Becoming savvy: Developing awareness of everyday politics

Jacqueline Janssen

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ABSTRACT

Key words: appropriateness, complex responsive processes of relating, conversational pattern, culture, experience, game, idealisation, identity, language, learning, meaning, 'political savvy', politics, recognition, reflectivity, reflexivity.

This thesis explores the experiences of an educational project manager/team leader, and at some point job-seeker, mostly in foreign countries. The focus lies, in conclusion, on developing awareness of everyday politics, brought about mainly by a significant change in the understanding of three closely related concepts: culture, language and identity. The understanding of culture developed into a notion of culture of groups – part of complex networks of other groups – simultaneously formed by and forming interdependent people who are interrelating according to evolving/emerging, explicit/implicit customs, norms, values and ethics. The exploration of language revealed patterns of conversation, common to specific groups, allowing co-creation of significant symbols, of which appropriate use enabled communication, establishment and mutual recognition. Identity became recognised as a social construct – dynamically adapting to specific local circumstances (groups), to social acts, which it forms and is formed by at the same time.

In researcher's management practice and career-coaching-trajectory rather abstract and idealised text and talk describing people and/in organisations was encountered frequently, seemingly aimed at reducing the inevitable uncertainty that results from the complexity of human relating. Attention is paid to ways in which people speak and write about them-selves and/at work and how this influences the experience of self and/at work, which revealed a relation between abstract and idealised conversational patterns and impacted sense of self.

The career-coaching experience in particular exposed how these conversational patterns in/and the strategic construction of 'glossy' identities (of organisations and people) do not reflect everyday perception of self and/at work, as work is developed in social interaction, of which meaning is negotiated and evolves through people's differing intentions, expectations and emerging insights; through everyday politics.

Becoming 'politically savvy', acquiring awareness of everyday politics, is necessary for our functioning in organisational life.

The argument is that developing 'political savvy' – becoming self-conscious in complex organisational environments where strategically co-created idealised images of self, organisations and work are common practice – is increasingly taxing, as glossy identities 'airbrush' away the messiness of everyday work life. The challenge for managers is to endeavour to see beyond these images, explicit strategies and certain conversational patterns, and develop their ability to make sense – by reflecting and taking a reflexive stance – of what it is people are doing together. Taking seriously everyday experiences may provide choice, options to proceed, possibly to develop (trust in) 'political savvy', and may increase awareness of how people adapt, change and develop (in) social acts because of and despite this.

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INTRODUCTION THESIS

The theory on which we, DMan students and faculty, base our research of management practice is that of 'complex responsive processes of relating' (Stacey, Griffin and Shaw, 2000), where 'we think of organisations as social objects' and the activity of management as being about 'making generalisations particular' (Stacey, 2011: 365), where:

> The processes of management as particularising are interpretive and conflictual, and it is in such local interaction that social objects continue both to be reproduced and to evolve – that is population-wide patterns are iterated in local interactions as continuity and potential transformation at the same time. (ibid.)

The theory, and this research, owes greatly to *pragmatism* (Dewey, 1910) (Mead, 1992), in which experience plays a central role. For developing understanding of our managerial practice, we must learn to interpret our experience, our local interactions, in which we particularise 'generalisations', such as tasks, plans, goals, strategies, analysis, of which the interpretations of the people we work with may be 'conflictual' (Stacey, 2011: 365). This central position for taking experience seriously can be traced to *phenomenology*, noting that

> there is a vast difference [in approach] between … the *transcendental* Cartesian phenomenology of Husserl with its emphasis on the detached, meaning-giving, knowing subject and the *immanent* phenomenology of Heidegger with its emphasis on *being-in-the-world*; the embodied, doing, *coping* subject. (Chia and MacKay, 2007: 230)

Heidegger's approach, also referred to as *hermeneutics*, is linked closely to complex responsive processes, as this relates 'knowing-in-practice', 'a more primordial form of practical engagement' (ibid.). We cannot understand our practice without engagement; or, as Gadamer explains:

> To understand is to participate immediately in life, without any mediation through concepts … not relating reality to ideas, but everywhere reaching the point where "life thinks and thought lives."(Gadamer, 2004: 208)

To develop understanding of our experience, we need to engage, relate, interact. To interact and make sense of our interaction, we use language.

> There is a great range in our use of language; but whatever phase of this range is used is a part of a social process, and it is always that part by means of which we affect ourselves as we affect others and mediate the social situation through this understanding of what we are saying. (Mead, 1992: 75)

For Mead, meaning emerges in ongoing social processes of gesture and response, which *mediates* the social situation and affects all people involved, rendering problematic concepts of one-sided, unidirectional control.

In short; complex responsive processes of relating emphasises the need to pay attention to 'local interaction', day-to-day experience, and by engaging in conversations on 'particularising' 'social objects' (organisations, plans, strategies), noticing emergent meaning, we develop understanding of what it is we are doing, attempting to do, together.

The context
In line with the above, this research scrutinises my everyday experiences of developing and managing change projects in educational institutes, in my home country the Netherlands as a team leader in vocational education; introducing project-based learning involving external parties, in Thailand as a project manager at a university of applied sciences; developing a life-long learning pilot to be embedded in society, and – applying to get back into education – a career-coaching trajectory and networking activities I engaged with in Switzerland. The rather dynamic character of this period in my life, my unfamiliarity with academic research, and the (sometimes challenging, radically social) theories underlying the perspective of complex responsive processes of relating, gave rise to a quite wide area of topics open for exploration.

Reflective/reflexive methodology

To research our day-to-day management practice experiences, we make use of narrative inquiry. We begin with writing up one or a series of narrative(s) on a professional situation, selected by means of importance. Experiences that are puzzling, anxiety-provoking, confronting, and so on. We reflect on this and explore emergent issues and send in our versions to our learning set – supervisor and fellow students. The learning sets keep in contact between residential weekends, offering timely email exchange and set Skype calls to rigorously discuss each other's progression. This peer- and supervisor-review approach demands thorough engagement with our own and each other's work by commenting on it, suggesting literature, providing diverging perspectives, questioning, contrasting and refuting conclusions drawn. This strongly iterative approach towards our writing has iteratively developed my understanding of the interrelatedness of the many issues I attempted to make sense of over time. The methodology deepened my ability to reflect on my practice and become more reflexive on my thinking. Taking on this critical stance impacted my research as it does my management practice. The methodology seems to have become interwoven with practice.

Paying attention to emergent meaning, patterns, led to my recognising the overall topic of everyday politics in human relating, however – in my case – only after concluding Project 4. This clarifies why we choose not start our research with formulating a fixed research question and performing a literature review upfront, as is the case in many traditional methodologies, rather we scrutinise our practice and take seriously the questions that emerge in the social acts we find ourselves in.

Literature

The literature – mainly sociology, psychology and philosophy – is brought to our attention during the four residential weekends per annum: in presentations by our professors, in group-sessions, and as mentioned, in the supervised learning set. Additionally I have searched extensively for articles that could provide me with insights on emergent issues, that I noticed myself or to which others drew attention. Furthermore the yearly conferences opened up information on authors and literature,

through keynote speakers and conversations with alumni and peers from other universities and organisations. As were the projects, the bibliography has been iteratively developed. Literature has been added to and removed from the bibliography as the projects, and insights in management practice, evolved.

'Political savvy'

At the start of writing up this thesis, after concluding Project 4, I began to understand in hindsight, I had been trying to avoid (writing about) politics. At work, by dealing with uncertainty and anxiety related to this, through extensive planning, strategic approaches, attempting to align people to idealised views, creating roadmaps, diagrams and structures, designing simple visuals and getting clear messages across – approaches I recognised as quite common in organisational life. My career-coaching trajectory drew my attention to the possible side effects of strictly strategic approaches towards highly idealised goals, masking complexity – more specifically the patterns of conversation that seemed to go with these, with which we co-created abstract and idealised identities for people and/in organisations, and 'glossy' images of the work we produce together. Following through on strategy in my work in education, and marketing my co-constructed 'sellable self' in the career-coaching trajectory – feeling compelled to comply with generalised rules and prescribed document formats, to use proper wording, text and talk – somehow appeared to undermine my confidence in my own practical reasoning, my 'political savvy'.

In this research I have found Mead's understanding of self-consciousness to express what 'political savvy' entails. Mead takes self-consciousness to be an awareness of ones relations to social acts and to all others involved in these. It implies an understanding of the influence all involved may have on the social act, forming the interaction and being formed by it at the same time. Developing this awareness, one may refine and modify one's adjustment in social acts, leading to a more conscious adjustment, affecting the outcome of acts. This new understanding revealed to me that what I had been encountering and tried to make sense of in the four projects were the political games that were played out in the various environments I found myself in. The issues I looked into such as trust, in/exclusion,

power, cooperation and so on were all related to the political stances of the people I (attempted) to work with.

My argument

Taking seriously my experiences in unfamiliar groups and exploring these as complex responsive processes of relating has aided me in making sense, both in the living present and in hindsight, of what we may have been doing together, or attempted to do. This in turn has heightened my awareness of possible intentions, expectations, experiences – in other words our everyday political stances – that were influencing our work and our-selves. Complex responsive processes of relating has provided me with a perspective on human relating and interdependence that points to the inevitability and necessity of politics in our dealings with complexity in our workplace while attempting to co-create movement, both enabling and restraining at the same time. Developing my ability to reflect, and taking a reflexive stance towards my thinking, proved to be helpful in gaining a deeper understanding from my experiences, so further developing my practical reasoning, enhancing my 'feel for the game'.

An apparently common approach to dealing with complexity in our day-to-day work life is to oversimplify it through strategic planning – idealising and abstracting our goals and activities by framing them in certain patterns of conversation that co-create 'glossy' images of work, ourselves and the organisation we form and are formed by. This seems to mask the messiness of our everyday practice, apparently to minimise anxiety; while this conceals the complicated workings of everyday politics, it too is a political process in itself. In such circumstances we may find it hard to develop or trust our 'political savvy', although we might choose to take up the challenge of seeking a deeper understanding of what is actually going on.

The four projects

This thesis consists of four projects and a discussion. Over the course of the four projects my understanding of how complex processes of human relating influence

my practice has evolved significantly as noted, as has my ability to write with academic rigour. As this development of my thinking is of major importance to the research method and impacts my practice, the projects have not been rewritten. The reader can observe my gradual development and may thus form a better understanding of how the method – increasingly reflecting on my professional situations and developing a reflexive stance towards my thinking – influences myself, my practice and my relations and interdependencies with the people I work with.

Project 1 was an exploration of how I came to think the way I did at the point of starting on the DMan, and how this evolved over the first six months of being on the program. The project created a basic awareness of my (conscious/unconscious) prejudices and assumptions that were influencing my practice, scrutinised a narrative of a clash with my team while attempting to change traditional vocational education into project-based learning, and introduced the plans that led to my leaving my home country, expecting to further develop myself through confronting my prejudices in unfamiliar settings.

In Project 2 I looked closely at my experiences in Thai higher education, where I tried to create, develop and manage the implementation of a life-long learning pilot project. I introduced fragments of narrative of a three-day symposium that reflected many of the issues I encountered in my work, and found that on reflection, situations appeared a lot more complex than I had been able to grasp at the time. My notion of concepts such as culture changed significantly – from a fixed national culture, to something more fluid that is socially co-created in local groups – and I started to experience how the DMan method, demanding intense reflection and reflexivity, allowed for thorough sense-making of the situations I was trying to understand more fully.

Project 3 explored a period of strong insecurity about my position in Thailand, from the perspective of recognition. I looked into the highly uncertain and anxiety-provoking time leading up to my resignation, then a sudden (apparently positive) turnaround of the situation before my job was unexpectedly terminated. The repeated

iterations considerably enhanced my understanding of the complexity of human relating in such unfamiliar settings.

I started Project 4 with a different methodology, given my situation of being a job-seeker (in Switzerland) and therefore having no professional narratives available. It took time to realise that experiences during my career-coaching trajectory offered useful insights into how strategic approaches to 'marketing' myself, and the specific conversational patterns associated with them, paradoxically appeared to diminish my sense of self and trust in my abilities. Making sense of this experience *as if* a game proved valuable.

Finally, I revisited my projects in the discussion and further developed these with reflections from the progression viva and by looking back at all the narratives in light of my changed understanding of human relating. Through the metaphor of 'the game' that proved so helpful in Project 4, I could now discern how everyday politics had emerged as an overall theme, setting the stage for my thesis.

PROJECT 1

INTRODUCTION PROJECT 1

Roots

Growing up as the middle child of five in a generally stable and open-minded environment, where sharing (both material and emotional) came naturally, provided a solid base for my future. However, the complicated nature of my parents' childhood did have some repercussions.

My father attended a seminary to become a Catholic priest; but, having grown up in the natural surroundings of a farm, he felt alien from what he was taught there and decided to quit after three years. The shame this brought upon his family was made very clear to him, which burdened him with a feeling of guilt that haunted the rest of his life. He busied himself taking care of people around him, neglecting his own well-being and constantly directing us, his children, never to place ourselves above anybody else and always to focus exclusively on other peoples' interests.

In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, translator Steven Kalberg starts his 'Introduction to the Protestant Ethic' with a quote:

> For sure, even with the best will, the modern person seems generally unable to imagine how large a significance those components of our consciousness rooted in religious beliefs have actually had upon culture . . . and the organization of life. (p. 125*) (Weber, 2002: xi)

The Protestant ethic (putting work and material success emphatically at the centre of life) was at the time, and to a certain extent still is, manifest in Dutch society, while the issue of guilt and shame (confessing one's sins, as the need to be forgiven is necessary to enter the hereafter) was ever present in Catholic circles. My parents were far from being orthodox Catholics; and while they valued commitment to work and (social) activities, they were not materialists.

Religious values have been instilled in me and – though I am no longer a practising Catholic – continue to affect me, as Weber points out. My respect for people, expecting them to have good intentions and make every effort in relation to others, has sometimes made me vulnerable to misuse of power. The Dutch saying, 'Act normal, that's crazy enough!' caused an internal struggle, whether or not allowing myself to stand out of the crowd.

EDUCATION AND WORK

Technique

My first choice was art school; but my partner at the time would not allow me to go, worried that it would be too chaotic an environment, that would influence me in a negative manner. After finishing high school, I therefore decided to study electronics; my partner did not approve of this either, but felt he could not refuse again. At the time women were strongly encouraged, through governmental publications in several media, to take up some form of technical study.

In this male-dominated environment, where core values such as analysing, systematic and process thinking were common practice, facts and figures ruled. Starting work as a draftsman, after graduation, my first job was not in electronics but

in instrumentation. By working in a different discipline than the one I studied, and later in other fields of technique, I began to realise that it did not matter which technical field I had studied: the basic structure and functionality of a (technical) system is almost identical – only the medium is different.

The course made me work in a highly structured manner, and perceive everything as analysable and rationally understandable, as described by Edwards Deming:

> … an outside view-a lens-that I call a system of profound knowledge. It provides a map of theory by which to understand the organizations that we work in. (Edwards Deming, 1994: 92)

This comforting approach can be easy to sustain, as it seems to make life and work highly controllable.

Design

My personal situation changed drastically when I met my second partner, who encouraged me to take up studying again. Following my wish to develop my creative talent in drawing and painting, I started studying part-time at the St. Joost Academy of Fine Arts. During the course of the first year, I lost my job. At this point it made sense not to apply for another job, but to set about as a self-employed technical draftsman, which would give me more freedom to plan my working week around the course.

I set out with the intention to study painting; but the insights I gained in the first year, during which both autonomous art and graphic design were taught, made me opt for the latter. I felt more comfortable with the more clearly outlined and less conceptual nature of the graphic design course, perhaps because of my (taught) preference for clarity and structure. Besides, the character of Dutch Design was attractive, described on the website Design.nl as;

> …The remarkable match, 'down to earth with a twist' can be found in the word 'relative': don't make things bigger than they are. (Premsela, The Netherlands Institute for Design and Fashion, 2012)

My taste is for simple and useful designs, rather than fancy and exaggerated ones, which explains why Dutch Design appeals to me. The graphic design department was known for its high standards in typography and emphasis on detail and quality; here, I saw a natural fit with my technical background.

One of the lecturers used the method of breaking down our confidence and then building it up again. His method can be related to the process of 'creative destruction', first introduced by Marx in relation to capitalism, and later used in relation to innovation by Schumpeter:

> [The innovational process] …incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure from within, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one. (Schumpeter, 1950: 83)

He went about this in a confronting manner, dismissing all our work as worthless and calling us the most unworthy group of students he had ever seen. I later understood that by doing this he was encouraging us to get rid of our 'old' ways and perceptions, making way for new perspectives, and teaching us that creativity is a continuous change of view. In order to come up with new ideas, we had to learn to develop or let go of earlier ones, to move on.

Criticism of my design work was painful: I felt that, rather than my work, it was myself that was not good enough. The close identification I felt with my artwork can be related to the position of the artist in the 1990s as described by Kalsmose, when she refers to art historian Amelia Jones's 'decentralised and split subject':

> The artist used to work with an object; now the artist takes the position of both subject and object and thereby divides the self into many markers of identity such as gender, sexual orientation, race, religion, class, age etc. (Kalsmose, 2010: 57)

We were constantly made aware of the importance of our personal signature, the uniqueness of the work we produced, and the strong relation between the work and the creator. We were asked *how we saw ourselves reflected in the work*, thus directing comments towards the artist (designer) and less towards the work created.

Apart from this struggle, I enjoyed the dynamic surroundings and the exchange of ideas and views. In numerous ways I was taught to look at form and functionality, research possible solutions for each design case, question every choice I made and discuss my own work as well as that of peers.

This ongoing process of research and choice made it quite clear to me that perfect solutions do not exist; nor was there only one perspective on whatever case was presented. This was underlined by our lecturer in cultural philosophy, who urged us to stand in the shoes of various philosophers – not necessarily agreeing with them, but to try and grasp their theories; this opened us to a broader spectrum of views (Linssen, 1992).

I was not able to grasp until much later that this absence of perfect solutions applies to everything. For a large part, I kept on working systematically towards 'ideal goals'.

I remember Wittgenstein's *Remarks on Colour* (1982) distinctly. His way of describing in words, the multitude of ways to perceive colour was formidable. Our assignment was to translate his writing into typographic design. We had to really 'enter' his words. By reading his observations this closely, I noticed how Wittgenstein gave the notion of colour a delicacy, depth, and diversity I had never encountered before.

Hacker makes sense of this type of writing in philosophy, known as the 'linguistic turn', in his paper *Analytic Philosophy: Beyond the Linguistic Turn and Back Again* (2005: 19);

> The aim of philosophy is the clarification of the forms of sense that, in one way or another, are conceptually puzzling – for they are legion. … The prize is not more *knowledge* about anything. Rather it is a proper understanding of the structure and articulations of our conceptual scheme, and the disentangling of conceptual confusions.

Wittgenstein described extensively how colour can be perceived in many different ways; in doing so, he also made me aware of the power of words in relation to presenting other (philosophical) views, explaining these or persuading the reader to take them up. On the other hand, he demonstrated the ambiguity of words;

> Lichtenberg says that very few people have ever seen pure white. So do most people use the word wrong, then? And how did *he* learn the correct use? – He constructed an ideal use from the ordinary one. And is not to say a better one, but one that has been refined along certain lines and in the process something has been carried to extremes. (Wittgenstein, 1982: I-6)

For me, this meant that there is no right or wrong: everything is perception, interpretation. I understood philosophy as a way of articulating perspectives by making use of what Wittgenstein calls: the language-game.

I now understand this as one view on a particular form of philosophy, and I am interested in exploring this further.

Art

Drawing and painting have always played an important part in my life. During the graphic design course, photography was added to my creative spectrum. After graduating from the Academy I integrated art into my professional portfolio and joined an art collective, thus changing the status of art from hobby to 'serious business'. Art projects were no longer just sidelines; they influenced, and in turn were influenced by, my design activities.

My exhibitions, projects and networking activities drew the attention of a newly established foundation that aimed to bring together art professionals in the West-Brabant region and set up large-scale exhibitions and projects, helping to make regional creative potential visible. They invited me to join the board in 2002 as a design and communication specialist.

Within three years, most of the foundation's goals were achieved. At that point the board intended to take up the role of facilitator, consigning the operational task to the artist community. Unfortunately, the artists did not succeed in keeping the organisation going at the same pace and scale that the board had achieved. The network that had been created, however, had enduring value, resulting in many smaller-scale collaborations.

My thoughts on why artists did not take up projects in the same way was that (commercial) collaboration was, in many cases, not their strong point – my view on artists being that they tend to be highly independent, creative people who are focused

on their own work and opinions; an attitude that is necessary for the production of original, genuine art.

As with any group of people, generalisations of what defines an artist cannot be made. The notion of the artist as separate from contemporary society gained popularity in the 1950s; whereas now, the professional artist is governed by social and economical conditions that determine whether they qualify for funding or membership of artists' associations (Karttunen, 1998). The way the artist values their own position and work also depends on their history and social surroundings, and whether they are active in the 'market' or 'social sphere' (Nistelrooij, 2009); in both cases, the authors conclude there is no single definitive view of an artist.

The collaborative nature of artistic projects might be another reason for the fact that collaborations on this scale tend not to last, as Uzi and Spiro conclude in their research on the 'small world networks' of Broadway musical producers, stating:

> The small world network effect was parabolic; performance increased up to a threshold, after which point the positive effects reversed. (Uzzi and Spiro, 2005: 447)

Many artists are soloists, which would explain their return to working individually after a long-term collaborative venture. Also, given that collaborative art projects are usually not easy to market and so are often regarded as social events rather than 'work' (Bishop, 2006: 179), becoming involved in one can be commercially unrewarding for the individual artist.

The indefinable character of an artist and designer fuelled a struggle in me between these 'roles': I wondered whether the first 'role' – which seems to call for free expression and non-conformism – was truly different from the creative process of design in daily practice, which was more bound to budget, supporting the message to be conveyed, and following direction on the media to be used. I felt I had less difficulty than artist colleagues seemed to have in working within boundaries, and usually presented myself as a 'free' designer, rather than an artist, within our group. This sometimes provoked discussion with artists who warned that this attitude would devaluate my artwork. To them, freedom of expression was extremely important:

they saw design as more commercial, an applied art, circumscribed by boundaries defined by others.

Nowadays I am no longer so interested in defining one or the other: the lines between art and design seem to be disappearing more and more, and the increasing use of technology has raised new questions about what constitutes art. I believe it is in the nature of art to be indefinable, or at least that it can be constantly redefined.

Networking

From the start in 1994, I got involved in several networks for entrepreneurs. I felt more at ease in mixed networks because I was used to working with men; but I was invited to join several female networks, where I noticed that 'softer' sides of doing business were shared – like expressing a sense of doubt and failure.

In a number of networks I became actively involved in workgroups or worked on special assignments, which taught me the importance of ethics and (personal/organisational) values, as well as integrity and trust.

As a designer, I had come to see mission statements and values as an almost indispensable means to create identity – a way of looking upon an organisation as if it were a person. At the time, I was convinced that we could agree on values and capture them in a document, and that most people in the organisation would have no problem in adopting these and acting accordingly. I perceived these as rigid 'corporate identity elements'.

During the July 2012 University of Hertfordshire (UH) residential, theme *Leadership and the exploration of values, norms and conflict*, I came to another understanding of ethics: not as fixed, something a group 'agrees on', but – as Griffin cites Mead (1908),

> … ethical meaning continually emerges in the interaction itself. Ethics are being negotiated in the interaction. (Griffin, 2002: 182)

This sounds more plausible, since every situation calls for an interpretation and confronts people with another perspective on a general value or moral statement. It also explains why I had experienced that attempting to work with these 'fixed values' caused problems in everyday practice.

Looking back at this active networking period, we were always, as a group, searching for the 'binding' factor: What made this particular network interesting to us? Why did we spend our (precious) time here?

In one network that I participated in for 10 years, there were periods when numbers increased or decreased dramatically. When discussing why this might have happened, we concluded that the 'style' and 'approach' of the board – in particular, of the chair – was largely what created an atmosphere that was attractive (or not) to female businesswomen. Reading for the UH residential provided me with an insight in leadership; Mowles (2011) takes the perspective of Mead (1992) when he concludes that

> leaders… have the ability to take the attitude of a large number of others to themselves and to articulate this in a way in which these others are able to recognise themselves in what is said. (Mowles, 2011: 114)

This may explain the success of some boards and chairs, in a way that makes sense to me in retrospect. When leading (mainly sole) practitioners – people looking for support, wanting to make sense of how they (should) run their business – in the way that Mowles describes, the board (and chair) will provide members with a safe surrounding where their needs are met and insecurities are understood: an environment, network, they want to be part of.

At the time, however, I ascribed the success solely to personal qualities of the leader and/or board members – to their strong rhetoric and persuasiveness, their 'correct' perspectives on doing business, and their clear goal-oriented strategies for the network.

TEACH AND LEARN

This section describes a complex period in my professional life; I reflect on it only at the end.

Career change

One Friday morning at the end of July 2002, I was interviewed for a job teaching media design at a local vocational college. The founder and his manager described the course, which had recently been set up, and gave me the weekend to think things over. If I were to start, I would have to come in again on Monday to go over details and sign the contract.

I weighed the pros and cons. On the 'pro' side, I was attracted to the 'security' of a steady job and the chance to work in a small team, which I missed as a sole practitioner. On the other hand, being bound to a school roster (diminishing my freedom) was the biggest 'con'. Apart from this, I had no idea how well I would be able to handle a group of students in the age of (roughly) 16–21. In the end, I decided to go for it.

With only my roster as a guideline, I entered the classroom, at liberty to write my assignments the way I saw best fit. I had expected some kind of format to follow, such as detailed documentation that outlined the contents of the course, like the ISO procedures I was accustomed to.

Two months later I was ready to throw in the towel, feeling swamped and unsupported, unsure if what I was doing was right. A conversation with my colleague prompted him to suggest weekly meetings to go over my lesson plans, helping me to define structure and lesson content.

I enjoyed the interaction with students; the satisfaction I felt accomplishing something with them was more rewarding than a content client for whom I designed a product.

At the beginning of my third year, I began studying for the mandatory teaching degree. The course provided a strong theoretical base for my work, which I welcomed. We were taught how to prepare our lessons, methods of teaching, and were provided with a number of standard forms and documents. Alongside this, we were acquainted with learning styles (Kolb, 1984), learning disabilities such as dyslexia, and some basic knowledge of personality disorders.

Most valuable to me were the sessions where one of us presented a case about something they encountered and shared what sense they had made of what happened,

what solutions they had found for emerging problems. We would then reflect on it as a group, and in doing so exchanged ways of dealing with such situations. It became clear that we all felt anxious and insecure at some point.

As the numbers of classes increased, so did the number of colleagues. I had trouble working out who was doing what, when and how; we had almost nothing on paper. During every personal performance review I raised the issue, being consistently told not to worry too much.

In the third year, our course was assessed. The report the committee produced was very clear: there was no reason for concern regarding either teacher qualifications or lesson content, but our written materials were considered inadequate. We were given a short time to revise these and produce a large amount of new ones. I could hardly restrain myself from saying 'I told you so!'.

Arrangements were made to facilitate our team in working on the revision. Collectively, we decided to base the system partly upon material I had developed. In cooperation with a colleague from the IT section, I drew the outlines. After we finished the description of the new structure and provided models for all documents, colleagues began rewriting their assignments. Some found it tough to work along the strict guidelines; they seemed to have difficulty grasping the structure behind it. The new documents were put up for review and were approved.

Management acknowledged that my systematic approach had been effective. As a result, two things happened: I was made team leader, and I was asked to set up another based on new competence-based learning documents. I was given the freedom to redefine the four-year course as I saw fit.

I gathered information on competence-based learning, consulted colleagues, and attended seminars and workshops to get a clear view on the matter. To me, as a professional, this perspective on education felt much more familiar.

Everything went smoothly. The team seemed content to have someone taking the lead. In meetings, I asked them to share their ideas and perspectives on the work I was doing; little input was given. I suggested more extensive use of new media and encouraged stronger collaboration among colleagues. The new weekly lesson

schedule provided for theory being literally followed by practice and enabled groups, even cohorts, to work together.

Once I had defined the outlines, the team would fill in the details. I invited them to co-develop a 'manual' that would make our course set-up more transparent for the team, management, (future) students and parents.

Alongside these changes in course content and structure, the classroom environment itself was adjusted dramatically. This process was put in motion by our director and management, and took place over the same period of time. The open workspaces were not ideal, but suited competence-based teaching more than the closed classrooms we had before. I had teachers to work together in designated pairs, which the open learning environment enabled, even dictated.

A team was set up to establish co-operation between 'creative sections' of three colleges within the institute. In addition to already extremely changing circumstances, I was asked to take part in the work group. The aim of this initiative was to obtain projects from external parties, to be carried out jointly by interdisciplinary student teams. Working in such a manner would require a flexible attitude from all concerned, but would certainly provide a challenging 'real-life' environment for students. Many organisations showed an interest, and soon several productions were carried out. They were taken up enthusiastically by our students, but demanded a huge amount of team improvisation and proved to be an intensive learning experience.

In addition to my tasks, I was invited to join a 'Serious Games' development team – an exciting and challenging assignment with an enthusiastic group of people from several colleges, strongly supported and widely advertised by the institutes' board and chair.

Clash

Team meetings took place on a weekly basis, and at some point a couple of team members started arguing about every decision that had to be taken. Every week, tension rose noticeably. Finally, it exploded. Two colleagues vigorously attacked my way of working, telling me I was going too fast, demanding too much and was not consulting them enough (at all). They made it clear that they preferred things as they

had been. This 'window-dressing for college brochures' was too much for them. I was taken aback; I felt I had worked hard for a good cause and that we had achieved a great deal. To my distress, I broke down in tears.

First damage assessment

That week, the HR officer and I planned a meeting to discuss what had happened. In the days leading up to this meeting, the situation became clearer to me as talks with colleagues began to reveal my 'blind spots'. The HR officer pointed out to me that in going too fast and doing too much on my own I had excluded the team, who had complained when I was not around. I had not noticed or sensed how uncomfortable they had been. The HR officer said situations like this occurred often with 'innovators' who tend to get way ahead of the 'troops' in pursuit of the 'ideal goal'.

I told her it was important for me to learn from what had happened, not wanting to run into the same wall again. She offered me a competence test and a 360° feedback.

The competence test showed that my strongest fields were creativity and development, my weakest administrative and repetitive tasks; this was not a big surprise, especially as I had the impression of being able to influence the outcome of the test by answering in a certain way; it did not seem very 'objective' to me.

The outcome of the 360° feedback (a questionnaire filled out by myself, five colleagues and one manager) was more confronting. It showed that my colleagues looked upon me as an enthusiastic person with good intentions but with a tendency to work alone, not involving people around me enough. What struck me most was that they found my loyalty to the organisation not very strong, while I had felt all I had been doing was in the school's best interests. Looking back now at this 360° feedback, I believe it is not the best method to use in a situation with heated and mixed emotions, making it even more difficult than usual to give an objective opinion of someone.

The feedback made me conclude that I had two major choices: either I would adjust to the 'common pace' as a team player, or I would have to change to another work environment. After long deliberation and an intense session with an independent consultant, I chose the latter and quit my job with the college to resume

working full-time as a self-employed designer. I felt it was not my time to 'slow down' just yet.

Surprise reaction

After my resolute (and to some, rather impulsive) decision, one of the two colleagues who had presented the strongest opposition invited me to talk. To my astonishment, he said he found my decision – to find a new path in my career, without the security of a steady job – very brave.

Over the course of long talks we had over the following six months, I learned that he had been not altogether opposed to my plans but had just had criticisms that he had felt unable to express because I had not been open to it and was running around all the time. Most importantly, he pointed out to me that working in a systematic, goal-orientated way is not always fruitful; not everything can be approached rationally and perceived as absolute. He made me aware that the way today's education is set up – where we spend time checking and accounting for each and every step – may provide clarity, but it also suffocates teachers and students and discourages spontaneity. He felt that although the dynamic new surroundings did enable creativity to flourish, the changes had been too comprehensive and needed another approach. He also pointed out that many teachers feel the need to be looked upon as experts, and my approach had challenged this.

Looking back

The meeting with the HR officer, the extensive talks with my (ex-)colleague and my own reflection revealed how much my own approach had led to the clash.
I had assumed that

- working systematically, structurally and transparently would make things manageable, easier and more understandable for everyone;
- Everyone felt the need to share experiences and learn from each other, reflecting continuously on what we were doing;
- my preference for competency- and project-based learning was shared by the team;

- the team was as excited as I was about new developments, collaborations and changes, and opportunities that I felt we should seize.

I conclude that the key issues in this narrative – for myself, as well as my colleagues – are *trust*, *expert status*, *envy*, *restraining/enabling* and *inclusion/exclusion*.

Trust and cooperation

The way I had been working had diminished the trust my colleagues had in me; I had taken everything too far, too fast and on my own (in their eyes, for personal glory), when I should have sought their cooperation, showing them my trust by sharing the work and appreciating their views and opinions. On the importance of trust in fostering cooperation, I refer to the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences lecture of Elinor Ostrom, whose conclusion includes the following:

> There is a five-letter word that I would like to repeat and repeat and repeat, TRUST! (Ostrom, 2009)

Her PowerPoint sheet on 'Factors that Affect Cooperation in CRPs' [Common Pool Resource Institutes] ends with:

> All factors that increase likelihood that participants gain trust in others and reduce the probability of being a sucker (ibid.)

Ostrom is emphatic about trust being crucial to cooperation, having reached this conclusion after decades of research and case studies; what she says in quite a bold manner, is very plausible to me, as I have difficulty working for or with someone I do not trust. Perhaps if I had tried harder to gain and give trust instead of 'storming through', my teacher colleagues and I could have gone through the plans together at a shared pace, increasing the likelihood of successful change.

Even now I continue to find the balance between functioning as a soloist and as a team-member; usually my work requires both (and I prefer it that way). I have some difficulty gauging how far I should go in adapting myself to the pace of others and the circumstances in which we find ourselves. The DMan makes me question this process of adapting to a group (and its pace), given that everything emerges in

the social, and everyone is interdependent – an issue that I will explore in the next project(s).

Expert status

'Expert status' was something I had not considered at all. In general, I am not afraid to say when I do not know or understand something; I feel we can learn from each other. But I had made colleagues anxious by asking them to share experiences, make course content transparent. They were afraid to *not know*, to be *exposed*.

In the publication *Anxiety Politics and Critical Management Education*, Russ Vince describes an example of a learning approach setting within the MBA programme, which, in not offering a traditional teacher–student relation, reveals what the expectations of this relation tend to be. In this exercise, students need to define their own task and manage it themselves; the tutor only comments on the process. Vince describes what happens:

> [T]he tutor is not behaving 'as expected'… This is further complicated by anxieties as the exercise confronts institutional expectation and practise concerning both the nature of the contact between tutor and student and the ways in which expert knowledge 'should be' communicated. (Vince, 2010: S32-S33)

This underpins a general assumption that the teacher is expected to 'lead the way' in the role of the 'expert'. In practice, this expectation is not only present in students but also in teachers. Education is still to a great extent based on teacher-centred learning, which means that *expected* roles and interaction patterns should be taken in account.

Envy

I believe envy was undermining cooperation from the side of the team at two different levels. The first was directed towards the positions I was offered and the perceived status these gave me. Second, at a deeper level, it had to do with some of my colleagues' unease about working in a dynamically changing environment, let alone enjoying it, as I (visibly) did. This dawned on me when I overheard one of my colleagues tell a student, 'Please leave me alone, I can't do two things at the same

time' – was this how they felt about the changes I had been driving? This insight was later substantiated when another colleague mentioned that not everyone could juggle the tasks I expected them to do.

Hill and Buss regard envy as necessary and useful, a trigger for people to perform better:

> [I]ndividuals who experience envy in response to a social competitor's advantage would be appropriately alerted to the advantage and motivated to commence corrective action. (Hill and Buss, 2008: 65)

However, often envy causes people to undermine the position of the envied person.

Restraining/enabling

The structure I had designed and the outlines I had drawn were meant to enable the team to work together and facilitate their tasks. I believed this would simplify matters and relieve the workload. Later, I understood how the (perceived) diminished control had weighed heavy on the team, restricting their freedom to organise classes as they saw fit and teach at their own pace and in their own style. Had we drawn the plans collectively, perhaps there would have been more space for personal interpretation.

I thought that as a team leader I was supposed to come up with (strict) guidelines and clear goals, to be able to achieve anything. I had very much underestimated the necessity of group participation in designing the course structure and the importance of flexibility in adapting to constant development.

Inclusion/exclusion

I knew I should involve the team, but sometimes found it hard to motivate them; so when deadlines came in sight, I let these prevail. I thought if I could present a ready-made format, the team would be glad of the clarity and structure and would adopt it easily. I took no account of the importance – necessity, even – of involvement and ownership. The team felt excluded by me taking up everything myself, which in turn also excluded me from the team. It became a 'me against them' situation, instead of – as I saw it – me working for the good of all.

The situation was not as black-and-white as it felt 'in the heat of the moment', when the clash took place. Later, most team members were prepared to nuance their opinions and views, and the dialogue opened up.

FRESH START

Innovation

In early 2009, when I was working freelance full-time, the college contacted me about a new project: project-based learning in a professional multidisciplinary environment. The location was deliberately chosen to be outside the college, situated in the city centre among shops and businesses.

I joined the team as Domain Manager Design, in which role I was more or less asked to do what I had tried to accomplish in the 'regular' college environment.

The project was subsidised and its performance was monitored intensively in order to measure its effectiveness. Coaches were to intervene only if asked or when they perceived it necessary.

What we encountered was that the amount of time we had to work with the students was insufficient. College management had made the assumption that students would be able to work on their own most of the time and just needed occasional 'back-up'. Although students enjoyed the new learning environment, they expressed frustration at being unable to get support quickly enough.

As a team, we concluded that this way of working called for closer participation of the coach than would be expected in a 'normal' educational setting. We did not want to solve problems on the students' behalf, but wanted to observe and support them as soon as an issue emerged, before the problem became frustrating. In doing so we would combine theory with practice, gradually building student's experience and confidence.

We all shared the experience, in regular vocational education settings, of students who could not focus their attention for long on books or (oral) explanations; they would incorporate theoretical facts more readily when they were closely connected with or embedded in a practical assignment – when they understood *why* they needed to know something. I have mentioned this 'combining theory and

practice' a few times in this project, and found an explanation of the problems this causes for knowledge transfer in an article by Korthagen and Kessels. While they are describing teacher education, I feel their observations are more generally applicable:

> In order to learn anything during teacher education, student teachers must have personal concerns about teaching or they must have encountered concrete problems. Otherwise the fruitfulness of the theory is not clear to them and they are not motivated to study it. (Korthagen and Kessels, 1999: 5)

This resonates with my own experience: I learn faster and better when I understand what I need this knowledge for, when I can see the connection with my daily practice.

Eighteen months into the project, my contract was terminated because the subsidy ended and no other funding was secured. The college had been unable to embed the project into regular education or to generate the income that had been anticipated from the projects. Teams at the college felt that the project was alien to them and only provided more work.

In hindsight, my interpretation is that a subsidy for innovative education projects had been available (probably with a closing deadline approaching), a project had been written according to the rules provided, and the plan submitted and approved. When the money was granted, a team of enthusiastic people was put together to set it up. At no point had the teams within the college been involved in the process, so it was presented as a 'fait accompli' to which they felt in no way committed. In order to make the project a success, their collaboration was crucial; it could then have been adapted to their needs and incorporated in their course structure.

In a sense, the project had gone down the same path as my work 'inside' the college. Because I joined the project at a later stage, I did not notice this similarity until afterwards.

Change of pace

As I had expected, I enjoyed the freedom and creative challenges of working as a sole practitioner. However, something I had not anticipated began to happen: I found myself winding down.

Perhaps because I was spending so much time alone, I had the chance to reflect. I realised I had been working like crazy, and I asked myself if this had made me a happier, better person. It occurred to me that I could work less, earn less and still lead a good – maybe even a better – life. Talking to people around me, and reading books, provided insights on the importance of taking care of myself and taking the time to relax. A book by Joke Hermsen, *Stil de Tijd* (2009) had a big impact on me, explaining how people nowadays follow the clock on the wall instead of their 'internal clock'. Hermsen concludes that we should reconsider how we deal with the issue of time. She points out the importance of boredom and slowness in awakening creativity.

My personal situation – single, no children, self-employed – allowed me to make choices I thought to be right. I pondered my possibilities and an old plan surfaced: to work abroad for an extended period. I find that people who have lived outside their home country usually have fresh ways of looking at life, and are not as judgemental as many of those who 'stay put'. An experience like this would add something substantial to my life. I thought it a worthwhile experiment to examine my own principles and values in relation to other cultures, opinions and perspectives; perhaps in the process I would re-evaluate.

INTO THE WORLD

Hostile territory

After a long period of talking to people and searching for possibilities, an art colleague told me about her Iraqi friend, a refugee who had been living in the Netherlands for 15 years and had recently returned to his home country. Iraq was seeking professionals to help rebuild education, and my colleague's friend invited me to visit Kurdistan, which apparently was now quite safe. When I replied that Iraq was not exactly my first choice of country, he stressed that my mental image was based

on media distortion, and challenged me to find out for myself. After much discussion, I agreed. One reservation I made explicitly clear to him: I would not get involved in party politics, because I had read about the risks this could involve in such a country.

In April 2010, I flew to Erbil. Social events – family picnics, afternoon teas, historical sites, an audience with the mayor of Erbil, visits to (art) universities and galleries – filled my days. At one point, we were invited to visit the head of the socialist party for morning tea. I reminded my host that I did not wish to take part in such meetings. He insisted that it was impossible for him to refuse; besides, it would only be for an hour. He talked me into it.

The meeting took place at the socialist party estate in the rural area surrounding Halabja. We were supposed to visit the poison gas attack memorial in the city later that day. After tea, we were invited for lunch; then a chauffeur and a photographer joined us on our visit to the memorial. On our return, dinner plans were already made; and finally, we were asked to stay the night.

