

# Art Dialogues for Professional Communities: Theater and Play for Imagining and Developing the Good Life Within Organizations

Heidi S. C. A. Muijen, René Brohm and Stanske Lomans

**Abstract** Ever since ancient times, theater has served a political and educational function. We have brought theater into the workplace to explore the revitalization of political life, and to counterbalance instrumental approaches towards career innovation. Within the framework of Art Dialogue Methods (ADM) that we have developed over the years by using different kinds of art forms, we present an arts-based action research. Experiments with theater have alerted us to the potential of embodiment in art dialogues. We argue that theater in organizations takes transitional space not just as a means to readjust to a fixed social reality, but also to stimulate people to play around with organizational reality. Imagining and developing the good working life as a community can emerge from play and thereby provide community learning and an existential perspective for career counselling.

**Keywords** Artistic inquiry · Professional community · Business ethics · Theater counselling

## Imagining Career Counselling

To see a World in a Grain of Sand.  
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower.  
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand.  
And Eternity in an hour. (Blake, 1984, p. 114)

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H. S. C. A. Muijen (✉)  
Thymia—Philosophical Counselling, Weesp, The Netherlands  
e-mail: thymia@xs4all.nl

R. Brohm  
De Nieuwe Kleren van de Wolf—Research Organization, Doorn, The Netherlands

S. Lomans  
Berings & Lomans, Training and Storytelling Agency, Utrecht, The Netherlands  
University of Applied Sciences Utrecht, Utrecht, The Netherlands

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Crucial to career counselling today is that the fluidity of postmodern times be taken into consideration. We can no longer assume that worker capabilities and jobs are stable entities in the face of globalization, robotics, digitalization and persistent cost-reduction aims. We argue that many career theories do not adequately address today's age of uncertainty and wish to present an approach that fits fluid contexts.

Sociologists and philosophers have noticed a general fragmentation in society and lament the widespread loss of moral authorities (Bauman, 2006; Taylor, 2006). A lack of common social values has contributed to making the market logic dominant. However, sociological analyses (Giroux, 2018; Sennet, 2009) stress the need of finding a logic that counterbalances the so-called neoliberal spirit that approaches poverty, alienation and injustice in terms of individual choices and lifestyle. Modern answers are of no use in meeting postmodern challenges. How do we organize people's working lives in uncertain times?

Debates on career development have recurrently been criticized for following a typical enlightenment approach—firstly, for the latter's belief in an autonomous self, based on individualistic, voluntary assumptions, and secondly, for its rationalistic planning strategies (Draaisma, Meijers, & Kuijpers, 2018; Yuthas, Dillard, & Rogers, 2004). According to Savickas et al. (2010, p. 14) "... identity development is a lifelong process. An individual must repeatedly revise identity so as to adaptively integrate significant new experiences into the ongoing life story."

We understand the self as a co-creation in relationship with others, while avoiding the pitfall of the other extreme of determinism (Conyne & Cook, 2004). Similar to Gergen's (2009, p. 400) "I am linked therefore I am", we have argued for "Tango ergo sum" (Brohm & Muijen, 2010).

The second type of critique is aimed at the inadequacy of planned career approaches, already disclosed by its etymology: *career* originally meant a rush by a horse towards the finish. The suggested one-dimensional orientation in this metaphor towards a straightforward goal is clearly obsolete in a globalized world characterized by multiple cultures and rationalities in which generally accepted and socially embodied narratives do not exist anymore. Jobs have become fluid and careers are only loosely connected to self-identity. Rather than assuming a fixed and rational self, processes of identity formation (De Valverde, Sovet & Lubart, 2017) require in-depth explanation. Therefore, career planning itself has to be questioned fundamentally as it may actually add to existing processes of alienation and anomy (Durkheim, 1997).

Before designing models and acting on them, career counselors have to face questions like "Who is 'the person' that is supposed to learn? What is 'the world' in which one chooses a career? What is 'a career' when jobs change overnight?". To prepare citizens for the *cosmopolis* (Appiah, 2017; Toulmin, 1992), transformation is required. According to Draaisma et al. (2018, p. 12) "[a] focus on so-called 21st century skills becomes apparent, including critical analysis and problem solving, creativity and innovation, entrepreneurship, digital skills, communication, collaboration, social-cultural awareness, and self-regulation and reflection".

New directions point towards restoring relationships through (self-)narration and emphasize radical contextuality by substituting 'employability' for 'career guidance' (Maree, 2018) and creative identity formation (Busacca & Rehfuss, 2016; Lengelle &

Meijers, 2014). Closely connected to this development is a shift in attention from individual capabilities to intertwined processes. Some researchers emphasize relationality, while others accentuate group learning and collective sense-making (Conyne & Cook, 2004; Karwowski & Kaufman, 2017).

