

## Feeling, Talking and Thinking Sense in Indigenous Asian Management Research

### ABSTRACT

*In this paper, we outline the CINE method with a focus on understanding Asian managers from the simultaneous influence of their sensing, talking sense and sense-making, and we discuss advantages and limitations. We also report on our methodological plans for a pilot study conducted in Thailand, where we aim to explore the embodied, discursive and cognitive constructions of Thai managers. In an 'embodied' culture like Thailand where cognitive and rationalistic Cartesian perspectives are foreign and imported, we find that our focus on corporeal, affective and sensory realities in addition to discourse and cognitions is particularly appropriate. Our intention is to advocate a way of cultivating indigenous approaches that escape from intellectual and 'disembodied' colonization by Western theories.*

**Keywords:** mixed methods, narrative analysis, discourse analysis, embodiment, sensemaking

### EMBODIMENT AND SENSEMAKING

Research on human embodied cognition emphasises that the creation of realities through the construction of mental spaces is based upon embodied experience (Lakoff & Johnson 1980). As a result, “sensemaking is a temporal process of making our life and ourselves sensible through embedded and embodied narrative performances” (Cunliffe & Coupland 2012: 66). Meaning is created through analogical reasoning and indirect associations between that which is embodied, familiar and understood and that which is unknown, less familiar or abstract. In this view, ontologies are associations between established images with which we are comfortable and emerging images for which we seek familiarity. In particular notions about abstractions are often established through reference to physical and embodied understandings. We refer to the internet (a virtual and contemporary phenomenon), for example, as a ‘web’; a physical creation of an insect. We also, in English (and German, French and Swedish), refer to whether something was understood using the metaphor of ‘grasp’; mental accomplishment is understood by an ability attributable to the hand (Bürge, Jacobs & Roos 2005: 80). Similarly, in English and many other languages we interpret, for example, notions of *evil* through metaphors such as *darkness*, a source domain of an embodied experience of sight. The body as a source domain is omnipresent. In English we might say “the Marketing director is the right-hand man of the CEO”. Analogical reasoning using metaphor is, therefore, a principal source of re-framing in sense-making. It facilitates mapping one (more familiar-

source) domain onto another (less or unfamiliar-target) and thereby incorporates new schemata into existing epistemes.

The research into cognition, discourse and embodiment offers great potential for Asian Management Research because it provides a possible catalyst to integrate cognitive, discursive and embodied influences on theory and practice (Statler, Jacobs & Roos 2008). Western management theory is, in our view, subliminally dominated by Cartesian assumptions which privilege mind over body. Our proposition is that in Asian cultures, where Cartesian assumptions are alien and imported, theories such as 'embodied realism' can serve as a catalyst for the development of indigenously relevant Asian management knowledge. This provides the opportunity to explore culture through corporeality, conversations and cognitions. Understanding how Asians map and blend (through analogical reasoning) the new and unknown onto their existing and more familiar epistemes will hopefully provide valuable understanding of the Asian life-world including indigenous practices, beliefs and philosophies. What is more, we hope to reflect (and encourage reflexivity within the community of scholars involved in Asian management research) on how analogical reasoning is also something equally central to what we do in our research processes and in our own construction and development of theory and production of knowledge.

We propose that embodied, discursive and cognitive interactions are mutually implicated. However, embodied, sensorial engagement is prior to and more immediate than discursive and cognitive interaction. Mediated by initial embodied experience, discourse and semiotics, humans eventually cognitively construct categories by which they perceive and make sense of the world. We argue that such realities are created through embodied actions and texts as a product of a cultural history. In our empirical pilot study we seek to explore Thai organizational life through the perceptions of Thai actors in the three domains of sense-making; embodied, discursive and cognitive. In the next section we outline our proposed methodology for this venture.