At every change of plan, I objected; but each time, I was told we could not refuse. This being a place where only men were present, several armed guards were on patrol and no public transport was available, I had no choice but to stay.

We spent the evening in a large living room with a big TV screen. Several men started pointing at it and there I was: in a newsreel for the socialist party channel. My inquiry led to the explanation that the anchorwoman was merely commenting on my interest in Kurdistan and its art and culture. To me, it felt that my visit had been abused for propaganda purposes.

I had not felt extremely anxious; but what I learned then, and during the whole duration of my stay – not being alone for a minute – was how much I value my personal freedom and freedom of speech.

On my return from the Middle East, Asia became my focal point – not only because of its supposed advanced design technology, but also because I hoped that Eastern culture would offer a sharp contrast to the Netherlands.

I got into contact with an organisation in Taiwan that was developing and selling English courses and had advertised for a graphic designer/communication

manager. In June 2010, I visited Taipei to get acquainted. In the month following my return, we agreed that I would join them in October.

I began arranging my leave. Selling my belongings, renting out my house, consigning my projects to colleagues, I felt I was severing all ties; this made me a bit anxious at first, but later evolved into a feeling of extreme freedom. Then, just a week before I was to leave, the manager in Taipei informed me that my visa and work permit had been refused. This was an unanticipated problem that they could not overcome. The inviting new road became a dead end. I felt angry and disappointed.

After reviewing my situation extensively, I concluded that I should either make a fresh start in the Netherlands or I leave for Asia and try to find a job opportunity myself.

On 17 January 2011, I got on a plane to Bangkok.

EMERGING ISSUES

In the process of writing this project, discussing it with my mentor and learning group, rewriting it several times and discussing it again, I have become aware of some recurrent themes.

Freedom

Why is personal freedom so important to me?

I connect this with the experience of confinement in my first relationship: nine years of being dominated by jealousy and emotional blackmail, with the continuous threat of anger outbursts that sometimes made me extremely anxious. Next to this, the importance that Dutch society awards to freedom (of speech, choice, expression) has inevitably affected me – and not just at a theoretical level: at times when I am deprived of it (such as in Iraq), I can sense a physical reaction.

Taking up freedom as an idealisation, Martha Nussbaum describes what I feel freedom in organisations (and life) should be about:

> In work, being able to work as a human being, exercising practical reason, and entering into meaningful relationships of mutual recognition with other workers. (Nussbaum, 2008: s111)

This underlines the importance of respect and genuine interest for the people one lives and works with, which – though I value it highly – is not always easy to bring into practice.

Dutch organisations usually have a 'flat' organisational structure. Yielding to power that is based purely on hierarchical status does not come naturally to me: I respect people for who they are, rather than for their role or position. In organisational life, especially in other countries, this can cause problems that I am still learning to deal with.

Finding ways to balance (Dutch) openness and directness with the (Catholic) wish not to hurt, embarrass or treat someone wrongfully has always been, and remains, a struggle.

Being able to make my own choices is extremely important to me: I feel very uncomfortable when others decide for me, without consultation. I now understand this must have been the same for my colleagues for whom I had been making decisions, without consulting them. On the other hand, having too much choice has a downside, as Joas describes when writing about the paradox of 'freedom of choice' in contemporary (Western) society:

> Greater numbers of options can be experienced as release and redemption, but also as a compulsion to be free; a wealth of encounters with the freedom of others can be experienced as heightening life's intensity or as a threat. (Joas, 2004: 396)

I have been experiencing the intensity that he describes – but also the threat: living alone, always having to make choices myself, has often made me wish there were fewer options.

More importantly, I am becoming more aware of the fact that the freedom I claim, and every choice I make, impacts my environment and the people in it. Reading on the subject of freedom, for this project, provided me with different insights on the interrelatedness of people, supporting in theory what I have experienced, and so strengthening my understanding. The links between freedom, power and politics also became evident.

Power

At the start of my second relationship I depended greatly on my partner, who gave me the freedom to do whatever I thought necessary, supported and assured me of his trust, and encouraged me to take up studying again.

When I left him, he began frantically searching for a new partner. Although at the time I had not seen how he was just as dependent on me, much later I recognised his over-zealous supportiveness as an inability to give meaning to his own life. Stacey draws on Elias (1991) on power in human relationships:

> [P]ower is a structural characteristic of all relationships in that it reflects the fact that we depend on each other and so enable and restrain each other. (Stacey, 2011: 387)

I have experienced both the enabling and the restraining effects of power, but had not identified them as such. I preferred not to use the word 'power', because of its negative connotation, but have come to understand that it is always present. A perfect balance, a fixed distribution, of power is not possible: there will be a constant shifting as one or another is 'stronger'. As long as power does not shift too much in one direction, people can feel both supported or corrected when needed. The interdependent character of relationships, as described by Stacey, to me also points out that when a relationship does not work out, this should not be conceived as one person's 'fault', as every party involved is influencing and being influenced by the others, continuously.

Certainty

I grew up believing there is a lot of certainty and clarity in life, and my technical study and work reinforced my belief that I could find the 'right' answers and methods through analysis and systematic thinking. Nevertheless, I was always confronted with feeling insecure about my decisions, and encountering unexpected outcomes.

The DMan, and related reading, have already provided me with new perspectives. Three of them I found especially striking. On decisions and ambiguity:

- The paradox is that no decision can reach a final definition, because it always simultaneously potentialises different decisions. (Andersen, 2001)
- Attitudes are not fixed or absolute, but context dependent. The same person who is in favour of accountability and performance evaluations might also like autonomy and freedom from dysfunctional measurements. (Alvesson, 2003: 169)

This describes what I encounter every day: each decision taken rules out other options and creates insecurity about it being the 'right' choice, while every new day brings with it another state of mind and offers new perspectives, altering my view on previous decisions or even rendering them obsolete. This has not stopped me from making (sometimes major) decisions, but has often left me quite anxious.

All my life I have found it difficult to deal with the frustration of being unable to put into words exactly what I felt or thought, believing this to demonstrate a lack of educational background and knowledge, and finding myself unable to overcome it. Bannet, however, refers to Wittgenstein on the inexactness of language:

> And Wittgenstein reminds us that the proper(ty) of language was, in fact, always already to be inexact. …undecided--in the sense of not having been exactly decided--that they have the freedom and fluidity to change their usage, however slightly, with each changing circumstance and form of life… (Bannet, 1997: 668)

I find this an interesting way of perceiving language, and it explains the great difficulty I encounter continuously in communicating: people often interpret what I say quite differently from what I mean. I understand that people listen 'through a filter' – a predefined set of expectations about the conversation, the topic, about me – 'highlighting' what they want or expect to hear.

Learning

It was pointed out to me that learning is a returning theme – something that I had not recognised, for I tend to associate learning with educational institutions. I came to understand that I develop myself through confrontation; others sometimes interpret this confrontation-seeking as bravery. To me, forcing myself to encounter unknown situations has been a way to remain open to other opinions and enhance my understanding of matters of interest.

Looking back on my years as a teacher, I find it interesting that the most interactive and lively classes I taught were those I undertook without preparation, merely improvising, leaving enough space for everyone to participate, without setting a rigid goal.

I learn best in interaction: reading helps me to explore and accumulate perspectives, but these only come alive when sharing experiences and views with others. This corresponds with Stacey, who reaches the following conclusion in his paper *The Emergence of Knowledge in Organizations*:

> From a complex responsive process perspective, knowledge is always a process of responsive relating, which cannot be located simply in an individual head, then to be extracted and shared as an organizational asset. Knowledge is the act of conversing and new knowledge is created when ways of talking, and therefore patterns of relationship, change. (Stacey, 2000: 37)

CONCLUSION PROJECT 1

I understand that the DMan is not going to provide me with answers, truths, universal rules or ideal methods. At this point, this appears to be a logical continuation of what I have experienced, but was not fully aware of until now.

In the next projects, I will be reflecting on my everyday professional experiences, underpinning my findings with theory that is made available to me by extensive reading and discussed during residential weekends.

I have encountered the impact of 'narrative inquiry', in writing this project.

Until starting on the programme, I still believed that to a large extent, rigid systematic ways of working are effective, despite having experienced otherwise. Furthermore, I never liked to engage in discussions on why I thought in a certain way; rather than substantiate my opinions extensively with theory, I would refer to intuition or a *feeling* that something was right, wrong or just the way it was.

By writing about my development in such an intense manner, and discussing it in my learning group, I am able to (co-)discover patterns in my acting and thinking. Through reflecting on these, I can identify possible causes or sources. Bringing in theory on matters and issues opens up new perspectives and also makes way for

dealing with (similar) situations in the future in a different manner. Substantiating theory can generalise an experience and make it useful in other situations and for other people.

The narrative helps me to see things in a larger perspective; for instance, my art course made me aware that there is not one perspective or solution, but until recently I did not use this notion outside the specific context of 'Art'. The same goes for the perspective Wittgenstein provided me on language, that I never connected with my struggle communicating until I read through my own writing.

My understanding of narrative inquiry is that it provides insights, a more flexible view and attitude, and increases my choices and options in any given situation. It enables me to recognise and respond in a more appropriate way to emerging changes, anxiety and ever-present paradoxes in work and life – an excellent tool in learning to make sense of complexity.

Expected exploration in Project 2

In the next project, issues emerging during the course of my work, as a project manager – developing participatory learning environments against the backdrop of a different culture – will play an important role.

I will address culture, freedom, power relations, politics, interdependency, inclusion and exclusion, trust and cooperation, roles and expectations, hidden transcripts and learning. Most of these have come up in this project and require further research and reflection to make better sense of ways in which they might impact upon relations in educational institutes and influence views of how education should be set up in order to stimulate and support learning.

PROJECT 2

This project concerns my experience working as a project manager developing a Life-long Learning pilot project, in Thai higher education. When researching, developing and rolling out the project, I experienced major difficulties in finding my way in this culturally very different environment and in attempting to engage people in implementing this highly participatory form of education in a traditional setting.

A three-day symposium, *The Inaugural International Symposium on Local Wisdom and Improving Quality of Life*, organised by the Research and Development (R&D) department I worked for, turned out to re-create many of the issues I had encountered in my everyday practice. I mainly use the symposium narrative to illustrate what I experienced.

In this project, I explore the situations I found myself in, describing my interpretation of these at the time and providing the reader with examples of what people working in a culturally different environment can encounter. In my reflections, I attempt to shed light on how our respective culture(s) and other factors may have influenced the working relationships; and I bring in theory to substantiate or contrast with my findings. Through revisiting my initial reflections and examining relevant theory, I attempt to uncover my prejudices – my taken-for-granted views on (Thai) culture, participatory learning, participation in general and globalisation – in order to arrive at a deeper level of understanding of these matters. My aim in doing so is to make my insights more generalisable, so that they may be helpful to managers facing similar issues of cultural diversity and collaboration in a globalising world.

INTRODUCTION PROJECT 2

Project 1 leads up to the point where I leave Europe for Asia, with the intention to immerse myself in another culture for an indefinite period of time. In Asia I anticipated encountering people with different perspectives on life and work, from whom I would be able to learn; I welcomed this opportunity to re-evaluate my personal norms and values, reveal my 'cultural blind spots', and (both literally and

figuratively) broaden my horizons. This viewpoint – typical of many people who seek immersion in an unknown culture – seemed to be borne out by people I knew who had already had such a 'foreign' experience: they seemed somehow to have become less judgemental and more understanding, with greater appreciation for and interest in other people's perspectives.

During the course of my life, I have found that I learn best by doing, experiencing, being challenged (which became more apparent in the writing of Project 1); so I believed that this new endeavour offered me a profound opportunity to boost my personal development.

I left for Asia at the start of 2011; and after eight months of travelling in nine countries, Thailand felt to be a good place to settle down, for as a traveller it more or less feels like 'being on the outside, taking a peek in'. I looked forward to really immersing myself in the culture: Thai society, as I first encountered it, is open, easy-going, safe and friendly. I was especially attracted to the city of Chiang Mai, as it is big enough to offer cultural variety (art, music, etc) yet nature is close at hand – an important balance for me. To deepen my experience, I assumed that the best plan was to find a job, as joining the workforce would deepen my involvement in Thai society and heighten my awareness of cultural differences.

Job opportunity

In December 2011, I was invited to meet with an American professor working as an advisor for Rajamangala University of Technology Lanna (RMUTL). We met on campus to have an informal conversation on how Thai education is set up, and for me to learn from his experiences of working in Asia in general and for this institute specifically.

Dr. Zwarovski (Robert) turned out to be a hearty and open-minded man, as he elaborated enthusiastically on Thai higher education. When we parted, he told me he would try to get me on his team, working on internationalisation; indeed, soon after,

I was invited to meet with him, Aj. Patrick[1] (VP R&D), Aj. Jan (Director of Community Technology Transfer Center), and an Australian expert in broadcasting. The expert and I were briefed on a multimedia project that put the university in the spotlight – they felt they had not done enough, had been too humble in sharing the universities' achievements – and asked if we would be interested in joining the team. We immediately accepted this invitation, which struck us both as a unique opportunity. Yet, despite our enthusiastic response, neither Aj. Patrick nor Aj. Jan got back to us. I made a few enquiries via different media; when no reply came, I assumed that things had not worked out – as did Robert, who had made several attempts to find out about the status of the project. This experience left me disappointed, for the mutual enthusiasm expressed during the meeting had left me with the impression of having agreed a deal. I had been warned many times not to get my hopes up high: people advised me not to misinterpret positive responses as concrete promises – the situation can change quickly, often for reasons that remain mysterious: in Thai culture, not getting back is a matter of not wanting to be confronted with someone who is disappointed, not wishing either party to 'lose face'. Being in the dark was tough for me: I prefer openness – just to be told what the status is, even if negative, so that I can make new choices (as taken up in Project 1, related to directness in Dutch society).

When in January 2012 I was admitted to the DMan programme, I notified RMUTL in the hope of re-opening negotiations. Management responded promptly and invited me for a meeting on another project, this time concerning Life-Long Learning (LLL); the broadcast expert was not asked to join. When I showed interest in the project, they asked if I could start the following week. The complex challenge of the opportunity as described to me was appealing, especially because this way of learning resonated very much with my own experiences and preferences; and RMUTL allowed me to incorporate the DMan research into the realm of the project,

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[1] Aj. is short for *Ajarn*, a term used for teachers/lecturers – usually combined with the first name, which is often a nickname.

which made it even more interesting (even though it was not yet clear how this would work out in everyday practice). I agreed to start the job.

Life-long learning

The reason for RMUTL to set up a LLL project was to comply with instructions from the Thai National Education Council: to develop a new form of education, participatory and experience-based, and related to higher education, that would be open to all Thai people. Robert was involved because of his experience in vocational education. At all levels, the importance of LLL is emphasised. The (simplified) Thai perspective: at a national level, LLL is supported by the National Education Council (Lao, 2009); regionally, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN, 2010) promotes LLL actively across its member states; and at a global scale, UNESCO is a driving force behind LLL initiatives, stating on their website that 'Lifelong learning principles, if systematically implemented, will be able to contribute to more just and equitable societies' (UIL, 2010-2013).

The experienced-based character of LLL works well for me for several reasons. Firstly, I have found that I take in knowledge and gain more insight as an active participant in a learning/working environment. I attribute this to the 'multisensory' and social nature of experience: any sudden insight reached during interaction with others tends to evoke a powerful awareness that is not easily forgotten.

Secondly, during my work as a teacher in vocational education I found that working on 'real-life' projects with a team of students enhanced their learning, made (most of) them eager to contribute, and helped them to make sense of theory and exercises they had done before. This way of working tended to reveal new insights not only to the students, but also to any external parties involved (as I learned from the feedback in closing sessions), as well as to myself.

Thirdly, I observe that Dutch organisations generally have a flat hierarchy, which makes it easier for people to engage in participation and share their experience and opinions with each other, usually without feeling overly anxious.

Thus, my own natural preference for working this way seems to be reinforced three times over; and I should bear this in mind, because I nevertheless *did*

experience major difficulties and anxiousness among the people I attempted to engage in participatory learning at the Media Design department in the Netherlands, as I have described in Project 1. Despite this discouraging experience, I now found myself enthused by the drive the initiating manager showed, the sense of urgency created around the project, and the fact that it could give this 'unremarkable' northern Thai university a chance to make itself visible – regionally, and possibly even nationally – by setting up the first successful pilot project to serve as a guide for a nationwide LLL network.

Notwithstanding the zeal of management, it turned out extremely difficult for Robert and myself to engage people in the project, starting implementation after finishing the theoretical framework. We were kept in the dark about how to proceed, and after Robert returned to the USA I found myself in a courteous environment where nobody was really communicating or collaborating with me. When I was on the verge of giving up, management took me to Bangkok to do a presentation on work done at the National Education Council (NEC), where I was congratulated and thanked very enthusiastically: the project was going to be a grand success! Unfortunately, on my return from Europe afterwards I learned – after weeks of trying to figure out how we should continue – that no funding had been granted; I was out of a job.

Again my enthusiasm, as in the Netherlands, had played a part in obscuring what went on; but here, my unfamiliarity with the Thai culture in general – as well as the university's culture and hierarchy, hidden agendas of general management and unrevealed intentions of the managers I worked with – made it very problematic to make sense of the situation I found myself in. Perhaps the project had been no more than a 'paper tiger' to please the NEC – a common practice, I had been warned; indeed, this may have explained why Thais, who are aware of this, were not keen to engage in it.

Importance of experience

I want to go into experience (-based learning), of which LLL is an example, because it is related to the issues in this project, as well as because my personal experiences form the basis of this project.

John Dewey's perspective on learning, which gained prominence in the early 20th century, remains highly influential around the globe. In 'Experience and Education', Dewey stresses the importance of (personal) experience in education, he writes that

> …every experience should do something to prepare a person for later experiences of a deeper and more expansive quality. That is the very meaning of growth, continuity, reconstruction of experience.

He goes on to explain how traditional education is different:

> But it is a mistake to suppose that the mere acquisition of a certain amount of arithmetic, geography, history etc., which is taught because it may be useful at some time in the future, has this effect…

Then Dewey underlines the significance of context:

> …and it is a mistake to suppose that acquisition of skills in reading and figuring will automatically constitute preparation for their right and effective use under conditions very unlike those in which they were acquired. (Dewey, 1997: 47)

As mentioned earlier, the situations and attitude I encountered in the months before the symposium – working on the LLL project and visiting institutions and classrooms, talking to education professionals – I found stood in close relation to what I encountered during the event: chaotic situations, panicky people failing to address problems that arose… in my perception, these issues related to the comparatively expert status of teachers and managers, which creates a power difference that can make it difficult for those with less power to engage and take personal responsibility.

The strong hierarchy[2] in Thai society inhibits a person lower on the ladder from questioning or challenging their superiors' instructions or decisions, leaving students/subordinates anxious and/or apathetic. When required to participate and take

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[2] I will expand upon the term 'hierarchy' later.

responsibility, as is the case in participatory education or collaborative work, the power relations are less one-sided, as Dewey describes:

> When education is based upon experience and educative experience is seen to be a social process, the situation changes drastically [compared to traditional education]. The teacher loses the position of external boss or dictator but takes on that of a leader of group activities. (Dewey, 1997: 59)

The manager in charge of the symposium was a typical Dewey 'boss'. He seemed to be everywhere, taking note of every tiny detail. The moment he appeared, people became visibly anxious. As I see it now, my preference for flat hierarchy strengthened my unsympathetic attitude to what went on, and may have blinded me to the less obvious ways in which the Thais were actually managing to work together. I found myself focusing on the negative effects the strong directive way of managing had; yet, given the social structure in Thailand, this could have been a better way of managing a project than the more democratic approach I preferred. I will take this up further on.

Unfamiliar territory

However valuable experience may be, experience alone is not enough – as Dewey underlines in *How We Think*, stressing that the experience must be to some extent analogous, otherwise it offers nothing to draw on or to clarify the current experience (1910: 12). And yet, even 'suitable' experience will not suffice to understand what goes on when working with people in a different culture. Critical thinking and reflecting (ibid: 13) on what we experience is crucial, and this is extremely difficult in an unfamiliar environment.

When arriving in an unknown culture, we judge/respond to what is experienced guided by our assumptions and prejudices – by our limited understanding of a still vague and incomplete 'generalised other' (Mead, 1992) formed by what we have

seen, read and been told about the place we are moving to. We carry stereotypes, simple rules (Hofstede, 1991) (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1997)[3] with us; these can skew our perspective on what actually takes place, but can also prove helpful in navigating our first encounters with another culture. I found that stereotypes and clichés did help up to a point – by preventing me to a certain extent from stepping on people's toes; but making some mistakes was inevitable.

Looking back, I see how much I projected onto the work situation my own prejudices about how 'ideal' education should be set up: I had strong ideas on how I felt we should work together. This, in combination with the simplistic understanding I had of the environment I was part of (or *thought* I was part of), blurred my perceptions. I now begin to see that I had some generalisations and assumptions that got in the way of understanding the attitudes people adopted, and limited my interpretations of what took place. For example, at a certain stage of my work on the project I had felt quite alone (Robert having returned to the USA for personal reasons, which made communication extremely poor). When I returned to the office after taking sick leave, I recorded the following events in my logbook:

> Went to work, nobody asked me how I was doing, which made my mood even worse, I felt very much isolated from the busy crowd around me. Colleagues from another location had taken 'my' desk, so I was back at the [commonly used] meeting table. Bernice looked very tired and was not approachable. […] Later, Bernice said something that made me realise she had not known I had been sick. She had been working long hours, so she just did not have time or energy to address me. I had been sensing things and interpreting them wrong, according to my negative pattern of thought.

This negative pattern of thought was 'fed' by the exclusion I had strongly felt, but also by conversations I had had with other foreigners. When I shared the issues I had encountered, many of them declared outright that it was impossible to 'get anything

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[3] I will return to this under the section on *Culture*.

done in Thailand'; only a small group had a more constructive attitude and attempted to reflect on what had happened, finding ways for me to deal with the situation.

It had been very easy to connect with other foreigners: most of them seemed very open and easy-going – but I noticed that many of these jovial people turned out to be very disappointed, cynical and lonely. Many felt misunderstood, and stressed the negative aspects of living in Thailand (where many had settled because they could no longer afford to live in their home country). I believe their negative interpretation of my situation reflects their own disappointments and failures; encountering another 'victim' makes their hurt more bearable, as they no longer feel isolated in their disillusion or lack of success. Though I was aware that no one can be completely objective (we are all influenced by our prejudices and former experiences), I underestimated the strong negative pattern of thought informing a number of them. This stands in contrast to the assumption I noted in the introduction, that most people with 'foreign' experiences tend to be less judgemental; at the same time, I acknowledge that I know many people who had never left their home region or travelled extensively, yet are indeed very open and accepting of differences and curious to explore and learn from them. This demonstrates to me that there is no fundamental correlation between foreign experiences and open-mindedness.

As already mentioned, it proved extremely difficult to make sense of my experiences in the unfamiliar environment of the Thai university. To acquire a deeper understanding, I will have to 'endure a condition of mental unrest and disturbance … maintain the state of doubt' (Dewey, 1910: 13); I have to avoid accepting suggestions at face value and allow for reflective thinking to take place. However, I, like anyone else, will never know what actually went on, for I can only reflect on the situation from my own perspective and attempt to take into consideration my former experiences and (insofar as I am aware of them) my own prejudices and expectations. Moreover, I will need to take in account the even more unfamiliar perspectives of 'others' involved. However, I do believe that reflection and sense-making can lead to a 'state of doubt', an anxiety level, that I can sustain – one that drives further exploration and takes into consideration parts of others' perspectives that *do* resonate with me and are as such familiar. By adopting this

approach, I hope to arrive at a less blinkered understanding of the situations I found myself in, and in doing so to value precisely the uniqueness of the personal nature of my experience.

'TYPICALLY' THAI

In making sense of the experience, my prejudices and assumptions – formed by reading, hearing other people's stories (before my arrival, outside of Thailand), and gathering information – formed my first touchstone. Talking to Thai nationals and foreigners living and working in Thailand, reading recommended documents, articles and my own research helped in the first refinement of these generalisations – providing new insights into what it means to be Thai, and what distinguishes Thai people from 'others'.

Thai pride

The way Thailand differs from other Asian countries is touched upon briefly in a paper on the influences of cultural and historical factors on Thai higher education:

> Thailand had to find her own way [no colonisation]. This was not done in isolation, however, it was undertaken without the confidence of having an imposed or inherited system. … Thailand has had the luxury of being selective in what is adopted and is also very mindful of retaining cultural and social values. (Bhumiratana and Commins, 2012: 2)

Although I am somewhat dubious about the assumptions inherent in 'without the confidence of an imposed system', this citation does point to the difference between Thailand and other SE Asian countries: not having been colonised. 'Being selective in what is adopted' can be recognised as a feature of Thai pride, and can be illustrated by a situation I encountered. During an education conference in Bangkok, I spoke with a lady working at a college in one of the suburbs of the Thai capital. Enquiring after my background, she began to question me intensively when I explained I was working in LLL. She told me how difficult it was for her to make a change towards this form of education in her school, and how she felt excluded by colleagues when making serious attempts to steer her teaching in that direction. She

then started asking me for solutions, almost in a demanding fashion. I came up with suggestions, but every time she would reply, 'I've tried it – that won't work, my colleagues will not accept that'. She rejected my proposals so vehemently that I eventually gave up, saying I was sorry it was so difficult for her to make a change at her institute.

Her stubborn way of responding, at the time, gave me the impression she was too proud to take advice, but out of respectfulness she had felt compelled to take an interest in my expertise. Looking back, she might also have been genuinely hoping that I could provide a solution, and had actually tried everything I had suggested, but had failed to engage her peers. This conversation (and others) made me start to question the feasibility of the implementation of LLL, a highly participatory form of education, in the very traditional academic environment that complies with the strict hierarchy, norms and values of Thai society.

Globalisation

Given that this Thai (national) pride, is enacted in the Thai Constitution (B.E. 2540, sections 46, 69, 81 and 289, underline the importance of 'Thai Wisdom' as a body of knowledge, along with fine art and culture), it is logical that the National Education Act B.E. 2542 and Amendments require these subjects to be taught at all levels and in all forms of education. The *Inaugural International Symposium on Local Wisdom and Improving Quality of Life* was set up in compliance with this government legislation. In a globalising world, however, it seems increasingly difficult to preserve 'objects of national pride', and virtually impossible to keep influences of other countries outside state borders – holding on to imagined sovereignty, as Elias describes:

> [I]magine themselves to be in the centre of humanity as if in a fortress, contained and surrounded by all the other nations, yet at the same time cut off from them. (Elias, 1978: 30)

But local knowledge can be a way of distinguishing from other nations, regions; reinforcing national pride. Sharing local wisdom, practised throughout all ages, is about sharing knowledge and valuable insights, and can be taken up as life-long

learning. While LLL is clearly by no means a Western concept, it seems that a systematic approach to it (UNESCO) has a Western origin, and the rigid structure and universalising character of this approach might threaten the value of local wisdom and insights. Countries such as Thailand may be wary of such imposition of external values, discarding LLL it in favour of 'general' knowledge; this may represesnt another barrier for the implementation of the LLL system in Thailand. I must admit that these Western ideals of generalising education (knowledge), and so opening up possibilities for people to move to other places, opening up the world to them, have been instilled in me as well – focusing my attention on these 'advantages', so that I may tend to discard local wisdom as interesting folklore, disrespecting the particular local knowledge that it represents and the unique value that it can offer, just as the particularity of my personal experience in this project warrants closer attention.

In a special issue on a *New Psychological Science of Globalization*, an article summarises contemporary views on globalisation with a statement that may be taken up to describe Thai pride:

> [G]lobalization can trigger an 'us versus them' negative mentality when people view the juxtaposition of highly iconic representations of different groups … (Gelfand, Lyons and Lun, 2011: 844)

UNESCO may be perceived as such an icon – guided by good intentions, but not sensitive enough to (Eastern) local needs and values, and thus potentially viewed as a threat to these. Over the ages, ideologies supporting locality, difference and diversity – such as those expressed in Confucius' *Harmony with Diversity* (Putten, 2013) and as the more contemporary 'glocalisation' (Robertson, 1995) may be taken up as counter-movements/ideologies.[4] Like globalisation itself, counter-movements are as much supported as contested – as outlined in the conclusion of the article

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[4] Expanding on these terms is beyond the scope of this paper; I expect to examine these concepts in greater depth in Project 3.

summarising the up- and downsides of globalisation and the fact it is taken up very differently in all its complexity of manifestations:

> Globalization has increased dramatically in its scope and reach in the last several decades. The effects of globalization have been glamorized by its supporters and demonized by its opponents. Globalization has facilitated international trade and technological advances, and exposure to different cultures, which can promote learning and creativity. Yet at the same time, it has been criticized for eroding important cultural characteristics of societies, and as such globalization has met resistance from those who feel threatened by foreign influence, breeding distrust and suspicion throughout local communities. (Gelfand, Lyons and Lun, 2011: 850)

This duality certainly corresponds with what I encountered. In particular, adults and elderly people shared their concerns about the apparent loss of respect, national/regional identity, Buddhist values and close family bonds, in favour of an increasing preoccupation with material goods. By contrast, the younger generation seemed to find ways to have the 'best of both worlds': I observed students enjoying their Thai dance groups, wearing traditional clothing and making an effort to attain every subtle movement, yet also saw male students on stage for a pop singing contest, cross-dressing in a tiny see-through dress. I also noticed young women, who had clearly paid a lot of attention to hair, make-up, accessories and dresses (resulting in a hybrid form of Eastern and Western styles) making merit at a Buddhist temple. A quote taken from an article on this 'identity remix' illustrates the situation from the viewpoint of the urban Indian adolescent:

> I feel that I am on both sides. I believe in religion and I follow everything that my parents ask me to do. I do my prayers. I go to the mosque. I'm Muslim. I pray to the Koran. I do everything traditional like that, but I also do other things. Like I don't wear a kurta [traditional male attire], I wear jeans and a T-shirt. I'm not like an old-fashioned person, but I do take care to do what my elders tell me to do. (Rao et al., 2013: 9)

The research revealed that

> …these youth were aware of changes in their daily lives due to globalization and evaluated such changes in a pragmatic light of losses, gains, and a need for adaptation. Furthermore, results showed adolescents remained strongly identified with traditional Indian collectivist beliefs, values, and practices but also identified and participated in individualistic, 'minority world' beliefs, values, and practices as well. Findings revealed that a blending of traditional- and minority-world identity elements (the identity remix) was a common response to globalization … (ibid: 9)

Young people seem to adapt more easily – indeed, I sometimes feel a little disappointed to see them in different places around the world dressing the same way, listing to the same music, doing the same breakdance routine, having the same hairdo; but I have become aware that the 'aesthetic' effect of globalisation – universal jeans and T-shirt – belies the differences that remain. We can be tricked into expecting 'others' to understand what we mean, only to be surprised by a response that is very different from what we might have anticipated based on their external appearance. We tend to think of globalisation as a 'good' or 'bad' phenomenon – I find myself judging in this way, depending on the 'topic': loss of diversity in dressing and music – bad; equal opportunities in education – good. But it can be both, and everything in between, depending on the local situation. One can also question how influential globalisation actually is, how deeply it impacts society: could it be that digital (social) media simply make 'global trends' highly visible, creating an illusion of the world rapidly changing into one global society that looks, sounds and feels identical? I have at times found myself caught up in this line of thought, which I am starting to question because of my enquiry into 'making change happen' on a large scale. Moreover, globalisation is a 'container concept' for any process that enables internationalisation (such as in trade, finance, or education), so it is virtually impossible to generalise about it.

Language and mistakes

Another issue that differentiates Thailand is highlighted in a paper on teaching English, which proposes that Thailand's pride in not having been colonised, led to its retention of just one official language – a choice that would seem to enhance national

stability (Wiriyachitra, 2004). This conservative attitude could be compared to the stereotypical French citizen, accused of chauvinism (Moles, 1979) for their apparent reluctance to speak any other language then their mother tongue. However, the ASEAN community, effective as of 2015, which uses English as the working language, stresses that all member countries should work towards a similar standard in English teaching.

Trying to attain a basic level of Thai turned out extremely challenging for me: because of the tonal character of the language, a word that is written exactly the same way can have a totally different meaning when spoken, depending on the intonation. Because I lacked time to immerse in learning the language, I gave up – at least, that was my explanation at the time. At the start of 2013 I moved to Switzerland, where I have taken up learning French – a language that is in many ways much closer to my native tongue. In doing so, I have noticed that I often silence myself, not daring to take part in a conversation, feeling ashamed of making mistakes; a surprising experience for me, as I consider myself fairly relaxed about making mistakes in front of other people. Perhaps it is because conversation is an intimate activity, and if the other person does not respond in the way we expect, this can arouse feelings of shame and embarrassment. When conversing in our native language, we have a chance to correct any apparent misunderstandings; but in a language not yet mastered, this is virtually impossible – which can create anxiety. Furthermore, as Mead pointed out, 'one has to understand what he is saying, has to affect himself as he affects others' (1992: 75); to me, this emphasises the difficulty in starting to speak a new language – I cannot fully grasp what it is that I am saying, and may not understand the response enough to know what I have actually said. With this experience in mind, I can empathise with how speaking English must have felt to Thai people: it is a totally different language from their own, and making an embarrassing mistake is a much bigger issue in Thai society than in most Western countries, where we generally accept the value of learning from our mistakes. A German paper on 'The Culture of Learning from Mistakes' describes this process as follows:

> [I]n each case an evaluation refers to a reference norm, and the attribution of a mistake implies the recognition of the deviation from the intended goal. Finally, the mistakes might lead to learning about consequences only if the individual is concerned about the incident, thus attracting her or his attention. The subjective estimation of the importance of the incident forms a motivational basis for initiating reflective processes. (Harteis, Bauer and Gruber, 2008: 225)

This definition of a mistake highlights some issues relating to Thai society: the *intended goal* may not always be clear to the person making the mistake, for in many cases people are given a small task without much information about the project as a whole. *Concern about the incident* may well lead to people not confessing to the mistake they (think they) have made, for they do not want to lose face – or may be reluctant to challenge someone they have seen making a mistake. As a result of these inhibitions, *reflection* might then only be related to the degree of risk they face. The paper concludes:

> [T]here is evidence for a culture that supports learning from mistakes in everyday work … succeeding and failing attempts of learning from mistakes are based upon the interrelation of personal and organisational contributions. (ibid: 230).

Thai culture seems unsupportive of this; however, I can imagine the pressure of 'losing face' and the strong hierarchy may lead to a strong solidarity among peers in a project, who may participate actively in jointly concealing a mistake, resolve it among each other and in the 'hidden process' learn from it.

Buddhism and Thai society

To this day, Buddhism is ever-present in Thai society, it is interwoven with it;

> 'Nation' in this ideology is closely associated with 'Religion' and 'King', both of which are fundamental elements in the traditional Thai Buddhist theory of kingship. According to this theory, the king, regarded as elected by a gathering of all the people, should reign justly as a protector on whom the people can rely, and should be guided by the restraints of the moral law of Buddhism. Accordingly, the concept

of 'nation' in this ideology is different from that in Western liberal nationalism. (Murashima, 1988: 80)

Religion or rituals (related to religion or belief) still play an important part in many countries and institutions – even in the very secular state structure of the Netherlands, the influence of the Protestant ethic is still noticeable (as touched upon in Project 1). However, these beliefs and rituals are not often interwoven into the 'official' structure of society, as they are in Thailand, where the importance of honouring such traditions is apparent in everyday life. For example, walking into the office on the opening day of the symposium, I encountered a pungent aroma, which turned out to emanate from the pigs' heads, chicken parts, food, incense and flowers that had been attractively arranged on shiny plates, ready to be offered at the university's temple.

Klausner addresses the problems contemporary Thai society faces regarding this 'interwoven-ness'. Under 'Thai Buddhism', he takes up a book under review (at the time of publishing) by Peter Jackson (1989), who, in his perception 'expands his intellectual horizons to focus on urban Thai Buddhism in its many manifestations' (Klausner, 2000: 177). Klausner discusses Jackson positing the functional role of Buddhism to legitimise political authority:

> [Jackson] joins other scholars in pointing out how traditionally metaphysical Buddhism, with its inherent hierarchical modelling, has been effectively used and manipulated by authoritarian governments to sanction their political control. Where Jackson breaks new ground is in focusing the readers' attention on a more assertive middle class drawing on rationalist reform-oriented Buddhism to legitimize their own right to vie for political power and to validate their economic goals. (ibid: 178)

Klausner contrasts Jackson's 'alternative rationalist urban Buddhist model with the 'development monk' movement in the rural North and Northeast of Thailand', which is

> … democratically oriented and based on villager participation in the planning and implementation of development activities with the guidance and support of monk leaders. This rural movement reacts against centralized authority and is often

interpreted as a focus for dissent against and opposition to authority. Development monks, like Jackson's rationalist Buddhist movement leaders, have likewise been accused of being communists or communist sympathizers. (ibid: 182)

This describes how Buddhism is interwoven with society: the government and middle classes, as well as the development monks, draw on it in a way that benefits them, for different and even contradicting reasons. Regardless of an individual Thai's loyalties, they all share Buddhist values and norms, though these may be interpreted differently. To define adversaries, the authoritarian government plays on the anti-communist sentiments that many Thais have harboured since the Vietnam war. Incentives for Thais to support anti-communism are multiple, as shown in a paper on 'The Village Scouts' (an organisation that provides a large non-military bulwark against threats to Thai independence and freedom, particularly 'communism':

> Many join in a nationalistic spirit to demonstrate their respect for and loyalty to the King, or to strengthen the nation against threats to its integrity. Some join to avoid being labelled unpatriotic, disloyal to the King, un-Buddhist, or communist, or in response to governmental pressure. (Muecke, 1980: 407)

Taking a stand against the government is risky: people can be imprisoned for making negative remarks about the Royal Family or the nation, and being labelled 'un-Buddhist' is a complex issue in this setting.

PARTICIPATION IN CULTURE

SYMPOSIUM | August 7
In the afternoon I walk into Aj. Noy's office, trying to find out if I am to be present at the symposium, starting tomorrow. She says she sent me an e-mail earlier this week, and was surprised not to get an answer. I had not received it. She stresses she wants me to be present every day and needs me to make a transcript of a round-table discussion on August 10; immediately she takes me by the arm and leads me to the 'nerve centre'. The large room looks chaotic, with people sitting on the floor and numerous things scattered all around. Several people on the phone pass us by,

literally running around. A colleague, Aj. Nina, emphasises that she also wants me to be at the site, to help out. They tell me to be in the office at 7:30am the next day to catch a ride to the premises.

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Uncertainty and lack of clarity

In the weeks before the symposium, I had offered my assistance several times, but it had been declined, apart from a few English documents that needed editing. It was even unclear whether my presence was actually required at all. The experience of being in the dark as to whether I was involved or not, and if so to what extent, echoed my experience of working on the LLL project in the months before, so being called in at the last minute came as no surprise.

Working for the university, I often struggled to grasp what went on around me: long periods of silence greeted my efforts to seek help, answers, or feedback on work done. There were times when I had no idea what was going on or what was expected of me; then there sudden ad-hoc decisions would be reached in hectic meetings, and out of the blue I would be informed for the first time of something that had been arranged concerning us.

The first meeting I attended on the LLL project was in January, followed by two meetings, the set-up of the first sketch plan (based on limited knowledge of the project's requirements), and a third meeting in February; then in March there were two meetings at the beginning of the month, following which I worked almost solo, from home, on several iterations of the project, until the end of April. Throughout this time, Robert seemed to be the only one supporting me actively. At the beginning of May, I was allowed to start working on campus. Our workgroup consisted of Robert, myself, and Aj. Jan. Aj. Patrick (Jan's manager, and the project initiator) would only step in every now and then. Although Jan was supposed to guide us (we did not read or speak Thai) and provide us with information, Robert and I found ourselves more or less dependent on each other. Whenever we asked for Jan's approval on anything, he usually commented that every effort we made was fine, and to please continue the 'good work'. In general, he was supportive in what he said and

enthusiastic with what we came up with; but he was not always very helpful in practice. Especially when seeking to involve people within and outside the university, which was crucial to the development of the project, we needed Jan's active support. Only a very small group of staff were able to communicate sufficiently in English, which was required not only for the collaboration, but also because enhancing English proficiency was an aim in the project. Support was often promised but never came.

After Robert left, the situation became even more difficult: while communication had always been poor, Robert's status (as a professor) seemed to open it up somewhat. As touched upon earlier, after his return to the USA, I felt almost as though I was stranded on an island: people were friendly, but I could not engage anyone. The few enthusiastic contacts we had made pulled back, insisting that they were too busy. I reached the reluctant conclusion that the project must indeed have been no more than a window-dressing exercise. Looking back on it now, however, I am not sure it was: the NEC may actually have pulled the plug or transferred project funds to another university, and even if the money had been granted to RMUTL, the project may have been taken up by a local group of education professionals, who would have a better chance of setting it up 'their own way' within their familiar culture. My attempts to clarify this with the department concerned have failed: they have not provided me with any information and seemed to avoid contact with me – probably because they did not want to be confronted with my disappointment.

SYMPOSIUM | August 8

After lunch, I am told to meet Aj. Noy in a special room where delegates and officials are having lunch. I am asked to hand out forms, but I have no idea who the delegates are and what the forms are for. The explanation I get is incomprehensible and hectic; further inquiry makes clear that foreign delegates need these to judge a poster presentation. I am introduced to the four gentlemen present, but I am told there should be more than 20 delegates, and nobody seems to be able to tell me who they are or where to find them…

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Keeping up appearances

I have experienced people being brought in just before the start of an event or meeting without any idea what is expected of them; this was certainly the case for me at the symposium and, as I found out later, also for two of the delegates. This 'last-minute effect' means that people cannot prepare for or influence the event very much. The delegates seemed to be deployed as status symbols, placed in the foreground as distinguished foreign experts, yet with no significant role in the 'play'. Over the course of the three-day conference, they had a total of six minutes' speaking time; we, and a large number of Thai delegates, were asked to judge their presentations. It is possible that setting up the symposium as an international event may have been a requirement to obtain (government) funding.

