

On the track of spirituality

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Abstract

The topic of my proposed research is the interpretive approach of workplace spirituality. My ontological and epistemological assumptions were not clear at the beginning of my PhD research, these were shaped and evolved during my work. So in this essay I would invite the Reader for a journey, to let her/him see how I arrived to the interpretative approach of organizational spirituality and how I exactly understand *and interpret* this approach.

Keywords: spirituality, workplace spirituality, organizations, interpretive approach.

A few years ago I did an empirical research which was obligatory to getting my master degree. The topic of my thesis was organizational learning and I did a qualitative research connected with this subject in a catholic high school. I made interviews with teachers, the head of the school and students as well. During these conversations I was furnished such answers to my questions - like “why did you decide in that way”, “why did you do that in that situation”, “why did you change your previous decision”, and so on - with which I, as a researcher, could not get along. These answers were oriented to God: “Because God is our Father.” or “You know, we have common spiritual exercises.” and “When Jesus was hanging on the cross...” etc. I was confused: what should a researcher do with such answers? What should be done with the spiritual experiences of my interviewees, or is there anything to be done? What should I do with God in my research? Actually, what does God do in the workplace? What does God mean to organizations, or does he even mean anything? At least these dilemmas led me to the doctoral training. In this essay I invite the Reader for a journey, to let her/him see how I arrived from the previous dilemmas to the interpretative approach of organizational spirituality and how I exactly understand (interpret) this approach. My ontological and epistemological assumptions were not clear at the beginning of my PhD research, these were shaped and evolved during my work.

1. About spirituality

Before I began my PhD research I decided to find a more open and less narrow, less religious expression instead of “God”, that is how I found the word “spirituality”. At the beginning of my research I jumped into the plethora of the literature of spirituality at the workplace with the aim to get an overarching, correct definition on which I can build up my empirical research.

With this aim, I found myself in a very strange and tough situation, because “there seem to be as many definitions of spirituality at workplace as there are researchers!”

(Singhal&Chatterjee, 2006, p. 167) The only one thing they agree on, is that “there has been a sustained and increasing interest in the study of spirituality within in the field of management.” (Oswick, 2009, p. 15) The widespread differences between the authors begin with the basic question: Is it possible to have *one* common, overarching definition of spirituality? (Krishnakumar&Neck, 2002; Singhal&Chatterjee, 2006) Or is this phenomena too subjective to be defined generally, as Mitroff (2003) claimed the “definitions are too cold, too abstract, too unfeeling to do proper justice” (Mitroff,2003, p.381) to elucidate spirituality?

Another important field-shaping question is that if it is necessary to have a definition, than what is the foundation stone of getting it: empirical research (Mitroff and Denton, 1999) or theoretical research (Pandey&Gupta, 2008)? And considering empirical research, what is the most appropriate methodology, qualitative or quantitative (Benefiel, 2003ab; Forniciari&Dean, 2001; Giacalone&Jurkiewicz, 2003; Lips-Wiesma&Mills, 2002; Moore&Casper, 2006; Rego&Cunha, 2008)?

There are many systematizing writings with the aim of making typology of the burgeoning thoughts (Krishnakumar&Neck, 2002; Pandey&Gupta, 2008; Signal&Chatterjee 2006). These writings differ so much, such as the thoughts on the drivers behind the increasing field of interest in spirituality in management (Bell&Taylor, 2003, Butts, 1999; Calás&Smircich, 2003; Mitroff&Denton, 1999; Neal&Biberman, 2003; Schneiders, 1989; Tischler, 1999)? And actually, what could organizations benefit from spirituality, and this increasing interest about it (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000; Bell&Taylor, 2003; Butts, 1999; Krishnakumar&Neck, 2002; Mitroff, 2003; Mitroff &Denton, 1999; Neal&Biberman, 2003)? And, of course, the number of the alarming articles, which draw attention to the dangers of spirituality in the workplace, is increasing. (Bell&Taylor, 2003; Case&Gosling, 2007; Lips-Wiersma&Dean&Fornaciari, 2009).

