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Paper Title: Imaged Work: A psychodynamic perspective on images that change organisational conversations

Name of author: Dr. Dawn Langley

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Hidden in Plain Sight: A psychodynamic perspective on images that change organisational conversations.

Abstract

The study of the visual in organisations is often concerned with issues of identity (Baker & Balmer, 1997: 79; van den Bosch, de Jong, & Elving, 2004), the symbolic (Dandridge, Mitroff, & Joyce, 1980) or culture (Hatch, 1993; Prosser, 2007) and could be said to focus on the outer frame, the context in which the object resides. This paper endeavours to explore how organisational members effectively stop 'seeing' certain aspects of their organisations in order to avoid the meanings they may contain. In utilising a psychodynamic and an analytic art psychotherapy approach I am going beyond much of the existing literature in terms of exploring both inner and outer frames (Schaverien, 1999) and how framing an image acts as a container for transference of unconscious anxieties.

The paper explores a number of images collected during change interventions and my doctoral research with a range of arts organisations and shows how they served to bring certain organisational phenomena into full view at the same time as providing a safe container for the emotions they elicited. The images were taken by both participants and the researcher and a number of existing images were also used in a form of photo elicitation (Banks, 2001; Collier, 1987; Harper, 1997, 2002).

The findings suggest that both the process of image making and the product, "...the life *in* the picture and the life *of* the picture respectively," (Schaverien, 1999: 79) have a role to play in containing the issues that participants have been unable to acknowledge or express previously. This paper has been an attempt to find a theoretical framework to explore how what was initially an incidental activity - image making - became a focal point for action.

Background

I work as an organisational development practitioner in the not for profit sector, primarily with arts organisations undergoing significant change projects. In my work I use a wide range of interventions from action research to poetry. Over the last four years I have been exploring Learning Histories (Kleiner & Roth, 1997) with Katie Venner, a fellow consultant, and have also been completing my doctorate in organisational learning. A Learning History is a participatory form of action research which involves recruiting a number of novice researchers from within the organisations involved and giving them some basic research tools. This enables them to undertake the research alongside the external consultants.

As part of the training process we introduced them to the use of photography and photo elicitation (Banks, 2001; Collier, 1987; Harper, 1997, 2002) as an interview method.

Initially, we thought it was a relatively straightforward tool to help put new interviewers and their interviewees at ease but as the images emerged we realised we were beginning to uncover a whole new form of data. As we listened to the conversations that occurred around the shared images within the wider groups, we were aware of what appeared to be deeper and different forms of meaning making to the more traditional purely verbal interview. Through the images the participants appeared to be more able to tackle what might otherwise have been regarded as quite difficult phenomena

I was particularly struck by hearing conversations change as people observed images of aspects of their organisations that they might encounter every day yet some of these meanings had either remained hidden or deliberately denied. Capturing them in image form seemed to allow the conversations to be held in a different way, the boundaries of the frame of the photograph (whether hard copy or digital) making the subject matter somehow more containable.

I also started collecting my own images of organisations alongside these formal interventions as I observed things that were once again in full view and seemed to be conveying meanings to organisational 'outsiders' that those inside the organisation either could not or would not see. While this was not a formal part of my doctoral research it was related to the work I was doing around looking at organisational learning from a multi modal, multi-level perspective. It was part of an approach that suggested learning models needed to look beyond the cognitive to include the emotional, embodied and aesthetic.

The following four images are a small selection of the many that have been taken and collected. They are initially presented without any accompanying text to allow the reader/viewer to undergo their own, initial familiarisation.





Framing

The notion of framing occurs in a number of disciplines, as wide ranging as semiotics and ethnography. In relation to this paper I am exploring the concept of framing in a psychodynamic sense, in that it can be both real and metaphorical, which effectively opens up consideration of two frames – inner and outer. In this sense the outer frame is the ‘actual, real, tangible frame of the setting,’ (Schaverien, 1999: 64) that creates the boundaried context in which social interaction takes place. The structuring or framing of these boundaries has an influence on how safe people feel within the frame. This outer frame is based on the material, its constructed nature and communications and is therefore socially related. It is within some form of outer frame that the images featured within this paper were created.

These images become frames within a frame and I would suggest provide a mechanism for exploring some of the inner world of the participants/photographers involved. In psychodynamic terms the image can become the embodiment of transference which is “relatively safe because, although material which was previously unconscious may be brought rapidly into the light of day, it is safely held within the edges of the limits of the picture.” (Schaverien, 1999: 66) The images created as part of the change interventions that I have either researched or worked on as a practitioner all have an inner framed experience contained within the boundaries of the outer frame.