Although creativity has been recognized in constructivist, dialogical and narrative approaches towards career counselling, our stance is to apply its role more radically, following Mills (2000). This pivotal work makes a plea to suspend everyday beliefs to embody new positions with regard to larger socio-economic structures. More recently, the imagination has come to be seen as the conscious human equivalent of the code of life—our DNA (Harari, 2014). To reinvent social life, we have to trust our imagination. If we look for certainty, we never will find new ways. For imagination to expand from daydreaming to having an impact on citizens, professionals and organizations, we take dialogue as its crucial partner to reconsider daily routines and personal troubles in the light of public issues (Castoriadis, 2016; Muijen, Lengelle, Meijers, & Wardekker, 2018).

These considerations prompted us to develop Art Dialogue Methods (ADM) to stimulate creative processes by means of painting, philosophical board games and music—in teams as well as for personal development and organizational change (Muijen, 2001; Muijen & Brohm, 2017). In an arts-based action research we focussed on a dramaturgical approach. Therefore we ask:

**How might theater help to revitalize the ethos of communities?**

In Part I, we introduced the need for a political perspective on career counselling, while Part II deals with ADM as a means to rejuvenate the political power of play. In Part III, we present the methodology of action research into theater as politics and explain how we analyzed the process and results. In Part IV, we introduce the dramaturgical approach and highlight three modes of space by play-acting a central scene of Sophocles' play, *Antigone*. In Part V, we elaborate on the dynamics between these spatial modes by describing art dialogues. In Part VI, we present theater as part of the curriculum and in Part VII we conclude that another approach towards career guidance is required. Instead of training students and employees to plan their career individually as if it were a horse race, a shift in perspective is needed to sense-making as a community and making people's working lives meaningful.

## **Theater as (Inter)Cultural Heritage**

Dramaturgical play is as old as the human race. Greek tragedy and comedy are said to have evolved from the religious cult, dedicated to chthonic god(esse)s of Euro-Asian origin. At Dionysian festivities, mythical figures like Maenads, Fauns and Satyrs were dancing and singing hymns, dedicated to the rejuvenation of life. Dramaturgical play developed, not just for religious purposes, but for political reasons as well.

The revival of Greek tragedy and comedy in classical French and English plays by authors like Molière and Shakespeare has contributed to developing the politi-

cal power of theater. For example, the typical figure of the jester who is allowed to criticize the king symbolizes an emancipator motive of juxtaposing elements of the existing social order and giving a voice to the underdogs. As such, this figure is comparable to Antigone—according to its ancient Greek meaning her name (αντι- γωνη) refers to countermovement (Hermsen, 2019, p. 76)—and to Anansi, known from oral traditions in the Caribbean area. Originally, the latter stories were transferred from Ghana during the era of European colonization (Addeah-Prempeh, 2019). Anansi embodies the wit of the scam and is comparable to the cunning fox in European narratives.

To develop ADM further, we have used theater as a rich (inter)cultural heritage. Rooted in a deeply layered understanding, we describe ADM by names that refer to these roots, such as *gnosis* (from *gnothi seauton*, ‘know thyself’, on the temple of Apollo). In order to understand the interwovenness of art and dialogue we need a method, very much according to the etymology of the words *meta* and *hodos*—*methodos*—as an in-depth exploration. A path (*hodos* = way) leads to insight (*meta* = what lies beyond) by means of different intelligences:

1. *Pathos* we still hear the etymology of pathos in words like empathy, sympathy, compassion, pathology. It was translated by the Romans as e-motion, literally being moved. We define pathos as the ability to give voice to anger, enthusiasm, grief and other emotions through sensitivity for others, relevant details and subtleties found in interaction.
2. *Mythos* refers to narrative imagination (Fry, 2018); the stories being told, myths about the creation of the world and about the quest for good (like in *Antigone*), as well as the very act of storytelling. Hereby, we find answers to existential questions that create order in the void that surrounds us.
3. *Logos* is deeper than common sense; broader than logical reasoning. It refers to dialogue as a way of understanding things; through words, images, or any kind of symbolic interaction (Langer, 1979). Dialogue is composed of the old-Greek *dia* (through an opening) and *logos*, referring to the (natural) principle of ordering the world. We see it as the synthesis of reflection on experiences, internal voices and coming to a mutual understanding (*logos*) in-between (*dia*) people.
4. *Ethos* precedes (moral) codes of conduct, and refers to pedagogical practices of building (good) character, communal habits and political (wise) actions. The etymology stresses the importance of transcending the individual scope of virtue and understanding ethics as relational qualities as a community, taking into account the inherent vulnerability of everyone who strives for the good life (Nussbaum, 2001).
5. *Phronèsis* the interplay of all intelligences results in collective wisdom embedded in good practices or *phronèsis*, which Aristotle understood as being both practical and ethical in nature (Eikeland, 2008). We see it as an emerging quality in (between) people and spaces, provoked through art and dialogue, inspired by Winnicott’s transitional space (1972), Arendt’s public space (1958), and Irigaray’s in-between (2016). Despite differences between these theories, we have extracted a common theme: the art of establishing free interplay between various

voices and values within and between individuals. The idea of an indefinable space is similar to the mythological void or chaos from which the world is created, and to *chora* (χώρα), an old-Greek term designating the territory outside the *polis* (city state). In this sense, it is a non-place that refers, just as the middle voice in Plato's dialogues in *Timaeus* 48e4 (Derrida, 1993; Kisner, 2017), to neither being nor nonbeing. It rather designates an interval in-between, where all the forms were originally held, similar to a maternal womb.