So, as an initial researcher I found myself in my Babel, where I could not find any fix, starting point. The diversified thoughts and the reasonable, but sharp criticisms to them (Bell&Taylor, 2003; Benefiel, 2003ab; Schneiders, 1989) absolutely made me feel lost.

The most reasonable criticism was, that in spite of the epistemological, ontological nature of the elemental, field-shaping questions (like „How should spirituality be defined? How should spirituality in organizations be defined? What research methods are most appropriate?“ Benefiel, 2003a, p. 367) the underlying issues have not yet been faced, and the field of interest lacks the foundational philosophical work (Benefiel, 2003b). So my way lead to organizational theories.

Another obvious fact was, that there cannot be found any correct, extensive information in the management literature about the word “spirituality” itself, so my next step led to the roots of the word: where does it come from, who constructed it, and for what purpose, how did it change over history and why, and so on.

Developing the genealogy of spirituality showed me that it is not surprising that the nowadays' usage of the term is fluid and burgeoning. Without going into details, I summarize the most important results of my theoretical research:

- the term “spirituality” used to be an exclusive Christian term until the end of the 19th century (Schneiders, 1989)
- Originally, it appeared in adjectival form, in the letter of St. Paul, which he wrote in Greek, thus using the Greek version of the term: pneumatikos (*spiritual*) (Schneiders, 1989)
- the original Greek term, pneumatikos (spiritual) was coined by Paul to describe any reality that was in connect with the transcendent. According to the anthropology of Paul, spirituality meant the deepest dimension of the human, which is the direct and living contact with the transcendent (see Poirier, 2006; Hamman, 1993)
- the Latin term appeared in the 4th century, when St. Jerome (Hieronymus) translated the Bible into Latin (Benedict XVI, 2008)
- the most important changes in the meaning or form of the term were closely interconnected with the important changes of the Christian Church
- Because of the particular state of the Christian theology (Lafont, 1998) there is no given, fix, Christian definition of this term. The Christian theology has lost the word to the effect, that the term is no longer an exclusively Christian term, and what is more, the understandings inside the Christian religion are not coincident as well.

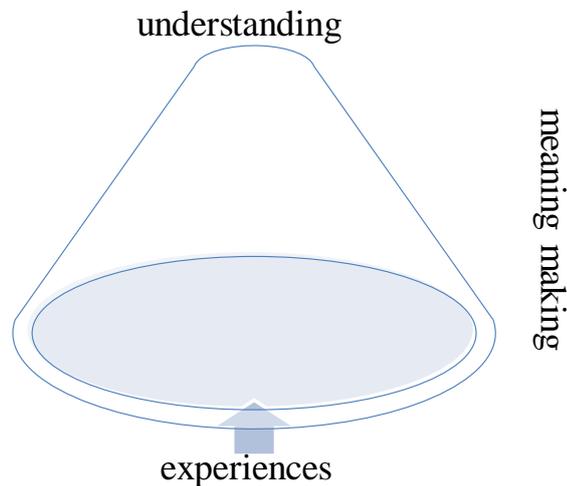
Mapping the historical background of the term helped me to understand, that there are really no basis points to define this phenomena so the definition depends absolutely on me. That was the point where my paradigm inquiry has met with the other side of my research topic and stimulated it.

2. Interpretive approach

The interpretive approach is not homogeneous. This is an umbrella term, under which many different schools of thoughts could be collected, because of their common epistemological and ontological assumptions. (Hatch&Yanow, 2009; Blaikie, 2007; Gelei, 2006) Their “central tenet is that there is a fundamental difference between the subject matters of the natural and social sciences.” (Blaikie, 2007, p. 125) “Unlike rocks and atoms, humans make meaning, and so a human (or social) science needs to be able to address what is meaningful to people in the social situation under study.” (Hatch&Yanow, 2009, p. 65) People have a

universal need to live in a meaningful world, and that is the reason why people make meaning and give understanding to everything that they experience: to their own actions, to actions of others, to behavior, and so on.