The pictures in some cases, particularly during the Learning Histories, became a central point of action, linking inner experience and the communal gaze as they were shared with colleagues and consultants. In containing some of the chaos of organisational life and potentially overwhelming nature of unconscious content the images became safe to discuss, because ‘boundaried space permits potentially unmanageable images to be contained.’ (Schaverien, 1999: 71)

The organisations in which these images were taken or utilised also provide a framed experience often with a core focal point as the centre of action and so it could be argued this was a dynamic that was familiar to them.

Theatres, galleries, theatre companies, arthouse cinemas and so on, provide a framed experience within a space that is set outside of everyday experience and often requires a degree of immersion on the part of the participant or viewer. This gives the audience the potential to enter into relationship with the object/image and the artist, a space where transference and counter transference can take place (Kuhns, 1983).

The use of images in my organisational development work could be likened to analytical art psychotherapy in that both the process of image making and the subsequent product create individual and collective meaning, “the *process of image making*, and the processes which revolve around the *image once it exists...* are the life *in* the picture and the life *of* the picture respectively.” (Schaverien, 1999: 79)

As part of my OD practice and doctoral research I have certainly experienced the process and the product of image making changing attitudes and conversations. Particularly when they are what might be described as embodied images (Schaverien, 1999). These are images that go beyond description and are an authentic extension of the feeling world of the image maker, ‘in the embodied image the form and content are unified in a way that may be expressive, but it is more than mere expression.’ (Schaverien, 1999: 92) This linking of form and content suggests that meaning and feelings, the cognitive and the affective are inextricably linked and can become manifest in the images made.

In organisational terms the importance of framing is reflected in what Armstrong refers to as the boundary settings which bring the notion of an ‘organisation’ into being. He proposes that organisations can be thought of as “an eliciting object of emotion.” (Armstrong, 2005: 103) The nature of the exchanges and patterns that then occur within organisations carry some reference to this object, it is an implicit element within organisational life. The “organisational object” becomes something “that functions as a point of origin of psychic experience...but which, like all mental objects, can elicit multiple responses, be subject to multiple readings, more or less conscious and more or less in accordance with reality.” (Armstrong, 2005: 103)

In defining the organisation as object Armstrong (2005) identifies four boundary conditions that determine the nature of the ‘object’ (which is either conscious or unconscious):

- The organisation as contextually embedded (the ecological dimension)
- The organisation as enterprise (the identity dimension)
- The organisation as process (the task dimension)
- The organisation as structure (the management dimension)

That is not to say that the organisation is a concrete entity or object. It is something which may be within or outside of our attention but it creates a dynamic referred to as the “organisation-in-the-mind.”(Armstrong, 2005) Any attention to organisational change can then be placed within this frame in terms of how these boundary conditions are

understood.

Container/Contained

Bion (1962) first wrote about the concept of container and contained in the 1960s in 'Learning from Experience', which focussed specifically on the psychoanalytic encounter. He later extended it beyond the individual to groups, institutions and society in the 1970s. It is a concept that appears deceptively simple, yet it can be applied in numerous ways. Bion's original metaphor likened container/contained to the relationship between caregiver and baby, where the caregiver is the container with the capacity to 'hold' or contain the distress of the crying baby. If the child feels sufficiently supported it will calm down.

In this space the child feels not only physical safety but the notion of a reliable container which has the capacity to take in its distress without damage, "thus the repeated experience of this external containing space contributes to the development of an idea of something resilient, safe, and supportive inside the self. The affect is still there, but it is now bearable (i.e. contained)..." (Hoggett & Thompson, 2002: 120)

Bain (1999) uses a physical analogy to describe it in its simplest form. Imagine grasping your wrist with your hand, the hand is the 'container', and the wrist the 'contained'. If you clasp too tightly i.e. the 'container' is too strong you will stop the blood flow in your wrist. If the clasp is too loose, the wrist can easily slip out of, or break the 'container'. At its core the container/contained relationship is a dynamic one. It is not the case that the contained sits statically and uninfluenced within the container. When considering the institution as a container there is interdependence between our individual experience and the collective experience. As individuals we are containers for the "stimulus of what may be contained." (Bain, 1999:2-3)

Equally, the institution performs a similar function for the collective. In acting as a container, some organisations could be described as more containing than others and therefore more able to provide the opportunity for growth in both container and contained, "some organizations and their structures are clearly more supportive and containing of managers than others, and this is likely to show by an effect on the entire organization." (Obholzer, 1996: 54) As in the wrist metaphor, some squeeze too tight and prevent the blood flow whereas others fail to contain at all.

This approach is closely linked to issues of communication, "the entire emphasis of the container/contained process is on the capacity to listen, to take in, and to react in response." (Obholzer, 1996) If the organisation is incapable of listening to its employees, like the child not supported by its care-givers, they will feel unheard and alone.