I myself experienced being a 'prop' on several occasions, when asked to join in activities or meetings without understanding why I was there. This case illustrates the situation:

> The meeting commences; I am asked to introduce myself to the people present. When I am asked if I speak Thai, they frown at my negative response. The meeting is going to be in Thai solely, without translation. René (who studied in the Netherlands) is present, and feels he is merely a 'prop' – as I do, too. During lunch, René says that just before I came in the attendees had said they were not amused that the director nor management of RMUTL had been present at the opening. My annoyance at just having to sit it out gets even worse when I walk out to pick up something from the office: I bump into the chairwoman (who does speak English), and casually ask her about the meeting and people present. She says the group is only using the RMUTL facilities; the meeting has nothing to do with the university, but concerns another (vocational) college…
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Reflecting on the reason for using people as 'props', I would suggest that their presence is a sign of involvement – an indication that the organisation is actively working on and seriously interested in the topic, and/or has 'invested' in a foreign 'expert' to advise them. At the symposium, the delegates were probably there to

underline the 'international' character of the event. Events I attended in Western countries also advertise people because of their (expert) status, even though their role is quite small. The phenomenon of 'name-dropping' is related to this, making events or people more attractive by presenting themselves as having many important connections.

> The high status name-dropping may be a deliberate ploy to impress the listener of the speaker's importance or ability to effect some action. (Donath and Boyd, 2004: 72).

I can also see a connection with the preoccupation I have seen with 'material' signs of success, like wearing brand clothing and expensive watches, which are generally used to demonstrate status by genuinely successful people; yet those with lower status can use fakes ('props') to assert a fictitious status. 'The audience for this symbolic display' (Scott, 1990: 17), in the case of the delegates at the symposium, may have been a sign of importance towards the event's financiers, or even an act of defiance towards the more established, higher ranked, competing universities; as a way to stand out.

I believe Thai people will cooperate with being used as a 'prop', for they cannot challenge the person putting them in that position. The Asian delegates certainly complied, but perhaps they will think twice about accepting any similar invitations in the future. For myself, I felt I had no real choice, for I would have to work with the people present; besides, being there was certainly an interesting experience. Perhaps some Westerners might have walked out on such an outrageous situation; but I expect most would sit it out, in order to avoid embarrassing people and potentially spoiling a relationship for the future.

(In)visible hierarchy

As mentioned, strong hierarchy influences Thai society to a great extent. Making hierarchy visible is a very strong way of confirming it. At the round-table session at the symposium, as with most large meetings I have attended, there is an inner and a outer 'circle' – making the position each person's status highly visible: those seated centrally are the key figures. The rest, on the outside, usually have a brief moment to

add something to the discussion or to bring in some information at a certain point; but they may walk out, or even nod off. Another visible sign at the symposium was that the places where lunch could be enjoyed varied according to people's level within the organisation, thus defining their status.

Gestures – the ever-present physical signs of respect – are also used to support hierarchy and status. The *wai*[5] to a person higher up in the hierarchy is the most well-known sign in Thai society; avoiding eye contact is also considered a sign of respect. During the grand opening ceremony, and throughout the symposium, these gestures were made continuously – varying from a brief, small bow, to almost grovelling on the floor in front of someone, which for an outsider can be somewhat disconcerting. Such displays made me feel uncomfortable, for I am not used to people physically demonstrating such humility.

As mentioned earlier, the Thai hierarchy is influenced by Buddhism – comparable with Cambodia, as described by Knowles Morrison, where hierarchy is listed as one of the influencing factors on participatory development:

> People at the top of the vertical hierarchy are privileged because of their karmic past and thus deserve to be leaders and are therefore inherently better than me. (Knowles Morrison, 2010: 167)

Connecting a place in hierarchy to karma in this way makes it very difficult to better one's position. Furthermore, Knowles Morrison underlines the inflexibility of the status quo by noting, as does Klausner, that financial and social status is ensured by a people at the top of social and organisational hierarchies, thus making low-placed people very dependant.

Keating describes how hierarchical position is brought to the foreground in a way that is audible, rather than visible: he suggests that by using language in a certain ways, social differences in efficacy and power are constructed (2009). As I understand it, Thai language has different 'levels' that are used by people in different

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[5] *Wai*, bowing one's head slightly, with palms of hands against each other, fingertips pointing up, in front of the lower part of the face.

hierarchical 'layers': by speaking in a certain manner, the level is sustained, including some and excluding others, comparable to the way scholars used Greek and Latin.

In professional life, the strong hierarchy diminishes freedom greatly. At the symposium, the way people higher up directed their subordinates left little room for personal initiative or freedom to choose how to respond to emerging situations. I suspect that the panic I encountered on several occasions was caused by the double-bind people found themselves in at having to carry out orders that they knew were inappropriate, or making their own decisions in defiance of a superior; judging by their high level of anxiety, they faced a huge dilemma.

Despite of this strong hierarchical power, I did experience a certain freedom to take up my – as yet undefined – task within the (confined) group of delegates; colleagues seemed to let me go about that my own way. I attribute this to my unclear place in the hierarchy, and the fact that my 'trampling on people's feet' would not be found as embarrassing as when a Thai behaved outside the tacit 'code'. In other words, I dealt with a problem and could be used as a scapegoat the moment things would get out of hand. In Jackall's view (2010: 91), it is possible that I may have ended up in the wrong place at the wrong time and been blamed when things got out of hand. In this sense, the Western notion of a 'shame and blame' culture resembles Eastern concerns about 'losing face'. Damage control here could be exercised by using the stereotype of the 'rude foreigner' to explain any unacceptable behaviour on my part. However, I do not believe that the possibility of using me as a scapegoat had been foreseen; rather, I think it emerged in the complex circumstances during the course of the event (as may have been the case in the LLL project). A scapegoat is useful, especially when the subject is an 'outsider': when matters get out of hand, the outsider is blamed and can be 'removed' – so that the team remains virtually untouched, does not lose face and can continue working together.

SYMPOSIUM | August 9
At 9am, two colleagues collect me and we drive to the symposium site. Like them, I had not received any instructions or tasks for today, and on arrival I am, literally,

dragged by the arm into the large symposium hall, by Aj. Nina, who is panicking about my late arrival and instructing me to take notes of the panel discussion and write a transcript later on. I am directed toward the front row, where I take out my notebook and start scribbling. [A while later] Nina rushes in and asks me frantically to formulate a question for the panel, stressing: 'Write it down, *immediately*!'

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Power and control

Based on my experiences during the set-up of the LLL project and being present at the symposium, I noticed how power and control are closely related. Nina, a doctor and manager from another campus, was under instruction to have me carry out certain tasks; and even though I sensed she was not entirely comfortable (and perhaps even disagreed) with some of them, she did follow directions. I believe this has its roots in the fact, as mentioned before, that challenging a teacher (manager) by asking questions is not acceptable in Thai classrooms (especially in rural areas), and learners are not accustomed to participate actively. In a study on 'Student Readiness for Learner Autonomy', a case study at a university, the results of a questionnaire show this clearly: the section 'Locus of Control in Classroom' shows that nearly 100% agreed that interactions in the classroom were under the teacher's control, 90% indicated that the materials used had been selected by the teacher, and 75% agreed that answering questions seemed the only activity under the control of students (Rungwaraphong, 2012: 36). This 'locus of control' – if transferred to the situation at the symposium, where staff seemed to follow directions blindly, not taking initiative – can be taken up as a result of what/how they are taught.

The Thai teacher is regarded as the unquestionable holder of truth; however, this does not make their power unlimited. In a sense, the true location of power may even be paradoxical: in many cases, teachers are not allowed to fail a student. The importance of the 'piece of paper' – the degree is handed out by a member of the Royal Family (if one can afford to attend the ceremony) – is immense in Thai society – more important, perhaps, than what the student has actually acquired in terms of knowledge and expertise. A large percentage of graduates never get to work in a position that matches the level of education they have achieved, which might imply

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that students, as much as the teachers, have an interest in maintaining the power difference. If students obey the rules, going through courses is fairly easy, 'Sabai-Sabai'[6] (Kamoche, 2000); hence students can even be found sleeping in class, without teachers paying any attention to it.

As Elias proposes, power is not situated in a person; we like to see it that way because we can blame someone for the pressure we are experiencing. To show how power differences exist between one person (or group) and the other, Elias uses game models in his book *What is Sociology?*. The more superior 'player' can influence the 'game' to a greater extent: the smaller the difference in superiority (power) between the players, the less people or groups can influence the game process – which remains the case as the number of people playing 'the game' increases (Elias, 1978: 71-103). The students might support the power of the teacher as much as the teacher constitutes it by being the 'holder of truth', as high graduation rates are of interest to both sides.

Jardine takes up 'truth' in 'Foucault & Education', suggesting that truth is tightly connected to power. Jardine cites Foucault on the impact of truth in traditional education:

> Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. …the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which this is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (Jardine, 2005: 11)

Holding the truth, and being supported strongly by the 'players' as such, enforces the superior power of the teacher. This power relation can constitute a very formal but still *Sabai-Sabai* environment; the teacher is not defied – can continue 'spreading knowledge' in the same way for years without making an effort; can hand out

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[6] 'Sabai-Sabai': easy-going mentality.

certificates to students who have not been challenged, who have taken every 'truth' for granted, and have not developed a mind of their own. An educational setting like this can turn into a vicious circle, creating obedient and passive workers who do not question their superiors or develop a sense of responsibility for their own work.

This 'vicious circle' turned out to be a serious obstacle for my work on the LLL project; many education professionals I talked to about the project, and about education in general, kept stressing that their 'culture', their 'professional environment', would not easily (some even said never) allow the change towards participatory learning, for teachers would not want to let go of their expert status, share responsibility on the process of development of students, or argue with them about 'truths'. In many cases, I learned that education professionals who had attempted to make such changes in their places of work found themselves excluded and even undermined by colleagues, and often felt they were struggling alone for a lost cause – making me wonder how small my chances of success might have been, and even whether choosing me for the project might have been a deliberate strategy, for reasons earlier mentioned.

> **SYMPOSIUM | August 9**
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> When I try to find out what to do in the afternoon, Nina is panicking again; she says, 'I am sorry, you want to kill me now' and holds me tight by the arm. Again, this gesture makes me feel uncomfortable, since I do not know her very well; but I sense she feels out of control. She says she is happy with what I am trying to do, but I get no clear directions from her.
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Physical power

Something I found difficult at the symposium was the physical gestures, limiting my movements; at times, I was literally dragged by the arm towards 'problematic situations' – which seemed a way to regain control over the situation by trying to control me. This physical limitation of my freedom of movement struck me as an exertion of power. Keohane and Nye Jr make a basic distinction between behavioural and resource power – the first being an ability to achieve desired outcomes, the latter

being based on the possession of resources that are usually associated with being able to realise the outcomes one wants (1998: 86) They go on to divide behavioural power into 'hard' and 'soft' power. Hard power makes use of threats or rewards to make people do what they otherwise would not do. Soft power is based on achieving results because others want the same outcome – attraction, as opposed to coercion.

Following this description of hard power, the gesture of grabbing me firmly by the arm, to me implied a threat: it felt like an invasion of my privacy. It would have been very difficult to not comply without making a scene or at least embarrassing the person making the gesture. The physicality gave it another dimension, amplifying the impact it had on me; in no way could I ignore it. I should emphasise here that I do not believe the gesture was meant offensively; I imagine it was used by people whose anxiety was so strong that they felt this was the only way to ensure my immediate compliance, resolve the issue at hand and regain control.

SYMPOSIUM | August 9

Collectively, we decide to start the jury task judging the posters, and also the booths, as had been made clear to us in the meantime. Because it appears to be a task that will take a lot of time and the delegates want to do it thoroughly, out of respect for the contestants, we start immediately; the results need to be in the next day, before 10am. It takes time and effort to understand the forms and exactly what is expected. Delegates want to know if the awarding is purely dependent on their reports. I am told that other people will judge too. In the meantime, I am handed a programme, and read that by the end of the afternoon people are to be at the poster presentation to explain their projects. When I ask if we need to interview them (the forms have 'oral explanation capability' sections), we are told not to bother, because yesterday only two of the contestants showed up.

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Respect, embarrassment and conflict avoidance

In general, Asian people go out of their way to treat people respectfully (the delegates wanted to go about the judging thoroughly) and avoid embarrassing others or themselves – 'losing face' (e.g. delegates felt somewhat awkward if the awarding

of prizes lay solely in their hands; Thai staff steered clear of the delegates as much as they could, to avoid embarrassment). The fact that only a few contestants showed up for the oral presentation might have been connected to the greater possibility of failing when presenting orally, and/or the expectation of having to present in English.

In the West, respect is sometimes mourned as a social quality that is diminishing or even lost; in Thailand, (hierarchically related) respect is so strong that it appears to inhibit personal development. Conflict avoidance, related to respect and embarrassment, is usually defined as positive in 'the East' and negative in 'the West'. In a paper by Lee of the University of Lancaster as part of an international partnership funded by the EC, the researcher describes a discussion between a culturally diverse group of presenters and researchers, making sense of the discussion she arrives at a different conclusion; 'It became apparent that, for this group, if there were national boundaries on the issue [of conflict] then they were blurred and situation-specific' (1998: 229). The article proposes an interesting differentiation between the ways of two groups dealing with conflict and the reasons behind it – interestingly, not related to typical Eastern/Western values:

> Those who saw conflict as a competitive game also saw the different perspectives to be malleable such that direct negotiation would lead to people changing their views, reaching agreement on the issues, and, therefore, to one side 'winning' the argument. They felt that, because the other group was unwilling to try and negotiate or to consider the possibility of relinquishing their perspective, then they were unwilling to work towards a common solution. They therefore felt that this indicated hidden agendas and lack of honesty – leading to lack of trustworthiness, loss of respect, and inferred personal insult.
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> In contrast, those who saw conflict as a fundamental threat, and thus to be sidestepped, saw the differences as reflections of fundamental difference in approach and thus not appropriate for negotiation or change. Instead they felt that resolution could only be achieved through an agreement to differ that preserved individuals' perspectives while allowing a way forward. They felt that the other group's attempts to seek conformity trivialised and under-valued their feelings and beliefs. They inferred that insistence on negotiation indicated that the other group believed that all values were negotiable, and that insistence on pushing direct confrontation indicated

insensitivity, cultural imperialism, and lack of ability/willingness to appreciate another's viewpoint – leading to lack of trustworthiness, loss of respect, and inferred personal insult. (ibid: 234–235)

This underlines that intentions both for seeking conflict and conflict avoidance are perceived very differently, and are not specific to certain nationalities, but lead to the same issues. It illustrates the difficulties we have with showing respect for behaviour when we do not comprehend its underlying values and intentions. Gestures that are taken up as signs of respect for one person may be perceived as disrespectful for another. If this understanding of each other's gestures is lacking or poor (which, as shown, may not necessarily relate to national cultural differences), then it might bring about serious issues in collaborative work.

Culture

I could have started my reflections by declaring the Thai approach, and my difficulty dealing with or fully understanding it, to be a result of 'cultural differences'. But I have chosen not to do so for a reason I will explain at the end of this section.

Culture in itself is extremely difficult to define. According to Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (whose theories are popular in service sector management training), the essence of culture is 'the shared ways groups of people understand and interpret the world' (1997: 3); it is also 'the way in which a group of people solves problems and reconciles dilemmas' and 'comes in layers, like an onion. To understand it you have to peel it layer by layer' (ibid: 6). They pursue knowledge of 'cultural patterns', by gathering 'comparable examples' in an extensive database (with over 30,000 entries). Trompenaars and Hampden conclude that culture has different levels – national (or regional) society, corporate (or organisational), and professional; and their analysis concludes with statements such as 'all the examples show that there is a clear-cut cultural border between the north-west European … and the Euro-Latin' (ibid: 7).

I feel that their structural and analytic way of dealing with culture leads to generalisations, suggesting that 'chunks of knowledge' can be handed to people in

business and education, providing a quick directive of what to do in case of cultural 'collision'.

Hofstede also mentions patterns – 'patterns of thinking, feeling, and potential acting, which were learned throughout their lifetime' – that are instilled in people by what he calls *mental programming*, which can only be changed through the difficult process of *unlearning* (1991: 4). In his book, *Cultures and Organizations*, he seeks to demonstrate that 'although the variety in people's minds is enormous, there is a structure in this variety which can serve as a basis for mutual understanding.' (ibid.). Hofstede also comes up with onion-like layers – starting with 'manifestations of culture' and working from the outside in through 'symbols', 'heroes', and 'rituals', with all three intersected by 'practices', to get to the core: 'values'. Secondly, Hofstede brings in 'levels of culture', adding gender, generation and social class to the list proposed by Trompenaars and Hampden (ibid: 9–10). Hofstede (like Trompenaars and Hampden) does bring in case studies and narratives, but concludes, after discussing the 'unavoidable subjectivity' of anthropological reports:

> Valid information on national cultural differences between literate and easily accessible societies can more readily be collected from indirect sources – like national statistics and the results of comparative surveys – than from statements by individual observers. (ibid: 250)

This preference is visible, in that analysing, structuring, defining and specifically measuring, take up the largest part of the book. However, Hofstede does stress the need for caution with stereotyping (253).

Geertz offers a different perspective on culture; in his introduction of *The Interpretation of Cultures*, he points out that Kluckhohn, in *Mirror for Man*, needed 27 pages to explain the concept! Geertz arrives at the following:

> The concept of culture I espouse … is essentially a semiotic one. Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning. (Geertz, 1973: 5)

He then goes on to explain how the search for meaning commences in the field of social anthropology, ethnography: 'an elaborate venture in, to borrow the notion from Ryle, 'thick description' (ibid: 6). 'Thick description' does not merely describe what is visibly happening ('thin description'), but rather is 'an image too exact of the sort of piled-up structures of inference and implication through which an ethnographer is continually trying to pick his way' (ibid: 7). Later, Geertz explains how analysis of thick description 'is sorting out the structures of signification … and determining their social ground and import' (ibid: 9). This 'picking his way', making sense of what goes on,

> … is like trying to read (in the sense of 'construct a reading of') a manuscript – foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behaviour. (ibid: 10)

Geertz underlines the complexity of what I am facing, in trying to understand what I encountered in an unfamiliar environment. This is in essence not exceptional, for is not every environment to a certain degree unfamiliar? Do we ever know (exactly) what is going on, in our own country, city, neighbourhood or even street? Yet we all try to make sense of what goes on around us in our (professional) lives, for various reasons: to 'just' get through it, to deal with it, to reach a better understanding, to learn from it, etc. Being in another culture adds a complicating factor, as Geertz explains, because the outsider is handicapped by: 'a lack of familiarity with the imaginative universe within which their acts are signs' (ibid: 13) Gadamer explains how the sign points to the 'other' by nature, and has to emerge from its context to be recognised as such, so that it can be substituted and be absorbed into its meaning (2004: 413). Thus, grasping the signs, uncovering their meaning, finding our way to this imaginative universe, is the way to reaching a fuller understanding of culture (cultural differences).

Contrasting the Trompenaars-Hampden and Hofstede approach with Geertz's, one can argue for the effectiveness of generalisation (producing facts and tables, as the first three do), or for valuing local and particular meaning (as Geertz does). The

first sounds like a robust and reliable way of going about the matter: clear facts and tables underpinned with 'solid' theories are more easily taken up as 'scientifically proven truths'; however, there is always the problem of *interpretation*, as Tufte points out:

> Almost all efforts at data analysis seek, at some point, to generalize the results and extend the reach of conclusions beyond a particular set of data. … The real difficulty is in deciding when the extrapolation beyond the range of the variables is warranted and when it is merely naive. … a matter of 'a priori nonstatistical considerations'. (Tufte, 1974: 32).

Thomas' writing suggests that Geertz's way of working provides 'a validation for making connections between another's experience and one's own, seeing links, having insights' (2011: 32).

The tendency people have to go for the 'simple toolbox' instead of facing the uncertainty and anxiety of trying to make sense of what goes on between people in the situations they find themselves in is, I believe, what makes these books so successful; but as I have underlined earlier, this does not get a person beyond a very basic level of understanding the unfamiliar environment they have entered. More helpful may be offering a narrative or anecdote (additionally), speaking in a direct way, making matters clearer; that is when the reader can identify with the processes described. Facts and figures clearly have value; however, they cannot entirely reflect the complicated nature of culture and networks of social interdependency - indeed, making assumptions from data can create false generalisations. The sense-making of narratives is not entirely enough to reveal truths, either; but as knowledge emerges in the social (Stacey, 2000), so the chance of a 'social story' resonating with people, providing profound insights, might be greater.

SYMPOSIUM | August 10
Although delegates are clearly disappointed by their very limited involvement in the programme, they continue to express their impressions of the symposium and organisation in a positive manner. Only subtle hints suggest that they feel otherwise

– e.g. one of the delegates shares an anecdote of a situation he encountered during a symposium, where the president was not proficient in English and asked him 'Who are you?' instead of 'How are you?', to which he responded by telling him he was the husband of … etc.

[the RMUTL president had not really spoken to them, and had not made efforts to find an interpreter].

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From my interactions with the small group of delegates I spent time with at the symposium, I discovered that it is impossible to generalise about Asian culture as a whole. All delegates came from different countries, and generally responded with typical Asian politeness to the situation they were in; however, there were noticeable differences between the ways certain delegates responded to the rather chaotic situation and how they chose to express their annoyance. The Chinese delegate calmly suggested possible solutions; the Korean delegate asked clear and direct questions in a respectful manner; the Philippines delegate tried to lighten things up by making jokes; the Indonesian delegate just smiled and appeared to 'go with the flow'; and the delegate from Myanmar made use of the anecdote narrated above to make his point. But even these responses cannot, without reservation, be generalised, as besides their national culture people are part of many social groups (cultures) that form their 'selves' (Mead, 1992: 154); moreover, most of the delegates had spent some time studying in Western countries, which might have influenced them to some extent.

So why have I avoided the issue of culture here? Because I have come to understand the complexity of culture – taking in account Geertz's 'webs of significance', locally defined ways of gesturing and responding; the multitude of social groups (generalised others) that form the self, to which Mead points; as well as human emotions (e.g. anger, sorrow, pain, shame) that are not bound to a specific culture, except insofar as culture influences their expression or suppression. Understanding someone from another culture, then, is not a matter of taking account of nationwide generalisations; one has to develop an understanding of the unique mix

of 'sign languages' a person uses. Even with someone from the 'same' background, bringing with them the specific 'signs' of their family, neighbourhood, schools, business etc., it takes time to 'get acquainted' – to reach the point 'when the community reaction has been imported into the individual' and 'there is a new value in experience and a new order of response' (Mead, 1992: 194).

CONCLUSION PROJECT 2

Working in Thailand, I had – unconsciously – made an important assumption: I saw most of the issues arising during my work as a project manager as 'typically Thai'. Yet not one of the issues I encountered has proven to be so; rather, the way people in Thai society interact – the clear 'visibility' of their signs, as it turns out – seems to amplify these issues compared with what I have seen in Western countries, making the issues, rather the unique combination of these, stand out. As a manager, I have to be aware of these generalising assumptions and stereotypes, and acknowledge other factors that may be in play – such as the superficial effects of globalisation disguising more fundamental differences; indeed, not delving below surface appearances will misinform my understanding of the people I am working with and undermine our chances of successful teamwork.

My experiences in Thai culture, and discussions about these in the DMan learning set, have also enlightened me about the tendency we have to assume that we fully understand our own (familiar) culture. I have come to recognise that *every* environment, even our own, is to some extent unfamiliar to us. By treating our environment as 'familiar', we create a sense of security and belonging; but in doing so, we may miss opportunities to enquire into the details of the situations we find ourselves in. If we were to pay more attention to what takes place in our daily practice, being more reflexive, then we might notice interesting openings for inquiry that could lead to rich conversations. By taking note of the unfamiliar; by exploring who we are, and what it is we are doing together, to a deeper extent; and by taking our own experience seriously, we might gain an deeper understanding that is valuable to us working as a group. Reflecting on and exploring the experience makes it richer and potentially more valuable to help us in future situations; we do not

readily forget what we have experienced, which might help to prevent us from repeating our mistakes.

It is also clear that the Thais themselves, like anyone else, were not absolutely clear on what went on; hierarchical layers played an important part in preventing them from seeing a wider picture. It is important, however, not to view hierarchy as strictly restraining: somewhat rigid structures might paradoxically enable people by providing a sense of security and guidance, when this is an essential part of their (group) culture. I should also try to avoid idealising more familiar ways of working together: indeed, collaboration might be taken up quite differently from 'our' ideal concept of it, if in the process we fail to recognise or value local manners and practices – wasting an opportunity to explore these particular ways and pick up on them, instead of trying to impose our preferred model of participation. This also goes for the Eastern predilection for 'keeping up appearances': I have tended to see this as contrary to my preference for openness, and even as hypocritical, but in doing so I overlook the fact that this too has as an important social function – preventing people from losing face (of more importance in some cultures than others). This leads me to consider issues of power and control: there is no 'right' power relation – every specific group of people, situation or location will call for a different approach, division of power. This obviously cannot be fully controlled for, but respecting local wishes and negotiating these may help to set up a more workable structure.

In Thai culture, it would seem that asking *why* is seen as challenging someone; this can prevent people from inquiring into matters, and as such forms an obstacle to uncover what is actually happening – which they might not even truly wish to know, given that Buddhist teachings encourage acceptance of 'what is'. Again, *not asking why* and *not wanting to know* are not only typical of Thai people: in many cultures and for many people personally, these are issues that can hinder them or prevent them from actively taking responsibility for what they are doing. As a manager, creating a culture of trust in a group, taking away (some of) the anxiety of questioning, finding ways to stimulate, underlining the constructive character that exploration and understanding can have, could lead to more equally shared responsibility and more reciprocally supportive group dynamics.

I understand that in Projects 3 and 4 I will need to take up culture in a much more broad sense of the word –relating it not only to nations or regions, but also to the combination of corporate environments in which we find ourselves. Every culture can highlight issues that may be of interest to other cultures, where these particular issues may be less apparent but nevertheless influence the everyday practice of working together. Additionally, I want to look deeper into culturally diverse teams, which are generally promoted nowadays: we may be overestimating the differences between people from a variety of backgrounds (national, disciplinary) and underestimating the differences between people from the 'same' background. Can there be a success formula for an innovative and highly participatory team?

For my work in education specifically, this project has impacted my ideas and challenged my assumptions. I now understand that I cannot view education as a 'separate sphere': it is established by people working and studying 'in it', by the society (culture) it is part of – just as corporate development is interrelated with corporate culture, international influences and regulations (globalisation). On the other hand, education has a significant part in creating all of these.

I am developing a better understanding of the difficulties of attempting to accelerate transition from traditional to participatory education, given all the factors in play; and I now understand better why, despite the insights about education offered by many great thinkers over so many decades, their critique has yet to result in large-scale change. Reasons for not participating are complex and numerous, and thus difficult to uncover, making it a huge challenge to finds ways to overcome these and stimulate people to take on an active participatory attitude. I have been looking for ways to make LLL work – like Jardine, who suggests a change of attitude to 'get out from under the oppressive powers of truth' [and give way to developing participatory education]. She writes that we might:

> …risk and challenge what each of us holds as truth and open ourselves to the real possibility that the meaning that the other person is communicating will affect us by allowing us to realize something that has not occurred to us before, which may transform our own understanding. Taking this risk and facing this challenge will allow each of us to tell the truth about ourselves and listen to the truth of others in

ways that have the potential to transform our Western systems of knowledge and power. (Jardine, 2005: 122)

But letting go of 'fixed truths', accepting that these can be negotiable or even contestable, changing attitudes, taking risk and facing the challenge is exactly what makes the whole process so extremely difficult: these are elements that make (most) people insecure and anxious, as shown in this project.

I started out stating that being a traveller feels rather like 'being on the outside, taking a peek in'. I have to conclude that I still am; but I have gained valuable insights into what is, or might be, blocking my view, as well as understanding why this may be happening. Furthermore, I have come to understand I have never *really* been on 'the outside'; even when feeling excluded, I was in fact part of the group, and was continuously influencing and being influenced by 'the others', as anyone is in every group.

I also began by expressing the hope that living and working abroad offered 'a profound opportunity to boost my personal development' – and I may conclude that it has; however, I must add that the writing of this project, reflecting intensively on the situations I found myself in, has considerably enhanced the experience. It is this that has really led to the personal development I was looking for, making me more aware of and open to what goes on in the 'living present' (Stacey, Griffin and Shaw, 2000) – reaching a more nuanced understanding of how I am informed by experiences of the past and influenced by my expectations of the future.

Unknown cultures may serve as something of a magnifying glass, enabling us to identify and gain a better understanding of issues that are less prominently visible in environments more familiar to us.

PROJECT 3

The need for recognition: Joining and leaving organisational groups

I set out writing this project to make sense of the difficulties I encountered working as a project manager – resigning/being dismissed from my position in Thailand and moving (after two years of living and working in Asian countries) to Switzerland.

I enquired into the strong impact diverging situations had on me, and what it was that caused the tenacious anxiety I experienced. By looking closely at, and generalising, my experiences I developed an understanding of how our need to *belong*, our need for *recognition*, provokes such anxiety and how this plays out and influences group formation within organisations.

Over the course of several iterations of the project, *recognition* became the overarching theme, connecting issues in relation to the main topics to have emerged earlier: (personal) space, exclusion/establishment, communication and uncertainty. In particular, Honneth's theories on recognition (1995) have influenced my understanding of our need for recognition and the importance of its being reciprocal.

The project reveals how recognition plays an important part in everyday organisational life, bringing to light the radical interdependence and interconnection between people forming and at the same time being formed by organisational groups and their environment. I also explore its influence on ongoing negotiations of power relations and varying (personal) intentions, highlighting the importance of recognition in the process of establishing oneself in groups, with special attention to how this may influence people dealing with the emotional impact of leaving and being left behind.

INTRODUCTION PROJECT 3

Only after moving from Thailand to Switzerland did the impact of the months I had spent working on the Thai Life-long Learning (LLL) project become clear to me: the constant stress I had been under, caused by insecurity and lack of clarity about my

tasks and position, had left me more anxious and affected me to a much greater extent than I had acknowledged at the time.

In Project 2, I did not pick up on the severe impact the situation had on me personally, and on the team I worked with; how we *co-created* circumstances – which I have come to understand[7] is important as I now draw parallels between this experience and what goes on for many people in organisations.

The 'distant' approach I kept in Project 2, *describing* rather than 'reliving in writing', not really addressing anxiety and emotions, is something that we tend to do in organisations because these intangible feelings appear to threaten to undermine predictability and control,[8] and are often not regarded as advantageous or useful.

The in-depth exploration in this project of insecure circumstances not only describes the individual's experience of uncertainty about their environment, their position, (the quality/status of) their work, and the dilemma of leaving voluntarily or fearing dismissal; it also shows how this impacts upon the wider group, demonstrating the importance of (reciprocal) recognition in groups. This was achieved by looking closely at a personal account of what goes on between people working together, and particularly taking seriously and making sense of emerging anxieties and emotions – as indicators of subtle ongoing negotiations of power relations and the playing-out of diverse intentions.

Although not a conscious decision at the time, I started keeping a log, for I sensed that I might need notes to refer to when trying to make sense of what was happening: the situation was complex, and seemed to be changing all the time.

Here, I use logbook fragments to illustrate how I felt at the time – such as my anxiety and my sense of being an outsider. Longer narratives highlight important moments where the situation changed dramatically or significantly and generalisable insights emerged. I have maintained the chronological order of logbook fragments and narratives to convey the gradual escalation of tension, as a continuing storyline.

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[7] An understanding developed during the writing of Projects 2 and 3.

[8] Explored under *Uncertainty*.

The reader may sometimes be drawn to issues other than those that I choose to examine in the fragments and narratives, as they are rich in content. Starting each section, I have strived to clarify and substantiate the reasons for highlighting certain issues above others.

In this project, I refer to a few people regularly:

- *Robert*, the American professor I worked with closely (who got me hired)
- *Jan*, my manager (Director of Community Technology Transfer Center)
- *Patrick*, Jan's manager and project initiator (VP R&D)
- *Saul*, dean, translator
- *Bernice* (Patrick's secretary).

Starting out

The first meetings on the Life-Long Learning (LLL) project took place at the end of January. Throughout February, I worked mainly from home; Robert was my touchstone and supported me actively. In meetings, Jan appeared enthusiastic about progress made and the ideas we proposed; Patrick dropped in every now and then and seemed pleased and confident that our plans would work out; but in general, working jointly remained a challenge.

> *March 16*: Meetings are hindered badly by calls coming in on Jan's cell-phone and demands from Patrick whenever he enters the office. In general, having a quiet talk is difficult because people are walking in and out constantly and we are seated at a conference table, which is often simultaneously used by others.

In May, I began working full-time in the office, sat at the conference table.

Personal space

I have come to understand, through my own sense-making and discussions with the DMan learning set, that the first 'practical' issue I encountered was that I could not *recognise* (myself in) my unfamiliar surroundings. Besides the obvious language

issues,[9] the environment impacted me more than I could have imagined; it was not inviting; it was crowded, noisy, either too hot or too cold; the facilities were shabby; the toilet was inside the office, separated by just a thin door. I could understand this perfectly because Thailand is not part of the 'first world' and, compared with Bangkok, Chiang Mai was regarded as rural. Not having my own desk, sitting at the conference table, was – in this light – acceptable, but it made it difficult to concentrate or have an in-depth discussion.

Even though the 'material' circumstances were understandably worse than what I was accustomed to, and I acknowledged this, I noticed how much I was attached to having a little space and some office equipment that I could call my own. An article by Reihlen and Werr helped me to consider how this need arises:

> [A]n individual's experience of physical space is mediated by two other spaces: relational and agential. (Reihlen and Werr, 2012: 70)

The authors interpret relational space as creating possibilities for interaction and influencing the structures of those interactions, whereas agential space

> integrates an individual's understanding and experience of physical and relational space the – immediate physical environment and power relations – with the individual's sense(s) of self and possibilities for future interactions. (ibid, 70–71)

Reihlen and Werr emphasise that space is not just a couple of square metres surrounded by walls, a floor and ceiling; they point to the experiential 'character' of space, of what it is that takes place within this space and how it is perceived by people using it. They stress the importance of connection to the social, to interaction, while drawing a distinction between physical, relational and agential space as different processes.

Construing space from a complex responsive processes perspective, this distinction would not be valid, as our perception of space is formed by social

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[9] I will expand upon the themes of language and communication later.

interactions and at the same time is forming these: what we do together in an environment affects how we perceive the environment, and simultaneously the environment influences our interactions. This is all part of the same process; the environment is as much part of the social as we are.

Engaging with this radically social view of space, I can more fully understand the difficulties I had working in Thailand, as the environment was severely influencing possibilities for interaction – or at least, for the kind of interaction I preferred. Having no place of my own meant more than lack of privacy: I felt that it also affected the way I was perceived by others. To me, the circumstances underlined that I did not stand out, was not taken seriously, not recognised; it affected my status, my sense of belonging.

This perception of space was highlighted when I spoke to a Swiss manager recently, who returned from holidays to find his office shared by another employee. Not only was this undesirable for practical reasons (the regular need to confer with employees confidentially), but it was also unsettling, as he acknowledged: 'I have to admit it: I felt they had taken away the privilege of having my own office. It affected my status, and I felt uneasy with that'. Assigned personal space is strongly connoted with recognition, an employee's degree of value being reflected in the amount and quality of space made available to them.

There was another issue: feeling guilty about being dissatisfied with my assigned space, knowing that Thais working in the organisation were worse off. I can imagine that this bothers many people working in developing countries, such as NGOs – people who come from better-equipped environments and have to adjust to unfamiliar and uncomfortable circumstances. While their altruism may prevent them from attempting to change the situation, the environment will inevitably impact their performance – placing them in what Bateson described as a 'double bind':

> [A]n impossible situation … as a consequence of the contradictory meanings …
> emanating from two or more contexts in which the entity's actions are embedded.
> (Bateson, cited in (Smith and Berg, 1997: 56))

If we replace 'contradictory meanings' with 'attached value to personal space' and 'context' with 'spaces', we begin to understand how diverging perception of space can lead to impossible situations. Smith and Berg explain context as 'the frames of reference' (10). I believe that it is helpful to be aware of 'where we come from' – our familiar 'context' and 'frame of reference' – as these shape what we consider to be normal expectations; it is not simply a matter of being spoiled or greedy.

As I observed in the Thai office, perception of space appears to differ across the world: while my colleagues were used to working in an overcrowded and noisy space, it felt cramped and disruptive to me.

Edward Hall (a ground-breaking scholar who introduced the 'anthropology of space', known as proxemic theory, in the 1960s) illustrates cultural differences in perception of space in an anecdote: a Latin American official showed him around their 'spacious' office, pointing to a 18 × 20-foot space occupied by 17 clerks and equally as many desks (1960: 4).

This difference in perception is also described in the article 'Personal Space [PS] Modelling for Human–Computer Interaction'; here, the authors base their models on Hall's 'standard' measures of intimate, personal, social and public distance (Amaoka et al., 2009). Interestingly, they demonstrate the complexity of the experience of personal space by specifying the difficulties in creating a model that took account of various factors influencing perception of personal space: *spatial* – body position and face orientation; *personal* – age, gender, social position, character. For the final model, they limited the parameters to distances considered acceptable to Anglo ethnic groups, including only people's position and (simplified) face orientation, and stressed that

> [t]here is … no HCI [human–computer interaction] technology that interprets the *meaning* of distances between people, neither the use of communication through space and distance. This concept is reflected in the notion of Personal Space (PS) which is a non-verbal communication and behavior. (ibid: 2; emphasis added)

It is exactly this *meaning* of distances (space) that I believe is of importance; the *perception* people have of their environment and how it influences their sense of

belonging and status. The cult movie *Office Space* (Judge, 1999) draws attention to these matters by enlarging and caricaturising them. The character of Milton Waddams emphatically illustrates attachment to place and items:

> *Milton Waddams*: [talking on the phone] And I said, I don't care if they lay me off either, because I told… I told Bill that if they move my desk one more time, then, then I'm… I'm quitting, I'm going to quit. And… and I told Don too, because they've moved my desk four times already this year, and I used to be over by the window, and I could see the squirrels, and they were married, but then, they switched from the Swingline to the Boston stapler, but I kept my Swingline stapler because it didn't bind up as much, and I kept the staples for the Swingline stapler and it's not okay because if they take my stapler then I'll set the building on fire...

Obviously, the scene is exaggerated; but it illustrates effectively how an unwanted person can be unsettled by interfering with his personal space, in the hope that he will resign 'voluntarily'.

Unfortunately, these practices are not merely fictional: a Dutch Radio 1 News story (21 August 2013) mentioned a recent article describing the 'banishment rooms' that are now used in Japanese companies. Internally advertised as 'education opportunities', in reality these are created to 'effectively force what [the company] consider surplus workers to quit' (The Asahi Shimbun Company, 2013); some have even committed suicide as a result.

Taking away space or items can be interpreted as a 'visible' sign of non-recognition, and so can be an effective means to pressure people. This underlines the powerful interconnectedness between human beings and their surroundings. A developed understanding of this can be a means for managers to support people's performance: respecting people's needs and paying attention to these – which does not imply giving into all wishes – may create a more inviting and productive environment.

However, organisations tend to continue to treat space as a figure-based commodity, an efficiency matter, focusing on saving resources and 'optimising' space use – matters of concern only to Facilities Management. For example, in

dynamically changing, strict hierarchical organisations, the focus is on keeping teams coherently grouped (Lopes and Girimonte, 2010).

I do understand the concern for efficiency, as most organisations are not charitable institutions, and defining and dividing space in large dynamically changing organisational environments is highly complex; I also acknowledge that it is impossible to please everyone. Nevertheless, I would stress the importance of paying attention to the more subtle repercussions of space allocation, and encourage facility managers to consider conferring with department heads to come to more meaningful, workable divisions of space. Allowing some flexibility for individuals to move around or make adjustments, within certain boundaries, can help them to feel recognised as partners in the complex process of dividing space in the organisational environment.

Interfering with one person's space or facilities might appear to affect only the individual involved; yet this may be an underestimation of the fear and anxiety the team or other people in the organisation could develop – asking themselves who will be next, or feeling uneasy about the mistreatment of colleagues and how this relates to organisational and personal norms and values.

People may distance themselves from the 'unwanted' or turn a blind eye, preferring to stay in a 'framework of denial' (Smith and Berg, 1997: 164), telling themselves: I will never be, and/or do not associate myself with, *recognise* myself in, the 'unwanted nerd' (stereotype); something like this does not happen to us 'normal people'. Such stereotyping can divert attention away from the underlying issue: mistreatment, dehumanisation, pestering, addressing the primal fear of being an outcast, being isolated.

Framing the issue in this way – viewing the situation as self-inflicted by the exception, the 'nerd' – can ease anxiety, but does not necessarily mean that others are not affected by it: emotional conflict may be suppressed, but still negatively influences working relations and performance.

LEFT BEHIND

At the end of May, Robert returned to the US for personal reasons, leaving me in an office where only a few people spoke English poorly. It became more difficult liaising with Jan, whose help I relied on to get the project to the next stage. Having completed the framework, we now needed to form a Thai team to fill in the content and details and set up an organisation for the pilot.

A period of frustrated waiting followed, during which I found myself continuously reaching out to Jan (and others), with little success. I filled my days with doing research, feeling uncomfortable because I felt I should have been further developing the project. I felt helpless to change my situation, or to force communication, as Robert had seemed to be able to do. I e-mailed him, explaining how the project was severely hampered by the lack of communication: I had no clue what was going on, and no team members had been assigned, as had been promised.

> *June 22*: E-mail from Robert: 'Welcome to my world, or the one I left. Just keep on doing what you are doing. One day they will remember you and all the work you did will be rewarded. You are only important as a tool, to be used when they need to.'