### **CRITICAL INCIDENTS OF NARRATIVE EPISODES (CINE) METHOD**

The CINE method aims to focus attention through critical incidents on the three domains of embodied, discursive and cognitive perception/engagement. By focussing upon methods for how to understand

the combined effect of narratives and stories with metaphors and other tropes in their cultural context, the CINE method aims to provide a suitable projective / reflexive methodology for exploring experiences of interlocutors using embodied methodologies, discourse and cognitive analysis.

The CINE method builds on several strands of literature. It begins by adopting the influence of Czarniawska (2004: 42) who proposes a narrative methodology heavily influenced by Goffman and Weick (Czarniawska 2006). She draws on Gabriel's (2002; 2004) method of eliciting stories which she likens to Flanagan's (1954) Critical Incident Analysis (CIA). Czarniawska's approach also adopts 'observant participation' techniques exploring the 'action net' of interaction, to provide a lens to "help grasp the social drama as it appears to the actors, their views of their roles, and their assumptions about the unfolding plot" (Czarniawska 1998: 25).

Critical Incident Analysis (CIA) enables a focus of dialogue upon memorable events as episodes. Reasons or plots can be attributed by actors to events which are critical to the construction of meaning in interaction (Butterfield et al. 2005). It may be used as a heuristic device to elicit embodied impressions, narratives and stories from network actors and it focuses upon retrospective 'action' and 'sequences of events', the basis for both Goffman's dramaturgy and Weick's sense-making (Czarniawska 2006). Subjective interpretations as well as 'facts' can be the focus of analysis. It encompasses both perceptions of subjective / qualitative aspects as well as positivist / quantitative factors. These aspects and factors can be interpreted in terms of effect upon the perceived aim of the business activity. For precedents of such a flexible and interpretivist use of CIA within management and social science research see White & Locke 1981; Bolman & Deal 1991; Dean 1992; Gundry & Rousseau 1994; Driskill & Downs 1995; Weisinger & Salipante 1995. CIA in, for example, marketing and services research has been demonstrated to yield valuable and insightful results within networks of actors in terms of service quality and customer satisfaction (Stauss & Hentschel 1992; Stauss 1993; Edvardsson & Strandvik 2000; Meuter et al. 2000; Roos, 2002; Gremler, 2004).

Metaphors and other tropes are central to the CINE approach. They are important in storying because of their synoptic capacity which allows narratives to be told in short form. Their poetic logic often means that they act as "fables in brief" (Danesi 1994: 60). They are often critical in establishing a plot

for a narrative and, therefore, in creating a story. Tropes are ‘figures of speech’ which initiate analogical reasoning, comparison and connotative associations. They involve picturing the world by representing one thing in terms of another, in other words picturing through indirectness and by association. Tropes are, therefore, a main reason why we can regard the social construction of reality as an imaginative, generative and fictional process or creative force (Jacobs & Heracleous 2006). Tropes are so important because they constitute first impressions of embodied perceptual picturing. These first ‘embodied’ impressions are key to any subsequent cognitive picturing, understanding and rationalisation. They are indirect signs of ‘resemblance’ that enable a rudimentary, embodied or ‘gut feeling’ understanding without which meaning is impossible. If we understand meaning as dependent upon ‘framing’ (Goffman 1974), then figurative speech can be (metaphorically) likened to the ‘wood’ for the frame. Tsoukas (1991) proposes that metaphors as a key trope act as a trigger for oscillatory analogical reasoning process.

Within Marketing Research for example, Helkkula & Pihlstrom’s (2010) EBNIT approach similarly advocates the use of metaphors as a projective device to access the tacit needs of customers in order to develop new services. In their case, a ‘magic wand’ metaphor was used to enable customers to project a new story of an imaginary service event that would satisfy their needs more ideally. Metaphors are seldom used in isolation. ‘Polytropy’, or the creative mixture of tropes allows analogical reasoning and transmission of meaning through indirectness and intertextuality (Lowe et al. 2012; Friedrich 1991). Once a trope is in play, others are brought into the analogical ‘word game’, metaphorically as cards are in a card game, as the interactive imagination expands and multiplies through exchange. As a result, we feel that users of CINE method should be creative in the selection of tropes to use and inventive in the mixing of tropes in collaboration with preferences of interlocutors. Popular tropes in English and the contexts that they might use are listed below.