## **Methodology: Arts-Based Action Research**

We present a dramaturgical approach of ADM by reframing an arts-based action research project that was carried out in the nursing department of a Dutch university college (Lomans, 2018).

Music, dance, dramaturgical and art therapy, arts-based research and arts-based learning, phenomenology and hermeneutics all stem from ancient, narrative roots (Eisner, 2008; Gadamer, 1993; Habermas, 1984; McNiff, 1998) and use symbolic interaction as dialogical ways of sense-making. They share the idea of invocational and embodied aspects of knowledge to understand (social) situations and make them change. Dramaturgical play stimulates reflection by expressing internal voices and experiences, as well as a mutual understanding by voicing insights in-between people. We have borrowed from these traditions and developed ADM as developmental and research programs. By using different forms of art, we gained experience on how to stimulate multifaceted modes of understanding for exploring personal growth and professional development, complex social situations and organizational problems. In this way, art dialogues help to untangle complexity without reducing it to a single factor. At the same time, they initiate healing processes in a polyphonic way by using dialogues through diverse media, by means of play-acting, singing, dancing, imagining, moving, etc.

ADM helps to avoid the pitfall of rationalistic discourse that reduces the complexity of career development to an individual and organizational factor like career success. Neither the organization nor the individual alone can be held responsible for life's misfortune or success in career development. Instead, it is a matter of collective responsibility and of taking political action, thus developing ethos as a community.

## ***Research Process***

The reason for our research was the entrapment experienced by lecturers as shown in an internal report. Despite their positive feelings about teaching the nursing students, they were dissatisfied with the organizational rules that were curtailing their professional autonomy. The way in which the work was organized by means of disciplinary

ICT and 'Planning & Control' systems affected the quality of relationships and work experience (Shore & Wright, 2000).

Theater as a narrative response to their disempowerment was designed and executed as a way of individual and collective sense-making (2017–2018). It entailed three sessions with two groups of six lecturers collaboratively staging parts of *Antigone*. Their aim was to facilitate art dialogues on personal and professional experiences. The classic Greek tragedy shows the ethical appeal to maneuver between the laws of the gods (*logos*) and the laws of humans (*nomos*). Asking the lecturers to play the scene was meant to stimulate their reflection on a parallel clash between personal and professional values on the one hand and organizational norms on the other—thereby urging them to take action.

As the first analysis showed *that* the art dialogues had been meaningful, the question on *how* needed further elaboration. The first route was to focus on interactional dynamics through axial coding and thick descriptions of key moments. The second route involved new cycles of action research (2018–2019) aimed at broadening the scope towards performing actual organizational theater (Schreyögg, 2001) and enacting working-life scenes, while integrating emerging insights. These new cycles comprised eight meetings with twelve participants (lecturers and managers). The art dialogues were based on the participants' experiences as young nurses, and these resulted in four performances for colleagues. From 2018 to 2019 the focus shifted to involving students in the performance and including the performance in the curriculum.