I left for Europe for two weeks to attend the DMan residential weekend, and take care of some pressing personal matters. Patrick and I had agreed on my regular absence during the 'hiring process', aiming to set up contacts in educational institutions and building a knowledge network (Patrick's suggestion). Due to illness, I returned a week late. I gradually noticed that our agreements on my absence, the creation of the knowledge network and my notification about returning late appeared to have been interpreted differently by each of us. I felt a shift in my interpretation of how my work on the project was valued:

> *July 27*: Meeting Percy (International Business Management); when I tell him it seems I won't be able to finish the project, which I find difficult, he laughs and says 'You will never finish it – at least, not in the way that you're accustomed to. It will be transformed, integrated into another project, adopted by someone else; it will disappear or get shelved'.

Mutual exclusion

The narratives so far provide a rich blend of issues to explore – such as communication and collaboration difficulties; unavailability; lack of clarity about expectations, roles and positions; disappointment and anxiety.

Starting out, I saw these matters more or less as 'imposed' on me, and felt excluded. I disregarded my own role in the 'play': how we were enabling and constraining each other by not finding ways to communicate, not knowing how to develop our understanding of who was doing what and what our expectations were. I now see that we were driven by very different personal and professional intentions; and the language we used to speak about them was also very different (although we were speaking in English). As a result, we did not recognise ourselves in each other's responses.

Communication as exclusion

Although language was an easily identifiable major barrier, the promised 'simple solution', a bilingual team-member or translator, was not made available. Not speaking Thai was one aspect; not being actively involved, or actively involving myself, in the social experience of the group (developing an understanding of how conversations are 'culturally charged') made having *meaningful* conversations virtually impossible.

Using the same language to communicate does not necessarily lead to understanding – which involves grasping the *meaning* of gestures made and what is said. Mead points to the interpretation of gestures as 'an external, overt, physical or physiological process going on in the actual field of social experience' (1992: 79). A translator will fall short if he literally translates what is said, without taking into account the meaning that lies in the social act, the (physical) gestures made between the person whose words he is translating and himself. A translator also needs to recognise the same 'significant symbols', describing a situation that – logically or implicitly – they both share.

What provoked my anxiety was the social exclusion that resulted from our failure as a group to establish communication. The noisy, lively interactions that surrounded me in the office only deepened my sense of exclusion: I felt I was not

being invited to join in. In retrospect, I recognise that the problem here lay in waiting to be invited – expecting my colleagues to take steps to include me.

Being involved in even a small activity made a difference: I noticed that when I was asked to do translation work, attend a ceremony or join a group for lunch, it made me feel part of the group – albeit temporarily and somewhat superficially. These invites may very well have been extended because I had clearly expressed an interest, or made a more obvious effort to engage with the group myself.

I now understand the effort it must have taken to involve me, given the difficulties of explaining the meaning of the conversations or ceremonies. Just as someone at the cinema continuously asking their companion to explain the plot of the film can be unaware of the distraction caused to those around them, so my own need to have things explained may have caused some disruption. Even my habit of asking 'Why?' fairly often, a natural tendency in Dutch society, may have been perceived as challenging in Thai culture.[10]

In stark contrast to the indirect, carefully chosen wording that characterised the Thai approach, I 'got the message' rather more bluntly at an HR lunch meeting organised by a Swiss university. I had just started French classes and attended the meeting firstly because of my interest in the topic, but also to immerse myself in the language and start building a network.

> At the table, a man opposite me asks me where I come from and what I am doing in Switzerland. I reply that I cannot answer in French, and immediately the man next to me turns his head towards me and says in an unpleasant tone of voice: 'If you don't speak it, you'll never learn!' (in French). He takes me off guard and I feel embarrassed. A bit later, I reply to one of the questions my conversation partner asks that I do speak German. Again, the man next to me turns and says sharply: 'Well, go to Zurich then!'.

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[10] As discussed in the conclusion of Project 2.

In just two short sentences, this man managed to make me feel unwanted and excluded. I do not believe language was the 'true' or only issue; rather, it felt as though he was opposed to yet another foreigner coming to his country – a feeling that was confirmed shortly after by a woman sitting with us complaining about expat partners taking jobs away from Swiss nationals. I was probably seen as a foreign threat, on top of which my failing to master the language could have been perceived as an unwillingness to integrate. I could have tried to make an effort to speak to the man in French, even though I spoke it poorly, to engage with his concerns; however this rational explanation did not ease the strong sense of incompetence I experienced, paralysing me.

Thus language can, consciously or unconsciously, be used as a tool for exclusion – not unlike situations I have observed in professional environments where jargon plays an important role, or where linguistic competencies demonstrate the degree of establishment, made possible by the high level of experience and understanding of the discipline (field) of the members. Bourdieu describes this as 'homogeneity of *habitus*':

> 'Communication of consciousnesses' presupposes community of 'unconsciousness' (that is of linguistic or cultural competences). […] The objective homogenizing of group or class *habitus* that results from homogeneity of conditions of existence is what enables practices to be objectively harmonized without any calculation or conscious reference to a norm and mutually adjusted in the absence of any direct interaction or, *a fortiori*, explicit co-ordination. (Bourdieu, 1990: 58-59)

A newcomer in a group (who is usually held responsible for their own integration, and must become like other group members, 'talk the talk and walk the walk'), as Bourdieu describes here, will have a hard time understanding conversations or discussions. Disturbing the harmony by asking questions is then anxiety-provoking; the newcomer risks embarrassment, using the wrong words, being perceived as ignorant. For an *unwanted* newcomer, the language barrier may prove virtually impenetrable. In this sense, language can be taken up as a power 'tool' that can be highly effective at both enabling or restraining people. As Bourdieu puts it:

> [L]*inguistic relations are always relations of symbolic power* through which relations of force between the speakers and their respective groups are actualized in a transfigured form. (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 142)

One is always part of 'the game'[11] (Elias, 1978), even as an 'outsider';[12] but I would suggest that we cannot be successful 'players' without understanding the rules (vocabulary) and getting the clues (meaning). Bourdieu additionally points to the importance of language to be spoken *à propos*, referring to the Sophists:

> [L]earning a language is to learn the appropriate moment, *kairos*, for saying the appropriate thing. (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 142)

As I understand it, this sense of timing is extremely difficult to achieve in a foreign environment, as it requires far more than a competent grasp of the language: we must also understand the cultural background, in order to be able to judge what is appropriate.

Pressure on the newcomer to integrate 'fully', together with their own self-censorship under pressure of feeling incompetent or unworthy, might maintain harmony within the group but miss an opportunity to learn or be inspired by the experiences that newcomers bring from other groups and insights they may have to offer, which in some cases are the very reasons for hiring someone.

Orwell illustrates the power of (the meaning of) language, as we know it, in the appendix to his book *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1987); he explains how its essence is taken away in the replacement of 'Oldspeak' (traditional English) with 'Newspeak' (a fictional language that he presents as current idiom in the novel). By abolishing words, purging words from secondary meanings and unwanted associations, strongly reducing irregular inflections, constructing ideological compound words, extensive use of abbreviations (deriving their ideological 'colour' from structure rather than meaning), providing a minimal range of words, spoken monotonously in staccato and

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[11] Explored in Project 2.

[12] The concepts of the outsider and the establishment are explored under *Never outside*.

as much as possible independent of consciousness, thus disabling reasoned arguments (as words are not available), an attempt is made to create a vocabulary that makes any 'other' mode of thought impossible and severs every link with the past.

Orwell sets the date to accomplish this as 66 years after the start of the 'project', in 2050 – emphasising that it will need generations to realise the goal of achieving a rigid, unambiguous, ideologically laden language. In a sense, he makes clear to the reader how powerful language is by describing the stripping of it, and showing how personally and (historically) multi-interpretive it is.

Perhaps a contemporary sign of what happens when language is oversimplified, while people are still concerned with getting the message across, making it recognisable, is the use of emoticons in digital messages – an attempt to literally *show* the meaning of the brief and potentially ambiguous instant messages.

People may consciously use jargon or excessive abbreviations to impress or exclude others, stand out of a crowd, or strengthen group coherence and recognition (among each other, or when under perceived threaten from 'outsiders'); but it is also quite possible that they are not even aware of it, because jargon has been ingrained (in the 'Orwellian way') – one simply does not notice using it anymore.

Scott adds complicating factors to oral communication; he refers to the relation with time (as Orwell to history), place and audience, making every enactment unique (1990: 161). Scott describes written conversation as, strictly speaking, 'more effectively anonymous than spoken communication'; but 'once the text is out of the author's hands, control over its use and dissemination is lost' (ibid.).

It can be useful for managers and leaders to be aware of the complexities of both oral and written communication. As long as we have not reached Orwell's '2050 situation' (and one hopes that even then, some people may have perfected Scott's 'arts of resistance'), all written and oral messages and instructions remain multi-interpretable and their impact will be highly dependent on (personal) circumstances, power relations, time and place.

Returning to my situation, the strong need I felt to be part of the conversation (to belong, to recognise and be recognised), was probably intensified by my lack of a

social network outside the workplace; therefore any remarks about my work qualifying merely as window dressing, and the probability of it being shelved, struck me harder by making me feel personally unimportant.

In a vulnerable situation, like the Swiss HR lunch, certain words or remarks gain strength, as one is more receptive, more vulnerable. It may be helpful for all organisational group members to take account of the situation of those they communicate with, rather than assuming – for example – that the organisation's values are interpreted similarly. A shared awareness that any given 'clear' message may be subject to another interpretation a few days later, when the situation changes or 'facts' have turned out to be less convincing, may lead to a more flexible attitude towards people's (unexpected) responses.

In every new group we enter, we encounter different, preferred ways of communicating and ways of addressing people in higher and lower positions in the hierarchy. Developing an understanding of how the 'etiquette' has been established, by paying close attention to how people interact, how they negotiate power relations, and attempting to relate this to the group's cultural background (e.g., are subordinates in general submissive, and leaders directive?), may be helpful in dealing with the way this influences behaviour, and can also be of value when seeking to respectfully discuss – from a 'foreign' perspective – any issues that the group's behaviour presents to the newcomer.

The 'closed' group

My *perceived* inability to change the situation was frustrating; it felt like scratching the surface. I knew that learning Thai quickly was not an option: even if I had somehow mastered this complicated language, the language alone would not have been enough to communicate fully.

In familiar surroundings, the 'need' to be included and recognised would have been less overwhelming; within my own social network, I would have found it easier to walk away from a group I could not find my way into or relate to. The signs of affection that were shown by some Thai colleagues were heart-warming, but not enough; judging by the palpable anxiety I experienced, my longing to be part of the group was more than just a professional need.

I could not help wondering if Robert's status (as a senior male with a PhD) enabled him to communicate better; I felt he was more a part of the group than myself. This was disproved later, when I learned how much effort he had put into establishing contact and obtaining feedback on his work, and how on his return to the US he had also found himself practically 'disconnected'. His Christian background, about which he was very open, perhaps made him more accepting; he seemed to surrender to the circumstances and be philosophical about the outcome – as expressed in his words to me, 'One day they will remember you and all the work you did will be rewarded'. Though no doubt he intended this as a comfort, to me the message was disconcerting: it underlined the fact that I would never be part of the group, which aggravated my need to belong and feel mutual recognition.

For Robert, not being part of the group may have been less distressing because he was married and had an established support network through the church. Churches tend to connect many social groups, often functioning as community centres (Elias, 1994: 52-53); whereas I had only a few, fairly tenuous, contacts with expats. His emphatically positive attitude may have given me the impression, when I started on the project, that I would become part of the group easily. This kind of expectation can often disappoint newcomers to organisations, as during the hiring procedure people usually paint a somewhat rosy picture of the 'warm' or 'open' group culture in their organisation – not only to convince the applicant, but perhaps also to reassure themselves, show loyalty to other group members, or avoid losing face.

The fact that we had no idea who was doing what, but kept discovering differing intentions and hidden agendas along the way – like the fact that there were 'others' working on this project ('competition', as Jan once mentioned casually) – increased my sense of exclusion. How 'real' was my part in the project? Was it valued? Was *I* valued? Percy's message[13] about never finishing the project, did not

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[13] Quoted earlier, under *Left behind*.

help; I began to feel disillusioned about ever being able to deliver a useful 'finished product'.

The social construct of work is described strongly by Arendt: 'A being labouring in complete solitude would not be human but an *animal laborans* in the words' most literal significance' (1998: 22). This may be a somewhat extreme way to emphasise the social aspect of working; but I do recognise that the work I was doing lost a sense of importance, because we were unable to share the experience or develop it further collectively.

As mentioned, the need to be included at work is likely to be more pressing for those lacking a strong social network outside the workplace – and can even inhibit the development of such external support, given that social status can be derived from being successful at work, implying interpersonal competencies. When people ask why I continued working on the Thai project, I now believe that I was driven to some extent by the possibility of finding my way socially through work relationships. It made me 'accept' the status quo; at least, I tried to live with it, perhaps for longer than was good for me.

People who (seem to) cooperate or even collude with management may be motivated by something far more personal than the desire to achieve agreed team goals. In motivating staff, it is helpful to understand individual intentions – though discerning these may turn out to be difficult; for, as I learned myself, at the time we ourselves are not always aware of what drives us. It is only through reflecting deeply on the situation I went through that I have gained a more nuanced understanding of what was going on for me in Thailand. Conversing, reflecting and being reflexive are crucial in making sense of what it is we are doing together.

TRYING TO RESIGN

Over time, I felt increasingly isolated; the uncertainty and my frustration of being unable to make any progress with the project reached a level I could no longer sustain. It became more and more difficult to arrange any time with Jan to share my concerns. I gave up trying what I regarded more suitable, a personal conversation

(showing respect the Thai way), instead I wrote Jan an E-mail conveying my decision and reasons to resign as per the first of September.

> *July 31*: After sending Jan my resignation mail, I am anxious when going to the office, but expect nothing, since he might not have had time to read it. When I come back from the coffee parlour, we bump into each other as he came around to meet me. We have a brief chat. I try to explain it has been increasingly difficult to manage without anyone to talk to and not being involved; he says he understands. I emphasise that I do not blame anyone, but that it is just extremely complicated trying to make sense of what is going on and feeling excluded. Adding someone to the team who speaks English, as he suggests, is not going to be enough, I reply; we need cooperation on a larger scale. He is disappointed, but understands that the current situation is difficult for me – especially now, with everyone 'running around' [organising the August symposium]. When parting, I ask him to inform Patrick personally of my decision, for I think that would be the suitable hierarchical route; he says he will.
>
> *August 20*: Before a meeting we both attend, I ask Jan if he has informed Patrick of my leaving; he says he will try to do that this afternoon.
>
> *August 21*: Jan is not approachable, smells like coffee and cigarettes and looks exhausted; I dare not ask him if he informed Patrick.
>
> *August 22*: If I can get hold of Jan, I will suggest (if he has not informed Patrick yet) to send Patrick the same e-mail I sent him a few weeks ago. This situation is affecting me heavily; I do not understand why I cannot let it go.
>
> *August 24*: I do not get to see Jan or Patrick, and again nothing in the mail, no response at all. I find it very difficult, but try not to worry. I postpone my message to Patrick every time, but I believe I cannot wait much longer.
>
> *August 27*: Patrick is in, Jan joins him later. I get to ask him if he has talked to Patrick. He says he did, 'more or less' – I do not know what this means exactly.

Uncertainty

Even resigning turned out to be difficult. The feeling of relief I was longing for – I see now as a fulfilment of my need for recognition of my difficult situation, and consequently of me – did not come; instead, my anxiousness increased. Having made what felt like a significant decision, and having to wait for weeks not knowing what

impact it might have on Patrick, was excruciating. Perhaps my taking the initiative in bringing up the subject of my resignation, by making such a distinct gesture, was what intensified the anxiety, as the response to such a gesture could turn out to be severe. Patrick could be angry, disappointed, embarrassed, insulted – or, worse still, a combination of these. I could not recognise Patrick's position in the situation, making it impossible to predict his response.

This uncertainty, resulting from a lack of mutual recognition, of 'seeing' and 'being seen' of which I had at the time not fully understood the social construct, involving *all of us*, made the situation almost unbearable. Jan may have felt the same – perhaps fear of potential repercussions if the project, or I, was not successful could have discouraged him from informing his manager; and the fact that I clearly did not appreciate this may equally have provoked anxiety.

Jackall states that the ambiguity of not knowing where one stands in an organisation 'not only reflects the ambiguity of the judgements that determine one's organisational fate, but also the tangled motivations, self-perceptions, and projection of images of those who make the judgements'(2010: 71). My 'fate' was as such connected to, and impacting (mutual) recognition of, the people in my group.

In exploring uncertainty, I want to start with Arendt:

> [W]hat was lost … was not the capacity for truth or reality or faith nor the concomitant inevitable acceptance of the testimony of the senses and of reason, but the certainty that formerly went with it. (Arendt, 1998: 277)

The role of churches as providers of trust (and thus certainty) declined in the modern age as the scientific view came to predominate: 'Theory became hypothesis, and the success of the hypothesis became truth' (ibid: 278); instead, we started to believe in what is understandable, controllable, 'turning away from truth to truthfulness and from reality to reliability' (279).

Companies became life-long providers of (financial) security, as people would work in the same place from their starting day up to their guaranteed pension. From the 1970s onwards, this started to change as people were encouraged to broaden their horizons and change jobs, enhance their professional competencies; the certainty and

security of steady careers gradually decreased, to be overtaken by the promise of personal and financial growth, thanks to ongoing training and development programmes and the expansion of stock market trading.

The latest financial crash and ensuing crises undermined much of the trust that had built up in development courses and financial experts (taking the 'science' approach). The level of uncertainty in work environments has increased as the market is highly unstable, investments are diminishing, budgets are frozen or cut back, and (particularly senior) experts are made redundant in large numbers. 'Full-blown' uncertainty is back! In fact, past perceptions of control were merely an illusion, encouraging people to trust and support economic growth by investing.

As Miller and Rose write,

> the dream of governing [controlling] in-depth and detail is as strong as ever: no doubt this dream will persist along with […] the perpetually and intrinsically failing nature of such strategies for governing each and all. (Miller and Rose, 2012: 217)

Having had direct experience of the devastating impact of anxiety caused by uncertainty – sleepless nights, feeling restless and nervous, an inability to concentrate or be productive – has deepened my appreciation of any efforts to control uncertainty in order to enable people to work. On the other hand, I understand that uncertainty can never be completely 'under control'. The constant changes we go through as we struggle through professional life, negotiating intentions and power relations, will always be uncertain. Mowles also acknowledges a prerequisite for novelty and innovation, stating 'that the future is radically uncertain; that novelty arises in self-organising, local interaction and the exploration of difference, even conflict' (2011: 240).

We have to deal with the paradox of predictability/unpredictability existing at the same time, dynamically connected. Moreover, any determined effort to secure predictable outcomes – even if this were possible – may lead to a sense of losing

freedom, which people may perceive as an undesirable facet of processes that paradoxically enable and constrain us at the same time.[14]

In a 2012 paper, Rose takes our failure to govern, control, further by drawing attention to uncertainty, uncontrollability, as an inevitable aspect of the human experience, as change can never entirely be imposed but must evolve organically:

> I do not think that we will come to regard humans, or other living organisms, as mere machines, open to our fantasies of total control. Vitalism will remain as a constant reminder of the self-organising, dynamic, self-regulating complexity of living systems – the fact that, unlike machines, they exist and develop in time and space – and of the inseparability of organism and milieu in life in the real world. (Rose, 2012: 16)

Rose goes on to make a stand for social and human sciences to acquire an understanding of

> operative philosophies of biology and biomedicine; to explore the 'philosophies of life' which they embody and the potential forms of life to which they may be linked', in order to use our insights to address inequities on a local, national and global level. (ibid.)

In this light, we could attempt to aim not for controlling or managing uncertainty, but enhancing our awareness, paying closer attention, acknowledging and *recognising* uncertainty and finding ways to work with it, rather than suppressing or concealing it. In fact, that is what we are doing already; but we tend to communicate about our ways of dealing with uncertainty as though our methods provide fitting, final, solutions, in our attempts to avoid holding the paradox of 'boundaries that contain' anxiety within groups (Smith and Berg, 1997: 106), finding ways to work with these coalescing and conflicting group and individual boundaries that both restrain and enable at the same time, are regarded conceivably advantageous 'for boundlessness

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[14] It is beyond the scope of this narrative to explore the theme of freedom more fully here.

has its own set of dynamics that have to be restrained in some way or the other, and each structural configuration will bring with it a shadowy coattail' (ibid.). It may be helpful to bear in mind that we use these boundaries, methods and techniques to attempt to bring down anxiety to a level that enables us, rather than paralyses us, in order to continue working together, and the fact that these are means rather than ends, calls for a continuous actively involved and reflective attitude.

One way of enabling people to deal with uncertainty is giving the situation meaning. Dewey speaks of 'supplementation' (1910: 126), a process by which we identify the unknown situation as something similar to what we have experienced before. In relating the two situations in this way, all known qualities of the previous experience are transferred onto the current one, allowing general conclusions, and thus making the situation seem more familiar and less threatening.

I experienced this myself at an Open Forum meeting in Switzerland, where a group of around 20 managers, coaches and consultants met to share issues they were dealing with, ideas they wanted to develop, methods they felt could be improved. I took part in a workshop 'Plastic Power Game' developed by a Leadership and Management Coach and Trainer;

> Eight people, including the coach are sitting in a circle. Each of us gets a number of round plastic chips, in four different colours and two different sizes. We do not get an explanation of what they are, only the instruction to start exchanging them among each other until we have a 'better' set. Based purely on colour preferences, I go for acquiring reds and greens in even numbers. Meanwhile, a discussion unfolds on what our instructions and these plastic objects mean. Uncomprehending glances are exchanged, but we get on with it. When we are 'finished', the coach tells us the value of each colour and the two people who have acquired the highest value are taken out of the room. Immediately, they are titled 'bosses' by us 'less fortunate' people, who are now instructed to discuss a possible re-division. We go through options: everyone as much variety as possible (same total value), everyone gets one colour (discard value). We just don't know. The 'bosses' enter again and tell us 'the reds' have to leave. As a group, we decide to throw all the chips in a big pile, and start to arrange them again… but how? Do the bosses have hidden agendas? Do the chips represent certain tasks, or people from different departments? Should we opt

for diversity or differentiation? All kinds of reorganisation models are considered. The coach ends the session.

When we discussed this experience, the coach explained that he wanted to demonstrate the search for meaning and emergence of power when we are confronted with a situation that is highly uncertain. People were disappointed about the lack of clarity and rules; they did not appreciate the open-ended character of the game, and wanted to understand its purpose. All we have been trying to do is make sense, add value and meaning; yet this has created an 'us and them' division. Acting into the unknown is anxiety-provoking, even if it is 'just' a game (interestingly, I noticed my disappointment when my colour set turned out to have the lowest value). I enjoyed the discussion afterwards, the sense-making, a lot more than most of the others; perhaps an influence of the DMan.[15]

In dealing with uncertainty, I feel that it is important to *acknowledge* the anxiety people feel, treating them with respect by taking their emotions seriously. I noticed in the game that people tended to quit because they could not see the point; talking about their anxiety as a group relieved some of this tension.

Another way of dealing with uncertainty I experienced during and after an internal meeting with a Swiss university team:

> The professor in charge starts the meeting quite informally, talking almost light-heartedly about the set-up of a new deanery, because of the removal of the previous dean due to conflicts. He goes on to talk about the Canton's financial problems and points out that this catastrophe will affect all public institutions in the area, including this university; budget cuts will be huge. He has no indication as of yet what impact this may have on our section, but does know that a number of chairs will be lost. Nobody responds; I see no visible signs of people being struck by the news, everyone remains quiet. He continues this role of messenger of woe by addressing a case of plagiarism by one of the faculty members, but ends his talk with one 'good news' item.

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[15] Explained in *Recognising the DMan*.

Two more people arrive for the colloquium; the rest of the audience play a game on their phone or chat, waiting for the next presenter to start, as though nothing has happened. On our return to the office, I cannot help asking my colleagues if they knew about these huge issues; they reply that they did not. I expressed my surprise that no one had responded to such shocking news, adding that I'd assumed they were already been aware; they shrug. After a while, one of them says, 'Our department is so small already, it won't affect us'.

I would call this a case of 'ostrich policy': hoping that the problem will cease to exist if it is ignored – the social defence mechanisms of denial and repression (De Klerk, 2012: 3) – as well as playing down the issue with rationalisation and intellectualisation (ibid.), so that it seems less of a threat.

Both are ways to diminish anxiety without taking any action. In Thailand, this may be related to demonstrating respect for decision-makers, reflecting the strict hierarchy in which questioning or taking initiative is 'not done'. In Switzerland, the reason for not dealing with or addressing the matter may be connected with the preference for consensus – as evidenced by the huge number of referenda, making it difficult to take initiative or question an issue outside a formal framework to which one is invited.

Let down

Commenting on an early draft of this project, a DMan learning set member intuited that 'something else is going on' in this section, and referred to Elias' idea about emotivity (K. Solsø -Iversen, personal communication, 19 August 2013). The emotional tension of the situation certainly was high: although I had decided to resign, when I found myself back in the office, confronted with the people I felt I had become somehow attached to, I still felt I owed them something; I did not want to let them down or see them lose face. Perhaps I did not want to be let down myself, or let myself down; as Elias puts it, 'the emotive need for human society, a giving and receiving in affective relationships to other people, is one of the fundamental conditions of human existence' (2001: 201). We had, after all, established some kind of relationship that required some degree of mutual affirmation and recognition.

Going back to the Plastic Power Game, despite our lack of understanding and control, we tried to make something out of it; we committed ourselves to playing. Our pride might have been dented if we bailed out; we might lose face if we acknowledged we could not 'pull it off', even though no one had any idea what was going on.

As Elias expresses it, I come from a country where 'the state level of integration has … taken over the role of the primary survival unit' (ibid: 205). In Western society, it is important to be an individual, strong enough to care for and give direction to their own life; in contrast with the Thai situation where the family still is this 'primary survival unit', providing 'the natural human need for an emotive affirmation of one's own person by others and others' need of affirmation by oneself' (ibid: 201). I believe the hierarchical structure in Thai organisations has some similarities to this patriarchal family structure.

I did not belong to this 'organisational family', but did feel the need to fit in; and looking back, I understand that my colleagues may have felt the same. They did attempt to support me through difficulties that arose, but not in the overt way I was accustomed to and craved: they were equally concerned not to embarrass someone else by confirming that fact I was not supported. This made their gestures so subtle that I hardly noticed them; and in a real crisis they would withdraw, perhaps feeling ashamed about the situation and being unable to help me in any way. It was probably more a matter of not being able to include me, rather not wanting to do so.

In the Plastic Power Game, I felt a change of perception as soon as the value of the chips had been disclosed: we seemed to rank each other according to the outcome, with comforting words said to those who had accumulated the least value. As soon as we turned the small plastic objects into 'humans', negotiations on how to 'treat' them were more carefully phrased and considered.

We need to belong, and long for this affirmation (recognition); thus most of us will aim to treat others as we would wish to be treated themselves, taking into consideration the power relations of our social (professional) environment.

RESIGNING FORMALLY

August 27: In the evening I meet Jeff [Canadian friend]. He agrees that writing a letter to Patrick is best, but stresses I should hand it to him personally. In it I should say that I became aware of Patrick not knowing about my leave, and explain why; all in a positive, non-accusatory manner. He adds that this is the professional way to do it – directly to the man in power, not wait on an 'unwilling, unworthy lesser God'. I write the letter on my return home.

August 28: I walk to the office earlier than usual, the digital version of the resignation letter burning in my laptop; the door is still locked. Patrick comes up the stairs with a smile, and tries to ask me something. I do not understand what he is saying. I feel very uncomfortable, knowing I will be handing him the letter soon, but also relieved he is there to receive it. As soon as we get into the office, I read the letter over again, print it, sign it and copy it. I hand him the original, give Bernice a copy and keep two copies. Patrick gives his to Peggy [clerk], who tries to translate it. When Jan comes in, they sit at the table together to make sense of what I have written. My heart is beating in my throat. Jan walks towards me and asks about the payment remark in the letter; he says I should not worry about it. He thinks for a moment, then says, 'Oh, I just thought – did I pay you for last month, or not?' He insists that I'll get my money. I stress that the money is the least of my concerns; all other matters are much more important.

August 29: When I come upstairs, the office is dark and locked. I go down to the international office and learn that there was a big party last night and everyone will be in much later. Two ladies ask me if I was not aware of this. Later that morning, apart from each other, both tell me they find it 'not done' to exclude me like this. They even start asking me how I am doing in the office, and share their concern about my situation. I sense that the news of me handing in my resignation is already getting around, but still it feels good that they make this gesture.

Never outside

Despite the prolonged stress of waiting for the planned meeting, I found myself somewhat less anxious now that it was 'out in the open' that I would leave. Although

controversial, my acting on the situation had somehow included me to some extent: they were now talking about, but also *with*, me, and generally seemed more aware of me, recognised me.

Reading the logbook now, I see that I was always part of the group – included by the gestures people made and things that were said. We are always interdependent: any situation, including my own in Thailand, involves complex responsive processes of relating (Stacey, 2011). However I felt at the time, I could never really be a complete 'outsider' in the spatial sense of the word, even though there was little noticeable interaction, I was always inevitably part of the social processes, forming these and being formed by these, as were my colleagues.

Exclusion is a powerful social process in which we were all immersed. Perhaps the literally spatial character of the word 'outsider' can be misleading, suggesting actual location on the outside of something tangible. Elias seems to have been aware of the problems of spatial metaphors, as he tends to use the term 'established' instead of 'insiders' (1994). Nevertheless, he still uses the word 'outsiders' to designate groups that are excluded, perhaps to emphasise the opposite status of their situation. I suggest the usage of, *disestablished* (excluded, removed), *un-* or *non-established* (a more static notion of outsider), or the temporal *pre-established* (emphasising that one is planning/starting/trying to establish oneself) instead of 'outsider' as these may offer more suitable alternatives, which additionally offer a variety of subtle distinctions in contrast with the notions of 'outsider' or 'excluded'.

A situation to illustrate these social processes comes to mind: years ago, I was working in a small company – not doing well financially, which I did not know about – where two male colleagues were called into the boss's office regularly to be scolded and berated so loudly that we could hear the shouts throughout the office. Later, they would emerge like beaten dogs, humiliated, sometimes even crying. I told the boss that this had a huge impact on the atmosphere and my personal well-being; but he replied that he was not scolding me personally, so it could not be affecting me.

Yet of course it was affecting me and other colleagues! People were anxious about being next; the air was thick with stress, and we did not know how to talk to or comfort the colleagues involved. Even outside the office, other staff heard about the

situation and tension spread. Several months later, people had to be made redundant, including myself; and I clearly recall being more relieved not to have to work there any more than I was anxious about losing my job.

Griffin describes the process of inclusion and exclusion as follows:

> Communicative action, patterned as official ideological themes, sustains current power relations and leadership position, thereby giving rise to the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, which are associated with the evolution of unofficial ideologies that challenge official ideology and so current power relations and leadership positions. (Griffin, 2002: 169)

As such, inclusion and exclusion are negotiated in the same way as power relations, and are closely related to these in the sense that increasing inclusion will probably enhance a persons' power. The degree of inclusion/exclusion is then not a static given, but will continuously differ given the specific circumstances and composition of the group and intentions at that moment. It is by no means a black-and-white divide; hence my preference for variations on the term 'established', which may better reflect our perceptions of to what extent (if at all) we are established as a social construct. By contrast, the terms 'included/excluded' suggest a more strict divide, even a line that can be drawn – similar to quantitative research, where the terms are used to define the criteria by which data are either used or discarded.

To me, the 'proof' that I was part of, recognised by, the Thai group was the gesture the two colleagues made; it showed that I was after all talked about, and was on their mind. The fact that my problematic situation was now 'officially' in the open might have given them the opportunity to share their concerns; while the power relations and 'official ideology' may not have allowed them to include me more. Perhaps they could not address the situation without the risk of being disrespectful or embarrassing others or themselves, as touched upon in the previous section.

Now that I had breached the intangible wall around me and the acknowledged leaders were openly addressing my situation, my colleagues could reach out; and telling myself that they had until now been constrained by the strong hierarchical structure of the workplace provided me with an explanation of their behaviour that was less personally hurtful.

It is a common response to point to 'management', 'the government', 'them', when a situation affects an individual strongly, and that person's own role in the situation might be too painful to admit. However, I have come to see that there is no reified 'them'; all parties are involved and interrelated, and we all take personal responsibility for our actions. Although we cannot always effect significant change, we do have some influence in the choices that we make.

In Thailand, I could have tried different ways of reaching out, or put more effort into learning the language, just as my colleagues could have tried to find ways of involving me.

UNEXPECTED TURN

August 30: Bernice tells me the meeting will be an hour late. I cannot help but think. 'Here we go again'.

Jan calls me to the table at exactly(!) 2:30pm; I am anxious. He starts to talk in Thai to Saul, who explains he is getting an update of my position and the project (which I expected him to know already), but interrupts himself with remarks on the project and questions about the DMan. Some time later, Jan asks me for my copy of the resignation letter and hands it to Saul – who apparently had not seen that either.

Patrick, who is sitting more or less behind me, joins in the Thai discussion from time to time. Suddenly he asks in English how the situation can be changed for me to reconsider my resignation. Saul remarks, with a big smile, that this conversation *should* have taken place some months ago. I am starting to wonder whether Jan did not convey any of the problems I faced to anyone. Patrick suggests making people available a day per week, or managers meeting once a week. I tell him my resignation letter stated only the 'Thai side' of my concerns; the DMan costs also call for action and support my decision of returning to Europe.

They go on asking how much time I would be able to work on the project: three months? I hesitate; I was not expecting this... They start asking how many times I need to be in Europe, what the travel costs are, how much tuition I pay. Saul starts writing down huge numbers in Thai Baht, and I say to Jan: 'This is *my* problem, not theirs'.

Patrick starts talking again, Saul translates; Patrick has an influential contact at the Ministry of Education in Bangkok and they might be able to get them to fund

my research – I must join them in a meeting in Bangkok on 13 September so that we can all discuss the matter. I am speechless; this is going in a totally unexpected direction.

Patrick suggests we have another meeting on Tuesday. He has a big smile on his face as he asks if I am OK. I find myself stammering an uncertain 'Yes' [I have a planned Skype call with the DMan learning set].

Back in the office, I check my e-mail and experience mixed emotions: the way I have perceived the situation seems to have been completely off track. If Jan has indeed kept all the problems to himself, and Patrick assumed everything was going just fine and regards what I have been doing as important, then this is opposite of the impression I was getting – of just being there for window-dressing purposes. If that is the case, then I have really been picking up wrong signals. All this time I have been frustrated and annoyed and trying to do things the Thai way, not pushing, not asking too much, being patient (on the outside); and now that I have had enough and put my foot down, things suddenly appear to be completely different. I think I should have confronted them much earlier – or maybe not; maybe this was the right time. This culture is deceiving me over and over again…

September 3: Robert is on Skype and I share what has happened. He writes: 'This is Thailand! Now you are beginning to get the hang of it. It is fascinating if you can stand it and it will take you a lifetime of wonder, joy and deep frustration to even get only a sliver of it. I loved it and would still be there… LIFE-LONG LEARNING = Thai!'

Seeking acknowledgement

I was thrown back and forth between trying to hang on, starting to grasp how things worked, followed by deep frustration when my perceptions yet again turned out to be mistaken. I doubted my ability to continue dealing with this. My deeply ingrained need to finish whatever I have started (the Protestant work ethic[16]) may have played a part in this, as well as notions of pride and failure in which my sense of satisfaction depended on acknowledgement based on mutually recognised 'normative entities'

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[16] Described in Project 1.

(valid claims, good reasons, genuine values) (van den Brink and Owen, 2007: 36). In retrospect, I now believe I was too much focused on 'acknowledg[ement of] some explicit or implicit claim concerning … duties or responsibilities as valid' (ibid.). The fact that my work ('product value'), apparently went unacknowledged may have affected my pride:

> [T]here must be recognition for what he or she *does*. This is the general sphere of recognition Honneth calls esteem. (ibid: 196)

At the time, I could not see the situation as one in which 'others' did not recognise[17] my work in 'their frame of reference' – a failure of personal recognition (a social construct), rather than a value judgement. In turn, I may have been afraid to attempt to take full part in the situation, being so overwhelmed by its complexity that simply focusing on the project work may have seemed easier.

Dewey points to the identification of pride with isolation, because of its potential to exclude (1929: 245). He considers the pride 'of those who feel themselves learned in the express and explicit will of God' the most exclusive, because

> [Pride] generates an exclusive institutionalism and feeds and sustains itself through its connection with an institution claiming spiritual monopoly, feel themselves to be special organs of the divine, and in its name claim authority over others. (ibid.)

At first, I did not understand my pride as Dewey describes it here, but more in the sense of losing face if the project were to fail or if I left it unfinished. However, the fact that I had been hired as an 'expert on the matter' may have played a (subconscious) role in creating a dynamic similar to that described by Dewey. It may also have made my Thai colleagues wary of this imported 'colonial authority', to which they may have been opposed.[18] Moreover, protecting my self-esteem by

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[17] Explored in the next section.
[18] Project 2, *Thai pride.*

focusing primarily on work results may have given the impression that I valued my own achievements more highly than anything we might have done together as a team.

As I have shown earlier, work is produced jointly; thus failure would affect not only myself, but also the people I worked with. Jackall describes this succinctly by quoting a manager commenting on their behaviour in relation to a poorly performing colleague:

> Our motives are purely selfish. We're not concerned about old Joe failing, but how his failure will reflect on us. […] What we do essentially when somebody fails is to put him in a little boat, tow him out to sea, and cut the rope. And we never think about him again. (Jackall, 2010: 72)

Having explored interrelatedness and interdependence thoroughly, I wonder whether any manager (apart from the exceptional ruthless individual) can really 'cut loose' without it affecting them personally in any way. I plan to look into this in Project 4.

MINISTERIAL MEETING

> *September 13*: We arrive at the Ministry of Education in Bangkok. Two men and one woman are the main discussion partners; three women appear to be assistants (all represent the National Education Council [NEC]). A photographer is present at the start and takes a lot of pictures; I am surprised to notice that I am his 'prime target'.
>
> During the meeting (in Thai) discussions among the three main NEC people, in various compositions, take place continuously; and as usual, one after the other is on the phone. Suddenly, I am to present. I ask Saul what has been said so far, to prevent saying something twice. He translates a bit, not of much use, and I take the group quickly through the presentation – apparently not fast enough for the chair, for he asks about the pilot. I change to my PDFs to explain, but do not get a chance to start talking: Jan immediately takes over. After the meeting is closed, the chair indicates that he would like to receive my presentation and PDFs to be used before a committee, adding that they will be setting up a steering group.

We return to the other room for lunch and Patrick comes over to shake my hand and thanks me extensively, with a big smile; I am pleasantly surprised.

Recognition

The enthusiastic manner in which Patrick thanked me made me feel that my presentation had been highly appreciated. I concluded that it had been successful; at last, I felt my work (and myself) being recognised. Pride played a large part in this, of course; but I have come to realise that what really mattered was the newfound sense of finally being a part of the team. Patrick's enthusiasm made me feel as though the hardship I had endured had not been in vain.

When afterwards the silence and uncertainty returned, I tried to make sense of my impressions. There were signs that what I was doing was appreciated and of importance; yet I still could not quite grasp *why* it was appreciated – what intentions Jan and Patrick, and seemingly many others, had with the 'fruits of my labour'; how it fitted into their 'context'.

The need to be *recognised* for what we do appears to be crucial, even more than being appreciated. Moreover, seeing our work used in a way that corresponds with the intentions we had for it, or perhaps seeing an unexpected but worthwhile outcome, is also important. I would suggest that the activity of work, or what arises from it, must serve a common purpose – have meaning in the context of the group – for a person to feel truly recognised for it, as an individual forming and being formed by the group.

People can feel recognised or seek recognition in many ways: symbolic recognition, recognition of origin, of language (dialect), physical appearance, (personal) opinion, and so on. Simpson (1997) refers to the recognition of people's voice, of being heard (in this case, in relation to rebuilding the 'social fabric' in the economic reconstruction of Bosnia).

In light of my findings in the previous section, my perception of recognition has altered in the sense that I was thinking of recognition as having to do with *myself* or *my work* being recognised, and more or less disregarding the social process of recognition; I now realise that I can never 'be recognised' on my own. Rather than draw distinctions between different categories of recognition, it would be useful here

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to make sense of what recognition means, in general – how it comes about, how it is established.

Making sense of Mead's explanations in *Mind, Self, & Society* (1992), I have come to see recognition as emergent in social processes of communication. Mead talks about symbols we use that call out responses in us; when the aroused responses in each of us are the same, we can anticipate some degree of shared mental content, through which a self can be shaped (ibid: 149), which I would say is what recognition is. He goes on to describe how the Self is fully developed by taking in

> individual attitudes of others into the organized social or group attitudes, and by thus
> becoming an individual reflection of the general systematic pattern of social or
> group behaviour in which it and the others are involved… (ibid: 158)

This points to two things: firstly, recognition is not *in* me, or *about* me, but is part of the systematic patterning of the behaviour of the group we are part of; thus we are recognised and recognise people differently in various groups (cultures). Secondly, it tightly connects establishment to recognition, bringing me back to my earlier statement that full establishment to me seems impossible, as the group and its members are evolving and are also influenced by other groups they are involved with continuously. I believe that Mead stresses something similar:

> Of course we are not only what is common to all: each one of the selves is different
> from everyone else; but there has to be such a common structure as I have sketched
> in order that we may be members of a community at all. (ibid: 163)

Full recognition, full establishment may thus be unattainable and even unnecessary; what is more important is to be recognised for different aspects. In this way, we become established in various ways, in the variety of groups we are involved in; we take 'generalised-others' (154) with us from one group to another, so each of us has something unique to offer to every group we join. Honneth points to this 'appraisal of particular personal features' as a means of individualising recognition:

> The more conceptions of ethical goals are open to different values and the more their
> hierarchical arrangement gives way to horizontal competition, the more clearly

social esteem will be able to take on an individualizing character and generate symmetrical relationships. (Honneth, 1995: 122)

As a manager, valuing the unique contribution that each individual can make, based on their own experience and understanding, can enhance people's sense of being recognised and encourage them to realise their full potential. As Honneth expresses it,

the experience of being socially esteemed is accompanied by a felt confidence that one's achievements or abilities will be recognized as 'valuable' by other members of society. (ibid: 128)

In other words, managers can emphasise trust in people's abilities and convey appreciation of the work produced in the context of their group.