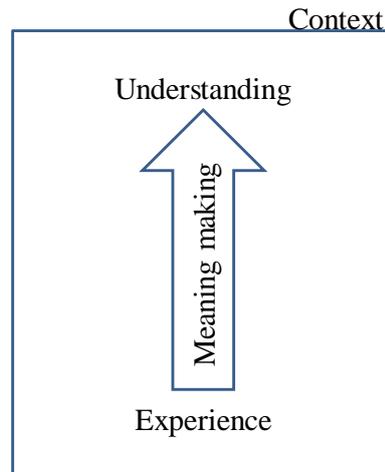
Figure 1. The meaning-making



However meaning making is not sterile. „Each knower comes to his subject with prior knowledge that has grown out of past experience, education, training, family-community-regional-national (and so on) background, and personality.” (Hatch&Yanow, 2009, p. 67) On the previous figure this is visualized by the funnel, which filters and shapes the experiences. The lived experience and the following understanding are built into the priori knowledge and so shape the future experiences and understandings.

The priori knowledge has influence to the experience as well. The context, which is constituted by the family, cultural-historical background, education, personality, and so on, filters and shapes the lived experience as well, and „in turn, shapes the way that we understand our 'Selves' and the world within which we live.” (Hatch&Yanow, 2009, p. 67)

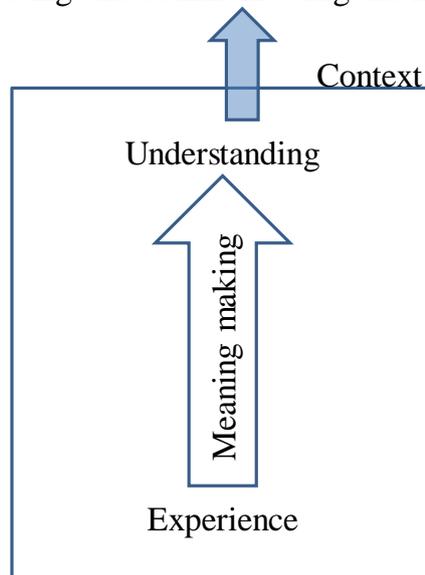
Figure 2. The Context of meaning-making.



These understandings and meanings cannot be grasped or observed directly. Human acts, language (interpersonal communication) and artifacts are „the projections or embodiments of human meaning.” (Hatch&Yanow, 2009, p. 66) We can only infer to these underlying meanings, which are not external, but covert.

Figure 3. The interpretive approach.

Expressing and communicating the meaning



In a community like an organization, personal experiences, meaning-makings and understanding influence each other. The organization is not a homogeneous reality but a multiple reality, where many different realities, understandings exist and the common reality is constructed by intersubjectively shared meaning-making, “the collective generation and

transmission of meaning” (Blaikie, 2007, p. 22). „It is a process of creating intersubjective understandings, in which members come to share a set of practices, knowledge about those practices, about one another, about how to address new situations, and so on. They become an interpretative community, who within this context at least, share frame – a view of how to approach and interpret new situations. (...) Interpretation, then, rests on a community of meaning.” (Hatch&Yanow, 2009, p. 68.)

So the interpretative approach assumes that a local, common understanding can grow up, in line with a common language and culture, which guarantee the understanding of each other, make consistency, give orientation for the members of the community, and permit of the collective, coordinated behavior. (Gelei, 2006)

Thus, organizational reality is a socially constructed reality, where organizational understandings of common experiences are made by a common meaning-making process. (Gelei, 2006) The aim of an interpretative researcher, is to investigate what things mean *here* and *now*. By which processes is the common understanding and meaning made? What are the common understandings and meanings? What kind of meanings are constructed and maintained and why?