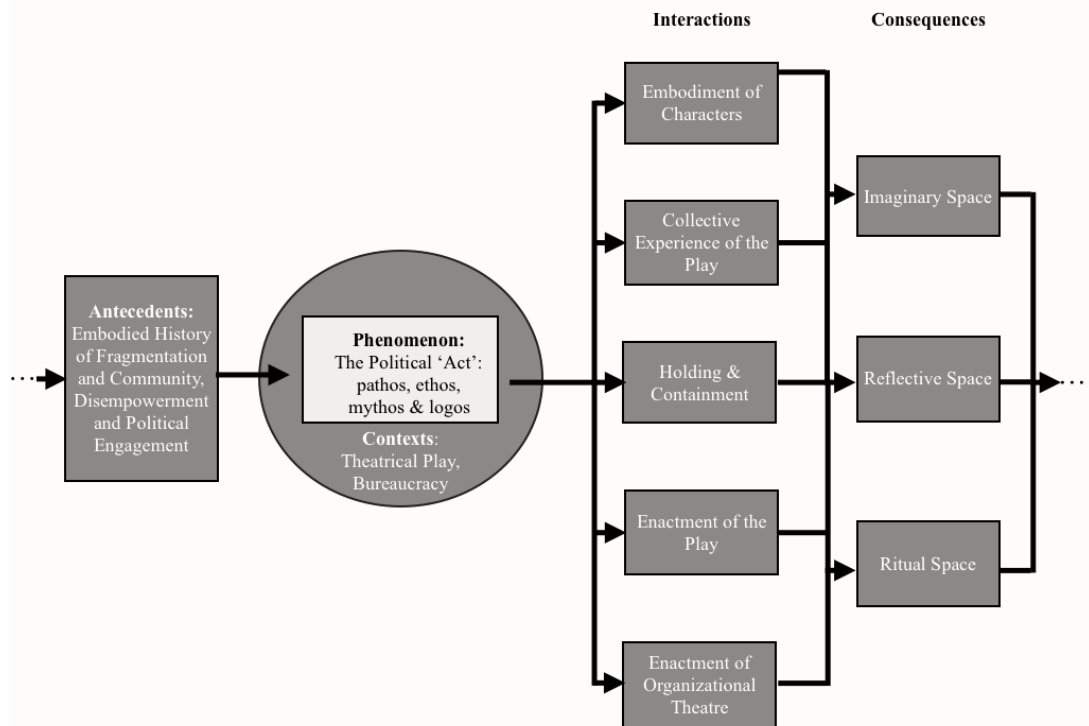
We emphasize the importance of an elaborate dialogical setting to design the inquiry. It includes the choice of play, preparing participants to rehearse the text, directing the acting, assisting the reflections of participants (Schön, 1999) on their play-acting and role-taking, as well as a collaborative evaluation of the overall process, in order to find new meaning about who they want to be, both as individuals and as members of a community.

### ***Data Analysis and Synthesis***

The sessions were recorded on video, the ensuing dialogues were transcribed (95 pages with 282 quotations), and the jottings made during the session were developed into detailed field notes. The transcripts were coded and then processed by means of theme analysis, which resulted in the first research report (Lomans, 2018).

The next stage of the interpretation process involved recording the data. Following Strauss and Corbin (1997) for axial coding to analyze interactional dynamics, processes and change in terms of preconditions, contexts, interaction strategies and types of consequences (Fig. 1).

Central to an axial coding diagram is the phenomenon—in this case, the political act in its ambiguity as theatrical performance regarding a political situation and as a way to imagine political action. The etymology of politics—taking care of the *pólis*, the city state or community, with governance as only one of its aspects—points to



**Fig. 1** Axial coding diagram

what we capture as the interplay between embodying characters (*pathos*) who reflect on playing through dialogues (*logos*), imagining (*mythos*) and (re-)positioning the self (*ethos*) in different roles. These roots are fundamental to empowerment in action research as well as in political theory (Arendt, 1958).

The antecedents to the phenomenon (the political act) consist of the participants' experiences that were validated in the orientation phase, as most of the participants reported recurrent feelings of being disempowered and frustrated by the organization (85 excerpts). It also became evident that, over time, participants felt reinvigorated and reconnected by engaging in play-acting, as they were beginning to sense new perspectives despite fatigue and heavy workloads (17 excerpts).

We identified the following five strategies with regard to interaction:

1. Embodiment of Characters: – Rehearsing the text according to directions of the theater counselor by imagining the implied context of the play. Participants typically reported on their uneasiness and joy in playing (20 excerpts).
2. Collective Experience of Play: – Stimulating participants to reflect on changes they experienced while playing (41 excerpts).
3. Holding and Containment: – Encouraging participants to express their feelings to each other and regarding the directions of the theater counselor (40 excerpts).
4. Enactment of the Play: – Play-acting Antigone and engaging in dialogues with participants on their role-taking (118 excerpts).
5. Enactment of Organizational Theater: – This was not a category of axial coding, but it facilitated the next stages of the action research.

Regarding the spatial consequences of these five interaction strategies, we discerned three main types. First: imaginary space, as participants experienced entering an alternative reality (112 excerpts). Second: reflective space, as participants engaged in exchanging ideas on how to act differently, individually, as well as collectively (122 excerpts). Third: ritual space, as participants showed new ways of role-taking (57 excerpts). As we reframed the action research from an ADM perspective, we do not base our conclusions on quantitative aspects of the analyses alone, as this would make *logos* dominant at the expense of the dynamics between *ethos*, *mythos*, *pathos* and theater *methodos*. Using all intelligences, we present an overview of the outcome, then provide an in-depth description of three example scenes and conclude by discussing their significance for transforming career guidance.

## Results

While evaluating the process, the theater counselor witnessed developments among the participants on three levels:

**The Lecturers Individually—Empowerment:** “If you look at Geke now, she is much more powerful and credible. This power she can also use at other times.”

**The Team—Community Building:** One of the participants who struggled terribly with the time pressures of her job: “Apparently I am not alone in this feeling, others are struggling as well.” A lecturer remarked after seeing the performance: “It was such a beautiful reflection on [...] what connects us.”