This all helps to explain why I felt it important to be recognised for my work, for the 'fruits of my labour', as well. Even if we work alone, what we produce does not develop through solitary activity: our work is always influenced by former working experiences with others, as well as by current work configurations, comments we get and shared insights. Our work is produced in the context of the sense of 'generalised others' we have formed of the group we work with, the customers we work for, the company we work in. Thus, if we feel that our work is not recognised, it implies that we ourselves have somehow failed to recognise the patterns of behaviour, have been unable to weave these into our product – resulting in a mutual lack of recognition, as we do not recognise the 'otherness' and 'sameness' of people we work with in their responses to our work.

In conclusion, I return to Honneth:

[O]nly to the degree to which I actively care about the development of the other's characteristics (which seem foreign to me) can our shared goals be realized. (ibid: 129)

RECOGNISING THE DMAN

Any narrative attempt to specify what was 'really' going on in Thailand would clearly be highly speculative; but it is nevertheless interesting to look at the complexity of the Thai workplace and the implications this had on people working there. Talking about one group in this context – as with any professional environment – does not do justice to its complex interrelatedness. Although these people do make up the R&D department, the larger group consists of diverse smaller official (and unofficial) groups with specific functions, which are – to a greater or lesser extent – initiated through the intentions and goals of groups higher in the hierarchy, as well as reflecting the concerns of 'external' stakeholders.

The exploration and reading involved in developing this project has led me to the following chain of thoughts.

First, the concept of groups: Bourdieu points to the fact that we speak more easily in terms of groups (realists classes) or individuals (who can be 'touched with the finger' (Bourdieu and Wacquant1992: 228)) than in terms of relations (ibid.), as I was on the verge of doing right now.[19] In his attempt to break away from the substantialist mode of thinking (ibid: 229), he proposes that it would make more sense to use the term 'field of power' rather than talking of a dominant class. Choosing 'fields of power' makes matters more complicated – Bourdieu goes on to sketch the difficulties inherent in researching an institution by focusing on its' relations:

> [T]he truth of this institution resides in the network of relations of opposition and composition which link it to the whole set of [similar] institutions … and which link this network itself to the total set of positions in the field of power which these schools grant access to. If it is indeed true that the real is relational, then it is quite possible that I know nothing of an institution about which I know everything, since it is nothing outside of its relations to the whole. (ibid: 232)

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[19] Writing the second iteration of this project.

If, on top of these complex interrelated fields of power, I have to take into account the complexity of communicating, together with the (at least) 'four varieties of political discourse among subordinate groups'(Scott, 1990: 18), which vary 'according to how closely they conform to the official discourse and according to who comprises their audience' (ibid.), while also being aware of the influence of previous experiences (Dewey), assumptions and prejudices I have, then it is quite possible that I will find myself paralysed by this overwhelming understanding of complexity. However, this is not the case!

I sense that right now, writing this project, this very section,[20] I am forming an understanding of Bourdieu's *Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (1992)– why Scott opens up the world of 'hidden transcripts' (1990: 4), Geertz provides insights into making sense of cultures (1973), Rose stresses the inseparability of organism and milieu in the real world (2012), Mowles asks us to 'rethink management' (2011), and so on; what I am doing right now is being reflexive.

I have reflected on what was going on in Thailand, and how I experienced my situation at the time. I tried not to take for granted my first impressions, then started thinking about and making sense of my own thinking (reflexivity). I began reading Bourdieu, went back to Scott, read through some of the other books piled up on my desk; I started feeling anxious about the extreme complexity of what I read, and almost gave up… Then it dawned on me: *this* is what the DMan is about, why Shaw and Stacey draw on Mead in pointing to the importance of being in the 'living present' (2006).

What all these authors are trying to convey is that we should try not to either deny or attempt to fully understand the complexity of our everyday (professional) life; instead, we should simply be aware of it, appreciate it, try not to take things at face value. It is more valuable to closely examine what goes on in our present work environment – knowing there is more to it than meets the eye, and being aware that everything and everybody is interrelated.

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[20] Originally part of the section *Unexpected turn.*

I am starting to understand how this makes me more sensitive to details, to what might be going on for the people in my workplace; and although I cannot foresee anything, or fully grasp what is 'really' going on (which is inevitably subjective), I do open my mind – or rather, my self – to other possibilities and, more importantly, to the people I work with.

The DMan does not claim to reveal management methods that promise success or solutions; instead, we are gradually reaching a deeper understanding and appreciation of what it is we are doing working together. Coming back to Rose,

> The more we know, the more we realise how little we know. Each dream of control over body or mind is soon met with downsides, side effects and disappointments. (Rose, 2012: 4)

I believe Rose is underlining the futility of trying to control our lives; in an organisational world, this means it is not helpful to believe that we can control, measure and predict the outcomes of our strategies, the impact of our values, visions and missions. This by no means implies that these tools have no use and research is pointless; it simply highlights the interesting complexity of how we work with measurements and findings, how we interpret values and visions in our everyday practice, and the importance of noting the discrepancies between our goals and how we take these up, and where our interpretation of these is actually taking us.

I believe it also points to the importance of paying attention to the diversity of opinions, intentions and experience that different people bring to the team; for valuing the unique contribution of the interdependent, interrelated people that form our organisations is potentially more motivating and productive than relying solely on tools, techniques and methods.

Returning to the first paragraph of this section, I would say it was of no use to try and fully understand, map out, all relations of my 'exotic' work environment, even had it been possible to do so. It would have been helpful to concentrate on the people I was involved with directly, and their relations; and by paying attention to their actions, their gestures, trying to *recognise* these people, attempting to grasp their intensions, showing my genuine interest, I would probably have been more

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successful in forming an understanding and building a work relationship. By focusing on acknowledgement for my own work and establishing myself within the team, I heightened my anxiety and obscured what was already there for me.

As for full establishment (which would theoretically only be possible if a person would be a member of just one unchanging group), I acknowledge that this is not possible or necessary, as establishment is tightly connected to ongoing negotiated power relations within continuously evolving groups of people, which – I now understand – are influenced by a multitude of connections to other 'fields of power' as described by Bourdieu. Reading Shaw and Stacey made me realise that by being in the 'living present', I can get a sense of my establishment in the group as our work together unfolds. Paying genuine attention to, making an effort to recognise people I work with, is likely to enhance my establishment; whereas being preoccupied with it only distracts my attention from the present moment and thus diminishes my experience of it.

CONCLUSION PROJECT 3

The unfamiliar workplace situations I experienced in Thailand brought the main topics in this project, present in everyday organisational situations, and their relation to recognition, to the foreground; it seemed to make these issues more visible, and therefore perhaps more 'accessible'.

The powerful impact of my experience, and my need to make sense of it, have enabled me to draw attention to the significant influence of reciprocal recognition among individuals and groups. These are crucial issues for managers and leaders in organisations to consider; for it is groups of people in local interactions, complex responsive processes of relating, that actually form the organisation, its environment and the work that is jointly produced, while being formed by all of these at the same time; all are part of this complex formation process in which recognition, as I have shown, is a significant factor.

I have developed an understanding of the importance of (reciprocal) recognition for interdependent and interrelated people entering groups and establishing themselves as members; but I recognise that this is equally true of those

leaving and those left behind. Paying attention to the ways people enable and restrain each other at the same time when dealing with their own or a group member's involuntary leave is of importance, as these situations can be threatening to future functioning, collaboration and performance, and thus for the organisation at large. Jointly developing dynamically adaptive ways to establish a stronger mutual understanding of each other's position, intentions and considerations in such situations – in other words, *recognising* each other as interrelated and interdependent partners, in the extremely anxiety-provoking circumstances when people are forced to leave – may help to minimise the negative impact on individuals and organisations alike.

In an earlier iteration of this project I began to relate recognition to identity; but given the complexity and importance of both, and the fact that I expect identity to emerge as a key factor in Project 4 (just as recognition turned out to be in this project), I will pursue its exploration there.

Expected exploration in Project 4

As mentioned, the relation between recognition and identity became evident in Project 3. Being recognised for and recognising oneself in one's work, the organisational groups one is part of and the workplace (environment), has a significant impact on forming our individual sense of identity. Given the importance of work in shaping Self, redundancy can be highly anxiety-provoking, as work is often removed suddenly and unexpectedly, sometimes even for no apparent reason.

My own experience, and having been in close contact with managers dealing with redundancy, enables me to enquire into the issues related to it. In doing so, I aim to add clarity to the articulation of everyday organisational issues that are amplified in situations of redundancy, in the hope of offering further insights that may be valuable for managers working with groups.

Instead of paying attention to the emotional aspects of organisational life, fashionable management trends tend to remain focused on control, predictability and measurability, proposing simplified 'step-by-step' scripts for managers having to deal with anxiety-provoking severance notifications. While having a script to follow

may serve to reduce the manager's anxiety, being treated as a disposable unit can dehumanise the person being made redundant. This lack of respect and recognition can also be unsettling for the colleagues who remain – and could even endanger future collaborations, if the group's sense of trust and their commitment to (corporate) values and norms have been damaged.

Project 4 will enquire into the question: What is the impact on group life of using standardised, simplified methodologies for making people redundant?

Drawing attention to what could be at stake for all involved may be helpful for managers dealing with redundancy, and enhance understanding of group processes in general. Greater sensitivity in recognising delicate situations and their impact on collaboration and performance may contribute to the development of professional practice in order to attenuate the negative repercussions of potentially painful situations.

PROJECT 4

Career coaching – a strategic game for constructing 'Photoshopped' images of self

While grappling with the (much more anxiety-provoking than I had ever imagined) situation of being a job-seeker, perceiving myself as being on the outside trying to get back in, I noticed how I began questioning my abilities, my status, my *self[21]*.

Finding myself immersed in a career coaching process, reading job ads, organisations' visions, missions and value statements on websites in preparation for composing motivational letters, putting together my CV and online profiles in accordance with strict prescriptions – in other words, strategically 'marketing myself' – I experienced a sense of alienation from my self. I started relating this alienation to a rather confident and abstract way of speaking and writing about organisations; what it is that we do in our organisations leading to specific ways of describing what people in organisations (should) look like, something I encountered many times in the process of career coaching. My discomfort with such assumptions seemed to be shared by a significant number of job-seekers who expressed the need to describe what was 'actually' going on for them; we seemed to identify more with a 'down-to-earth', 'real' (less abstract) way of talking about ourselves and/in organisations than we were expected to follow in our career coaching procedures. All of this prompted me to pose the question: In what ways could (procedures around) career coaching processes be impacting our selves?

I have begun to explore this question by writing a narrative about my experience. Making sense of this narrative, reflecting on it, taking a reflexive stance

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[21] I deliberately phrase 'my self' here as two separate words (or else hyphenated), not referring to a fixed identity that resides inside of me, rather a social concept of self, identity, that I explore in this project.

towards my thinking and discussing it in the DMan learning set[22] has highlighted three major areas in relation to career coaching that seemed to impact our selves.

Before inquiring into these three areas, I first draw an outline of my own position within this research – as both a job-seeker in a career coaching process and at the same time a DMan researcher scrutinising this experience; as in the process of sense-making, I came to understand this rather special position to be crucial to this project, as it strongly affects the ways in which I (enable myself and am enabled to) make sense of what I came to see, metaphorically, as the career 'game' (Elias, 1978: 97) (Bourdieu, 2003: 81) in which power plays a major part, notions that I explore throughout this project.

The first area I found to be impacting was the way in which the career coaching processes are set up; a strategic management approach. In the first section, I explore the history of strategic management ideology to develop my understanding of these procedures, go on to inquire into my career coaching experience in this context, and explore in what ways this approach may be impacting.

Strategic management text and talk (as alluded to above), which I have called 'conversational patterns of strategic management ideology', is the second area. I explore what such patterns look like and how they seem to have formed; and delve into the notion of language and/as action to explore the view that 'thinking' and 'speaking' might be seen as acting (into the social) as much as 'doing' – a perspective that may change perception regarding the impact of language use.

In the third section, I bring together these two elements – the strategic management approach, and related conversational patterns – and make sense of how these can impact upon identity formation or, in this context, the strategic construction of 'sellable selves'. I look into this 'marketing of self'; how it is taken up and perceived in and around the social environment we call organisations, in management literature and as complex responsive processes of relating.

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[22] Learning sets gather for several meetings at the DMan residential weekends, where we discuss each other's projects and progress in a small student-peer group supervised by a member of faculty with whom we work over the complete duration of the course.

Based on the findings of this threefold exploration, I have intended to show in what ways people (and their relations) may be affected by (text and talk in) procedures around career coaching. These findings may be helpful in forming an understanding of disturbances and anxieties people experience in these processes, both for job-seekers and for those working in organisations that are going through, or working with, similar procedures.

INTRODUCTION PROJECT 4

Project 3 was, largely, an inquiry into the emergent overarching topic of recognition and its complex relation to the interdependent topics of (personal) space (workplace/environment), exclusion/establishment, communication and uncertainty. By making sense of multifarious circumstances at work in unfamiliar places, I had come to understand people's need for recognition as a paramount factor influencing and impacting upon group life in organisations.

This understanding of the need for recognition, together with the strongly affecting experience of sudden dismissal from the project I had been working on in Thailand – after a long period of uncertainty about its status and my position within it – led me to an inclination to engage with the 'victims': people made redundant. The experience of this severely impacted my sense of self, which struck me as significant when listening to innumerable personal accounts from people around me on how deeply disturbing similar experiences had been for them, and how little attention people in organisations appeared to be paying to this.

My first inquiries from the 'victim' perspective underlined that a lot of attention is paid to the impact of redundancy or job loss – not only on those forced to leave, but also on their managers and colleagues who are 'left behind'; and not only in scholarly articles but in guidelines and trainings in organisations, outplacement trajectories and (professional) blog-posts as well (see for example Clark, Georgellis and Sanfey (2001), Hareli and Tzafrir (2006), Gandolfi (2009), ADOA Career Center (2013), Wahlgren (2001)).

Though I value the insightful exploration of (involuntary) job loss and how people deal with the issues arising from it, I came to understand that my specific

situation might be better suited for a different contribution to organisational studies: an opportunity to explore what I experienced *after* the 'loss and mourning' period. How did I come to see this as a more worthwhile investigation?

In dealing with the issues related to losing my job and being unemployed, it took time, a lot of sense-making, reading and several iterations of this project to regain my voice and to understand that my career coaching experience – a process closely related to processes used in organisations for (career) development of employees through which people are 'groomed' to facilitate their (re-)entry into, or career development in, organisations – was not quite the smooth process that it is often advertised, or thought, to be. I developed a need for understanding what was causing the disturbances and anxiety I was experiencing.

Apart from this, I came to understand that I was not an 'outsider'[23] in the common sense of the word. Somehow, I felt both 'in' and 'out' at the same time, making many efforts to maintain a close connection to organisational life – a position I came to recognise as one that could offer insights that could be meaningful to people both 'outside' and 'within' organisations. [24]

Career coaching has been critiqued, though not widely. In this project I have explored career coaching by means of an auto-ethnographic (Alvesson, 2009) account, starting from my own personal, unique experience. I believe the issues explored in this narrative inquiry (Anderson, 2006) may be recognisable to people in a wider community of management practitioners, and hope that the findings offer new or different insights around processes of career coaching outside and within organisations.

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[23] I will return to the notion of 'outsider'.

[24] Evidently important for me as I am attending a *Professional* Doctor of Management programme in which I am expected to write personal narrations of my experience of *professional* situations, in a compelling manner; the basis of the DMan research method. A narrative I would be able to inquire into and come up with findings of importance to management practice (research).

(UN)RECOGNISABLE

Prologue

Returning from Thailand to Europe (not to my home country the Netherlands, but to live with my new partner in a small town in the French-speaking part of Switzerland), my life felt as though it was turned upside-down. I was co-habiting for the first time in years; I became financially dependent because, for the first time in my adult life, I did not earn an income. I had no social network, did not speak the local language, and the cold greyness of Swiss wintertime seemed to close me off from the world. Although I felt appreciated by my partner, I felt insignificant.

When spring finally awakened, Switzerland began to appear more inviting, but the job market still seemed inaccessible. At a networking event I spoke to a few people; two of them advised me to hire a job coach as, in their opinion, doing things 'the Swiss way' was extremely important and not easy to figure out on your own.

I started defining my 'Professional Project', as my newly hired career coach called it, and at the same time struggled with developing the second project for the DMan. After a great many iterations, both were good enough. Still, something was going on; it felt as though these two projects were not connecting. My changed (changing) perspectives on organisational life did not seem to relate to how I was 'selling' myself in my resume, which was carefully constructed to follow the rules.

Around the same time my partner was confronted with an unforeseen forced early retirement, to be expected within 10 months. This required us to change our relocation plans three times, which in turn affected my job hunt. I 'worked around' the shameful feeling of being unemployed; went out networking, joined forces with a group of (executive) managers who had been made redundant, did voluntary work at a 'dual career network' for expat spouses[25] and took on a research project (with

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[25] The dual career network was set up by a number of large multinational organisations, in order to assist spouses of their expat employees to help integrate into Swiss society and (if applicable) find a job.

excellent networking opportunities) assisting a professor at a local university. I did not, however, find an official job.

After our move from the French to the Swiss German-speaking part of Switzerland, I received an invitation from the dual career network to take part in a panel discussion at an upcoming event; it seemed that I was considered an alumna (member who has found a job). They thought it good for members to listen to our 'inspiring' stories. I responded that I was happy to partake and share some of my experiences, but emphasised that I had not found a job. The organising committee seemed not to mind.

Presentation

The event took place at a large multinational organisation, in a huge room three storeys below ground level. All the seats around 10 large round tables were occupied; people were standing around the walls.

Following the network's formal welcome, an HR officer presented her company, our host. She was American, fast-talking, ending many of her sentences with 'right?' but leaving no room for response. She spoke of her organisation as innovative and collaborative, cherishing values with which, she emphasised, employees dealt in a *unique* manner, as they would consider these in *every* decision taken. She also underlined the importance of diversity – stating that it was scientifically proven to increase an organisation's successfulness; hence theirs! I felt as though I was listening to a recital from a glossy brochure – the mission, vision and value statement of *any* large organisation; her story certainly did not come across as unique.

Following this introduction, members were invited to practise their job interview skills. In two workshop rounds, each table would have a corporate recruiter or a service provider[26] conducting mock interviews with members who had volunteered, while the others could 'listen and learn'. Preparation seemed to be the

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[26] Service providers in this case were independent advisors, career coaches, assisting expat spouses in their integration and/or job search.

keyword, and special importance was attached to having examples of situations ready in which one had dealt with management issues[27] – such as decision-making, planning, conflict management and ethics.

In the second round, a recruiter sat with us. She explained that her organisation had developed a competence-based interview method that was now used in *exactly the same manner* in every country they were located in. It enabled candidates to have their first interview over the phone, by a hiring officer calling from another country. I found this prospect rather unappealing: how could a hiring officer so far removed from the actual workplace form a good understanding of the job circumstances and requirements, and of the people the candidate might have to work with? I also wondered if any method can ever be said to be used in 'exactly the same manner': the DMan had deepened my understanding that people can have very different notions of what a method is, what it is intended to achieve, and so on. Every social situation is unique and influences the course of the method and outcomes in different, sometimes unexpected, ways.

Role-playing an interview, the recruiter asked her interviewee to give an example of delegating work. What struck me in his reply was that he seemed to stick to managerial jargon: he had set 'targets', created 'a framework', sketched 'outlines', defined 'milestones', had given 'clear briefings', yet seemed unable to talk in non-management terms about what he had actually done or experienced. It was as though he was somehow stuck in this confident wording. Only when the interviewer pushed him to describe any difficulties he had encountered in the collaboration did he start, somewhat hesitantly at first, to talk a little more about what had happened between him and his team. This change in how he spoke seemed to draw us into his story. He particularised his narrative, brought it to life by revealing more about himself and the people involved, exploring intentions, their relationships, the possible perspectives on his experience, more or less inviting us to 'join in' reflecting on what all of this

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[27] A large part of the network's members had held (senior) management positions.

might mean; opening up a conversation rather than giving an abstract description, and providing us with an opportunity to gain insights.

Recognition

The moderator had a difficult time quieting down the buzzing conversations around the tables. From the stage, she announced the panel discussion and introduced the 'very special' guests, which included me. I noticed how this made me nervous: would people be disappointed?

There were only three of us; I was sat in the middle. When asked to introduce ourselves, I felt a hot flush going through my body. When handed the microphone by the first (successful!) panellist, I started by confessing that I was on the panel 'illegally' as I had not found a job. To my relief, laughter rose from the audience; my tension subsided.

I found myself replying to the questions posed very much from 'within' my own experience – not in a prescriptive and overly confident manner, as my fellow panel members seemed to do. It appeared that my intense work on the DMan, paying close attention to what it was I was experiencing and issues related to this, made it virtually impossible for me to stick to providing the usual generalised advice; rather, I felt compelled to relate my personal take on what I perceived to be our shared experience – at times anxiety-provoking and disturbing. For instance, when I drew attention to how uncomfortable we [job-seekers] feel because we *need* something, experiencing a strong dependence, I saw people nodding, agreeing; I felt as though I was establishing a connection with them.

Afterwards, standing around the luscious lunch-buffet, I hardly got a chance to eat. Independently from each other, several people approached me to say how much they appreciated how well I had put into words what they had been feeling, what they were going through. Apparently, what I had said was very different from what they were hearing elsewhere, in their job searches; my replies were more *real* to them than the abstract wording we were hearing and being urged to use in our job hunt, using the prescribed methods and terminology for 'constructing our sellable selves'. These people felt understood; they felt recognised by, and recognised

themselves in, what I had said – describing our shared experience of ambivalence and anxiety. This made me feel recognised in return; it felt good.

POSITIONING MYSELF

As stated earlier, I believe it is important to elaborate on my particular 'position' in what I came to refer to as the 'career game', as I have come to understand that this strongly affected the way I went about the work and my views on, and perception of, my experience.

The career coaching process somehow increased my sense of connection to organisational life; indeed, my involvement sometimes felt even stronger than when I had been working. I was constantly occupied by organisational matters, as collectively we (myself, coaches, fellow job-seekers, authors of articles/blogs, etc.) stressed the necessity to explore 'the market,' define 'target' employers, identify their needs, tailor documents to match these specific requirements, engage in networking, establish contacts, and so on. Yet being *involved* was no match for being *inside*; and I was faced with constant reminders that I was not *inside*, at career events and in the 'How To's' I was urged to read and follow.

The disturbances and anxiety I experienced in my job hunt, as had other job-seekers I spoke with, seemed not to be generally acknowledged, judging from audience responses to the panel session described earlier. Among ourselves, we job-seekers found ourselves talking more freely about our frustrations; I gained more insights on management issues than I ever had when working. Yet still we exercised caution in what we shared, given that at any moment one of us might get hired and become a valuable connection in our struggle to 'get back in', or we might suddenly find ourselves in competition.

We needed to overcome our anxieties, sustain our confidence and get on with the next application; or, when successful, become fully immersed in the new workplace, 'stay in' and forget about our struggle.

My experience of anxiety and disturbance at first seemed irrelevant to the *professional* DMan programme, which appeared to have no direct correlation with organisational life. However when, over time, I began to notice a relation with the

career coaching procedures and strategic identity construction as practiced in organisations, these disturbances became an invitation to further exploration, rather than something to ignore and carry on regardless. I began to pay closer attention to what I was asked to do in the career coaching process and what effect this seemed to have on me.

Involvement and detachment

The process I went through appears to bear resemblance to what Elias describes in his paper, 'Problems of Involvement and Detachment' (1956). Here, Elias describes how deep involvement (irrational, subjective) (ibid: 226) in matters over which we have little control can block our ability to form more 'detached' (rational, objective) concepts of these matters, limiting our vista and at the same time our inability to attain more grip on our emotions, our fear of 'the uncontrollable'. In primitive society, such fear was appropriate, given that natural events could threaten lives and livelihood. In our more complex current-day society, Elias argues, this deep involvement has shifted through 'processes of social change' (ibid: 231), where our interdependence involves increasingly large numbers of people.

As a job-seeker, I was unable to oversee the situation I found myself in: I was too involved. I regarded career coaching as an aid to help me regain a position of detachment; however, this appeared to be not entirely the case – at least, not in the way I was anticipating.[28] As a researcher, I needed to 'face myself' as 'an immediate participant from within' (ibid: 234) and detach myself from my experience in order to widen my view and enable myself to discern the changing configuration of the patterns I was forming with the people throughout my web of interdependence (ibid.). I have found these different 'vistas of detachment' (through career coaching and as a DMan researcher), combined with my simultaneous deep involvement, to be what enabled this exploration of the impact of strategic identity construction on our sense of self.

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[28] Of note, these procedures led not only to self-confidence, but also to some form of 'detachment of self', to which I return in the third section on 'sellable self'.

Elias describes the relation between involvement and detachment as 'a scale between […] two extremes' that 'keep each other in check' (ibid: 226), a 'continuum […] between marginal […] poles' (227), that 'balance each other and blend' (228); however, I did not experience a balance – rather, paradoxically, involvement and detachment both at the same time. I do not think this was solely due to my 'double role'. To make sense of this paradoxical experience, Mead's theory on reflection and reflexivity (1992) proved helpful.

Mead suggests that thinking takes place in conduct, in the social act, where the central nervous system enables a person to *reflect* on ideas that are formed based on the situation one finds oneself in, past experience, and future expectations. Mead introduces the notion of 'delayed reaction' (ibid: 98) enabling reflection and thus choice in the moment, *consciously or unconsciously*, determining behaviour, allowing for learning and spontaneity. When carrying on a social act where the entire process 'enters into, or is present in, the experience' (ibid: 134) of those involved, people can become self-conscious. Mead takes self-consciousness to be a person's awareness of his relations to the social process and all those involved in it, and of the influence he himself and the others have on the social act through their reactions and interactions, together modifying the social act as it unfolds. This developing awareness leads to a modification and refinement of a person's adjustment in the social process (ibid.). Bringing the social process into his experience, and turning this experience back upon himself – being *reflexive* – enables a person to 'take the attitude of the other towards himself' (ibid.) and allows for a *conscious* adjustment to the social process, affecting its outcomes.

To be able to inquire into my experience of career coaching, I needed to be strongly *involved* in the social processes that procedures entailed, while *at the same time! detach* myself, reflect, think, and be reflexive, think about my thinking; and all of this *in the moment* – hence the sense of paradox. This was evidently the case when I was actively engaged in career coaching procedures. However, in situations where I would have considered myself to be 'more' detached, such as 'looking back' when writing iterations of this project, I noticed that in order to enable myself to make sense of my experiences in hindsight, I needed to 'live through' the experience anew;

in other words, to become involved again, *at the same time* – sometimes to the extent that I could sense disturbance and feel anxiety rise.

The metaphor of the game

Another 'means' of detachment to aid me in making sense of my experience has been to bring in theory, validating, contrasting, generalising my experience. Especially helpful has been looking at career coaching processes *as if* a game:

> Game models are an excellent way of representing the distinctiveness of the forms of organization which are met with on the level of integration represented by human societies. (Elias, 1978: 97)

Such models could, according to Elias, allow me to 'examine questions of power without being emotionally involved' (ibid: 93), for power is 'one of the central problems of sociological effort' (92). Power had come up during my career coaching process,[29] such as with me feeling *powerless* and the suggestion that career coaching could be *empowering*; but not so much as a relational concept – a power differential between interdependent people, power differentials that could both be restraining and enabling at the same time, and more or less 'elastic' depending on a diminishing or increasing differential.

Looking at career coaching as a strategic game, learning to identify the 'players', inquiring into their intentions, preconceptions, goals, finding out 'who is more or less dependent on the other […] has to adapt himself more to the other's demands?' (ibid: 79), the 'figurations' (webs of interdependence) (15) that players may find themselves in, has helped me to make sense of what I was experiencing by exploring interdependencies in the game. It has been useful to consider the differentials of power between all players – including myself, rather than focusing solely on myself; to take account of the entire group of players, or of the game 'itself' (if indeed such a thing is possible). Such an approach does help to lessen my emotional involvement. This does not necessarily make me a 'better' player, but

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[29] I have also to some extent explored power in Project 3.

certainly helps me to be more aware of stakes and interests, and influencing regularities, perhaps even constituting another game.

Bourdieu underlines (as does Elias) the importance of bearing in mind game theory as a model that may be helpful to understand 'social universes [fields] *resembling* games' (2003) (italics added). In this project I have not tried to define the game, spell out its rules for other people to be able to follow my instructions and get better at it – in other words, reifying the game as an object as if there is only one definable game; rather, I have attempted to deepen understanding that in a certain 'social space' (for example, that I take the career coaching process to be), 'some things are important and others don't matter' (ibid: 79). 'Agents well-adjusted to the game are *possessed* by the game and doubtless all the more so the better they master it' (ibid; emphasis added).

Bourdieu rejects the reduction of the *interest* in the game, which he calls *illusio*, to conscious reason and economic interest: 'that the principle of action is well-thought-out economic interest and its objective is material profit, posed consciously through rational calculation' (ibid: 79). He also refutes the notion that human behaviour is always aimed at a pre-planned goal, insisting that experienced players with a 'feel for the game' 'do not need to pose the objectives of their practice as ends' (ibid: 80), but rather are

> present at the coming moment, the doing, the deed (pragma, in Greek), the immediate correlate of practice (praxis) which is not posed as an object of thought, as a possible aimed for in a project, but which is inscribed in the present of the game. (ibid: 80)

Building on Husserl, Bourdieu distinguishes between the project (plan) and protension (preoccupation), where the first aims for 'a possible' (goal), posing 'the future as future' and the latter is a relationship 'to a future that is almost present' in which

> social agents have 'strategies' which only rarely have a true strategic intention as a principle. (ibid: 81)

This perspective has shed new light on my situation, making me rethink my experience, *the project*, career coaching as a strategic approach, as opposed to allowing myself to be guided by 'practical reason' (Bourdieu, 2003); being in the moment, interacting with people, enabling myself to notice a career opportunity or change emerging, instead of pursuing it in a fairly mechanistic, prescribed manner. With hindsight, I believe I developed a feel for the 'game' throughout my working life, but began to doubt my expertise once I found myself inhibited by the strict prescriptions of strategic career coaching, as described in section 1.

In the second section I look into language use, certain patterns and specific words that I was urged to use strategically in the career coaching trajectory, words that where related to 'having' power and 'being in control', confident wording that needed to be combined with provisional and euphemistic wording, the first for suggesting one could deal with, the latter for covering over, uncertainty and not knowing in organisational life.

Section 3 brings together the strategic approach (first section) and a certain use of language (second section) in the construction of the 'sellable self'. Here, I explore the implications that his approach may have on our sense of self.

STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT IDEOLOGY

In this section I enter into a brief exploration of strategic management ideology, which I take career coaching processes to be. The exploration shows how this ideology came into being, how it has been disseminated and in what ways it has influenced business schools and organisational life. I then go on to explore the notion of career coaching as a strategic management process, explain why I engaged in it and, more importantly, why I continued the process even though I began to question the outcomes and sensed that its procedures heightened my anxiety significantly at times.

> The Renaissance brought forth individuality. Religion and later the (organised) state were effective restrictive agents on the boundaries of this individuality. The rise of science began in the 17th century and reached vertiginous heights at the

Enlightenment. Science took the form of objective facts. It was however facts that were rationalised through interaction with the (human) world. The Industrial Revolution demonstrates the interactive and dynamic nature of scientific rationalisation. People, through rational discourse on the latest discoveries, played the significant role in determining scientific and technological current practice. (Preston, 2001: 1)

Locke identifies these 'people playing a significant role' as the ones creating what he termed a 'new paradigm' in business schools just after World War II, changing organisational life significantly. Locke refers to earlier research, where he concentrates on the development of Operations Research in industry and Higher Education (2009: 28); draws attention to a chapter of Khurana's 2007 book,[30] which looks closely at economists taking over business schools after the transformation of economy into a 'decision science'; and quotes H. Thomas Johnson on how this 'colonisation' in (Johnson's field) management accounting occurred:

> After World War II, professors of accounting and finance in graduate business schools such as Harvard, Chicago, and Columbia started to show corporate executives how to use their accounting information to plan and control business activities in the same way that economists were showing government administrators how to use national accounting statistics to plan and control affairs of a national economy. In part this idea emanated from accounting professors who had received doctoral training in economics. […] But the idea also received impetus from accounting instructors, whose experience with wartime agencies had introduced them to advance use of operations research and mathematical economics. (Locke, 2009: 29)

This use of accounting information to *plan and control* organisational activities, and to advance the use of operations research and mathematical economics, is the foundation of what is often referred to as 'managerialism':

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[30] See the chapter, 'Disciplining the Business School Faculty: The Impact of the Foundations' in Khurana's *From Higher Aims to Hired Hands: The Social Transformation of American Business Schools and the Unfulfilled Promise of Management as a Profession* (2007).

> Managerialism is essentially the belief in a strategic approach. The belief is that by setting goals all of us will get to where we wish to be. […] If you fail to reach your goal it was your target getting that was in error not your target setting. (Preston, 2001: 2)

I will not use the term 'managerialism' here, as it has been used and interpreted in many different ways (e.g. Fitzsimons (1999)); instead, I prefer to use 'strategic management ideology' because I believe this to be a more clear and accurate term for how I have come to interpret the career coaching process.

Strategic management ideology is easily linked to its roots in (wartime) military operations. Sir Basil Henry Liddell Hart, an officer and later in his career a well-known military historian and theorist, is often quoted on theories of strategy. A US Army student devoted a monograph to the writings of Liddell Hart and brings forward a quote quite similar to the one above:

> Strategy, though not defined, here dealt with the question of selection of objectives the accomplishment of which would insure achievement of the nation's goals. (Swain, 1986: 39)

The strong emphasis on economics (as a 'decision science') in business education (Locke, 2009) can also be linked to Liddell Hart's military strategy:

> Success as a strategist was measured by 'a sound calculation and coordination of the end and the means', in short, 'a perfect economy of force'. (Swain, 1986: 79)

Decision-making based on financial reports became increasingly common; this, together with the adoption of separate divisions in organisations modelled after military organisations post-WWII (ibid: 108) and (Locke, 2009: 29)), may have contributed to an uncoupling of management from what goes on in the workplace, as Johnson (quoted by Locke) suggests:

> [S]uccessful managers believed they could make decisions without knowing the company's products, technologies, or customers. They had only to understand the intricacies of financial reporting. (Locke, 2009: 29)

This belief in the strategic approach and its abstraction, generalisation, from what goes on – what people 'actually' do together in the workplace – is a crucial theme underlying this section.

Career coaching

In our contemporary world it is a pervasive belief that we need to become lifelong learners in order to enter and (continue to) survive in our organisational surroundings, where constant change is accepted as inevitable. Strategic goals must be set to plan the next step in our ongoing developing career, anticipating future demands from the market; remaining employable. Career coaching is commonly regarded a necessary aid in setting and reaching goals:

> The Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 on key competences for lifelong learning underlines, with reference to several key competences, that the ability to search for the education and training opportunities *and guidance and/or support available* is essential for an individual's personal fulfilment, professional development and social integration. (Counsil of the European Union, 2008: 2) (emphasis added)

This notion leads to widespread efforts to prepare for, coach and mentor people in this arduous and inevitable task, from as early on as possible:

> As researchers emphasize, career related learning in the elementary school should 'focus on students' awareness of educational, occupational and other choices that will be available as they proceed through school and into the adult world, of ways *to anticipate and plan* for them; and of the relation between work habits, abilities and interests, and related characteristics' (Herr, Cramer and Niles, 2003: 334) in (Sidiropoulou-Dimakakou et al., 2013: 23) (emphasis added)

The emphasis on planning (managing) one's career from primary education onwards points to an exceptionally strong conviction of its importance. Even when education has been completed, the need for assistance in managing careers continues to be underlined:

It's no secret that it's still a pretty tough job market out there – both for people who are completely without work and those who have jobs but certainly not the dream careers that they desire. […] Fortunately, there are a growing number of professionals out there who can help make your search a bit easier – people like Donna Sweidan, a certified career coach with over 15 years of experience in the field […]

Sweidan: The goal is to support people in making informed decisions about their career development and trajectory, as well as offer various tools that they can use – résumés, cover letters, LinkedIn profiles – to meet those goals. […]

In general, 'coaching' tends to be a solution-oriented approach, which involves working with clients to see what concrete steps they can take to achieve career objectives. (Cheek (for LearnVest-Forbes), 2013)

There remains a perceived necessity for continued support even once 'inside' an organisation – such as this example of how in-company career coaching and mentorship is envisioned by a leading global management consulting firm:

You'll be amazed at the opportunities there are to choose from – and the doors opened from day one. With the collective support of your teams and the firm as a whole, including alumni, you can develop faster and go further, focus on what makes you tick, achieve your goals, and make your own McKinsey. (McKinsey, 2014)

The apparent commonly shared understanding that anyone in search of a job or pursuing a career path will encounter a 'tough market' suggests an impenetrably gloomy horizon. Yet these dark clouds, it seems, can be overcome by the career coach, who can help define our goals and provide advice in the form of *concrete steps* to help us achieve these[31] (the strategic management approach), parting the clouds to reveal the sun. Once inside the organisation, our horizon becomes even brighter with the promise of faster development, achievement of career goals and

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[31] In this specific case, counselling is offered too; however, describing this in more detail is beyond the scope of this project.

even the possibility of going beyond these – but only if we follow up on the advice we are given:

> [*Sweidan*: If] and when—for whatever reason – clients are no longer doing the work required to conduct a thorough job search or make the desired change, the utility of career coaching will […] decrease. […] I have a client who's currently in this situation. He knows what he wants to do, but for some reason, he's sabotaging the process by not heeding my advice to revamp his resume and network effectively. He applied to what he considered to be his ideal job, but because he failed to follow up and network, the opportunity disappeared. (Cheek (for LearnVest-Forbes), 2013)

Sweidan stresses that it is is a widespread misconception that career coaches actually *find* us a job; nevertheless, she seems to believe that the methods and advice she offers will probably get us where we want to be: 'doing the work required' (that is, prescribed by her) is the right way towards achieving the goal. Furthermore, 'not heeding advice' is not just regarded as inadvisable; it is considered 'sabotage' – pointing to the huge importance attached to career pursuit, and the major role that coaching is thought to have in achieving desired goals.

There are a number of assumptions in this that seem problematic: the assumption there is *a right* way of going about the job hunt; that a client 'knowing what he wants to do' means that his *aim is crystal clear* and will lead to him making *rational decisions* in order to reach this goal; that follow-up and networking will bring about the *preferred outcome*. Building on Elias (1956), what seems to be overlooked here is the deep involvement of the client, which may impact him and his 'clear view' of what he wants; also, little attention is paid to the highly social process of following up and networking, in which power relations largely dictate what connections can or cannot be made. In a social context, where one is interdependent with many people (possible employers, contacts, competitors), it seems unlikely that there should be *a* right way leading to success. In informal discussion among job-seekers at networking events, we often voiced doubts about the effectiveness of rigid methodologies producing similar, impersonal, results, both in our job search as in our experiences in organisational settings; as well as expressing how much we valued actual interaction with people in organisations, forming a 'real' acquaintance.

Governing

Although career coaching, and (assessment) methods and tools related to this, are researched extensively, often with positive outcomes and/or recommendations for improvement, it has also been the subject of critique. A number of researchers regard career coaching to be (self-)governing or coercive – 'a disciplining process at work' (Darmon and Perez, 2010), which may 'encourage commitment' (Krejsler, 2007: 473) but could just as well 'be turned into manipulative power instruments, or be reduced to shallow rituals' (ibid.).

In Fogde's 'fieldwork and participant observation of career coaching'[32] (2011: 68) the researcher underlines that 'practices of writing a CV and preparing for job interviews' are generally understood as 'an instrumental project which is to be managed and achieved' (ibid: 79); but she views such practices more as 'a multifaceted process characterized by tensions' (78). In her article, 'Governing Through Career Coaching: Negotiations of Self-Marketing', Fogde touches only briefly on the origins of the seemingly 'general acceptance' that she has observed of the instrumental process of marketing oneself *as if* promoting a company. She puts forward an argument for using Foucault's theory on governmental techniques as a tool in her research, mentioning Rose's 'governing through freedom' (Rose, 1999). I agree that Foucault's understanding of (self-)governance is helpful here, and would like to take this further by briefly introducing Rose (who builds on Foucault, among others) and exploring Bourdieu's notion of 'the game' in this context.

