

Abstract for **The Politics of Meaning-making / Meaning-breaking**, the 8th Annual Liverpool Symposium on Current Developments in Ethnographic Research in the Social and Management Sciences. VU University Amsterdam, August 28-30 2013

Title: Being puzzled

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In abductive logic, that is characteristic for doing ethnographic research, every act of meaning-making starts with a puzzle (Agar, 2010; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). Interestingly, in the light of the conference theme, in order to observe a puzzle, there needs to be an instance of meaning-breaking: the ethnographer encounters a situation that doesn't meet her or his expectations. Ethnographers need the sensitivity and openness to detect or experience something puzzling. The ethnographer subsequently takes the puzzle as the starting point for her/his search for meaning, in a process that is both iterative and recursive (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). And one may add: creative. This process of making meaning out of situations where meaning is broken, evidently, is not the privilege of academic researchers. Oscar Salemink (2003: 2) made the observation that professionals other than academic researchers made use of ethnography (in the past, and still) in order to make sense of situation that were different from their expectations: missionaries, development workers, politicians, government officials. When (those) people make ethnographic sense in formal situations or for formal purposes, politics is right around the corner. The act of meaning-making may be seen as, in Bourdieu's sense of symbolic power, an attempt to define the situation. A puzzle, as a situation where meaning is broken, provides an opportunity for redefinition and reframing. Defining a puzzle is itself an act of meaning making that has political consequences.

In my paper I will analyze organizational life and managerial practice from this perspective. In my own ethnographic study of a Christian school in higher education in the Netherlands I experienced a concrete situation of meaning-breaking, that was puzzling both to me and to the president of the school who I followed during my research. He was faced with a concrete situation where, in the presence of important stakeholders of the organization, the letters of the adjective 'Christian' (standing for the schools' identity and public legitimation) were physically removed from the façade, for everyone to see. His way of dealing with the embarrassing situation was an act of meaning-making that proved his tactical insight and skills as the schools' top manager. Besides describing and analyzing this instance, I will provide illustrations of situations in the same school that were unexpected and contradictory, that broke existing meanings, and that asked for new meaning-making. These situations were embedded in the daily organizational life of the school. More specifically, they concerned material,

textual artifacts (buildings, the interior of the school, organizational documents) that are symbolic for changes in the identity of the school at the time. These situations of meaning breaking (puzzles) typically are moments where organizational change takes place. Being able to be puzzled by those moments (often elusive and ambiguous) is valuable for both the ethnographer and the manager. Puzzles provide the starting point for deeper insight and understanding in the tensions and dynamics of organizational life and they provide opportunities for managing change.

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Schwartz-Shea, P. & Yanow, D. (2012) *Interpretive research design. Concepts and processes.*, New York and London: Routledge.