**The Students—Professional Guidance:** Because of the enthusiastic response, the presentation became part of the 2019 curriculum, including art dialogues with the students about their internship experiences, thereby (career) guiding them to find their way as young professionals. Experiencing their teachers on stage, one of the students remarked: “... you were SO funny. Seeing you also made mistakes and had your moments when you just didn’t know what to say, was very recognizable and supportive!”

## Scene I: Antigone’s Revolt

By securing a proper burial for her brother Polyneikes, Antigone acted against the decree of her uncle Creon, the new king of Thebe. Creon refused to bury Polyneikes as he had started a war, causing the loss of many lives and harm to the city. He therefore feared that giving Polyneikes a burial would lead to more upheaval. However, Polyneikes’ right by birth to the throne indebted Creon morally.

This knot of interdependences served as a frame to perceive similar patterns in the lecturers’ role-taking while feeling the urge to take a stance in the organization.



## ***Art dialogues***

The theater counselor jotted down the following field notes:

Merel, as Antigone, appears despondent. Especially as her articulation is colored with shame. I tell her that Antigone feels confident, she knows of no shame and is proud that she has buried her brother. I give her technical instructions, to stand firmly, look her opponent in the eyes and take time. Thus staying in the moment and really meeting him. When Merel follows these directions, her attitude and looks change. She acts proudly and in no way shamefully. One of her colleagues in the audience says: 'Now you sound powerful, it was really a NO!' Not in volume, but in intention. Other participants agree.

An essential component of theater-as-politics is reflection on playing. Sharing experiences and associations as a group turns the stage into a playing field for narratives. Therefore, it is important that emotions and conversations be voiced freely, without judgment or comments, as shown in the following transcript:

Merel said: In the scene, I really feel like Antigone when she says, 'Everybody agrees with me, but no one will speak out.' In real life, in the organization, I might feel like Antigone. But then I realize that we as individuals 'cannot win the battle'.

Lisa commented on her playing the character of Ismene, who persistently gave her stubborn sister Antigone a 'no' to her request to bury their brother together:

Experiencing difficulty with saying 'no' is very similar to my own life. I find it so difficult to take a stance, it really costs me a lot of effort.

Lisa experienced that in order to play Ismene's persistence in a convincing way, she had to develop a strong character not to give in to Antigone's determination. It shows how playing a role requires awareness of the body and of one's internal dialogue. Participants were helped to become aware of nuances in their emotions as 21st century professionals, while at the same time they were connected with motives and personal struggles of the characters in the play.

From the first scene, we distilled three important theater ingredients, namely imaginary space, reflective space and ritual space.

### ***Imaginary Space: The Sense of Playing***

The first ingredient is the transition from everyday life to imaginary space, a place where one can visualize an alternative reality. A classic story like Antigone takes participants to another time and place in which the characters are not the modern type of manager, nurse or teacher, but kings, princesses, gods and warriors.

A significant part of the dialogues shows participants as being invigorated merely by sharing experiences. The art dialogues are characterized by two aspects:

1. There is a sense of playing, having fun, excitement and surprise at embodying roles. This involves a process of body awareness, learning how to use emotions and physical expression to really embody a character and to influence the dynamics on stage. Counseling on different levels simultaneously is needed so that participants feel their personal drive as well as the motives of the character in the play.

2. Participants express gratitude to the theater counselor for providing a safe holding environment (Winnicott, 1972). This concept originates primarily from parental nursing of the child, which later expanded to ever-widening circles of family, school and social life. As participants are vulnerable in this process it is of utmost importance that they feel safe to open up and establish bonds as a community, by encouraging them and giving comfort, while at the same time providing them with suggestions on how to create new routines and explore their identities: *“You are so positive in your feedback, I bought everything from you. You took me, step by step, out of my comfort zone. In this way, I learned something new.”*

This process was expanded as participants started to encourage one another.

### ***Reflective Space: The Importance of Taking a Stance***

Creating a reflective space is central to philosophical counselling. ADM adds invocative power to reflection and provokes embodiment to make the participants really feel the metaphorical meanings, wordplay and references to everyday life.

Organizing reflective space means inviting the participants to reflect on the scenes played—both on the what (content) and the how (process). Learning processes therefore take place on two levels: firstly, on the level of collaborative play-acting and storytelling, and secondly, on the content level of ethical dilemmas. Although the play is situated in a different cultural context, away from the contemporary situation, the participants recognize similar emotional frictions. Play-acting opens an imaginary space in which they re-enact felt dilemmas and existential themes, and reflect on their meaning. This urges them to take a stance, both on stage and in their working lives.

Antigone’s quest to be a loving sister to her brother eventually meant making a choice that led to her death. Furthermore, Ismene’s joy of living and her loyalty to Antigone clash. She cannot be a good sister and a good citizen while at the same time being true to her inner feelings. Creon’s virtues of being a good king also clash with his being a good uncle. Then and now the question is: how to reconcile personal virtues with public obligations? Despite differences on a content level, the struggle itself is part of the human condition: how does one reconcile opposing values stemming from the different roles one has to play in life?