Rose describes how governance has changed over time, from being imposed on people by measures from 'the government' to contemporary government operating 'through the delicate and minute infiltration of the ambition of regulation into the very interior of our existence and expertise as subjects' (ibid: 11). Rose argues that people have come to see themselves as 'ideally and potentially certain sorts of person' (11), subjects who can close the gap between who they are and who they could (should) be with the help of 'experts in the management of the self' (11), who

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[32] At the Swedish white-collar union, Sif.

believe they are free to choose their freedom, their way of life, and who are to some extent unaware of the (self-)regulating forces brought about by 'normative judgement':

> Rather than being tied rigidly into publicly espoused forms of conduct, a range of […] types of 'lifestyle' are on offer, bounded by law only at the margins. Forms of conduct are governed through a personal labour to assemble a way of life. (Ibid: 230)

In the 'assembly' of this 'chosen' lifestyle, career *choice* plays an important part. To be successful in pursuit of their chosen career goal, a person should (govern themselves in order to) 'incorporate a set of values from among the alternative moral codes disseminated in the world of signs and images' (ibid: 231). In this context, as already discussed, career coaches are viewed as experts who can help us to acquire the necessary moral codes and dexterity with the appropriate signs and images, managing us towards the strategically constructed sellable self that matches the desired career. Once the 'free' choice to engage with the expert is made, the subject starts playing the 'career game':

> We have an *investment in the game*, *illusio* […]: players are taken in by the game, they oppose one another, sometimes with ferocity, only to the extent that they concur in their belief (*doxa*) in the game and its stakes; they grant these a recognition that escapes questioning. Players agree, by the mere fact of playing, and not by way of a 'contract', that the game is worth playing. (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 98)

Career coaching, broadly 'advertised' as the ultimate 'tool' to teach us how to play the 'career game' – not only job-seekers, but also those already working inside organisations – makes it difficult to reject and attractive to engage with, especially for those who are anxious, vulnerable, and lacking in self-confidence. Once 'in', Bourdieu suggests, we cannot question the rules if we want to succeed; and we acknowledge the value of the game the moment we 'choose' to become a player.

In this context, it is conceivably difficult to be critical about our 'self-chosen' engagement, the expert status of the coach, and the given rules or guidelines. For

instance, in order to seek a definition of my talents (which is considered difficult for us to ascertain ourselves), my coach suggested that I contact people I had worked with, offering me an email template for this purpose. I felt awkward about this task and edited the standard message thoroughly to make it more personal, adding specific notes for each person I was addressing.

Most people responded by 'doing the exercise' – responding to the invitation to choose three words defining my talent. A few disregarded the instructions (perhaps misreading or misunderstanding the question, or disliking the way it was put), and gave extensive descriptions of how they experienced me. Others remarked on the instruction being too simplistic:

> Difficult to capture someone in a few words. A person is much more than 3 words.

> With the 3 words above I feel, on and off, I have short-changed you because it does not cover your versatility.

Although they uttered these objections (the same objections I had felt towards this approach), they still went ahead and 'provided' me with the words – apparently for perfectly valid reasons.

A tendency to follow procedures without question often means conforming against one's own judgement. This can happen for a variety of reasons plausible to the person. Being invested in the game (or even 'possessed' by it, as Bourdieu says), relying on the coach for expert advice, in my experience dampened my urge to critique procedures and led to merely questioning *how* to use them, as Fogde has observed:

> [T]he students do not openly resist in the sense of questioning self-marketing [the procedure] but they negotiate and show ambivalence towards *how* to market the self. (Fogde, 2011: 79) (emphasis in original)

This appears essential to this project: in the name of efficiency, uniformity, certainty, we seem to have become accustomed to the idea of working methodologically towards set goals, using strategic management tools and techniques (e.g. to manage our own career). Generally, we do not openly question our ambivalence towards

these procedures and their outcomes; we may start to distrust our own abilities, our 'practical reasoning' (to borrow Bourdieu's terminology). Some of us may even be unable to discern why we feel uneasy with the procedure and/or its outcomes.

Good advice

I would like to address another issue in relation to career coaching procedures: the apparent contradiction between what is offered as a 'guaranteed success' procedure and its unpredictable outcomes, and the emphasis the career coach placed in Fogde's research on the subjective evaluation of the latter on the 'receiving end' (employers).

Fogde (2011: 76) notes that the 'experts' provide 'general advice' to 'guide the subject in certain directions, but when it is negotiated with students it is often stressed that employers are individuals with subjective perspectives' and there are no 'rights or wrongs' (ibid: 75). This seems related to Bourdieu pointing to the game following 'not explicit' and 'codified' 'regularities' (1992: 98), rather than rules, suggesting a provisional character and underlining the need for particularisation of general rules to suit the specific situation – something that is given scant attention, for example, in popular 'How To' guides.

In my experience, general advice tended to lead to frustration – a view that I heard other job-seekers voicing after every CV review made available to us at events like the one described earlier.[33] I had completed my CV in collaboration with the coach, who assured me she was pleased with the outcome; and on three different occasions, I presented the result at (recommended) reviews from HR officials. All three of them advised me to change it thoroughly (in different ways); they all said something along the lines of 'in the end, it's a matter of taste'.

What is both interesting and potentially disturbing here is on the one hand encountering a coach who confidently portrays CV preparation as a trustworthy aid producing reliable outcomes, and on the other finding this negated by experience. While it is obvious that every document will always be subject to personal

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[33] CV reviews seemed to be a standard agenda item at most career events.

interpretation (and as such the coach, as she admitted, could never guarantee it to be 'right'), the illusion of a 'successful formula' is nevertheless perpetuated by many (popular) articles and guidelines. Some examples:

> Crafting a Winning Cover Letter [IDCN workshop]

> The featured speakers […] gave spouses some useful tips, along with a helpful list of do's and don'ts. (Gibson, 2014) (emphasis added)

> Six of the Most Common Resume Flaws (and How to Fix Them) (Taylor Christensen, 2013)

> 10 LinkedIn Do's and Don'ts (Elad, 2014)

> Career Success – This book will help you every step of the way during your job search. With information on career fairs, networking, interview preparation, etc., you'll be ready to land your new job in no time. (Sparango, 2014)

I can understand that superficial impressions of 'certainty' might encourage the job-seeker to feel more at ease and secure, in control. However, for vulnerable people who are anxious at the outset, first being convinced that the (often costly) coaching procedure will help them to be successful, then being confronted with continuing uncertainty despite the efforts of someone whom they regard an expert, may intensify their anxiety. Indeed, the cause of their unease may be less easy to define – and perhaps even more difficult to overcome, given that people in difficult circumstances often blame themselves for ongoing negative results.[34]

Section conclusion

In this section I have drawn attention to the seemingly widespread consensus about the necessity of lifelong learning (employability), which is commonly thought to be

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[34] I will return to this in the section on Identity.

enhanced through strategic career planning, and is generally believed to be successfully guided by agencies and/or coaches. This apparently taken-for-granted method of pursuit is however not free from issues. There are several problems with the notion of lifelong learning and strategic career planning. The choice to engage in career coaching is not as 'free' as it is portrayed; questioning procedures once 'in the game' is problematic, and stepping out or not taking part is considered inadvisable. The pressure to 'play the game' (by the rules) is strong; and finally, although procedures and guidelines are depicted as effective, no guarantee for success is given.

In the next section, I explore one of the major rules of the game: the use of language. Certain conversational patterns and vocabulary suggest confidence and control, yet (as I encountered during the career coaching experience) can also be 'euphemistic' and sometimes 'provisional' enough to provoke a certain degree of anxiety and/or insecurity.

STRATEGIC CAREER MANAGEMENT TEXT AND TALK

I was not alone in questioning the 'uniqueness' of the host organisation as put forward in the presentation by the HR officer in the narrative earlier: I noticed people raising eyebrows, exchanging glances, yawning, checking their watches and looking through the agenda to see what was on next. Furthermore, as a panel member, I sensed a shared dissatisfaction with the way things were said/written, based on the strong audience response both during my talk and afterwards – thanking me for having expressed something that felt more 'real' to them than what they tended to hear in the course of their job searches.

There seemed to be a disconnect between how we were instructed to write our 'professional project' documents, CV, online profile, motivation letters etc., and how to respond in interviews and what we thought would represent our selves more truly. At times I perceived the (pressure to use) 'appropriate' language, to 'present and improve ourselves', to be policing, controlling and labelling (Orwell, 1987) – perhaps this is why the IDCN emphasise their 'more friendly' environment in the example below?

Dear IDCN members,

Following the success of first Career Coffee morning, we are glad to invite you for the second Career Coffee event of this year. Come and meet your fellow members in a *more friendly* environment and share your experience plus tips on CV format for Swiss job applications.

Topic: **Curriculum Vitae**

Get some tips to *mould* your CV for Swiss job market.

Share your experiences and network with the others participants.

Together we can improve ourselves!

(IDCN, 2014) (emphasis added)

At times, I was told to change 'I *enjoy* … in my work' into 'I am *passionate* … in my work'. Such phrases seemed exaggerated to me, and I felt that the over-use of such emotional words resulted in a certain loss of impact.[35] We were moulded – but at the same time were moulding ourselves (and each other) – into an image that we hoped would be attractive to potential employers. In a sense it was attractive to us, too: it seemed to boost our self-confidence.

I came to notice this difference between what I call 'abstract' and 'down-to-earth' conversation patterns, as described earlier in the narrative, when the interviewee was struggling with abstract management jargon in response to the HR interviewer. Once he started explaining his experience in a more 'down-to earth' manner, I observed how this drew the small group into his story. I also noticed his hesitation to do so – as if he was taking a risk. Perhaps felt he could take a chance because it was 'just' a 'mock' interview; but at the same time he knew there was always the possibility of encountering the same HR officer later on, in a 'real' hiring procedure. Sticking to 'general'/abstract terms may feel safer, depending on your interdependence in the relation you find yourself in (Elias, 2001: 52); we have to estimate the risk of opening up, making matters more concrete, particularising the

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[35] I acknowledge that expressing enthusiasm in a motivation letter or CV is of importance; I merely question the use of popular words such as *passionate*

general – which inevitably means becoming more vulnerable, possibly showing weaknesses, not being in control.

I had not intended to respond differently in the panel discussion – rather, I found myself talking 'differently' and only afterwards realised that I too had taken a risk by not speaking 'appropriately', in the usual confident terms. I could have undermined the work and status of career coaches in the room, whose focus in workshops and presentations seemed to be primarily on helping people by 'maintaining and building' (self-)confidence. Obviously, their livelihood to some extent depended on their clients, which accounts for their investment in the 'game' we were playing together. There seemed to be a shared belief in their ability to release a person's potential:

> [Certain method] consists of powerful, proven coaching techniques and strategies that can define and release your infinite career and business potential. (the National Black MBA Association, 2014)

Conversational patterns

I deliberately chose not to use the term 'd/Discourse' here, as this is used in a variety of ways (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000). In the context of this project, I prefer 'language use' or 'conversational patterns' (of strategic management ideology), drawing on Shaw (2002), as this underlines that I do not refer to one clearly discernible discourse; rather, I discuss patterns that show certain similarities.

Although language is discussed in articles around career coaching, these usually focus on *discursive practices*, negotiated talk in the construction of a 'sellable self' (e.g. Cremin (2009)). The impact of patterns of language used, the wording, seems to be less explored. In the following, I inquire into the relation of these aforementioned patterns and strategic management ideology and how they appear in, and may influence, job-seekers in career coaching processes.

Paradoxical patterns

In order to support the notion of a stable, controlled environment (of great importance in military operations during wartime, where lack of preparation or indecisiveness could endanger operations), the use of language in strategically

managed organisations – and so career coaching procedures, it would seem – needs to be as rational and unambiguous as possible.

The language I encountered in the course of my job search (e.g. in vision/mission statements) nonetheless seemed paradoxical: in many ways, it appeared to confidently describe a straightforward situation of complete control (efficiency, performance, planning, strategy, measurability, quality), yet it could also be described as 'euphemistic' and 'provisional' (Jackall, 2010: 144)[36]. It also appeared highly subject to management trends/fads (Abrahamson, 1996), identifiable by the frequent use of (new) 'buzzwords' (Spicer, 2013: 658).

I asked myself how the systemic (e.g. Taylorist) language, popularised through the rise of industrialisation, seemed to have become enmeshed with this 'trendy' (Spicer, 2013) and 'euphemistic', 'provisional' (Jackall, 2010: 144) text and talk, a pattern that seems paradoxical. The most fundamental change, I believe, has been brought about by what Elias has termed the 'longer chains of interdependency'[37] (2000) that exist in society and organisations nowadays, through which control and planning become increasingly problematic. One can still (as Taylor and Ford did (Banta, 1993)) break down the pieces of the process chain, but the resulting number of 'component parts' would be enormous and difficult to oversee. Moreover, the potential impact of discrepancies or deviations from one 'piece' to the other on the process as a whole are hard to control – let alone the influence of countless human actions in a complex chain that can link many separate, multidivisional and/or hierarchically layered, organisations.

In such complex environments, being too clear, direct or certain in your statements (e.g. about expected revenues, percentage of efficiency improvement) may cause unwanted situations (e.g. failure, loss of face/credibility) over time.

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[36] Explained further on.

[37] 'Societies in which the division of functions is more or less advanced, in which the chains of action binding individuals together are longer and the functional dependencies between people greater.' (Elias, 2000: 370)

According to Elias and Rose, this risk leads to increased self-restraint and the use of certain preferred language patterns:

> [M]ost often when managers use euphemistic language with each other […] its principal purpose is to communicate certain meanings within specific contexts with the implicit understanding that should the context change, a new, more appropriate meaning can be attached to the language already used. (Jackall, 2010: 144)

Giving ourselves some 'leeway' in this manner, Jackall underlines, is not intended to deceive:

> Managers past a certain point […] are assumed to be 'maze-bright'[38] and able to 'read between the lines' of a conversation or memorandum and to distinguish accurately suggestions from directives, inquiries from investigations, and bluffs from threats. (ibid.)

Taking account of the above in relation to my career coaching experience, it could be the case that job ads, which can be interpreted in so many different ways, are occasionally meant as a test of potential candidates' skills in 'reading between the lines'. Certain conversational patterns could be a front, a filter – a firewall, if you like – to select those who are best equipped (or dare) to pass through it: networkers, people with contacts, people knowing how to play 'the game of games'[39] (Mowles, 2015: 108). While these experienced 'players' are presumably unconscious of their skill in navigating implicit regularities, their strong 'feel for the game' (Bourdieu, 2003: 25) will probably alert them to the possibility of using different strategies. They may feel no need to follow the 'simple rules' commonly dispensed to less experienced (and less confident) players, but take a shortcut and confidently contact valuable people in their network directly.

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[38] Someone is maze-bright when he or she is capable of (quickly) forming an understanding of the organisational 'map', of all stakeholders, people forming the organisation, of their needs and expectations, their duties, stances, responsibilities, the products made and services offered, organisational issues etc., more or less knowing their way around.

[39] 'there may be multiple games being played at the same time' (Mowles, 2015)

The ambiguous use of language may also serve as 'protection' against controversy over any perceived change of responsibilities in the advertised job, or misinterpretation of the job requirements (conceivable in a complex organisation, where alienation from one division to the other can so easily occur).

This language pattern seems to be well suited to portraying oneself – and the organisation in which one works, or would like to work – with confidence: in a euphemistic manner, it is possible to lay claim to various trendy skills and competences (e.g. 'sensitivity', 'intrainstitutional action', 'fostering integration') that enable one to plan, measure and control one's work and steer the organisation and oneself in the right direction, towards desired, preferably common, goals. It conveys a sense of confidence and control; where these are weak or even lacking, euphemisms and provisional wording can camouflage this. While this allows some leeway in describing positions, tasks and organisations, which can be useful when dealing with uncertainty, its ambiguity can also be problematic in job application procedures, as the candidate relies on the job description for crucial information.

Strategic language use

Although my career coach provided me with an apparently simple template to complete when writing application letters, in many cases this was not so easy to use in practice. It seemed that the way job descriptions were formulated (as discussed above) could make it difficult to know how best to respond. I believe this is closely related to the experience of the mock interview:[40] the more abstract (less personal, particular, specific) the wording, the more difficult it was to discern its meaning and engage fully and sincerely with the 'invitation to apply', to define my motivation for the job and write a 'connecting' letter.

I went through many job descriptions in search of examples of 'good' and 'bad' ones – yet found myself struggling to put my finger on what worked and what didn't. I found that it would be tricky define the criteria for a clear job description

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[40] In the narrative

(and perhaps not helpful to create yet another 'How To'!). I also realised that the most helpful information lacking from the job descriptions was something that could not easily be contained in words: *social* context.

In many cases, when describing requirements for the job, certain traits were attributed (solely) to the candidate; yet I have come to understand from experience – and for which I have found a theory that makes sense to me, in 'complex responsive processes of relating' (Stacey, 2011) – that the tasks described in these job descriptions are only possible in, and because of, the social environment; our interdependencies and interrelatedness with other people. Furthermore, we do not work with anonymous, faceless 'positions' such as team members, directors, and internal/external stakeholders; we find ourselves directly engaged in (power) relationships, with *specific people*: Henrik, Sandra, Mahmut, John, Birgit and Deidre.

In our radically social context, where people have varying interests and intentions, sentences such as those listed below seem problematic (taken from several vacancies posted online on Intermediair (2014) emphasis added):

> *Deliver* profitable growth of the business in line with sales targets
> *Maintain high level contact and relationships* with customers
> *Proactively create* opportunities
> You contribute to *sound* decision-making
> Preparing *crystal clear* analyses and briefing notes
> You can form *independent* opinions
> Being *able to make* a strong first impression
> *Independent and self-motivated*

These 'activities/skills' are all socially enabled and restrained. To explore this further, for instance, what meaning could be derived from (to take another example from a job ad) 'experience with change management, in which one can demonstrate a successful change that has been made'? Can anyone ever claim the success of change management solely as a personal triumph? Is 'successful' here meant as 'in full accordance with a preconceived plan', or as emergent change that was (perhaps even afterwards) considered meaningful for (a *large enough* part of) the group one has been involved in? Another example:

> [Y]ou take sufficient account of the interests, positions and responsibilities of aaa,
> bbb and ccc and create an open environment where all stakeholders feel valued and
> motivated.

Can one take *sufficient* (how much is that, and for whom?) account of all interests (how do we acquire this 'information', which is not always 'available'?) and create an open (what does 'open' mean to whom, and how much openness would be 'appropriate'?) environment (on one's own), where *all* stakeholders feel valued and motivated (idealisation)?

Although I find this last example abstract and highly idealised, it does to some extent indicate the social environment in which the candidate may participate, pointing to the different interests (intentions), positions (perspectives, status) and responsibilities (felt, interpreted) involved. It describes, however briefly, the social network and interdependencies that underlie such major tasks. Nevertheless, it would appear difficult to express these complex situations in more meaningful words, to paint a more 'realistic' picture, if this is ever possible (or indeed desirable!).

It is possible that writing in a politically correct manner, avoiding being too precise about specific work relations, tasks and job circumstances, may protect the author within the organisation from 'getting it wrong' by portraying matters incorrectly; or perhaps it is believed that the person applying from outside the organisation will be safeguarded from disappointment. As suggested earlier, such evasiveness may be a way of dealing with (or masking) the inevitable uncertainty in organisational life.

Cremin insists that 'with the aid of such words […] we are in a position *to speculate* on what the employer wants' (2009: 3) (emphasis added); but a very abstract job description renders such speculation virtually impossible – providing no understanding at all of the position or the organisation, no valuable insight into 'the game' specific to the organisation and its particular text and talk. Such lack of clarity might encourage people who might not suit the task/organisation to apply who are (or, through career coaching, have become) perfectly able to write in a similarly confident, commanding yet provisional/euphemistic manner, while perhaps discouraging those who would have been excellent candidates but cannot clearly

visualise the positions, tasks and organisations that are so abstractly formulated, or who are unfamiliar with the necessary euphemisms and provisional expressions. The ways in which this conversational pattern of strategic management ideology may affect people have yet to be fully investigated.

Every person is formed by, and at the same time forms, society – which consists of the groups to which one belongs. In order to develop our understanding of our groups, we form a sense of the 'generalised other' (Mead, 1992: 154) that allows us to interact with people in ways appropriate to that particular group. We use 'common' language – significant symbols that call out the same response in ourselves as in other members of our group (Mead, 1992: 71) – and adhere to group norms and values. As these 'generalised others', group norms and values are generalisations (idealisations, if you will), we must continuously pay attention to the specific circumstances we find ourselves in, in relation to the people we interact with, adjust our behaviour accordingly and be aware that the 'generalised other' is not a static given but evolves over time, as can significant symbols. The meaning of what we say arises in the social act, and only through ongoing processes of gesturing and responding do we co-create, and change, meaning.

It seems that this co-creation of meaning through meaningful social interaction is what is difficult to replicate in these prescribed, abstract ways of writing and talking about ourselves and organisations in career coaching procedures. Little attention seems to be paid to the meaning of words (container concepts) and the extent to which our depictions of organisations, and of ourselves, can be idealised – to the point that they may seem only vaguely related to actual experience. People may feel disconnected from themselves, from their group (organisation), as they cannot recognise themselves in, or relate to, the text and talk they encounter or produce (about) themselves in prescribed manners. This in turn makes me wonder: how much skill in 'reading between the lines' would a successful applicant need to remain successful once started on the job, or an HR officer/hiring manager to be able to select suitable candidates from piles of equally abstract, overly confident and idealised motivation letters and CVs?

Dynamically changing patterns

I have not yet examined the apparent need for novelty in wording (different from the social development of meaning, described above) that I noticed in job ads; new usage – such as *sensitivity* in the terms 'environmental sensitivity', 'organisational sensitivity' and 'people-sensitivity', to take just one example – seemed to crop up regularly. How do we explain the constant flood of new jargon?

Driven by the need to demonstrate more effectiveness and efficiency by dealing with 'issues' that appear to be obstructing the process, in ever more complex organisations, it seems important for higher circles of management to appear 'fresh, dynamic, innovative, and up-to-date' on 'the latest trends in managerial know-how' and not 'appear stodgy before one's peers' (Jackall, 2010: 149). These management circles fuel 'the industry of consultants and other managerial sages' (ibid: 150). Abrahamson refers to these as 'fashion setters', whose aim is to keep ahead of the competition, leading 'the forefront of management progress' (1996: 254). In this ongoing process, it cannot easily be determined who is driving who; management or fashion setter.

According to Birnbaum, fashion setters promise

> that, unlike previous techniques (which may be explicitly denigrated as fads), the technique now being promoted will significantly improve core organizational processes and functions. Promises of extraordinary outcomes are made, and resistors are painted as traditionalists unwilling or unable to respond to change. The technique is often presented as both necessary and sufficient to transform the organizational sector; true believers may present their views with messianic zeal and suggest that the success, perhaps even the survival, of the sector depends on adopting this innovation. (Birnbaum, 2000: 6)

These fads, whether they are a passing phase or are (partially) taken up in organisational practice, tend to bring with them new or rediscovered buzzwords. In the case of the word (*n-*)*sensitivity,* the need to pay (more) attention to being sensitive (towards people, the organisation, the environment) may actually have been important in a particular (kind of) organisation. However, a 'copy-and-paste'

dissemination of so-called (or hoped-for) successful fads, can copy a fad onto an organisation or field where it may not be appropriate at all.

A Dutch friend of mine, who was made redundant some time ago, shared her experience of preparing for an open application:

> The unemployment-agency officer told me to get to know the company's 'philosophy' [she gestures quotation marks] by checking their website in preparation for an open application. I tried, but their mission/vision meant nothing to me; for some reason, it was overflowing with mainly English 'buzzwords' that could be interpreted in multiple ways. None of this helped me to form an image of who these people were and what these words meant to them – let alone whether, and how, I could fit in. (J. L., personal communication, July 30, 2014)

She also experienced what I have described in the narrative: the 'glossy brochure' approach to describing an organisation – a presentation laced with popular words, apparently in common usage yet open to interpretation. These buzzwords appeared to mask a certain meaninglessness, painting a perfect picture with a glossy varnish but no depth. Later in our conversation, my friend wondered aloud whether she would fit into such a company culture, as she did not speak their 'language' – referring not to English, but to the buzzwords used.

The difficulty in challenging buzzwords lies partly in the fact that they are often not easy to 'resist': who would not want to 'show respect', 'have integrity', 'support sustainability'? When the novelty wears off, or the word becomes devalued through overuse, new terminology is soon introduced (or old terms revived), according to Spicer:

> [M]any corporate strategies are typically made up of a set of rapidly shifting trends, ideas and management fashions. […] Once questioning and criticism has been formulated, the discourse has moved on. (Spicer, 2013: 661)

Just words

We often hear or say things like: 'Why don't we stop talking and start doing something?'. This uncoupling, however, belies the fact that we are never just talking: words are more than just words.

I have come to understand text and talk *as* action. We seem to have a tendency to take more seriously our responsibility for our actions than for our words – for instance, pleading freedom of speech when the possible consequences of saying inflammatory things are pointed out to us. Understanding text and talk *as* action may increase our awareness of the impact of language and encourage us to pay closer attention to what we say and write, as well as what we do.

In *How to **Do** Things with Words* (emphasis added), Austin sets out to establish classifications for words *as* action, only to conclude halfway through the book that he has 'failed to find a grammatical criterion for performatives' (2009: 91), starting his approach afresh:

> We want to consider more generally the senses in which *to* say something [illocutionary act – coupled with force] may be to do something, or *in* saying something [locutionary act – coupled with meaning] we do something (and perhaps also consider the different case in which *by* saying something [perlocutionary act – coupled with achieving effects][41] we do something). (ibid.) (first two emphasis added)

These three classifications, Austin finds, do not provide watertight criteria either; he proceeds to explore a general 'theory of speech-acts' (ibid: 150).

I have not brought in Austin's work to come up with 'proof' for 'specific words' being acts, because I do not find the categories he brings forward *as such* helpful; however, I believe that he offers a plausible argument for *why* words should be considered acts:

> [W]henever I 'say' anything […] I shall be performing both locutionary and illocutionary acts, and these two kinds of acts seem to be the very things which we tried to use, under the names of 'doing' and 'saying', as a means of distinguishing performatives from constatives. (ibid: 133)

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[41] Text in square brackets refers to the naming of types of action in the following lectures.

Mead's social behaviourist understanding of language of words as acts provides an important complementary view to Austin's linguistic-philosophical exploration:

There is a great range in our use of language; but whatever phase of this range is used is a part of a social process, and it is always that part by means of which we affect ourselves as we affect others and mediate the social situation through this understanding of what we are saying (Mead, 1992: 75).

For Mead, meaning (including the *perceived* achievement of certain effects, and *interpretation* of force used (Austin, 2009: 73)) *emerges* in an ongoing social process of gesture and response – mediating the social situation and affecting all those involved. Such an understanding of saying something, using language, does not create categories of words as acts (or not); rather, in Mead's theory all words (gestures) *are* (phases in) social acts, language *is* action.

Of major importance in this is 'mediating reality', which suggests that words are used as a medium to describe, make sense of reality, as we (want to[42]) perceive it. I take it that we perceive (a preferred) reality and by using language to describe our perception we may influence, to some degree, our own and others' perceptions of reality.

Section conclusion

If language is action, as I have argued – and, furthermore, action that mediates and so influences our (perception of) reality, a 'lifestyle-reality' that is to be strategically managed by (among others) a sequence of continuously developing 'desired' career goals – then in what ways can a paradoxical use of language, conversational pattern, both 'strategic/clear/in-control/confident' and 'euphemistic/provisional/trendy', influence how we perceive our managed and mediated reality, and more importantly, how we describe and perceive ourselves as part of such a reality? I explore this question in the next section.

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[42] Our intentions, expectations, hopes (etc.) influence our perception.

STRATEGICALLY MANAGED IDENTITY

In a world where strategic career pursuit is deemed 'essential' not only for 'professional development' but also 'for an individual's *personal fulfilment*' and '*social integration*' (Counsil of the European Union, 2008: 2) (emphasis added), personal life becomes merged with the 'desired' career; the division between professional and personal life seems to vanish and is transformed into a 'freely' chosen *lifestyle* (Rose, 1999), to be managed according to guidelines and 'How To's' such as those provided by lifestyle magazines (Hancock and Tyler, 2004) and online platforms:

> The whole paradigm of work is changing, and many of us are still stuck under the thumb of the boss in our life when what we want is to be the boss of our own life. We crave the freedom to manage our own time, to be valued for who we are. We want a career that encourages risk and excitement, growth and personal development, learning and exploration. (Canda (on LinkedIn), 2014)

Our dynamically changing world requires careers to be adaptable, flexible; lifelong learning/employability has become the norm. To remain employable, each individual must adapt; their lifestyle needs evolve accordingly. The way this is written/talked about assumes that we can (and should) take our career, our life, into our own hands; and the coach is generally considered the expert to help us in this task.

> Each of the attributes of the person is to be realized through decisions, justified in terms of motives, needs and aspirations, made intelligible to the self and others in terms of the unique but universal search to find meaning and satisfaction through the construction of a life for oneself. (Rose, 1999: 231)

As often advised in career coaching, to accomplish all of this, one's *professional* identity (which may be problematic, given the context of lifestyles merging personal and professional life) must be moulded into a 'sellable self' (Fogde, 2011). This is thought to be best achieved by viewing oneself *as if* a company, 'ME Inc.' (ibid: 70) or a product, a 'brand called "you"' (Hancock and Tyler, 2004: 633). This seems closely related to the notion of identity as defined by a leading business school:

It is the leader – the strategist as meaning maker – who must make vital choices that determine a company's very identity, who says. 'This is *our purpose*, not that. *This is who we will be.* This is why our customers and clients will prefer a world with us rather than without us'. Others, inside and outside a company will contribute in meaningful ways, but in the end it is the leader who bears responsibility for the choices that are made and indeed for the fact that choices are made at all. (Montgomery (for McKinsey on Finance), 2012) (emphasis added)

In career coaching, this translates into: you (job-seeker/career-pursuer) are advised to view yourself *as if* an organisation whose identity[43] you, as a leader, need to strategically manage towards a perceived ideal for the desired customer, (future) employer, and to which others (e.g. coaches), both inside and outside 'ME Inc.', may *contribute* in meaningful ways – a process in which vital strategic choices need to be made for which in the end you alone, the leader (of your lifestyle), are responsible. Moreover, identity appears to be equated with purpose: who we are (choose to be) defines our purpose (in life). Thus purpose in (perhaps even the ultimate meaning of) life becomes intertwined with careers, rendering employability of immense import. Moreover, when the strategic career pursuit is not successful – that is, when employers (seem to) 'prefer a world without you' – you alone are to blame. You become a 'have not', in a world were 'haves' are regarded successful in professional, social and personal life.

Although in essence competition is one of the key forces that drives people to develop and move on, the pressure to perform has increased to the point that it can become overwhelming; failure will often lead to self-blame in such a context (Sharone, 2013). Influences from the social environment impacting upon the chances of success (e.g. access to networks, unemployment rates, economical/political situation) tend to be overlooked or deliberately omitted in career coaching trajectories.

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[43] This seems to work interchangeably: the organisational identity can be viewed *as if* a person.

Towards a 'sellable self'

Career coach Sweidan states 'the core virtue of career coaching is to help people assess their professional situations with a greater degree of honesty, curiosity, empathy and compassion' (Cheek (for LearnVest-Forbes), 2013). Furthermore, it is a widespread belief that job-seekers and career pursuers need to strike a balance between demonstrating their uniqueness (e.g. Sharone (2013)) and complying with expectations – or, as my career coach put it,[44]

> Finding a right balance between conforming while demonstrating the highest expertise level is THE challenge.
>
> (F.G., personal communication, February 26, 2013)

Getting this balance right is both difficult and essential. In addition, every position the job-seeker applies for demands the construction of a different 'sellable self' – requiring them to accurately gauge the desired[45] employer's needs – 'speculate on what the employer wants' (Cremin, 2009: 3) – and supplement this with the strict guidelines to 'discursively construct' (Fogde, 2011) the 'sellable self', in wording that is simultaneously 'strategic/clear/in-control/confident' (highlighting personal traits they feel confident about, sometimes exaggerated for extra impact), 'euphemistic/provisional' (perhaps slightly enhancing 'necessary' traits they may be less confident about) and 'trendy' (mentioning traits believed to match the current trend). Bearing in mind the pressures already discussed in the introduction to this section, I experienced this whole process as a recipe for anxiety.

Besides the difficulty of dealing with these complex, uncertain and sometimes contradictory demands, I challenge the notion that a person's 'sellable' identity can be 'easily constructed'. It seems to me that even the *as if* treatment is problematic: we cannot define our 'purpose' or 'who we are (want to be)' just to suit ourselves,

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[44] Commenting on documents I had drafted before we started the procedure.

[45] 'Desired' may be a somewhat flexible term in times of high unemployment, when one cannot afford to be (too) choosy, and when one might also apply for truly 'desirable' careers (of high status, or regarded as important) despite not being entirely suited to them.

but rely on our social environment to make sense of our identity. Many authors have argued identity to be a *social* construct, dependent on and interrelated with other (groups of) people.

> Because of the very nature of the human condition – that we can only define ourselves in exchange with others, those who bring us up, and those whose society we come to see as constitutive of our identity – our self-understanding always places us among others. The placements differ greatly, and understanding these differences and their change is the stuff of history. (Taylor, 1992: 257)

Our understanding of who we are we derive from *being* with (groups of) people; our understanding of self emerges in ongoing processes of gesture and response (Mead, 1992); our interaction with people informs us about ourselves (as adapted to specific circumstances). Gaining such an understanding of who we are (expect to be) in certain situations/groups in a particular organisation would inevitably be, even with the help of a coach, extremely complicated, especially (in the 'first round') when having to draw on abstract descriptions as I have discussed in the previous section.

I know and appreciate the need to present ourselves differently in different places – for different 'audiences', as Goffman illustrates well in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959-1990); it is natural that we cooperate and compete (Elias, 2001: 48) to achieve goals. However, our 'sellable selves' go beyond this. Our co-created images – in response to (contradicting) prescriptions, unclear needs (perceived as demands), anticipated strong competition, and so on – are not just a slightly polished presentation, but an over-adaptation of how we have come to understand ourselves in and through social interaction. We turn the social adaptation of the self (Elias, 2000), which is necessary to function in varying groups in social life, 'artificially' into over-idealised selves, similar to the glossy images in an advertising brochure.

> 'Human nature' into which one was born was replaced [during the Renaissance] with 'identity' which one needs to saw up and make fit. (Bauman, 2002: 3)

As I have suggested earlier, this 'sawn up and made to fit' glossy image may perhaps be as attractive to ourselves as we believe it to be for potential employers; feeling insecure and anxious about finding a job in such a competitive market, the manipulation of my image certainly boosted my self-confidence to some degree. This effect, however, soon subsided whenever I imagined my 'match' with this image being assessed eye to eye in a real job interview – what Goffman describes as the 'crucial concern' of 'whether it will be credited or discredited' (1959-1990: 245).

I acknowledge the generally accepted need to enhance or emphasise some of my virtues and talents slightly, as I expect the particular situation to demand, drawing on my understanding of the 'audience' (ibid.) as a 'generalised other' (Mead, 1992). Nevertheless, the wording I was encouraged to use to describe my enhanced image did not fit comfortably with the way I see myself or talk (about myself), even when in important negotiations.

Reading through my discursively co-created images, something did not feel right, although it was hard to pinpoint exactly what. Somehow I had the impression of plastic surgery taken too far: what had begun as minor modifications to my image, when carried out iteratively over successive applications, had resulted in something more like a caricature. Just as the subtle changes through 'plastic surgery' can result in a gradual sense of alienation, rather than an immediate reaction to an obvious caricature, so I felt that the discrepancy between my social versus 'enhanced' identity had only gradually became perceptible and was difficult to specify. I can imagine others also feeling uncomfortable with the image they have co-created, but lacking (or not allowing themselves) the time or inclination to reflect on where this unease originates from.

Adding to this difficulty, this enhanced ('glossy') image was based on assumptions about (the needs of) the employer and the job description (written in similar wording) that could easily become challenged during an interview. In job interviews where the constructed image turns out to be non-fitting, this may cause anxiety and prevent a good conversation from taking place – a conversation in which mutual understanding could have emerged (important for both interviewer and candidate).

In reflecting on this struggle to define sellable selves, marketable identities, it is worth considering the conclusion from Bauman's paper:

> Perhaps instead of talking about identities, inherited or acquired, it would be more in keeping with the realities of the globalizing world to speak of *identification*, a never-ending, always incomplete, unfinished and open-ended activity in which we all, by necessity or by choice, are engaged. (Bauman, 2002: 11)

In our ongoing struggle to attempt to construct our optimal lifestyle (something that we have come to believe is possible), we are constantly shaping our identity to suit potential employers and job descriptions. Yet this may be a never-ending process: no sooner have we attained the 'desired job' than we find ourselves in yet another position where we need to deal with the usual frustrations of uncertainty, power differentials, interdependency, conflicting intentions, and so on. We soon begin the search for our next step towards another idealised position. In this ongoing process, the constant reiteration of our carefully constructed identity process will never be finalised.

Perhaps it is through compensating for uncertainty and unpredictability with confident but still provisional and euphemistic text and talk people that are kept, and at the same time keep themselves, in motion: continuously and painstakingly developing themselves to stay aligned with anticipated but uncertain future demands in pursuit of a better(-fitting) lifestyle, and so staying apace with the lifelong learning that is so widely promoted as both essential and beneficial.

THE ARGUMENT PROJECT 4

In our increasingly complex society, where intricate patterns of interdependency can be difficult to discern, where we may feel overwhelmed by uncertainty and lack of clarity, we seem to have convinced ourselves (with the help of the media, of course!) that we can carefully manage the trajectory of our work, relationships, career – our life, even – by following precise steps, methods and strategies. Perhaps simplifications, generalisations and methodologies are attractive because they give us a sense of security, an illusion of being in control.

My aim in this project has been neither to deny the need/desire to pursue a career path, nor to discredit career coaching. Careers obviously play an important part in the lives of many people, and career coaching can certainly be a means of supporting people in their chosen direction. Rather, I have drawn attention to the way in which the pursuit of career goals, with the help of career coaching, is commonly portrayed; have raised certain questions about the strategic approach for reaching goals, and related tools and techniques, that is sometimes used in a rigid, impersonal manner in the name of efficiency; and have expressed concern about how such methodologies are widely promoted as effective, and the potentially damaging expectations this may create.

I have drawn attention to the product of career coaching, 'sellable selves', to ways in which these may yield seemingly job-matching profiles and (temporarily) boost self-confidence; yet the discrepancy between our strategically managed, discursively constructed, 'Photoshopped' self-images and our social selves (self-consciousness emerging in social processes) appears to be increasingly unsettling, affecting our sense of self and our self-confidence in social interaction. This is an unanticipated side effect of job-seeking strategy that appears to be run contrary to the fundamental principles of career coaching.

I therefore propose that we pay closer attention to how we use text and talk when composing documents and procedures related to career pursuit and recruitment. Employees and candidates alike could attempt to seek ways to particularise the general information that is exchanged, in order to provide a more meaningful representation of the candidate, the organisation and role, and – perhaps most importantly – to try and provide more insightful descriptions of the social context of the potential work environment. It would surely enhance the chances of a successful working collaboration if the processes of recruitment and job-seeking took account of the fundamentally social nature of human beings and their everyday work activities.

CONCLUSION PROJECT 4

In writing this project I believe I have added on to the ongoing academic discussion around the topic of career coaching a 'detailed understanding of interaction in naturally occurring settings where governing is constructed and negotiated' (Fogde, 2011: 67).[46] In the process of my inquiry, I have become more acutely aware of the sense of pressure to engage with career coaching procedures, and the complexity of issues around this.

Still, I cannot help but ask myself to what extent we allow ourselves to be so intimidated by the widely accepted depiction of today's world as one that is dynamic, demanding, obscure and overwhelmingly complex that we become anxious about the need to keep abreast of continuous change through what might literally be considered 'lifelong learning'? It seems that we feel pressured to reconfigure ourselves continuously to match unclear, perceived needs, failing to acknowledge that each of us (albeit to a different degree) is always continuing to learn from our ongoing experiences, inevitably developing our 'practical reason' (as Bourdieu would describe it). None of us can ever 'manage' to remain the same. While we may feel overwhelmed by the complexity of social networks that we may be anxious to join, in actual practice these are no more than the small groups of people we find ourselves in direct relation with. And while such groups in turn do form part of a large and complex society, we should keep in mind that this is a society in which no single individual or group can ever predict or control the future or its shifting demands.

In the meantime, having 'survived' the first selection rounds in four application processes; I have found myself engaged in useful – and even enjoyable! – conversations with recruiters, talking for the most part about what genuinely mattered to us, to people forming the organisation and specific organisational challenges that lay ahead. On at least a couple of occasions, I was happy to observe

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[46] Fogde found this to be missing in her literature-review.

how we philosophised on how this could affect our typically changing and uncertain everyday practice. In these interview situations, I found the strategically constructed 'sellable self' not of great importance, as together, we co-constructed an understanding of what the job entailed, tried to formulate a meaningful description of the people I was going to be involved with and how closely we thought my skills and experience would fit these requirements and this specific group. Meaning emerged and developed between us. The use of 'buzzwords', confident and euphemistic wording seemed irrelevant.

> [I]t is important to remember that in private among trusted others, [managers'] language can be very direct, colorful, and indeed earthy. (Jackall, 2010: 144)

DISCUSSION

> […]
> This is not a love song
> I'm happy to have
> Not to have not
> Big business is very wise
> I'm inside free enterprise
> […]
> I'm adaptable   *(repeat)*
> Now I like my new role
> I'm getting better and better
> I have my new goal
> Changing my ways
> Where money applies
> This is not a love song
> […]
> This is not a love song
>
> *But it is really*
> […]
> (Lydon - Public Image Ltd, 1984-2011) (emphasis added)

Public Image Ltd (UK), a post-Punk group popular during the late 1970s and '80s, expressed the 'no future' mentality of many young people growing up during the Cold War: threat of nuclear missiles, high youth unemployment rates, scarcity of housing. The band embraced an anti-establishment stance. I believe my rather one-sided view of politics as negative and exploiting, and my reluctance to engage with it (as if I could!), is rooted in this period of my life. The name, Public Image Ltd, has a close relation to my fourth project, reflecting the notion of strategically co-constructed 'sellable selves'. My developing understanding of politics as unavoidable, a necessity even to enable collaboration and movement, underlines that

it *is* in fact a love song. I believe I may enjoy – love, if you will– my work, the more I accept politics as inevitable and continuously attempt to enhance my understanding of how our political stances may affect what it is we do, attempt to do, together.