**Metaphors** - Body, Senses & Mind, Dancing, Drama, Morgan’s organizational metaphors, etc

E.g: *The internet as a ‘web’*. *A successful business deal as a ‘home run’*. *‘Grasping’ a firms strategy*.

**Synecdoche/Metonymy** - Part/Whole analogies: E.g: *Person from ‘head’ office referred to as a ‘suit’*

**Irony** - Comedy / Jokes/ Counter- rationality / Contradiction: E.g: *‘Personal automated customer services’*, *‘deliberate accidents’*, *‘free advice’*

### **A Brief Outline of the CINE Method**

We use the metaphor of a 'yo-yo' to analogically reason how we envisage it working as an oscillatory and fairly heuristic process. A 'yo-yo' is held in the palm of the hand and the string is connected to a finger. To use the toy, you must release it so that it extends out and then when it retracts, you must catch it and begin the process again. In the CINE approach, we envisage an iterative focus on critical incidents sequentially focussing upon embodied, discursive and cognitive sense-making using tropes / metaphor, analogy and isomorphic aspects of the analogical reasoning process (Tsouka 1991). The situated learning process of CINE method requires skill and practice development. At the beginning the extension-retraction may well fail through lack of experience and skill and we may have to restart the process. With practice, however, the process should become easier, more effective and accomplished.

The expectation is that each research project using the CINE method will have its own idiosyncrasies and that no two projects will be identical. Early on in the iterative process it is advisable to introduce an inductive intervention, such as 'analogically mediated inquiry' (Barry 1994), through the use of 'embodied metaphors'. This involves using objects (such as, for example, toy models, objects or actual maps/pictures) that participants can make, handle, move and engage with interactively to construct shared spatial understandings through storying. These are "collaboratively constructed physical analogues" (Jacobs & Heracleous, 2006: 207) that have shown to have had beneficial effects in terms of addressing issues of consequence to participants as well as enabling "politically contentious issues to arise and be decoded and debated, foster creative thinking, and facilitate organizational change by being occasions for collective sense- making where important issues can be surfaced and debated" (Jacobs & Heracleous, 2006: 208).

The next stage involves exploring further structural similarities between domains using narrative techniques. Participants are encouraged to construct stories in the context of the metaphor. At this stage, tropes and stories outside the initial metaphor can be encouraged as participants warm up to the creative and connotative nature of the exercise. In the final stage, the purpose is to promote cognitive

isomorphism, which requires reflection from the participants on what the exercise means in terms of their narrating a worldview and the consequences for rationalisations in future action and plans. Perhaps the best way to exemplify is through a hypothetical example of a dyadic relationship between a Hong Kong garment manufacturer (let us call them Chee Sin Fashions) and a British High Street Fashion Store (who we will call DHS). Imagine at stage (a) the researcher secures access to actors (buyers, salespeople, marketing managers etc.) from both parties. The next decision is which trope to begin with. Preliminary research questions concerning the effectiveness, quality and durability of the relationship can at this stage be established in consultation with both parties. After initial exercises involving expressive tasks (such as model building, drawing, mapping and other art/craft activities) and pilot discussions, assume the research team decide to start by using the metaphor of horseracing because of its popularity in Hong Kong and the U.K. and because the connotations of speed and ‘throughbred’ quality matches the two most important critical success factors of the business (speed of delivery and high quality of goods). Assume that the researchers establish Hong Kong as the venue because of the availability of DHS buyers to travel there. The CINE method is employed using English when both parties are together and Cantonese when only Chee Sin interlocutors are present. The researchers would then use a combination of associative, completion, construction and expressive tasks using the horseracing metaphor. The purpose of this in Tsoukas’s (1991) terms is to promote imaginative development from a superficial comparison between domains triggered by metaphor into more structural comparisons through analogy and more systematic comparisons through isomorphism. For example, these tasks might be designed to elicit from dialogical images around identity in the relationship such as ‘who is the horse?’ and ‘who is the jockey?’ or characterizations of the nature of the course, the stakes or the reputation of the stable. Once the interlocutors ‘warm up’ to the imaginative and connotative nature of the dialogical exercise, this would be time to introduce the ‘critical incidents’ question. Initially this requires critical incident narration (accounts of what happened in interaction within the relationship). At this stage the interlocutors should be encouraged to stick to (to use an adhesive metaphor) the horseracing metaphor. Subsequently the researchers should request critical incident storying, where interlocutors are encouraged to put the plot into the narrative (the attributed reason which turns the event into an episode through an analogical process).