If it is full of anxiety it will spill over into its employees and once again communication and growth will be impaired. This focus on communication echoes the notion of learning as a

“communicational phenomenon.” (Bateson, 2000: 279) I would suggest that a number of these images speak to the nature of the organisation as container.

The Images Revisited

The images are now represented with a short accompanying text to be ‘read’ in the light of the preceding theoretical discussion.



*“The cinema makes me feel uncomfortable.”
Jan, research participant*

The image of the cinema provoked an emotional conversation about the last restructure and the fact that the all staff briefings were held in this space.

Jan found it quite difficult to ‘see’ that space without recalling the difficulties of that period. As she talked this through her colleagues were silent, someone then said they had no idea she felt that way.

“At one point we thought it was never going to happen, but we didn’t give up!” David, research participant

As part of an initiative to improve library services, front line staff were given a budget and the mandate to develop their own projects. This caused significant challenges for the staff concerned, and their managers, in terms of their usual working relationships. Issues of building works, health and safety and project planning all proved very difficult, with the staff feeling that obstacles were deliberately being put in their path. The coffee machine being a case in point because of the need for a mains water feed.





The staircase runs from a long narrow office downstairs to the upstairs office. Several of the admin staff talked of it being a barrier that created a “them and us” feel to their work, perhaps in the old “upstairs downstairs” tradition.

“I hate having to use this printer in this ridiculous space; it makes me feel sick and never works properly.” Stella, research participant

The restructure which saw some 15% of the staff leave was accompanied by an expensive building refurbishment which received a mixed response from those remaining. One of the major changes was the addition of a printing ‘room’ on each floor with one printer for two departments; many teams lost their personal printers.



While the logic of the change was understood the impact was significant, not helped by the apparent inability of the technology to cope with demand. The small rooms were unventilated and many people complained of feeling dizzy but if the door was left open adjacent staff complained of the noise. It was generally regarded as a disaster.

Discussion

In bringing together the psychodynamic concept of framing and expressing it in terms of container/contained I am proposing a theoretical framework for interpreting the meaning of a range of images I have encountered in my research and practice.

The images of everyday aspects of the organisations concerned have become frames or containers for the issues that participants have been unable to acknowledge or express previously. While the intention of the participants in creating a particular image may have been descriptive initially, in the selection represented in this paper I would argue they have become embodied.

The process of image making appears to have gone through a series of phases which contribute to the life of the picture (adapted from Schaverien, 1994):

- Identification: contemplation of the image as the phenomenon is laid bare. The attachment develops through the gaze and words are not part of the process.
- Familiarisation: The image becomes more familiar and is seen as 'outside'. This is part of the process of separation from the image-maker
- Acknowledgement: the implications of the image are acknowledged and wider aspects of what it contains can be discussed, verbalisation joins the process
- Assimilation: The material explored can now be reintegrated and once made conscious the implications can be assimilated. This may or may not be openly discussed with others
- Disposal: This is based on the relative power of the image; some may lose their power once their implications are verbalised/assimilated while others may remain empowered for some time.

Such was the impact of the communal gaze and discourse regarding the images taken that one group who had chosen not to make images but to undertake more traditional interviews expressed their regret at making such a decision.

Conclusions

In this paper I have explored the interrelationship between the visual and spoken in organisations and how organisational members effectively stop 'seeing' certain aspects of their organisations apparently in order to avoid the meanings they may contain. Drawing on the psychodynamic concept of container/contained (Bion, 1962) I have argued that attention to the visual during or after change initiatives can change the nature of organisational conversations and surface that which has previously been unspoken; changing the relationship between 'container and contained'. It would appear that the images provide a manageable boundary and a safe container to allow for the process of transference acting as a mechanism for managing unconscious anxieties and defensive routines.

The literature on the visual in organisations is often concerned with issues of identity (Baker & Balmer, 1997; van den Bosch et al., 2004), the symbolic (Dandridge et al., 1980) or culture (Hatch, 1993; Prosser, 2007) and could be said to focus on the outer frame, the context in which the object resides. This paper has looked at the role of *both* inner and outer frames (Schaverien, 1999) and how framing an image provides a container for transference of unconscious anxieties.

Through my involvement in a series of organisational change interventions participants took a range of images which revealed how much meaning is 'hidden in plain sight' unacknowledged, deliberately denied or out of awareness.

This paper has been an attempt to explore the meaning of images I have collected during a range of change projects with arts organisations of different scales, artforms and locations. While they were initially felt to be almost incidental to the other work I and my colleagues were undertaking we were increasingly struck by the power these visuals exerted, they had the capacity to surface issues which had previously been undiscussable. In looking to psychodynamics and analytical art psychotherapy I have begun to explore a theoretical framework which might support interpretations of this power. In undertaking 'image work' we found a safe, bounded container for managing what emerged from the unconscious.

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