



Aesthetic Ways of Knowing the Shipboard 'Human Element'

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Abstract

Antonio Strati (1992; 1999; 2000) has made important theoretical contributions to the aesthetic strand of knowledge in organization and management studies. Aesthetic inquiries attend to the multi-sensory 'human elements' of lived experience: sight, touch, sound, smell, and taste. Based on first-hand perceptions of the environment and human interactions encountered therein, both organization members and researchers may make aesthetic judgments. These judgments may be understood in terms of 'aesthetic categories': the beautiful, the comic, the ugly and the tragic, as examples. Sensory experiences and aesthetic judgments then form an 'aesthetic dimension' of organizational life.

Aesthetic research methodologies are qualitative in nature. This reflects an underlying assumption that multi-sensory and aesthetic experiences are difficult to evoke and to write about through quantitative methods and measures. Thus, the 'aesthetic dimension' is often unnoticed and underrepresented through more traditional research approaches. Aesthetic knowledge does not negate other ways of knowing organizations and organizational life. Rather, it enriches discourse and understanding about the 'human element' through the evocation and representation of 'thick multi-sensory experiences and aesthetic judgments' (Taylor and Hansen, 2005); which are humanly lived organizational experiences. In the field of organization and management studies, the maritime context appears to go under-explored and thus, under-remarked.

In contrast, the shipboard experiences of seafarers provide the current 'setting' for this aesthetic inquiry. Norwegian's have historically been considered to be among the world's most highly trained and qualified sailors. However, talking with them about their shipboard experiences has involved many access-related challenges; especially for an academic researcher from the United States. The global nature of seafaring and increases in maritime safety and security measures compound some of the traditional qualitative research issues surrounding access to seafarer informants. Plus, large numbers of seafarers from traditional maritime countries, such as Norway, have been displaced as shipping companies have sought cost-saving labor from other regions throughout the world (Lane, 2004). Current and former Norwegian seafarers were located primarily through ads placed in newsletters and on the Internet. An analysis forty-one accounts opens up the 'aesthetic dimension' of these seafarers' lived experiences. The paper invites dialogue and exploration into the different ways of accessing, sensing and knowing the shipboard 'human element'.