Reflective space gave participants the opportunity to explore different viewpoints and positions freely, not just in a cognitive way, but embodied by means of empathy, sympathy, antipathy.

For instance, in the dialogues, not everyone was negative about Creon’s strict rule over Thebe and the need for law and order. Some sympathized with him because he wanted to keep stability and peace for the people, and they criticized Antigone’s resistance: *“That brother did not even love her. [He was] Stubborn, irritating”*, said a participant; and about Creon: *“I am not a manager but I always have sympathy*

*for a certain orderliness and clarity: everyone benefits from it. [...]There must be a captain on the ship.”*

Thus, reflective space invites participants to explore values, uncertainties and re-tell the story of their lives. At the same time, they recognize mutual struggles and ambiguities as professionals in the political context of the organization.

The art dialogues facilitated the sharing of disturbing experiences within the organization and stimulated collective storytelling that allowed the participants to criticize the social codes of the team and their relationship to management: thereby the *nomos* is being calibrated by the *(dia)-logos*. The story of Thebe and Creon's rule created a context in which they could reflect on their feeling of being oppressed as a professional team. They became conscious of the quality of the place they inhabit and how they worked together as a *polis*. The question to be answered was: Do they want to keep the status quo or create new ways as a community?

It is important to remember that the process does not happen in orderly or predictable steps. Rather, it is nonlinear and participants recurrently commute between imaginary and reflective space, which represents the threshold for entering ritual space.

### ***Ritual Space: Fluid Reality***

In the dialogues, substantial reflections were made on the transition of sense-making from play to everyday working life. Participants expressed a new understanding of the self and intentions for future action, both as individuals and collectively.

To comprehend this, we use the concept of ritual space, building on classical works from cultural anthropology and psychoanalysis (Turner, 1982; Winnicott, 1972). We especially embraced the idea that cultural experience, including play, is located in-between individuals and groups, nature and nurture. The liminal stage in rites of passage is the in-between when an old symbolic order fades away and a new reality is to be born; for example, the transition of members within communities from childhood to adulthood. Transitional objects are used that give people the necessary reorientation and comfort to enter another domain of life. From a psychoanalytic perspective, objects such as dolls and blankets help the baby make the transition from symbiosis with the mother to separation as an individual.

The theatrical setting consists of many transitional objects, for instance the textbook and the drama classroom, and it includes, in a more fundamental sense, the body, the felt-self, the positioning of the actors, the proximity of the audience. When participants engage in the dynamics between playing and reflecting, ritual space will emerge as a space in which self and others become intertwined and a community develops by shared sense-making. Our approach is to facilitate transitional processes in human life in general, linked to the view that, as soon as we have the courage to dismantle dominant discourses, reality is in essence fluid (Rizzuto, 2014).

## Scene 2: Euridice and Creon

The scene showed the embodiment of Euridice, Creon's wife, as being a manipulative and calculating woman. Her power was not to be underestimated.

### *Art Dialogues*

The theater counselor made the following remarks in her field notes:

I try to let Eva embody the character of Euridice as the real ruler who manipulates her husband Creon completely. It is therefore important that Eva shows tranquility in her speech and checks whether her words actually have an impact on Creon.

Bas, is playing the desperate and soft character of Creon as his natural 'color'. I therefore focus my feedback on Eva in particular. Gradually her playing improves. "I notice that speaking with a softer tone creates more contact", she says. This is confirmed by others. A colleague says: "Being quieter makes you much more convincing. I ... even felt shivering."

I ask Eva to stand upright and say: "Let Creon bow to you." Eva shows powerful energy. Cool and calculating instead of restless and desperate. I give her the assignment to stand behind Bas, to seduce him, to whisper the lyrics in his ear. From the side stage Merel says: "Good synergy, Eva, it is really beautiful." Eva laughs: "We are a beautiful couple, aren't we?" The scene gains more credibility and I say to Eva: "Now you are acting non-verbally, I see you listening and the words really do affect Bas."

Gradually the participants grow in their ability to connect working life themes, like power and communication, with aspects of playing together.

A participant notices: "At university, we also work very hard, [...]trying to cope just like Creon and Antigone do, sticking to their point of view."

For me, as Ismene, it [your conversation] is all about pride. It really moves me that you do not come closer together at all. Merel (playing Antigone) says: It is not pride, it is honesty! [...]you really get disconnected[...], you are in your own monologue. ... Just as in real life.

Another participant remarks: "...to see what this means in the context of the organization, we'll have to explore together. [...]There is no management against 'the others'. [...]We have to do it together. At the same time, we are different and have to accept [...]our different feelings on how we do things."