At this stage it is likely that some tropes recurrent within the organizations, and in this case some British and indigenous Chinese tropes/ proverbs, will surface, if they have not already done so. From the outcome of that process, the group would be set an expressive narrative task and asked to return to the horseracing metaphor. The task might require expressive describing and performing a mini-play called 'a perfect race day'. The researcher needs to be sensitive to the form of expression most appropriate for the group here. Riessman (2004a), for example, reports on narrative interviewing with a group of young, black, pregnant females which met with silence using oral elicitation but rich stories when artistic productions and role-play were used. At the final stage of the cycle review of outcomes in relation to research questions is undertaken. Several methods of narrative analysis are available to evaluate the data. Riessman (2004b) outlines a typology of models of narrative analysis which include thematic, structural, interactional and performative approaches. These vary in sophistication and focus upon what is told, the way it is told, the dialogical co-creation of meaning or the dramaturgical and performative aspects of the narration. Riessman (2004b: 706) emphasises that "In practice, different approaches can be combined; they are not mutually exclusive, and, as with all typologies, boundaries are fuzzy". After narrative analysis a plenary needs to be held where participants can explore and rationalise what they have learned and what the implications are for practical action.

Depending upon the time and resources available, the 'yo-yo' process would then start again but this time with additional tropes, particularly those that have been brought to the dialogical exercise by the interlocutors themselves, being explored further. The 'yo-yo' process of the CINE method requires successive iterations that adopt increasingly 'thick' descriptions. As a result a CINE 'yo-yo' methodological process may begin with interview-based techniques but should aim in successive cycles to ideally adopt increasingly more ethnographic approaches to capture actual critical incidents in action through participant observation. This means a gradual move from a focus upon 'perspectives of action' to 'perspectives in action' (Down & Reveley, 2009: 386).

#### **Advantages, Issues, Problems and Limitations of CINE Method**

A major advantage of CINE method is it gives access to tacit knowledge and lived experiences, particularly about cultural projections and identity reflections between the actors and the mirroring of

images involving outside stakeholders. In business network relationships, for example, it allows exploration of issues that are unspoken, difficult to express, taboo or sensitive and therefore cause actors to be reluctant to express them. So, for example, in the hypothetical case above, Chee Sin Fashions is likely to get valuable impressions related to the customers of DHS through the analogical reasoning of DHS buyers and their tacit understanding of their customers in the exercise. Similarly it would give each cultural party access to mutual and different notions of time, which could provide vital solutions to problems of co-ordination and new opportunities for improvements and innovation. Some of the issues arising relate to definitions of narrative and story, episodes, Tropes, culture and identity. Much of the terminology used so far is polysemic within social science because of differences in paradigmatic assumptions made by different authors. For example, Helkkula & Pihlstrom (2010: 357) state an unreserved preference for chronological stories but for Boje (2008) these Aristotelian (beginning, middle, and end) tales are considered controlling, modernist 'centripetal' narratives. It is important, therefore, that the research group has reached a tolerable consensus of meaning of terms before the dialogical exercise starts. Equally the research team needs to have reached a negotiated agreement (in consultation with the participants) on their collective onto-epistemological position, objectives of the research and criteria for establishing validity and reliability of data.