The ontological assumptions of the interpretative approach are as follows:

- organizational reality is socially constructed
- „the social world we inhabit and experience is potentially a world of multiple realities, multiple interpretations” (Hatch&Yanow, 2009, p.67)
- meanings and understandings are tacit, cannot be observed directly; these are embedded in acts, minds, feelings, interactions, etc.
- meanings are local, subjective, particular, cannot be generalized.

These statements about meaning making and understanding can be applied for the researcher as well. „Both researcher and researched are, then, situated entities: their meaning-making and meaning is contextualized by prior knowledge and by history and surrounding elements (other event, other experiences). (Hatch&Yanow, 2009, p. 67) With other words: we, as researchers, are understanding the understandings, and we are making meaning of the meanings. And a researcher is a „researcher-as-writer in constructing, rather than mirroring” (Hatch&Yanow, 2009, p. 73). In that way „the knowledge process can not be said to be objective (...), and

knowing can not be said to proceed through direct, immediated observation alone.”
(Hatch&Yanow, 2009, p. 66)

The other important statement of the interpretative approach is that we never can reach the ultimate truth, the complete, entire reality. The meaning and understanding is always local, and limited as well. The reality can only be approached, converged.

All of these comprehensions are the reason, why I find the interpretive approach the most appropriate for researching the very subjective and fluid phenomenon of spirituality in the workplace.

3. The interpretative approach of spirituality in the workplace

Staying at the interpretative point of view, I profess that I am interpreting, and that I cannot isolate myself from these interpretations, from my contexts, so the only thing I can do, is to be fully aware of this. Imperatively, I have a previous understanding of spirituality, which is based on my Christian roots and is close to the Pauline term. My research topic is spirituality, under which *I* mean a lived experience and contact with the transcendent¹.

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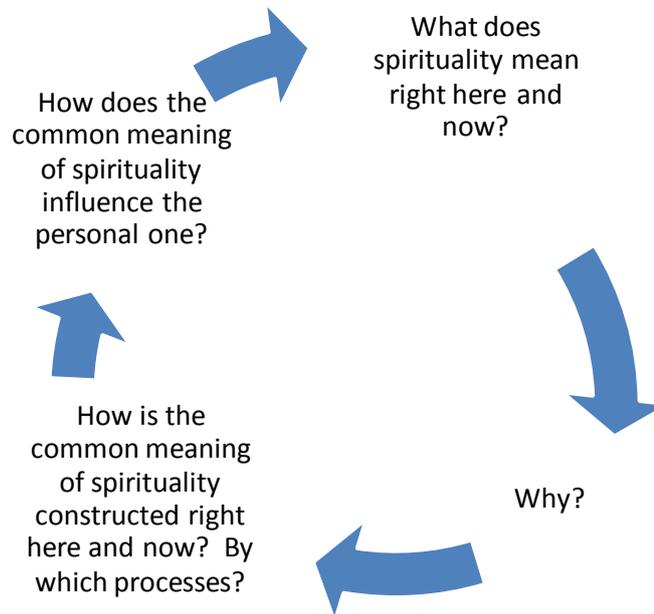
My focus is on the *common* meaning-making and understanding of these lived experiences in a workplace, and the way that these understandings are built into the context (lens, worldview or culture) through which the future experiences are lived and get meaning. How can - if it could - spirituality as a lived experience be a subject of the common meaning-making? How can it be the part of the common lens or worldview which contextualizes the process of meaning-making?

How can a common organizational spirituality grow up and through which processes, acts?

Which are the common understandings of spirituality and how do these influence the common construction of reality? And in turn: how does the common understanding of spirituality influence the personal understandings?

¹ In this term atheism has relevance as well, because it means a lived experience of the non-existence of any gods.

Figure 4. My research questions



I am convinced that these questions rhyme to the dilemmas I mentioned in the introductory lines of this essay, which questions have led me to the doctoral training.

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