Back to reality, but which one? All the participants prioritized the meetings over many other pressing issues at work, even skipping other tasks in their agendas. One of them stated: "*I have learned now how much more powerful it is to do less. [...]I can especially enjoy this because I am part of a larger community.*"

As opponents in the play, participants developed insight into each other's motives and enhanced their communicative repertoire. In doing so, they discovered (unknown) aspects of themselves: "*I often stay in the background, as I am a bit of a contemplative type. Here on stage, the playing triggers and challenges me [...]by really achieving something together. By having a shared mission, I could handle the whole world, that's how I felt when I left last week.*"

The art dialogues made them think about the core of their profession, its beauty, hardships and the (ethical) dilemmas.

In addition to counterplay, the feedback from the group helped participants to identify personal qualities and uncertainties in themselves. The way in which the audience reacted to the actors provided for even deeper reflection on their playing. The togetherness on and around the stage leads to the building of a community: the transition from a bunch of alienated and disempowered persons in disrupted organizational life to an ethos in which their bonds as professionals are restored.

A *communitas* had been developed, by getting attuned to one another. The interactions of the participants showed that as soon as people really listened and played, they were sincere in their responses and the playing was real. Thus, reality unfolded in its fluid quality!

### Scene 3: Theater in the Curriculum

The initiative was born to create a presentation for nursing students to be performed during the lustrum of the University. The presentation would show dilemmas in their professional work, after which the lecturers would discuss ethical questions with the students.

There was a good response: nine lecturers and three managers, as well as some so-called training actors came forward. Now the playing was not based on an existing text, like *Antigone*. The participants were invited to visualize their moments of pride and the dilemmas they experienced as young nurses. In the end, a number of collective themes were distilled: the friction of giving care under time pressure; how to do justice to the patient; is it (morally) justified to force people 'for their own good'? How does one cope with suffering, vulnerability, and power plays? Based on these and other themes, a number of scenes were orchestrated to create a performance. Careful consideration was given to what messages the presentation could convey to the students.

#### *She Is Her Young Self Again!*

The following emerged from the field notes: "*Laura tells the story of her first experiences as a young girl in a nursing house. She stands in the spotlight, in the middle of the stage, surrounded by her fellow players. Laura goes back in time to that very day. After many years of desk work, she is again a nurse with the nurses on the floor, showing how she felt then. She tells about the little clock she has received from her proud mother. When Laura rolls up her sleeves and puts on her trousers 'just like the girls', she is her young self again, uncertain and full of expectations.*

*Her play is funny and moving at the same time. Then other participants transform into nurses and greet her enthusiastically. Suddenly we are actually in the nursing house. The nurses drink coffee and Laura is eager to begin her working day. The emergency bell rings. Laura cries out for joy: something is finally happening! The*

*audience laughs when the nurses take action, in slow motion with music from a well-known medical soap. They give instructions, grab the emergency suitcase and move towards the patient, enlarging their actions and expressions. The audience is cheering and applauding. While performing in slow motion, colleagues laugh and shout their names outrageously.”*

## **Art dialogues**

On stage, the participants experienced being liberated from the disciplinary rules, protocols and hierarchical relationships of organizational life. One of the participants, Suus, said: *“Feeling vulnerable and [...] very uncomfortable, until you think ‘whatever’! Everyone is doing it! It gives you the feeling of being nude, really free to discover something. [...] The fact that you don’t feel restrained by thoughts going on in your head.”*

Linde remarked: *“I have the feeling that our lives are determined by the need to set goals, by being useful, by accomplishing all kinds of tasks. [...] Playing and theater make me feel free to do things that are not useful or important. [...] It makes me feel happy and gives joy. Indeed because it is not useful, you know, like when we played as kids, just for fun and not for tasks and obligations.”*

Another participant declared: *“It feels so good to act in a free manner for a change! [...] I don’t have the feeling we can make mistakes. You can do it differently, but that’s okay!”*

## **Carnival and recreating reality**

Reflecting on the second scene, Linde pointed to an important condition for creating free space: to let go of functional roles and useful activities, to be as spontaneous as a child. Playing is not for the sake of achieving a goal external to the play itself (Huizinga, 2008). Children play for the sake of playing. It needs trust and to let go: *“Let’s see where the playing will lead us.”*

After the third scene, the audience was invited to participate in the art dialogues and thus they became part of the playing. In this way, the *communitas* continued to develop and expand organically on and around the stage, with participants and spectators coming together in one carnival of play: *“To feel how the audience reacts! Everyone speaks in superlatives, embraces you and has enjoyed it.”*

Playing together resulted in feeling happy as a group and in becoming free in a way that is taboo according to normal codes of conduct, for example being seductive, manipulative, expressing anger. Acting gave very special energy; it caused fun and laughter, and at the same time everyone concentrated and listened attentively to one another.

