance. Building on the insight that stories can be ‘shared, built upon (chained), and dramatically transform a group’ (Turner, 1974, p. 389), the authors theorize how performing music collectively establishes shared aesthetic experience (similar to collective mystical or religious experiences, *ibid.* p. 390) that creates a sense of *communitas*. *Communitas* is ‘a flash of lucid mutual understanding on the existential level when participants feel that all problems, not just their problems, could be resolved ... if only the group as “essentially us” could sustain its intersubjective illumination’ (Turner, 1986 – cited in Marotto et al., 2007: 390/391). It is a moment that often coincides with a shared consciousness and an emotional state that stresses the ‘we’ over the ‘I’ - as epitomized in comments such as “we were one heart or” ... we were one” (Marotto et al., 2007: 408).

Artistic interventions and aesthetic experiences in particular, thus represent a form of communication (Gagliardi, 1996: 566; Nissley, 2002), which can be described as aesthetic interactions and transformations on the collective level (Taylor, 2002). It builds on a collectively felt sense, an aesthetic interaction materially mediated through music reflecting both “material conditions and social relations” (Styhre, 2008: xvii). We argue that this materially mediated aesthetic experience is essential for bridging subjective experience and collective collaboration.

2.2. Materially mediated communication: aesthetics and CCO

One way to bridge subjective experience and collaboration comes from emerging perspectives on the role of materiality in organizational communication. Focusing on the communicative constitution of organizations (CCO, Ashcraft et al., 2009; Cooren et al., 2011; Putnam & Nicotera, 2009) this literature emphasizes text and discourse as bringing organizations into being (Nicolini, 2012: 189). Organizations are understood as socially constituted with communication as the

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