More than a summary

This discussion is more than a summary of the four projects I have completed; rather, this section draws these together and identifies the overarching theme of everyday politics – becoming 'savvy',[47] self-conscious (Mead, 1992), implying a thorough understanding of the social act one is part of, along with all those involved in it; an ability to adjust to it and to affect outcomes[48] – an understanding that emerged after finalising Project 4, reflecting on the work in light of the previous projects, strongly influenced by the development of my thinking on the DMan. Only at this point am I able to discern the relationship between all projects, apparently heading in various directions, to which several changes in my work situation added significantly. An experience in line with the theory underlying the DMan – complex responsive processes of relating, in which emergence, emerging patterns, are taken to be significant. This emergence of insights, learning from experience, points to the close connection between the method – narrative inquiry, in which reflection and reflexivity are of major importance – and making sense of my daily practice; hence method extends beyond the methodology section and appears in both project summaries and their critical evaluation. It is exactly this strong emphasis on developing reflectivity and reflexivity – from defining my 'starting-point' in Project 1, how I came to think the way I did at the time – that is key. I want to underline *at the time*, even though this is only three years ago, as I believe that the intensity of the DMan group sessions, learning-set discussions and extensive reading appeal greatly to developing this critical stance, which is, I dare say, what changed me, and consequently my practice. This movement of my thinking is clearly noticeable in the writing of the four projects, which have therefore not been rewritten for this thesis.

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[47] I have deliberately chosen this rather colloquial wording, explained under *third argument.*
[48] Extended under *third argument*, subheading *self-conscious.*

In the following, I

- Summarise the four projects, address these in hindsight and point to the overarching theme
- Critically evaluate the research in light of the overarching theme
- Discuss the research method and its relation to change in my practice
- Elaborate on my contribution to knowledge and practice.

PROJECT SUMMARY AND RE-EVALUATION

Project 1

For Project 1, I was invited to look back upon my (professional) life to gain insights on how my thinking had been influenced and evolved over time, to the point where I started the DMan, and make sense of developments over the first six months of the course.

I approached Project 1 systemically, chronologically, and noticed now how fragmented it is. I merely touched upon highly complex matters such as the Protestant ethic (Weber, 2002), negotiation of values and ethics in interaction between people (Griffin, 2002) and leadership, where I contrasted the notion of a leader as someone who is able to take the attitude of others to themselves, in such a way that others can recognise themselves therein (Mowles, 2011: 114), as opposed to someone *incorporating* leadership traits. The project highlighted the different environments I have been, and still am, part of: technical, design and education. These seemed to emphasise different ways of approaching work (and life). Despite these experiences, my tendency to work systemically towards ideal goals persisted.

The project became more engaging from the point where I reflected on a narrative depicting my experiences as a team leader, in which my idealised picture of how we *ought* to work, teach and set up the department led to a crisis with team members. I explored too many topics, leading to a shallow understanding of the situation. It was valuable to review the experience, making sense of it in hindsight. I recognised key issues: *trust*, *expert status*, *envy*, *restraining/enabling* and

inclusion/exclusion, and developed an elementary understanding of how my way of working had excluded colleagues and diminished the trust that is essential to cooperation (Ostrom, 2009), which in turn made me recognise the 'expert' status many teachers appear to be comfortable with. I concluded Project 1 by defining four main issues that I, once more, explored briefly: *freedom*, *power*, *certainty* and *learning*.

Revisiting Project 1 for the progression viva, I noticed how I could have triggered envy, undermining collaboration; how my systemic set-up and call for transparency had not only enabled but also restrained my colleagues; and finally, how I shared responsibility for the crises and my own exclusion.

While developing Project 1, I began to grasp the radically social nature of the situations I was attempting to make sense of, and started to gain insights regarding the DMan method, which turned out somewhat different than I had anticipated. I had expected a format for writing, clear tables and graphics to enlighten complex theory, such as I was used to having myself and creating for students (and colleagues, for that matter).

At this point I acknowledge that my systemic stance – focusing on planning and fixed goals – was blocking my view of what was going on at work. What I disregarded, by and large, was the extent to which interdependency and interrelatedness between people, their intentions and expectations, influence the process – culminating in the crises I had experienced. Perhaps my reluctance to explore power, and to acknowledge that power (which I had viewed as negative) and freedom (which I valued highly) are paradoxically enabling and restraining at the same time, was an indication of not wanting to dig too deep in the messiness of everyday working life. I took no interest in political games, which I considered to be negative, even abusive. I wanted everything to be transparent, honest; in 'typical' Dutch style, I wanted to be able to 'tell it like it is'. I did not allow myself to deal with the fact that the interplay of power is an inevitable aspect of human interaction: it is relational and dynamic, and may enable or restrain movement. We all have our own intentions and presuppositions, which constitute political stances. I preferred to

ignore this and tried to stay 'out of the game', not realising that I had no choice but to be a player in it.

I intended to inquire into experience-based learning and issues around its implementation in Project 2 – *managing* change, which I expected to learn on the DMan and assumed would help me to prevent or control further crises. This, I believed, would be beneficial, with direct practical benefits for my work.

Project 2

Project 2 delved into my experiences at a Thai university where I worked as a project manager, attempting to develop and implement a life-long learning project – I had left Europe for Asia a year earlier.

I began to develop an understanding of the social context of learning, and became so absorbed in this that it prevented me from recognising other themes emerging in my narratives, fragments of a three-day symposium, organised by the R&D department I worked for – an event that seemed to emphasise issues I encountered in my daily practice. I mainly used the narratives of the – from my perspective at the time, rather chaotically and ad-hoc run – symposium, to illustrate my experiences of lack of clarity and insecurity.

As I struggled through several iterations, unable to connect theory and narrative, my learning set pointed to the emergent issues of *freedom* and *culture*, which at the time seemed frighteningly complex to me. As soon as I dared to let go of my 'practical' subject and re-read the narrative, the importance of experience (Dewey, 1997) changed within the context of the project, from educational learning to taking my own experiences seriously. By exploring my unfamiliar environment in this light, I touched upon stereotypes, generalisations, and the concept of the 'generalised other' (Mead, 1992) and concluded that in order to acquire a deeper understanding, I would have to 'endure a condition of mental unrest and disturbance … maintain the state of doubt' (Dewey, 1910: 13) – which, in hindsight, I believe I did.

My understanding of matters I found 'typically Thai' changed significantly, not so many things were 'typical' to the Thai. Exploring globalisation (something of a 'container concept') revealed that on the one hand this might affect Thai matters, but

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could also stimulate strengthening of traditions and create fusions of old and new – the 'identity remix' (Rao et al., 2013). Appreciating the strong influence of Buddhism on Thai society and noting that regardless of an individual Thai's loyalties, most Thais share Buddhist values and norms – though these may be interpreted very differently – underlined my growing understanding of norms and values (ethics) not as fixed, but rather as negotiated in social acts.

I looked into hierarchy-defining signs, gestures and settings – such as those connected with karma (Knowles Morrison, 2010), which make it difficult to selfishly better one's position; discussed differences in the language used in various hierarchical layers (Keating, 2009); and explored the ambiguity of my position in the hierarchy and the possibility of being used as a scapegoat (Jackall, 2010).

I proceeded to examine educational issues, drawing a parallel between the power relations in Thai education – where the locus of control I thought lay mainly with the teacher – and the manager/subordinate relationship in the Thai workplace. Despite my reluctance, I felt I needed to explore power. I came to understand that as power relationships shift for various reasons, they are continuously renegotiated, yet both teacher-manager and student-subordinate may choose to sustain the relation unchanged – which may appear oppressive, but perhaps actually offers a more comfortable arrangement for all concerned. It became clear that my solutions were not necessarily straightforward, and carried no guarantee of success in this environment (if any). I had not recognised these power figurations (Elias, 2001) as part of politics at the time, enabling a way of working together while maintaining the – possibly preferred – image of the expert-teacher and submissive student.

Briefly exploring respect, embarrassment and conflict avoidance, I concluded that intentions for both seeking and avoiding conflict are perceived very differently, and not specific to certain nationalities: gestures taken up as signs of respect by one person might be perceived as disrespectful by another, giving rise to potentially serious issues in collaborative work.

Lastly I explored culture. Noting that people tend to use the generalisations and 'simple toolbox' described by Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997) and Hofstede (1991), I acknowledged that such an approach offers only an elementary

level of understanding unfamiliar environments; although facts and figures clearly have value, they cannot entirely reflect the complex notion of culture as e.g. Geertz describes it (1973). Furthermore, I learned that making assumptions from (context-less) data could lead to creating false generalisations (Tufte, 1974).

Mead's writings helped me to make sense of the notion of culture I started to develop, described as locally defined ways of gesturing and responding (1992). Moreover, I began to see how human emotions are not bound to a specific culture, except perhaps insofar as influencing their expression/suppression. To comprehend someone from another culture, one must develop an understanding of their unique mix of sign languages. Even with someone from a similar background, bringing specific signs of their family, schools, businesses etc., it takes time to reach the point 'when the community reaction has been imported into the individual' and 'there is a new value in experience and a new order of response' (ibid: 194).

I noticed how our tendency to treat our everyday work environment as familiar creates a sense of security, belonging; however, in doing so, opportunities for thorough inquiry into our experiences might be missed. I concluded that unknown cultures (groups) might serve as something of a magnifying glass, enabling us to identify and gain better understanding of issues that may be less noticeable in more familiar environments.

I mentioned Elias's game theory (1978: 71-103) once, almost coincidentally, to make sense of power differentials; I did not relate this to culture, but could have drawn these together. I came to see culture as locally defined (Mead, 1992) and let go of the narrow notion of national culture; culture then became related to groups, groups behaving and speaking in certain ways, developing significant symbols, ethics and values, *habitus* (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 13), which could be labelled as (explicit and implicit) rules to play local 'games'. In an environment as unfamiliar as the Thai university was to me, language was certainly an obstacle; however, rules (especially implicit) of social behaviour were of even greater importance, as these defined *appropriateness* of gestures (ibid: 142) (Project 3). Working on the life-long learning project, I had been unable to form an understanding of games and the roles of players – let alone of the players I was not

even aware were partaking, of whom I only caught glimpses. Given that no one has a precise overview of the ongoing games and rules (politics) in our increasingly complex environments, as these are continuously (re)negotiated and co-constructed in social acts, paying attention to everyday social interaction is evidently crucial to gaining a 'feel for the game'. I understand now how this is more valuable than what I once saw as more 'practical' topics.

If I had viewed the group I was part of *as if* game-players playing *local* games this might have prevented me, to some degree, from being blinded by cultural generalisations, taken-for-granted assumptions and prejudices. Paying close attention to our interaction, what it was we were doing (or not doing) together, and our dynamic interdependencies, might have led to insights – 'political savvy' – that would have been helpful for functioning in this particular group.

Project 3 – *The need for recognition: Joining and leaving organisational groups*
Relocating from the Netherlands to Asia and back to Switzerland (start of Project 3) felt important: these experiences seemed to provide me with research opportunities on moving in and out of groups and cultures – situations similar to those that people frequently encounter in organisations, possibly impacting collaboration and performance, which I thought could lead to generalisable findings.

I explored my anxiety during the last period of working on the life-long learning project and how my resignation (or, as it later turned out, dismissal) came about. The narratives I introduced were logbook fragments; I seemed to foresee difficulties recalling the many puzzling and anxiety-provoking events. Each entry led to an inquiry into a topic related to recognition, which had become the overarching theme; the impact these experiences, and the transition from Thailand to Switzerland, had on my sense of belonging, had revealed this relatedness.

I studied recognition in relation to personal space, inclusion/exclusion, communication, uncertainty and establishment. I looked into what it meant being in an environment that I perceived very differently from how my Thai colleagues seemed to experience it, and explored the experiential character of space – impacting possibilities for interaction, influencing a sense of belonging. I inquired into communication as essential to becoming part of a group; essential to communication

is *meaning* – entailing an understanding of signs and gestures, forming and being formed in social acts (Mead, 1992). This was extremely difficult in this unfamiliar group, for which Bourdieu's notion of language as 'relations of symbolic power' (1992: 142), and his emphasis on the importance of speaking at 'the appropriate moment' (ibid.) were insightful as well. How apprehending the 'appropriate moment' is closely related to having 'feel for the game', being politically savvy, had not dawned on me at the time.

In the Appendix to *1984*, Orwell (1987) helped me to understand the power of language by describing its stripping, disabling reasoned arguments by the unavailability of words – showing me how personally and historically multi-interpretive language is.

I came to understand how my work in Thailand lacked importance because I had been unable to share it with the group. I probably also had a more pressing need to be included at work – not only as I lacked a strong social network outside the workplace, but also success at work implied social competencies, which in turn might enhance social status outside the workplace.

Exploring the impact of anxiety caused by uncertainty, on me personally, deepened my appreciation for efforts made to control it, to enable people to work; however understanding that uncertainty is itself a prerequisite for novelty 'the future is radically uncertain … novelty arises in self-organising, local interaction and the exploration of difference, even conflict' (Mowles, 2011: 240), revealed uncertainty is a paradoxical notion.

Examining my ambivalence towards wanting to resign and my simultaneous resistance to the idea, which related to letting the group and myself down (losing face), I noted that despite the difficult circumstances, we had in fact established a relationship: I needed the affirmation of the group, and it is very likely that they had needed mine (Elias, 1991).

I delved into the notion of the 'outsider' – the word implying that we can be *out*side the group, which turned out to be problematic as we are always part of 'complex responsive processes of relating' (Stacey, Griffin and Shaw, 2000), forming the group and being formed by it at the same time. I proposed non-spatial

alternatives: *disestablished, un-* or *non-established*, the temporal *pre-established*, as the degree of inclusion/exclusion is not static but will continuously be negotiated in specific circumstances; whereas the notion of 'included' versus 'excluded/outsider' suggested a strict divide, even a border that could be clearly drawn.

Probing complexity in relation to groups led to an 'Aha!' moment regarding the DMan's call for reflection and reflexivity. I concluded that it had been fruitless to try and *fully* understand my foreign work environment; it might have been helpful instead to concentrate on the people I was involved with and their relations. By focusing my efforts on recognising these people, I might have had a better chance of building a relationship.

The central theme, recognition, revealed that without this, collaboration and cooperation become highly problematic and no clear or practical method or project approach can overcome this. When the symbols we use call out responses in us, and the aroused responses in all of us are the same, we can get a mental content, or a self (Mead, 1992: 149); recognising similar responses, understanding each other, affirming each other, establishes our-selves.

In my research presentation on the July 2013 residential, I stated: 'I lost my self'. On the DMan I had not recognised what people were talking about, the concepts discussed and unexpected responses called out by my gestures in our ongoing social acts – just as in Thailand I had not recognised people's symbols, their subtle gestures. Struggling with Project 2 and preparing the presentation, an understanding of what complex responsive processes of relating entails emerged; I felt as though I found a DMan-self. More importantly, in writing Project 3, exploring recognition (Honneth, 1995) equipped me with an understanding of the social construct of self, as formed by and forming the group; I find myself continuously in different environments and groups. 'The self is essentially a social process going on with these two distinguishable phases [I and me]'[49] (Mead, 1992: 178)).

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[49] '"I" both calls out the "me" and responds to it' (Mead, 1992: 178)

Interestingly, I did not mention the 'game' in the summary of Project 3 for the progression viva, where it came up literally in the form of the Plastic Power Game I played at an innovative management meeting. Here, the rules were not given and the game's meaning was left unclear; these were established by negotiation both during and after the game, when we evaluated it together as a group. Some people were upset not to be told what to do; it seemed that those who just started playing and paid close attention to what emerged, responding to that, did not mind so much. I believe I have overlooked the significance of this section. What I appear to have been concentrating on in Project 3 are the 'rules' for playing 'the game of mutual recognition', and not so much the social construct and interdependence of these rules forming and being formed by games and players at the same time. I believe this is why the project appears somewhat fragmented. In the Plastic Power Game, people's political stances – their intentions and expectations – emerged and developed as we negotiated meaning for the coloured plastic chips we had been given at the start. This became especially apparent from the moment we designated the chips as representing groups/departments of people. Focusing on the interaction, on what emerged in the social act, our political stances – instead of remaining preoccupied with what *the* rules could be and which meaning the game *had* – seemed to be less anxiety-provoking, perhaps more effective. When only paying attention to the rules, neglecting the social act in which meaning emerges and political stances may become (slightly) apparent, one may miss out on: learning the game while playing it – this is at the heart of my argument and Project 4.

Project 4 – *Career coaching: a strategic game for constructing 'Photoshopped' images of self*
I planned to explore the experience of leaving groups involuntarily – a theme that had emerged in Project 3, as I had experienced my dismissal, and the job-seeking period that followed, to be anxiety-provoking and severely impacting my sense of self. However, both the DMan faculty and myself regarded my unemployment as problematic, as our method is based on narratives describing *professional situations*

in the workplace. My supervisor, learning set and I were not convinced I could offer such narratives in my circumstances. To address this problem, it was suggested that I adapt the method: instead of writing narratives, I should interview people. This struck me as a good solution.

The interviews went fine; people were interested in taking part, and quite open. The sense-making, however, was more difficult: in many cases, I could not connect to other's experiences in the same manner as I could to my own – at least, not in the question-and-answer interview form. My narratives, and refection/reflexion on these, allowed me to relive my experiences, which proved a powerful way of exploring.[50]

Something bothered me, apart from the methodological issues: I felt I had maintained a strong connection to organisational life, and sensed I still had something important to relate. As a job-seeker, something in the career-coaching trajectory seemed to disturb me. I drew parallels between how this was set up, strategically, and the specific use of language and enhancement of identity that I had experienced in organisations. After presenting an argument for scrutinising this to my supervisors and learning set, we agreed this could be a worthwhile exploration.

I described my struggle finding a job in Switzerland, hiring a job coach, and the friction there seemed to be between how I began to understand organisational life, as complex responsive processes of relating, and the way I was instructed to write up strictly specified application files. My narrative related an event, arranged by a network for job-seeking expat spouses, where the host company was introduced in a 'glossy brochure' manner – presenting an image rather similar to those that we, job-seekers, needed to co-create for ourselves to 'become marketable'. Most of the text and talk at the event seemed to be highly abstract and idealised – something that became clear in the mock-interview I depicted, where I noticed how this made it difficult to form an understanding of the experiences the mock-applicant related. The panel discussion I was on at the end of the event, where I replied to questions of job-seekers from my experience, from 'within', and the recognition I got from the

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[50] I elaborate on this in the method section.

audience, pointed to this strategic text and talk as not only helpful, but possibly anxiety-provoking.

Being unemployed created a strong urge for me to describe my double role as a job-seeker/researcher, as I thought this might influence the project. I experienced my position as involved and detached at the same time. To form a better understanding, I explored Elias' notion of involved/detachment (1956). I found involved/detachment not to be balanced, as Elias suggests, but rather paradoxically present both at the same time – for which I found Mead's notion of 'delayed reaction' (1992: 98) enabling reflection *in the moment,* to be helpful. Furthermore I found that exploring my experience *as if* a game (Elias, 1978) (Bourdieu, 2003), enabled detachment to allow such sense-making (reflection/reflexivity). Such an approach, I would now say, is typical of my explorations of situations at work; a fairly accurate description for the reader of how this research is undertaken. Subsequently I introduced three main sections around issues I saw emerging: strategic management ideology (which I took career coaching to be based on), strategic career management text and talk, and strategically managed identity ('glossy' images).

In the section on strategic management ideology, I briefly explored its history and made a connection to the widespread belief that employability is enhanced by career coaching and approached most effectively through strategic planning and managing towards desired goals. I introduced Rose's notion of 'freely chosen lifestyle' (1999) in which career 'choice' plays an important part, and explored Bourdieu's notion of 'the game' (2003) to underline why people get involved and may stay involved in career coaching, despite experiencing anxiety. I inquired into how people seem to have become accustomed to working methodologically and often do not question this; how on the one hand guaranteed success is commonly claimed in advertising such procedures, yet experts admit they cannot guarantee any such thing.

The second section inquired into conversational patterns (Shaw, 2002) that seem closely connected with strategic management ideology. I explored the mixed language used in this context: on the one hand, in-control/confident statements, such as 'Preparing crystal clear analyses and briefing notes' (Intermediair, 2014); on the

other, euphemistic and provisional (Jackall, 2010) wording, such as '[Y]ou take sufficient account of the interests, positions and […]' (ibid.). Additionally there seemed to be a proliferation of the latest fashionable terms (Abrahamson, 1996), such as 'organisational sensitivity'. I concluded this mixed pattern of speaking and writing are a way of addressing or disguising the insecurity and uncertainty that are inevitably part of human interacting; painting an idealised picture of organisations, what it is we do together and ourselves in this context – which is thought to give leeway (Jackall, 2010), prevent failure (texts are multi-interpretable and can thus be explained differently when situations change, or one is accused of getting something wrong). However, these conversational patterns make it difficult to establish an understanding of what is going on for people as they form organisations and are simultaneously formed by them. One requires considerable 'reading-between-the-lines' skills, a 'feel for the game' (Bourdieu, 2003: 25) to enter into, become, or remain a successful part of an organisation.

The strategic approach (planning and managing towards predefined goals) and conversational patterns (of trendy, in-control/provisional wording) appeared to impact the way in which we, job-seekers, perceived our managed and mediated reality and ourselves as part of it; in the third section, I explored the implications of this on our sense of self. To remain employable, people need to develop; this is thought to be best achieved by strategically managing careers and creating 'sellable selves' (Fogde, 2011); viewing yourself as though you were a company (ibid.) or a product (Hancock and Tyler, 2004). In this approach, the career-pursuer alone, as a *leader*, is responsible for the success of this trajectory, which often leads to self-blame in case of failure (Sharone, 2013); the social environment, greatly impacting the possibility for success, is largely left out of the picture. Furthermore, the social construct of identity itself appeared to be disregarded in favour of recommending the construction of idealised images of self – subtly enhanced to meet contradicting prescriptions ('How To's') and unclear needs (of targeted positions and potential employers), and impressive enough to stand out against the anticipated strong competition. The iterative and subtle ways in which images were (re-)created for every aspired position seemed to lead to an effect similar to plastic surgery:

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something felt unnatural but was difficult to pinpoint, leading to a subtle yet indefinable sense of alienation from self that caused anxiety for people immersed in this ongoing process.

I should add that all three processes – strategic approaches, the co-creation of certain conversational patterns, and 'glossy' identity co-creation – are political, in the sense that people have developed them with certain intentions and expectations.

The focus in Project 4 was on strategic management ideology and conversational patterns, and ultimately what this meant for our professional selves; the metaphor of the 'game' was useful, enabling detachment to develop an understanding of the rules. What only afterwards became apparent was that this game perspective turned out to be the research's connecting link: everyday politics. Indeed, these findings had considerable implications for my understanding of politics, relations between the topics and 'political savvy'.

CRITICAL EVALUATION OF THE RESEARCH IN LIGHT OF THE OVERARCHING THEME

First argument: *Strategic text and talk is used to simplify or cover over complexity in organisations, idealise what it is we do together, in order to maintain a sense of control.*

Specific conversational patterns emerged in Project 4 as a theme of importance to this thesis. This section connects explorations of language in the preceding projects with these findings, to arrive at a deeper understanding of language, and of the influence certain patterns may have on our perception of self, our organisations and what it is we do in working together.

I started the DMan expecting to learn, be given tools, to manage change. I thought at the time that language – or rather, communication – was an important obstacle in

processes of change and that learning to communicate more clearly and effectively would help me reach goals. In Project 1, I made a general[51] note about feeling frustrated, 'being unable to put into words exactly what I felt or thought', and attributed this inability to 'a lack of education and knowledge [of grammar, vocabulary]'. I introduced Wittgenstein – I had created typographic designs of sections of his *Remarks on Colour* in art school – whose writings, according to Bannet, were to 'remind me' (1997: 668) that language is intended to be inexact, undecided. For me, this was not a reminder; it was more of a wake-up-call – at the time a good enough explanation for the difficulties I encountered when people interpreted my words quite differently from what I wanted to convey. Concluding that people listen 'through a filter', a 'predefined set of expectations about the conversation, the topic, about me', I did not take it further. However, this became the start of an exploration of language throughout this research. The topic emerged repeatedly, gradually developing my understanding to arrive at a complex notion of language, and more importantly of meaning, not as *embedded in* our words, but as emergent in ongoing social acts of gesture and response.

> Just as in fencing the parry is an interpretation of the thrust, so, in the social act, the adjustive response of one organism to the gesture of another is the interpretation of that gesture by that organism – it is the meaning of that gesture. (Mead, 1992: 78).

'Interpretation' is different from the 'filter' I was thinking of. The filter would suggest that people only let parts that match their expectations seep through while others are blocked out, consciously or unconsciously. Emergence of meaning however, interpretation in the social act, is not necessarily 'filtering' anything out, but rather an altered or new meaning *arising* between us. It is thus based on the same words, influenced by our expectations, experience, and understanding of significant symbols – a vocal gesture that evokes socially created, similar responses in groups of people (Mead, 1992: 71). Another word that I now find problematic is 'predefined':

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[51] Not only referring to professional life.

this suggests a set of rigid, consciously chosen, identifiable expectations. Yet – as became clear in Project 1 – we are often unaware of our own presumptions; indeed, investigating mine is a continuous and ongoing process.

We may rehearse scenarios of planned conversations, but experience demonstrates that we can never prepare fully. As conversations unfold, meaning arises and changes; our expectations may become apparent and are likely to alter in the process as well. Often I have found myself wondering, after a well-prepared discussion: how did we come to talk about what we ended up talking about? We participate in negotiating meaning, and altered or new significance may arise in the social act of communicating:

> [I]t does not become significant to the individuals who are involved in the act unless the tendency to the act is aroused within the individual who makes it, and unless the individual who is directly affected by the gesture puts himself in the attitude of the individual who makes the gesture. (ibid: 81)

In order to form an understanding of what it is we are actually talking about we need to participate, engage. We need to try to make out, through paying close attention to what we call out in the other and what they evoke in us, meaning that arises in our ongoing social act and how this develops. In order to do so we have to attempt to 'take the attitude of the other to ourselves', particularise the rather general picture we have formed of the people we are communicating with and the topic we are exploring, refine our understanding of their positions, expectations, presumptions, and at the same time develop increasing awareness of our own. This goes to show the complexity of the social act, in which meaning

> can be described, accounted for, or stated in terms of symbols or language at its highest and most complex stage of development (the stage it reaches in human experience), but language simply lifts out of the social process a situation which is logically or implicitly there already. The language symbol is simply a significant or conscious gesture. (ibid: 79)

We use language to describe how we perceive situations we find ourselves in; through using words – significant symbols – we negotiate what this means to us,

usually to arrive at a common, or mutually acceptable, understanding. This in turn provides a kind of reference point for the further development of our conversations; at work, for instance, in our exploration of plans and goals.

Clear talk

We talk of change processes in terms of concepts, goals, plans, keywords… each of which evokes a wide variety of interpretations – such as how change should be brought about, what the outcomes should be, the necessity of it all, and so on. In an attempt to minimise ambiguity, often 'simple' goals are defined, with the trajectory towards them broken down into small, manageable steps; straightforward statements are drafted, clear visuals are designed. However, my professional experiences have shown that such simplifications (usually idealisations) of what we aimed to achieve did not prevent a multitude of interpretations from arising. When speaking in groups about straightforward plans, we would find ourselves discussing what certain crucial terms – such as 'transparency'– meant to us; how being 'transparent' about how we worked might affect us and our work, perhaps inhibiting our individual freedom to adjust to specific circumstances or groups. Many plans were made assuming only a narrowly favourable meaning of keywords – thus, as Orwell suggested in the *Appendix of 1984* (1987) (Project 3), creating a vocabulary that precludes any 'other mode of thought' and severs all links with the past, an arduous and highly questionable aim.

In my practice, I have yet to encounter a document that evoked just a single interpretation; even the seemingly simplest, clearest note could call out unexpected responses. We cannot escape the complexity of communication, and we can never fully oversee how participants in the social act that we try to describe are influenced, how the numerous interdependent relationships we all have, that form and are formed by our political stances, intentions and expectations, impact our sense-making.

Appropriate talk

Through exploring my difficulties with a foreign language in Project 2, which seemed obviously difficult as it concerned Thai language, a more general

understanding emerged. Looking back I see how the Thai language provided me with a literal example of multiple meaning, as pronouncing a word differently could change its meaning completely, which could lead to extremely embarrassing situations. The importance of speaking at the appropriate moment became apparent, something for which extensive knowledge of language is not enough; it is vital to have a thorough understanding of the specific circumstances, and of the culture (the customs and values of the group one converses with) of the social act one is engaged in.

> [L]earning a language is to learn the appropriate moment, *kairos*, for saying the appropriate thing. (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 142)

This is why 'political savvy' is of major importance, as understanding when it is appropriate to say something is closely connected with having 'feel for the game' (Bourdieu, 2003: 25). Being able to assess the situation by taking the attitude of the other to yourself (Mead, 1992) – forming an understanding of their expectations and intentions, while deepening awareness of your own – provides insights into how your gesturing and responding may be taken up and can influence outcomes.

The barrier that language can form, as a radically social concept, has taken on a different meaning for me. Using the wrong words may be funny in some situations, but can be extremely insulting or embarrassing in others. Lack of 'political savvy' in this particular 'game' can make it hard for us to recognise others' responses, making it difficult to establish close collaboration.

Conversational patterns

I have also explored specific language use and patterns of conversation in Project 4. Patterns that appeared to create rather confident text and talk, perhaps to mask the uncertainty and not knowing due to complexity of human relating; or provisional and euphemistic wording (Jackall, 2010), which allows for different interpretation when circumstances change because of this complexity. Such interpretation is a highly political choice – as is simplifying and idealising text and talk about what we do working together, and adding a trendy ring to it, in order to appear to be at 'the forefront of management practice' (Abrahamson, 1996), (Birnbaum, 2000).

In the career coaching trajectory, I now view my own use of these rather confident/ambiguous terms as a way of bluffing: to impress recruiters and myself, disguise my uncertainty and anxiety, and convey authority; the language used implies that I would certainly be in control in the position I was applying for. Similarly, when working on branding as a graphic designer and communication officer, we would discursively create an image designed to convince target audiences of competence, reliability, trustworthiness, transparency, or any other concept that we anticipated future clients of our principal would be seeking. Even at the time, I knew this was a kind of game we played; however, I did not acknowledge it as such – perhaps because openly showing awareness of this might diminish the value, impact and credibility of the images we produced. I now recognise this as being politically savvy: understanding the game of keeping up appearances, but not disclosing this understanding, so that we could go on and profit from 'winning'. We did not fool ourselves; I believe everyone involved was aware of the superficiality of it all, and – like my glossy résumé – the images did boost self-confidence to some extent (enabling me to apply to similarly glossy job-advertisements). Perhaps in management circles, where our organisational world is depicted as extremely demanding, competitive, even hostile, we may believe that we depend on such images if we are to be recognised as competent; as a reliable, in-control partner.

Careful wording

We generally recognise the patterns, the fashionable words, and probably take these for granted because 'everybody does it' and 'everybody' has come to expect it; we play similar political games. We seem to overlook that these words may make it difficult to form an understanding of who the person *behind* the resume is,[52] what the work so formidably described actually entails, and what the organisation we make up as a group of people, described in such fabulous terms, means to us (next section). The lack of social context in these patterns of conversation appears to evoke a sense

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[52] I emphasise 'behind' because at times it felt as though I found myself behind the discursively co-created image, covered over by it, covering myself over with it.

of alienation (Project 4). However, describing our social context – which forms ourselves and is formed by it, as is our work and the organisations we form – in great detail, even if it were possible, would not provide a conclusive solution, as no one can give a clear and definitive account of the complexity of human relating and interdependence. Even when reading a text in solitude, we interpret it socially: interrelated with 'generalised others' (Mead, 1992), the 'audience' (Goffman, 1959-1990) we take the text to be written for and/or that we are part of, we make sense of it from our own specific political stance. Meaning arises differently for every reader – as it does even for the author, when re-reading it.

The fact we can never be absolutely certain of how meaning is intended and interpreted, however, does not relieve us from our individual responsibility for what we write or say. As concluded in Project 4, language is action (Austin, 2009), action that mediates our perception of reality (Mead, 1992). When our perception of reality changes or becomes more difficult to derive meaning from, this impacts how we find ourselves as part of reality. We therefore need to choose our words carefully, keeping in mind any unintended effects they may have. Although simplified texts, schematics and graphics depicting complex processes can be insightful, we must keep paying attention to how we interpret these, and negotiate meaning with the people we work with to enable mutual recognition.

Second argument: *Strategically constructed identities, images of people, organisations and the work we produce together, created by 'airbrushing' away the messiness of everyday politics, can be potentially alienating.*
This section initially builds on my findings in Project 4, where I explored my experience of a career coaching trajectory. I go on to establish a connection with the fields I worked in prior to education (Project 1): technique, where I familiarised myself with strategic approach, strict planning and control through ISO procedures; and (as already mentioned) graphic design and marketing communication, where identities/images were created with a view to aligning people with these – considered an easily achievable goal. I go on to describe how my understanding of identity and meaning-making has changed, how this altered my view on anxiety and sense of

alienation, and in what ways this appears related to the messiness of everyday politics.

Marketable identities

I begin the prologue of Project 4 by describing my situation, leading to my engagement with career coaching:

> Returning from Thailand to Europe (not to my home country the Netherlands, but to live with my new partner in a small town in the French-speaking part of Switzerland), my life felt as though it was turned upside-down. I was co-habiting for the first time in years; I became financially dependent because, for the first time in my adult life, I did not earn an income. I had no social network, did not speak the local language, and the cold greyness of Swiss wintertime seemed to close me off from the world. Although I felt appreciated by my partner, I felt insignificant.

In light of this perception of my situation and my-self, I was in need of security – someone or something to help me find my way back into organisational life; the career coach came highly recommended. Initially, the strategic approach gave me the sense of direction I craved; but over time, anxiety returned. Project 4 enlightened me on how my discursively co-created 'marketable identities', the outcome of this process, seemed to aggravate my stress.

I believe my long-term familiarity with strategic approaches, strict and prescriptive guidelines, disinclined me from questioning them. In education in the Netherlands I had structured my department, developed similar guidelines for how we *ought* to teach/coach and work as a team (Project 1), and used the same approach for the life-long learning pilot (Thailand, Projects 2 and 3). Creating images for organisations as a designer and thereafter expecting people *within* an existing organisation to flexibly adapt to this new look and feel, while persuading customers *outside* to subscribe to it, by using strategic marketing and communication, encouraged me to view these 'sellable selves'(Fogde, 2011) as something that would work. Yet my growing anxiety in the seemingly straightforward career-coaching trajectory began to alert me to the possibility that this approach, which I had

encountered in many organisations I had worked in/with, was not without side effects.

My experiences and this research changed my understanding of identity significantly: starting from a view of identity as something fairly fixed and reliable, through the notion of strategically constructible suitable images, arriving finally at an understanding of socially co-created selves, iteratively adaptive to particular and specific circumstances. In the previous section I have discussed the discursive construction of identities by using certain patterns of conversation. In Project 1, I wrote about 'looking upon an organisation as if it were a person', creating identities as a designer. This went beyond the use of words: the idealised image would personify values – with the ethics captured in photographs, images in documents, intended to help people in organisations to adopt and act according to these compelling 'corporate-identity elements' (as we called them). On my third residential, when this was called into question, I cited Griffin on ethics in Project 1:

> [E]thical meaning continually emerges in the interaction itself. Ethics are being negotiated in the interaction. (Griffin, 2002: 182)

I remarked that this sounded 'more plausible' and made clear to me how these 'fixed values and ethics' caused problems in everyday practice; I now think I had only just begun to grasp the full implications.

In Project 4 I explored how the career coaching trajectory and the documents I produced depicting my 'sellable self' (Fogde, 2011) began to cause anxiety. Fogde states that 'practices of writing a CV and preparing for job interviews' are generally understood as 'an instrumental project which is to be managed and achieved' (79). Yet, similar to my own experience, her research revealed such practices as 'a multifaceted process characterized by tensions' (78). I have explained that confident wording boosted my self-confidence initially, which may have helped me to build and maintain a sense of control; but in the iterative process, the words seemed to drift away from how I experienced, and would talk about, myself – the images we co-created began to provoke an uneasy sense of alienation. With the proper words, we created 'airbrushed' images and jointly covered over my unwanted particularities,

imperfections, to fit the apparently desired formula for each position. The notion of the *perfect candidate* arose – an image I could no longer relate to. I was anxious about sustaining the illusion in an interview (Project 4): the 'crucial concern' of 'whether it [my presentation of myself] will be credited or discredited' (Goffman, 1959-1990: 245).

Surveying identity

The polished images that the career coach and I produced were in essence based on the description I had provided initially. To complete the picture, I followed her suggestion of inviting ex-colleagues to choose three words that described me best. This approach was similar to many of the branding trajectories I had been involved in: we often started by conducting surveys to find out how those representing the principal currently saw the organisation and what they thought clients wanted/needed, then formulated a new proposed image based on this information. The exploration of my own image co-creation demonstrated how this popular approach can backfire, perhaps partly explaining the resistance I had encountered time and again when following the process: participants can become aware of a painful gap between the ideal future image and how people *forming* the organisation actually experience their current group image. What seems to be lost in translation is the complex social creation and multifaceted perception of identities, according to Taylor:

> Because of the very nature of the human condition – that we can only define ourselves in exchange with others, those who bring us up, and those whose society we come to see as constitutive of our identity – our self-understanding always places us among others. The placements differ greatly, and understanding these differences and their change is the stuff of history. (Taylor, 1992: 257)

This implies that we cannot understand ourselves other than in relation to many others. Bourdieu takes this complex notion even further (Project 3):

> If it is indeed true that the real is relational, then it is quite possible that I know nothing of an institution about which I think I know everything, since it is nothing outside of its relations to the whole. (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 232)

The surveys we used to gain information on how we were perceived *outside* the organisation were often simple questionnaires, with multiple-choice answers narrowing response options – probably a political choice, in order to engage outside parties and reassure them of their importance, while controlling the results. We ended up with a shortlist of words describing who *we* (the personification of our organisation) were, should become; words that, as described in the previous section, are endlessly ambiguous, yet were portrayed as though they had just one appropriate meaning. Our dynamic relations and interdependencies to these respondents were given no room to play a significant part in these methodologies.

This bears a close resemblance to change trajectories, where a goal is similarly based on a start picture (Where are we now?) and a finish picture (Where do we want to be?) and is often described in similar conversational patterns. In many cases, a new/adapted organisational culture/identity is thought necessary to *make* the change – apparently based on a strong underlying assumption that organisational identity and culture is manageable (Project 4). 'Knowing nothing' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) about our institution at the outset of such a trajectory – not unlike how I perceived myself and my situation (section introduction) – is extremely anxiety-provoking, even more so if we cannot conceive of our future image; and entertaining this line of thought in daily organisational life may indeed be paralysing. It is therefore quite understandable that in order to deal with this, matters have become simplified, complex interrelatedness and interdependency are mostly left out of the picture, and a belief has been co-created and nourished that we *can* manage identities:

> 'Human nature' into which one was born was replaced [during the Renaissance] with 'identity' which one needs to saw up and make fit. (Bauman, 2002: 3)

However, as my experience of the career coaching trajectory has shown, such an identity – shaped to fit what we perceive of others' expectations – could subtly begin

to feel like a misfit, stirring up the anxiety that we have been trying to control. The glossy images I encountered of jobs and organisations made it extremely difficult to form an understanding: only glimpses of the complexity of the job challenge, or the organisation and its relations and interdependencies, were occasionally discernible – which again is likely to be a political choice.

'Airbrushing' away complexity

We make use of words that reflect a sense of control, words with which we discursively create glossy images of our work, ourselves and our organisations. What we are doing is simplifying, abstracting, idealising; 'airbrushing' away the complexity of human relating that forms and at the same time is formed by ourselves, our work and organisations. We attempt to deal with (or rather, disguise) the messiness of human relating; everyday politics – like the wrinkles, birthmarks, and scars of models – are airbrushed away in favour of emitting confidence and maintaining the illusion of control. As I concluded in Project 3, we may have different motivations for keeping up appearances, presenting ourselves more favourably (Goffman, 1959-1990), for example, during the hiring procedure, where recruiters usually paint a somewhat rosy picture (e.g. for the 'warm, open' group culture of their organisation) – not only to convince the applicant, but perhaps also to reassure themselves, show loyalty to other group members, avoid losing face etc.

We seem to tacitly acknowledge that admitting we are in fact muddling through daily organisational life most of the time – which is not a 'pretty sight' – is problematic, as it may arouse anxiety. We prefer to imagine that we can to some extent predict and control human relations and interpretations of the goals we set ourselves. However, what this research has brought me is an awareness of what may happen if the simplification, abstraction, idealisation, is carried too far; when messiness, social co-creation, is completely negated and identities become alienating – this in itself can also provoke anxiety.

If we cannot recognise ourselves at all in the glossy images we co-create of our work, our organisation, our relations, expectations, the intentions we have… then what are we actually doing together? When the meaning of our everyday 'messy' work and how we see ourselves reflected in it, how we experience our purpose in the

organisation we form and are formed by, feels as though it is not esteemed, then we may feel not esteemed, recognised; a basic need is not fulfilled.

> [T]here must be recognition for what he or she *does*. This is the general sphere of recognition Honneth calls esteem. (van den Brink and Owen, 2007: 196)

Third argument: *To become politically savvy, one needs to look beyond strategic text, talk and identities, acknowledge human plurality and take seriously everyday experiences of relating in our social work environment.*

Project 4, looking at my career coaching experience as if it were a game, developed my awareness of how certain patterns of text and talk, used for discursively co-creating identities, seemed to make it increasingly difficult to acquire the necessary 'feel for the game'. In Projects 1–3, the notion of metaphorical games did not seem of major importance until I reread all the projects for this thesis. It became clear that what I had been writing about was my sometimes naïve understanding of local games, people's political stances (including my own), in situations I found myself in. I appeared to have focused on getting the work done, and conveying the message, as clearly as possible; I was blinded, blinding myself, to the importance of everyday politics.