The third scene especially showed that both participants and audience rediscovered the importance of taking care of the self with regard to their personal-professional values and sought an answer to the question: what do I need for the

good life? (Foucault, 2005; Hadot, 2004). The team manager confessed: "*I have gotten to know these people in a totally different way. I'm used to having functional relationships with them, but in the rehearsals, I have seen everybody in a different role. I take these enriched images back to our daily work.*"

## **Conclusion: The Good (Working) Life**

The findings presented so far give a contextual and finely tuned answer to our central question: *How might theater help to revitalize the ethos of communities?*

### ***Redefining Career Counselling***

We conclude that ADM redefines career counselling. Theater as politics helps to raise awareness of the embodied roles that managers, professionals and students play within organizations, and it also experiments with ways of how to change them. As such, career guidance is about the adventurous art of role-taking, in-between being a pawn of organizational (societal) forces and the illusion of being the autonomous actor in control. It is in the eye of the other that one knows oneself. The postmodern answer to the ancient quest to know thyself (*gnothi seauton*) involves a multi-dimensional and poly-vocational view on the self as growing within communities. Therefore theater is more than intervention; it is politics in the sense of community building.

That said, ADM gives no roadmap. It is, however, a contextual and relational refined art of (re)directing interplay between different spaces and intelligences. This implies a huge advantage to planned career counselling programs in organizations. ADM literally sets the stage for transformative rituals and creates meaningful symbols, thereby counterbalancing fragmentary and accelerating forces (Han, 2014). This implies shifting the perspective from career planning as a segregated part of individual life to a non-linear approach of lifelong learning as a community.

The craftsmanship of the theater counselor is crucial in guiding participants to really embody a character. Thus, existential experiences are reinforced by collective learning processes and vice versa: to know yourself by getting to know and acknowledging 'the other. Thereby, invoking an ethos for negotiating on organizational agreements. Therefore, theater as politics is an answer to postmodern challenges characterized by fluidity and alienation, in which individualistic and rationalistic approaches of career counselling have become obsolete.

## ***Practical Implications of ADM for Career Counseling***

ADM adds to career counseling by:

1. Expanding the individual orientation in existing programs to develop collective learning.
2. Changing the instrumental approaches of career counselors away from career guiding as a step-by-step procedure solving a practical problem towards an empowered, emancipatory way of sense-making as a professional community.
3. Shifting the predominant rational and verbal models to a non-linear dialogical and art-based way of using all intelligences, to develop *phronesis*.
4. Redefining career counseling as a cultural praxis with a focus on healing horizontal and hierarchical relationships and making the working life meaningful as *communitas*. Since employees are hindered not just in their career, but in their professional life as a whole—by fragmentation, loss of control, feeling lonely, disempowered—we have to address these problems as interrelated phenomena. Therefore, we propose to embed career counseling in an overall ADM research-and-guidance process.

## ***Reflections on Theater as Politics***

As indicated earlier, the theater methodos integrates three modes of space:

In imaginary space, participants visualize issues (*mythos*), both by embodying (*pathos*) characters of a classic narrative (*Antigone*) and by telling the story of their lives.

In reflective space, there are cross-overs from classical to personal narratives, from playing on stage to empowered role-taking in everyday life (*ethos*). Thus, participants must find new words to give meaning (*logos*) to their working life by means of emplotment, “which makes the juxtaposing of events possible” (Hermans, 2001, p. 341), jumping back and forth between role-taking on stage and functional roles in their daily lives.

In ritual space, embodiment fuels the transition from ‘as if’ to real play and role-taking as a means “to live truthfully under imaginary circumstances” (Silverberg, 1997, p. 9). Thus, common ground is created for re-enactment as a constructive alternative to acting-out (Schaverien, 1994). The embodied processes of healing disruptions in and between people are conditional for developing a collective wisdom or *phronèsis*; both as a community and individually: to become who you really are, according to Nietzsche and other philosophers on the art of living.



## ***Methodological Reflections***

It is extremely important to let the imagination work unrestrainedly, as every association may be significant. It is also important to orchestrate different modes of consciousness and to acknowledge parallel processes on intrapersonal, interpersonal, team and organizational levels. Finally, it is essential to integrate these levels so that the quality of playing together as a community can emerge. As one of the participants reflected, “It is so special that from nothing we create something beautiful”. The art dialogue dynamics will be lost if theater were to be limited in an instrumental framework of managerially set (educational) goals.

Theater as politics adds to the classical notion that emotional purification (catharsis) is enough by itself, as well as to the principle of pluralism as being predominantly a cognitive ability to switch perspectives. Through embodiment, participants learn to traverse back and forth between a theater perspective and a real-life perspective. In so doing, ADM enriches the psychodynamic principle that transitional space serves to help people find their way back to reality, as claimed by Winnicott (1972). Our research has shown how ritual space stimulates playing with fixed (organizational) roles.

An interesting philosophical implication of these enriched concepts is the deconstruction of metaphysical assumptions about reality itself. It challenges dominant ontological views, both from an idealistic stance (reality seen as a construction of subjects) and from materialistic perspectives (reality as determined by economic, cultural and social structures in organizations and society at large). Instead, the concept of fluid reality as a ritual space might be closer to the truth than the frozen realities that are recycled via dominant discourses.

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