'Political savvy'

The reader may wonder why I have chosen the rather colloquial term '*political savvy'*. I have done so because I have come to understand that I can only become politically savvy by accepting that 'playing games' is inevitable – that is, engaging with, immersing in these, forming and being formed by these, in relation to others; players who are also shaping the games while simultaneously being formed by the games in which they are engaged. I have to become, in essence, *streetwise*; hence the colloquialism. I need to form an understanding of what people's intentions are, of their past experiences and future expectations, maintaining awareness of meaning as it arises in the social act, the 'living present' (Stacey, Griffin and Shaw, 2000). Meaning evolves that may affect our intentions and expectations in never-ending cycles of gesture and response; and by paying attention to these processes, we can learn what is likely to be 'appropriate' action (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) – even

though the outcomes cannot be accurately predicted (Arendt, 1998). 'Political savvy' means being aware of how we interrelate and are interdependent, how our 'power-figurations' (Elias, 2001) both enable and restrain us; understanding how taking account of each other's political stances, acting (as) (in)appropriately (as possible), can develop 'practical sense', 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 2003), enabling us to establish trust (Ostrom, 2009) and movement. Perhaps this is the movement we need, or believe we should be seeking; again, of this we can never be absolutely certain.

Human action

For forming an understanding of the cause of uncertainty of action, the writings of Arendt (1998) were helpful. Arendt explains the importance of human 'plurality' and the notion of action to politics:

> Plurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same as anyone else, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live. (Arendt, 1998: 8)

In Arendt's view, only human beings are capable of action, and action can only take place in the 'constant presence of others' (ibid: 23); action furthermore needs the 'disclosure of the agent in the act' (180). It cannot be separated from thought, as this would destroy 'validity and meaningfulness' (225): action cannot be interchanged with 'making', 'fabrication', where the 'image', 'shape (idea, *eidos*)' of the product-to-be (ibid.) is first perceived and subsequently the process of execution is started, since the notion of *making* suggests a dichotomy between thought and action (227). According to Arendt, political thinking, which interprets action 'in terms of making and fabrication' (228), leads to utopian schemes that 'broke down quickly under the weight of reality … of the human relationships they could not control' (227):

> [M]en never have been and never will be able to control reliably any of the processes they start through action … this incapacity to undo what has been done is matched by an almost equally complete incapacity to foretell the consequences of any deed or even have reliable knowledge of its motives. … The reason why we are never able to foretell with certainty the outcome and end of any action is simply that action has no end. (232-233)

As I noted earlier, entertaining this notion of inevitable uncertainty could lead to a reluctance to attempt doing anything – to paralysis, governed by understandable anxiety about the potential outcome, which lies beyond our control. However, we simply cannot do nothing at all; every choice – even nonaction – has consequences. Besides, we have natural drives to act – drives that we have learned to control, adept to socially acceptable ways of behaving through 'civilizing processes' (Elias, 2000). As we are social through and through, we need to relate to others in order to become a self (Burkitt, 2008-2013: 73). This in itself requires action: even refraining from making gestures affects social acts, since saying or doing nothing can be a very strong gesture. To cope with such inevitable uncertain circumstances it seems as though we can, largely, choose three approaches: (1) let go of planning and goals, just muddle through and see where we end up; (2) strictly follow a strategically planned route; or (3) follow a strategic route and adjust the path while we walk it, based on what emerges.

The first approach is problematic: we cannot just muddle through, given that we are driven to act. In our modern-day complex society, we may act in what we consider to be 'civilised' ways – that is, appropriate ways that form and are formed by the groups we are part of; we are always part of groups, even if only at the fringes. We may be able to lower our expectations or limit our intentions, but we cannot be entirely free of these. At the very least, we will have the basic intention to find food, the expectation of acquiring shelter. In order to fulfil our basic need of recognition (Honneth, 1995), our expectations and intentions must align with those of other group members; we need to belong to a group to be recognised. Even a group of homeless people, who seem not to participate in general society, are indeed a part of it – thus, perhaps by being at the fringes they may even define the boundaries of what we call 'our' society:[53] they co-create the image of what we consider acceptable in a complex society that is interrelated and interdependent with

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[53] I am hesitant to use this spatial metaphor for it suggests a closed whole, which 'it' is not, explained below.

a multitude of other groups – groups that dynamically overlap and mutually define/continuously re-create each other.[54]

In strategic change processes I have managed over the years, I thought I had been using the second approach: I felt the goal was clear, the road was defined, and we all shared the conviction that this was the way forward. I held on to the route, blocked escape routes, drew maps and posted signs, believing this to be the most effective way to direct the outcome; yet time and again, I found that people seemed to lose their enthusiasm, appearing to stray from – or even become completely opposed to – our agreed destination. Through this research, I have explored the many holes, bumps and blockages – the issues identified and explored in the projects, such as trust, recognition, power, freedom etc. – that I encountered en route, and showed that jumping over these and sticking to the path had not been helpful; that in fact, presenting the path and goal as reified object(ive)s, was itself problematic.

I can now see that I have always been taking the third approach, consciously or unconsciously: I did set goals, but – more importantly – I *have negotiated* paths and goals along the line with others; and, while playing the game, have developed trust in my own practical sense, reasoning, and formed an understanding of my 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 2003) – though, unfortunately, this was often rather basic. I know now that I will never be able to *fully* grasp the complexity of human relating; but I do seem to have developed my awareness of it.

Political beings

Why has it been so hard for me to identify politics as an overall topic? I believe this has a lot to do with my upbringing (c.f. Public Image Ltd lyrics) and the popular conception of politics as a negative, perhaps even malicious, phenomenon – as personified in the character of Francis Underwood, a ruthless politician, the leading role in the recent TV series *House of Cards*, whose one-liners express an attitude that many people take to represent, to some degree, what politics entails:

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[54] Hence no fixed boundaries.

Francis Underwood: 'The road to power is paved with hypocrisy. And casualties.'
(Oberfrank, 2013-2016)

Though such a character is clearly repellent, their 'maze brightness' – ability to see through others people's strategies, power relations, organisational structures – is impressive, allowing them always to be a few steps ahead. Adjusting the game to one's needs and goals, getting things done, being successful, are all useful and desirable; yet recognising that such insights can also be used ruthlessly to manipulate people, sometimes to the extent of extortion and destruction, makes it less appealing to accept that human beings are political beings.

The research significantly changed my understanding of what it means to be political and has enabled me to look back upon my work and acknowledge how much of it relates to politics, discussing political stances and behaviour (such as teachers' expert status in Project 2). I believe now this is quite simple: I cannot go about my work acting like an unruly child; I would not last a day. I need to act politically: that is, behave, speak appropriately, and act 'civilised' in order to be accepted, be recognised and recognise others in the groups we are formed by and forming. In any group that embraces strategic approaches, I need to find ways of working with that. I may push the limits of what we find acceptable, contest rules if I believe these should be open for discussion or change; but I must take into consideration other people's intentions and expectations if I want to remain a part of what we have established. Much of what I shared in my narratives is about how I have tried, succeeded and failed, to become established, to understand what was appropriate, trying to make sense of implicit/explicit rules, norms and values – often by using inappropriate manners, which led to encountering anger, disappointment, exclusion; in other words, I was acquiring a feel for the game in the playing of it, which as I have experienced does not come without scratches.

I am increasingly convinced that had I not focused mainly on following through on strategy, but instead paid more attention to what may have been going on, and developed my awareness through reflecting and being reflexive and adjusting my actions based on this, I might have co-established collaboration; or perhaps accepted failure more easily, understanding that my game was part of a 'game of

games' (Mowles, 2015) as my goals might unwittingly have obstructed the higher aims of more powerful groups. This was most probably the case with the Thai life-long learning project, where tacit intentions, I now believe, were very different from those that were shared with me – the picture presented, beyond which I could not see.

Self-conscious

In Project 3, I began to understand my own role in matters such as exclusion: I initially described this as being done *to* me, but gradually came to see exclusion as a social construction in which I played as much a part as others. I can now acknowledge how my exclusion was mainly caused by my inability to behave appropriately, as I had not found ways to form a more insightful understanding of the groups' norms and values, taking these too much at face value. The need I felt to be included also revealed that people who seem to cooperate or even collude with management can be motivated by something far more personal than the desire to achieve agreed team goals; they may have their own political agenda. Scott's four political discourses (1990: 18), which I only mentioned in the conclusion, would have been worth exploring in greater depth, as people's discourses could have enlightened me on 'infrapolitics' (ibid.) and might have helped me to form some understanding of political stances. Given the language barrier, I would have needed to focus mainly on non-verbal signs (plentiful in Thailand), bearing in mind that

> *linguistic relations are always relations of symbolic power* through which relations
> of force between the speakers and their respective groups are actualized in a
> transfigured form. (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 142)

I needed to 'reflect on ideas that are formed based on the situation' I found myself in, 'past experience and future expectations' (Project 4, *involvement and detachment*); however, my experiences and expectations seemed out of synch with the unfamiliar environment.

I explored self-consciousness in Project 4, paraphrased in the following:

Mead takes self-consciousness to be a person's awareness of his relations to the social process and all those involved in it, and of the influence he himself and the others have on the social act through their reactions and interactions, together modifying the social act as it unfolds. This developing awareness leads to a modification and refinement of a person's adjustment in the social process (Mead, 1992: 134). Bringing the social process into his experience, and turning this experience back upon himself – being *reflexive* – enabling a person to 'take the attitude of the other towards himself' (ibid.) – allows for a *conscious* adjustment to the social process, affecting its outcomes.

Becoming self-conscious thus is not about understanding 'the self' as a stable entity; rather, it is understanding 'self' as more fluid, formed by and forming the social – self as radically social. Being politically savvy is having acquired a high degree of self-consciousness: a thorough understanding of the social act one is part of, and of all those involved in it, as well as an ability to adjust to it and influence its course. Even though we can never be certain about how our actions affect outcomes, we can become more sensitive to what may be going on, form a deeper understanding of the political stances of people we work with, make sense of social acts we find ourselves in, based on our past experiences. By enhancing our ability to reflect and developing our reflexivity, we become better informed about our social environment, people we interrelate and are interdependent with, as well as our own prejudices, expectations and intentions; we get to see beyond glossy images and perhaps find way of working strategically in a different way.

Savvy managers and leaders

'Political savvy' is given much attention in popular management publications. According to *FYI – For Your Improvement*,[55] being a skilled 'politically savvy' person means that one

- can maneuver through complex political situations effectively and quietly

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[55] A management 'Guide for Development and Coaching'.

- is sensitive to how people and organizations function
- anticipates where the land mines are and plans his/her approach accordingly
- views corporate politics as a necessary part of organizational life and works to adjust to that reality
- is a maze-bright person.

(Lombardo and Eichinger, 1996/2009: 291)

According to the guide, this should result in 'getting things done in the maze with the least noise for the maximum benefit' (ibid: 292). Although it is stressed that 'political savvy' is hard to acquire,[56] the language used to define it here is rather confident – similar to the patterns of conversation I have described under my first argument: becoming savvy may be hard work, but it leads to 'getting things done', implying being *in control*, and with the 'least noise for the maximum benefit', suggesting *effectiveness*.

In order to develop this competence, the guide offers 'The Map' (292), a paragraph in which organisations are described as political landscapes; 'Some Remedies' (292-294), 10 examples of not being politically savvy (enough) and appropriate remedies for each; and 'Develop-in-Place Assignments' (295), 'job tasks that require application of certain competencies' (ix) – recommended as 'Research shows that 70% of development happens on the job, and jobs differ in development power and in the competencies they address' (ibid.).

Under 'Remedies', the guide emphasises human diversity: 'The complexity of life is that people are different. Each requires special consideration and treatment' (293). This sounds one-directional and rather fixed, as though the manager can somehow choose to specially 'consider' or 'treat' the subordinate/peer, as appropriate; but I have come to understand this to be relational and emergent. Moreover, the authors immediately fall back onto the vocabulary of predictability and control: 'If you are able to predict what individuals or groups will do, you will

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[56] In the Developmental Difficulty Matrix (B-1), political savvy scores highest in 'developmental difficulty' on both 'individual contributor level' and 'manager level' and lowest in 'average skill rating' (B-2/3).

be able to select from among your various tactics, skills and styles to get done what you need' (ibid.).

I have argued that one cannot form such a comprehensive understanding, self-consciousness – that is, conscious of self as both forming and being formed in the social act, precludes being able to *predict with certainty*. Furthermore, it is impossible to make a split between self and the group, as the guide does: 'People who are politically savvy work from the outside [audience, person, group] in. … and select … the best approach to make things work. … Practice not thinking inside/out when you are around others' (ibid.). The spatial metaphors are problematic, as there is no outside/inside. Thinking itself is a social act; even our so-called 'inner dialogues' are social, as we have a 'generalised other ' (Mead, 1992), 'audience' (Goffman, 1959-1990), in mind. What I believe is meant here, but not made explicit, is that we have to try and take the attitude of the other to ourselves, to develop our understanding of what others' dynamically evolving political stances may be, and practise paying attention to, and creating awareness of, meaning emerging in the social act. The goal of 'making things work' is not about an individual somehow forcing their will upon others – it is social, relational: we, as a group, can allow for things to work if we can establish common meaning. It is exactly this emphasis on developing a skill, competency, as something a person *has* and can *apply*, that is problematic: becoming politically savvy is about continuously developing awareness, becoming sensitive to interdependence and interrelatedness, and noticing emergence in groups immersed in social acts. It requires us to focus not so much on how people *should* act (improvement ideology), but rather on how people *are* acting.

Strategic development

The guide approaches the development of 'political savvy' as a strategic action plan,[57] starting off with 10 'Universal Ideas for Developing Any Competency' (Lombardo and Eichinger, 1996/2009: C-1), followed by a form that includes space

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[57] Similar to the career coaching trajectory and branding projects mentioned earlier.

for 'my "before" description' and 'my "after" description', for 'my action plan' containing 'Development remedies, Substitutes, Compensators or Workarounds' (ibid: C-4). Managers are strategically enhanced – formulating a 'glossy' future image – with remedies for their faults, and 'substitutes, compensators or workarounds' (ibid.) for their irreparable defects. Rather than accepting human plurality, here it seems to be substituted, compensated and worked-around. Competencies are categorised, overlaps and relations between these are explained in clusters and factors, development on the job is emphasised; yet the complexity of human relating, so vital to developing 'political savvy', seems to get lost in this fragmentation into 'trainable pieces'.

Management guides like these can prove helpful in providing basic insights, and presenting a wide but simplified overview of issues we may encounter in our everyday work life; they can enlighten us on (in this case, 67) competencies we may lack, and alert us to those most difficult to acquire. However the instrumental, strategic, approach towards becoming 'skilled' (skills incorporated, instead of relational) lacks complexity – the kind of complexity one encounters when paying attention to what emerges in the 'living present' (Stacey, Griffin and Shaw, 2000); complexity that cannot be fitted into a 'development plan' or a 'time frame' (Lombardo and Eichinger, 1996/2009: C-1).

I may ask for 'feedback on' or 'help' to 'work on' my 'need' (ibid.), but what is it worth if I cannot interpret the response; what intentions do my colleagues have to advise me on, or help me develop this 'need'? How could they be impacted if I became better at this competency? The same goes for 'Learn from others' (ibid: C-2) – important as learning, from experience, is social (Project 2) – when we are advised to reduce complex, specific, circumstances into 'what they [models] do or don't do to a set of principles or rules of thumb to *integrate into your behaviour*' (ibid; emphasis added) or 'Copy what the good model does that leads to good outcomes. *Get rid* of the behaviors that match what the bad model does' (ibid; emphasis added). Can I 'copy' the behaviour of another person 'into' another situation, with different people and circumstances, and expect this to produce 'good outcomes'? Would I be 'true' to my specific self, in this specific group of people formed by and forming

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these specific circumstances? Will the experts' top tips help me 'best learn' the skill? Or the course into which I need to 'throw' myself, in order to 'learn the theory and have a lot of practice with the skill'? (ibid: C-3) – as though theory and practice were separate? Will 'starting small', 'low-risk' and then 'stretching tasks' do the trick, or 'rewarding' myself, 'keep a log', 'make a chart' of my progress or having people 'who haven't known you for long' give feedback 'a third of the way into your skill-building plan' (ibid.)? I feel that these methodologies have only limited value, like my career-coaching trajectory. Such exercises highlight issues and provide abstracted 'How-to's', which are qualified by only weak disclaimers (e.g. 'A course always has to be combined with the other remedies in this Universal Development Plan' (ibid.)) – no doubt for political reasons.

Messy learning

What I have learned through the DMan is that it is understandable for us to try and simplify complexity, as it may cause paralysing anxiety, and that focusing on issues we encounter in our daily practice and exploring these in detail – such as trust, freedom, recognition – aids us in developing insights; however, we cannot focus on these specifically in our work, as the situations we find ourselves in are never *simple*. Trust may be identified as an issue, but political stances play into this; power figurations are influential; goals may be questioned; mutual recognition may not be experienced, etc. Keeping an open mind for what may lay behind the issue in focus, reflecting on this and being reflexive on how we think about this, making sense of the specifics of the situation, is helpful. In other words, learning to recognise general behaviour but remain prepared for surprises. Or, as stated in Project 2, to acquire a deeper understanding we must

> endure a condition of mental unrest and disturbance … maintain the state of doubt. (Dewey, 1910: 13)

This is what I have to learn to live and work with; as Geertz suggests, I must keep 'picking' my 'way', to make sense of what may be going on – which is like

trying to read (in the sense of 'construct a reading of') a manuscript – foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behaviour. (Geertz, 1973: 10)

Naivety

The *FYI* guide warns against the 'overuse' of 'political savvy' as a skill, as this

- May be seen as excessively political[58]
- May not be trusted
- May tell others what they are expecting to hear rather than what he/she knows to be true
- May overstate what he or she knows
- May be seen as manipulative and scheming.
  (Lombardo and Eichinger, 1996/2009: 291)

In other words, we could become a 'Francis Underwood'[59] (Oberfrank, 2013-2016).

Yet I believe this is a distorted view of 'political savvy'. We cannot 'overuse' something that is not a learned skill, but an awareness and sensitivity that we can never develop enough, let alone too much. Paradoxically, then, this list would suggest a lack of 'political savvy'. In a sense, the research has reconciled me to the fact that I will always remain to some extent naïve; and I have even come to appreciate this, because I do not feel held back from taking on challenges that I might not attempt if I knew everything in advance – challenges that allow me to develop.

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[58] 'A polite term for not being trusted or lacking in substance' (Lombardo and Eichinger, 1996/2009: 292).

[59] Explained earlier under *Third argument*, subheading *Political beings*.

THE RESEARCH METHOD RELATED TO CHANGE IN PRACTICE

Theory

As mentioned several times and elaborated on in the introduction to this thesis, the theory on which we base our research of management practice is that of 'complex responsive processes of relating' (Stacey, Griffin and Shaw, 2000), We consider organisations to be social objects formed by and forming the people making these up. The work we do as managers is making particular social objects such as general guidelines, goals, objectives. Social objects such as tools and techniques we adapt to the specific situation we find ourselves in (Stacey, 2011: 365). Our interpretations of these general guidelines, tools etc. can conflict with other's particularisations. In the local interactions we reproduce and at the same time develop social objects, leading to the iteration of population-wide (organisation-wide) patterns. These patterns can be continuous and transforming at the same time. (ibid.)

We build on the theories of *pragmatists* (Dewey, 1910) (Mead, 1992), in which experience plays a central role. This can be traced to *phenomenology*, more specifically Heidegger's immanent phenomenology, which emphasises '*being-in-the-world*; the embodied, doing, *coping* subject.' (Chia and MacKay, 2007: 230) also referred to as *hermeneutics*. We learn from our experience, coping in our day-to-day practice, engaging in conversations to make sense of our interactions. The importance of language in relation to making sense of our experience may draw parallels between complex responsive processes and *social constructionism*. In the latter, language is thought of as *constructing* reality:

> … [W]e *construct* and make sense of social realities in various forms of discourse; conversation, writing, and reading. (Cunliffe, 2003: 988) (italics added)

Burkitt warns us of potential pitfalls. For example, discursive social constructionism ultimately tends to reduce

> all human experience to the symbolic or, if it admits a 'reality' 'outside' language, claims that this is of no importance because we can never have direct knowledge of it.' (Burkitt, 1999: 37)

The distinct difference between complex responsive processes and social constructionism lies essentially in the word *constructing* as opposed to *mediating*:

> There is a great range in our use of language; but whatever phase of this range is used is a part of a social process, and it is always that part by means of which we affect ourselves as we affect others and mediate the social situation through this understanding of what we are saying. (Mead, 1992: 75)

'Constructed social reality' suggests that (only) our words *create* reality, whereas 'mediating social situations' posits language as a medium to describe and make sense of situations while we are experiencing them. The notion of a 'constructed' reality seems to suggest that we can somehow manipulate and control reality by using certain wording (e.g. 'appreciative inquiry' (Ludema, Cooperrider and Barrett, 2006: 155). *Mediating* reality as we engage in social acts and negotiate meaning, as Mead describes, is different in the sense that this makes clear we cannot control reality one-sidedly, as it is a social process. We are able to influence this process, however we cannot predict with certainty how our acts will play out.

Using the complex responsive processes of relating theory to make sense of our practice means we need to take seriously our everyday experiences, pay attention to patterns emerging, or meaning developing and engage in social acts, conversations on what it is we are doing, trying to do together.

Research role

In light of the above, the role of the DMan student can be described as that of

> a researcher engaging in epistemic reflexivity [adopting] a participatory approach to increase awareness of their own habitus processes. (Johnson and Duberley, 2003: 1293)

However, I prefer the term *understanding* rather than *episteme* (knowledge). For forming this understanding of 'habitus', I find Bourdieu's work helpful. In his words, 'habitus' is

> an *open system of dispositions* that is constantly subjected to experiences, and therefore constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies its

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structures […] that experiences will confirm habitus, because most people are statistically bound to encounter circumstances that tend to agree with those that originally fashioned their habitus. (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 133)

This points to the interrelatedness of experience and habitus – as well as to the importance of being aware of a tendency to conform. We are often alerted to 'habitual understanding' by our learning-set members and supervisors, who are usually active in other occupations, work in quite different settings, and may offer contrasting or opposing interpretations to our own. Wacquant comments on the above citation by adding a footnote, suggesting other ways of 'habitus-transformation' via 'an awakening of consciousness and a form of "self-work" that enables the individual to get a handle on his or her dispositions' (ibid.). Developing such awareness of our dispositions is, I feel, among the key accomplishments of the DMan – starting with Project 1, illuminating our own thinking by investigating our prejudices, assumptions and biases. Through this ongoing developing awareness, becoming self-conscious, transformations take place in our perception of our habitus, which in turn influences and changes our management practice.

Reflection and reflexivity

In this method, the importance of reflection and reflexivity cannot be emphasised enough:

> Reflexivity means thinking through what one is doing to encourage insights about the nature of social science and, especially, the role that language, power/knowledge connections, social interests and ideologies, rhetorical moves and manoeuvring in the socio-political field play in producing particular accounts. It may also inspire creativity through opening up for new perspectives and providing reference points for what one is doing and to avoid or minimize certain 'harmful' aspects of research that follow from lack of reflexivity. (Alvesson et al., 2008: 497)

We thus make sense of our experiences and further develop our ability to reflect on this, and be reflexive on our thinking-acting, both in the moment and in hindsight. This citation sums up quite accurately the role of reflexivity for my research

specifically, examining the 'socio-political field play' (ibid.) of the social acts I have been inquiring into.

Narrative inquiry

A comparison can be made between the DMan research method and 'ethnography as participant observation' (Gellner and Hirsch, 2001). The main differences are that, in many cases, the anthropologist immerses in a particular workplace in order to produce a specific ethnography, often by assignment, describing 'in detail the social life of a particular place or institution' (ibid.), whereas DMan students take seriously and scrutinise experiences in their own everyday workplace. They are not participant observers, but active participants immersed in groups, co-creating meaning around issues emerging in daily interaction, while experiencing interrelatedness and interdependence.

Particular narratives, 'thick descriptions' (Geertz, 1973: 6) from our practice, form the basis of the method. We explore emergent issues that bother, puzzle, intrigue us. This method of narrative enquiry can provide 'a validation for making connections between another's experience and one's own, seeing links, having insights' (Thomas, 2011). However, our 'monological narratives' can be critiqued; Buchanan and Dawson discuss the method and suggest an alternative – a 'polyvocalist' approach:[60]

> Boje (2001, p. 9) is critical of monological research accounts that 'rely upon sequential, single-voiced stories' in presenting 'accurate' and 'objective' versions of events. These monological narratives are problematic in at least three respects. First, the concept of language as merely mirroring reality has been undermined by the view of discourse as constituting meaning, challenging the notion of unbiased researchers producing impartial accounts (Hatch, 1996; Van de Ven and Poole, 2005). Second, several studies reveal how different stakeholders provide contrasting versions of the same change events (Brown, 1998; Fincham, 2002). Third, research narratives can be authored with different voices (Hatch (1996) depicts research as

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[60] In combination with process theories to be used to gain understanding of change processes.

'narrative performance'), or styles (Rhodes (2001) describes the researcher as 'textual practitioner'). (Buchanan and Dawson, 2007: 673)

We do not consider our narratives to be 'accurate' and 'objective', but personal and sincere accounts of events. These help us, according to Cunliffe (referring to Merleau-Ponty) to develop 'our relationship with our world: an understanding not based on rational theoretical knowledge but on knowing how to live in practical situations' (2008: 133), which may help us establish 'a relational and dialogic *implicit knowing from within*, situated in embedded and contextualized understandings' (ibid.).

As for the first issue raised by Buchanan and Dawson, we do not – cannot – see ourselves as 'unbiased researchers producing impartial accounts': we actively participate and take account of our presumptions and prejudices as much as our understanding of these allows us, and explore jointly[61] what may be going on. In doing so, we shed light on the second issue – the potentially 'contrasting versions' of other stakeholders – through reflecting on and making sense of their responses in our interactions, and being reflexive on our thinking, both while writing and discussing our work in the learning-set. The third issue raised, of different voices or styles, I consider irrelevant, as our voice or style may merely lead to more or less compelling writing for our readers. It is the content of our writing that is important.

Validity

The thoroughly iterative process of writing the DMan projects entails extensive reading (mainly, sociology, psychology and philosophy), intensely reflecting and being reflexive on our thinking and/in our projects, reflecting and commenting on learning-set members' work and rigorously discussing this with our supervisors via email and Skype calls in-between, as well as in sessions during mandatory residential weekends every three months. Narratives become 'thickened' as other views, interpretations, are negotiated and explored; theory we bring in to substantiate or

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[61] With our supervisor and learning-set, explained below.

contrast our findings is discussed and further developed; suggestions for other articles, books are made; our arguments are tested, refuted and strengthened – collaborating in this way is how we validate our 'creative' work, our 'new perspectives', clearly negating any 'lack of reflexivity' (Alvesson et al., 2008: 497).

On residential weekends we engage in discussions in the learning set and in-depth sessions in the large group and smaller groups, either with or without faculty. Our 'community meetings' are especially intense and insightful: these start off in silence until someone proposes a topic or situation, similar to emergent issues in our narratives. The way we address what emerges between us as discussions unfold, the alert attention paid to what are often strong gestures/responses of various kinds, allows for – indeed, encourages – people to speak (as) openly (as possible) about what meaning arose between us and how it affects them. This form of discussion, which is likely to be inadmissible in the workplace, enables us to form an understanding of differing intentions, influences of past experiences, divergent expectations and interpretations; people's political stances. We become more acutely aware of what may be going on between people working together, making us more sensitive to, and accepting of, the gesturing/responding of people we encounter in our daily practice. This in turn provides us with further insights that are invaluable in developing our projects.

Other research methods

In research projects for a Swiss university, I employed other methods. I used *direct observation* for observing group formation, noticing how difficult this is in practice, as my mere presence influenced the group and their behaviour – for example, people would turn to me to see my responses. As mentioned, from a complex responsive processes of relating viewpoint it is not possible to be an observer 'outside' the social act. Even though I did not partake, being passive is itself a form of gesturing, a sign of which the meaning emerges in the gesture/response of people forming and being formed in the social act. If I am introduced as a researcher, participants may feel self-conscious about being observed and may try to act in a way they believe I am looking for; if I am not introduced, they may be preoccupied by wondering what I am doing there. Similarly, in the *qualitative research interviews* I undertook,

respondents seemed to offer answers that were assumed to be desirable. For my own part, asking questions 'neutrally' seemed problematic: the meaning of a sentence can subtly change by unconsciously emphasising or using one word rather than another, while my para/non-verbal gestures may also have influenced interviewees. Though some interviews remained fairly superficial, others were compelling: sometimes the interviewee would draw me into their story, enabling me to relate strongly to their experience – similar to re-living and making sense of my own lived experiences, through my narratives.

Transcribing the taped interviews helped me to appreciate the complexity of interpreting conversations, sometimes confronting me with statements I had not picked up upon during our interview. On the other hand, a literal transcript cannot convey the emphasis placed on certain words, facial expressions, scribbles and other gestures people made while talking – all the little details that add subtle nuances to our interpretation of the literal words spoken.

Generalisability

When we build our research on complex responsive processes of relating, where 'local interaction' mediates 'social objects' from which 'population-wide patterns' may emerge and evolve, it is appropriate to take our day-to-day management experiences, and the influence our own and others' presence and presuppositions may have on these, seriously. Reflecting thoroughly on our iteratively co-constructed 'as-thick-as-possible' descriptions, being reflexive on our thinking-acting, extensively discussing findings with DMan students and faculty, validates our inquiry into, and sense-making of, management practice. By generalising our particular experiences through thorough supervisor and peer-reviewing, an intensely iterative approach to our writing and extensive explorations of existing theories, we add different perspectives and may offer novel or renewed insights to the body of management-practice knowledge. This I address in the following.

CONCLUSION

In Project 1, I wrote about the need I felt to go abroad to 'examine my own principles and values in relation to other cultures, opinions and perspectives; perhaps in the process I would re-evaluate'. I understand now that I could have conducted a similar exploration simply by staying at home, as every situation I find myself in is in essence unfamiliar. Foreign experiences did seem to magnify and intensify issues, revealing them more clearly; but it has been the intense reflection and developed reflexivity on these experiences on the DMan that made possible thorough exploration. I have acquired an understanding of people as radically social and political beings, and have come to attribute value to taking my everyday experience seriously. This thorough manner of exploring and shift in understanding has brought about the re-evaluation of my-self; self as *being-with-others*. More importantly, I have gained the understanding (savvy) that such re-evaluation does not lead to any specific new self-identity: it is not a progression from one static identity to another ('improved') version, but rather an ongoing process of social interaction. Such processes influence not only my-self, but also – and simultaneously – the groups I am engaged with, the work we produce together, the organisations we form, the political stances we assume, the goals we set, the changes we try to accomplish, and so on: the continuous and complex reciprocity of forming and being formed.

Contribution to knowledge

This research has altered my understanding of several concepts, establishing unexpected links between them. I have developed a notion of culture as groups of interdependent and interrelated people that form and are formed by specific patterns of relating and conversing. These (habitual) patterns – people interrelating according to evolving/emerging, explicit/implicit customs, norms, values and ethics – are what we recognise as culture. Such patterns can have quite local characteristics – which may be difficult to form an understanding of – but may emerge as noticeable, rather general, patterns on larger (e.g. national) scale as well. I have come to acknowledge the necessity of interpreting and particularising these patterns in specific social acts, in the rather small groups we find ourselves in relation to, in our day-to-day

interaction. I have come to see that appropriate use of these patterns can enable communication, establishment, mutual recognition.

Learning to think about self as radically social provided me with helpful insights, most importantly that we can only understand our-selves in relation to others. In our interaction with others, we establish a sense of self: we are formed by, and forming, our groups at the same time. Moreover, I have come to understand speaking itself is action. I experienced and explored the difficulties of developing an understanding of what is appropriate action in groups – even more so in unfamiliar groups, which may lead to insecurity and anxiety. In my research I have emphasised the relation between understanding of 'appropriate' action and having 'feel for the game' (Bourdieu, 2003), becoming politically savvy, and linked this to self-consciousness (Mead, 1992) – a thorough understanding of social acts we form and are formed by, and of all those involved; an ability to adjust to these and affect outcomes. The research has furthermore revealed – from a novel perspective – a correlation between certain abstract, idealised conversational patterns and a notion of identity as something manageable and constructible, and anxiety about our trust in and development of 'political savvy'.

I have identified, extensively described, and scrutinised the rather mixed character of these conversational patterns, in an original manner. Such patterns are widely used in organisational life, describing ourselves and/at work and the organisations we form in a 'glossy' manner: we co-construct confident identities that we appear to believe we can manage. During career coaching, I became conscious of how limiting these discursively co-created images are. Such texts made it more difficult to form an understanding of organisations. Vacancies advertised in similar wording offered little information to determine an appropriate response. I noticed I shared this experience with many other job-seeking managers. We thought the only valid response was an equally abstract and idealised text, envisioning matching 'glossy' images of our-selves. I recognise these approaches as formed by and forming political processes. Examining these experiences more closely has revealed how such image-building – a strategic process – to some extent boosted self-confidence, as intended; yet it also had the contrary effect, with a gradual sense of

alienation from self. This has been described in research, but not so much by means of an auto-ethnographic account. As such I have added 'a detailed understanding of interaction in naturally occurring settings where governing is constructed and negotiated'– which Fogde found missing in her literature review on career-coaching practice (2011: 67).

Similar strategic, political, processes used in organisations to define ideal goals, targets, *before* and *after* images in change processes and personal development trajectories, appear to be built on the same 'improvement' ideology; apparently in the belief that projecting a confident image for the future will somehow give us the confidence to achieve it. To some extent, of course, it is helpful: but I have found that if there is too wide a gap between the idealised image and how we experience ourselves, our work, organisation, targets and goals in daily practice, then we may no longer relate to these images as we fail to recognise our-selves in them. We may even find it increasingly difficult to speak/act appropriately, as our co-created idealised and abstract conversational patterns do not provide us with the words to describe what we encounter in our everyday organisational lives in a way that can be recognised.

To make sense of the complexity of our day-to-day experiences, to learn, I believe we need broader, more inclusive conversational patterns – vocabularies that allow us to jointly explore and make meaning of our messy practice, take account of human plurality, and allow for expressing less 'glossy' matters, such as power relations, assumptions, prejudices, differing intentions and expectations. This is given greater weight by the recognition that we need to take as much responsibility for what we say as for what we do.

My contributions to knowledge I find to be of interest to managers in general, for we all work with people – social and political beings, who learn through experience; but my insights may be particularly useful for those who are closely involved in processes around the creation of corporate identities, those responsible for recruitment and personnel development/educational programs, those developing change trajectories, and those working on an interim basis. What this might mean in practice for myself and before mentioned managers, I discuss in the following.

Contribution to practice

While aware that one can never be savvy enough, I have experienced that relying more on our practical reasoning, our understanding of our day-to-day experiences 'political savvy', is helpful. Understanding, for example, that 'those people holding power' are not restraining us; rather, we all restrain and enable each other at the same time, as players influencing social acts – each and every one of us without being able to foretell with certainty where our game may take us. This radically social perspective may help in relaxing more into not knowing, accepting uncertainty, paying close attention to what we are doing together, I find of help to managers in general as we are all dealing with inevitable complexity.

What I have noticed in my practice is that I seem to have developed a different way of conversing that enables me to describe more comprehensively situations I encounter and issues I notice emerging in these. I have become a little less direct and confrontational, and feel that I am better able to suspend judgement. This appears to be reflected positively in our cooperation. I have pointed out speaking is acting, that we have responsibility of our acts, even though we cannot know with certainty what our acting may evoke. Managers need to pay attention to their text and talk, consider their choice of words carefully, and weigh ethical dilemma's that may emerge from the way in which we mediate our reality through our acts and understand our-selves as part of this. Developing a reflective and reflexive stance towards what we say and write, when and how we respond to others in interaction (delayed reaction), I believe is recommendable to managers in general.

A critical reflective and reflexive stance may aid managers as well in forming a better understanding of how their particular 'civilising process' has shaped them, where they are coming from, on what prejudices they base their sense-making etc. Furthermore it may help them in trying to establish their understanding of appropriate action in specific circumstances. A critical stance can as well be beneficial in noticing the interrelatedness of an issue in focus with other issues, such as problematic cooperation that may arise from a lack of trust or perhaps differing perspectives on, expectations of the goal.

In regard to the use of tools and techniques, e.g. planning and goal-setting, I have found that a more critical stance is beneficial: valuing these as means rather than ends, and continuously and jointly evaluating whether such methods remain applicable to specific situations. Managers may benefit from negotiating meaningful use of the tools that are common in their practice. This may enhance their understanding of how the people forming their teams relate to the task at hand. Closer collaboration may be established as managers and teams get to a more shared interpretation of the goals pursued. As people feel they play a valued part in the setting, adjusting and developing of these goals, they may feel recognised.

My perception of change management has shifted accordingly: I have found it is important for managers of change trajectories to try and create more (political) awareness concerning alignment to guidelines from higher management and/or other stakeholders, and to invest in finding ways of engaging teams in a joint effort to particularise the general change trajectory to their circumstances, expectations and intentions. Trying to ascertain different political stances towards the changes, including their own, and negotiating the trajectory, and preferable outcomes, along the way – endeavouring to notice what works and what does not – appears to enhance cooperation. Some people may find it difficult not having a clear and fixed objective and will try to hold on to the apparent clarity (derived from oversimplification) of initial version of the change trajectory, but acknowledging in discussions that this is not always helpful may result in a slightly different conversation – more of a negotiation than a direction of the way forward; people seem to feel more engaged in this approach to such processes. It is likely for teams to become more open to change, that may have appeared threatening in the generally formulated initial proposal, when they are invited to adopt and develop the trajectory in a way that is meaningful to them.

Managers responsible for initiating, developing and implementing corporate identities may profit from insights in the radically social concept of identity creation. I do acknowledge that this social stance makes the use of usually rather linear and simplified approaches towards the creation of new identities problematic. This approach may take (a lot) more time and effort: engaging people actively in the

development of a significant image. A more jointly achieved corporate identity, however may help close the gap, people often experience, between the popular 'glossy', trendy image and how people perceive themselves, their work and the organisation they form. A recognisable identity – still somewhat 'glossy', politically acceptable (we all want to present ourselves (a bit) more favourably) – may arise with which people may identify more easily. Recognition of the newfound identity may be greater and shared more comfortably with stakeholders. Additionally a more comprehensive and specific vocabulary for writing texts about the organisation, people forming the organisation and the work that is done, may lead to unique and particular stories that may be more recognisable or speak to people's experience and even imagination. Of course this approach is no guarantee for success, nor will each and everyone in the organisation support the image as is. Interpretations will still vary and even conflict. Paying attention to these particularisations and remaining open for discussions around these will remain necessary. The co-created identity will most probably continue to evolve.

HR and hiring managers may benefit as well from the above, as such corporate identity-creation and accompanying richer, organisation-specific vocabulary may aid in producing texts that are likely to give away a bit more about what the organisation, the people, the work is about, within politically acceptable boundaries. Candidates may then respond in a similar, less abstract manner in their application. Here as well, the investment in the hiring of people in more meaningful ways will take more time and effort. In the current job-market circumstances this may be problematic. However, I do think it worthwhile for an HR/hiring manager to consider estimating the effectiveness of different approaches and the possibility of finding suitable candidates: people who are able to more easily blend into the organisational culture and form quicker understanding of the tasks that lie before them.

Starting a new job as an interim teacher-coach was still anxiety provoking, but accepting uncertainty and paying closer attention to what was going on in the team I joined, trying to make sense of their political stances – not starting off by giving advice, but taking the time to feel out the situation – seems to have changed how I was perceived and how I perceived the team. It appears that simply allowing

'political savvy' and awareness of ongoing co-creation to inform our way of responding in day-to-day interactions is likely to enhance our abilities to work collaboratively with teams, a notion I believe to be helpful for managers in general. For interim managers (and management consultants) this may seem more difficult as they may need more time to familiarise with the political landscape of the organisation they are joining. Furthermore their status of being perceived as an 'outsider' may seem restraining, however on the contrary this may be enabling as people may feel they can open up precisely because they appear to have this special status. The latter can however become a cause for ethical dilemma's, around confidentiality and loyalty to the different stakeholders: leading to a need for an even greater sensitivity, 'feel for the game'.

For people working in education management and personnel development, understanding learning is essentially a social experience, may shed different light on their practice. It may lead to paying closer attention to what goes on between students/trainees, and discussions around what this may mean. Perhaps to being less concerned with grading objectively and more focused on providing students with comments on the processes they are involved in as members of groups, underlining the value of their joint experience. And to trying to work with them, rather than observe them, and share what one experiences doing so. This may be helpful and insightful for both student/trainee as teacher/manager. Discussing the processes of learning, emergence of meaning, exploring experiences may lead to developing understanding. Co-creating moments of developing understanding are no guaranteed solution to arguing, irritating each other, or making little progress; but approaching these processes in this manner seems to make it easier to relate and recognise each other, which I believe is the basis for enabling collaboration and learning, for becoming self-conscious.

Based on my findings and personal experience I conclude that career-coaches could pay closer attention to the tools they use, emphasise the significance of interpretation of these. In the trajectory through which they take the job-seeker it is of great importance to pay attention to anxiety, and other emotions, arising and continuously negotiate whether the candidate can still identify with the documents

that are co-produced. Supporting candidates' trust in previous experience, underlining the need to make use of their practical reasoning capabilities, establishing a more realistic view on the job marked, complexity of networking, may be constructive. Perhaps the metaphor of the game can be useful as a way of discussing the involvement of the job-seeker, the rules that are regularities, the different stakeholders, the guidelines (vacancy texts) that need reading between the lines skills. A career coach may also point out, interpreting Jackall, that job-interviews with HR/hiring managers: can be very direct, colorful, and indeed earthy.

This research may lead to greater acceptance that one can never be savvy enough, which brings me back to the start of the discussion, to Public Image Ltd: we may thus come to express our experience of management practice as a love song, for better or worse.

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