In terms of limitations, one problem could be the cost and resources required and the critical need to find researchers with appropriate skills and an imaginative orientation. Another issue is taboo or 'sensitive' issues. When actors in relationships are encouraged to explore their tacit understandings and express them, this may lead to offense being taken or misunderstandings causing conflict. Again, the critical importance of the skill of the researcher is emphasised. In the example given, colours, numbers, animals, family, proxemics etc., have different connotations in Hong Kong than the U.K. Equally, different philosophical, cognitive and linguistic styles make East and West very different (Nisbett 2003). The researcher has to be able to skilfully broker meanings, in the face of national and/or organizational cultural distances, if and when misunderstandings arise in the dialogical imaginations of the actors from different cultures.

In terms of resemblance, the CINE method is more like the approach of Czarniawska (2002; 2004; 2006). Czarniawska's approach follows a reflexive approach to process and practice that refuses to be



subservient to the realist expectations of objectivism and statistical logic. Czarniawska's (2006) approach can be described as a narrativity of dramaturgical sensemaking as it is heavily influenced by Weick's sensemaking (Weick 1995) and Goffman's dramaturgy (Goffman 1956). It seeks to understand the dynamic and multiple processes of contemporary social life in viewing identity as narrated within cultural contexts and accomplished through interaction. The CINE method adopts Czarniawska's (2002; 2004) advocacy of a 'narrative cognition' because it is more holistically attuned to a 'firstness' of bodily experience and avoids the limitations of requiring solely rationalist and analytical / classifying deduction and response from interlocutors (Aarikka-Stenroos 2010). The CINE method also supports Czarniawska's (2007) focus upon episodes (as emplotted events) by using Critical Incidents and/or 'shadowing' actors. Czarniawska's 'observant participation' techniques are CINE methods that "help grasp the social drama as it appears to the actors, their views of their roles, and their assumptions about the unfolding plot" (Czarniawska 1998: 25), and the way in which social networks and the expression of social identities are used to further individual and group ambitions (Goffman: 1956). This enables the recognition of the emplotment of connotative meanings to events because it focuses upon emplotted 'action' and 'sequences of events', creating episodes which are the basis for both Goffman's dramaturgy and Weick's sensemaking (Czarniawska: 2006) and provides a suitable catalyst for imagistic-based cross-cultural research and indigenously relevant Asian management research.

### **PILOT STUDY IN THAILAND**

In our pilot study conducted in Thailand, we aim to explore embodied aspects of practice through the combination of non-cognitive and non-discursive techniques with narration and storytelling. We intend to surface practices performed by embodied actors in a Thai corporate context. Our embodied actors are Thai managers who will be asked to physically construct representations of their view of a current problem in their organization. They will be given the opportunity to visualize their mental images with the help of construction toys that allow them to build 3-dimensional models. The experiment is based on the intention to explore the link between manual and cognitive activity, in other words the link between the hand and the mind (Bürigi et al.2005). Our presumption is that the

manual activity happens prior to the cognitive activity. This is in line with Czarniawska's notion of the 'firstness' of bodily experience (Czarniawska 2002; 2004). The building and grouping of models gives participants an opportunity to visualize their intuitive understanding of the organization which they can subsequently interpret and share with others. The process of sharing one's interpretation of the visualized mental model will inspire discussions and further negotiation of meaning. The underlying thinking has been aptly expressed by Bürgi et al. (2005) (paraphrasing Weick 1995) '*how can we know what we mean until we see what we build*'. Similar techniques have been used successfully in corporate strategy consulting (Barry 1994; Bürgi & Roos 2003; Statler et al. 2008). The experiment with construction toys allows participants to 'think with their hands'. We expect that in an embodied culture such as the Thai culture, with its strong focus on embodied feelings and emotions, this technique will prove particularly useful to explore participants' intuitive understanding of situations and to provide a tool for encouraging deeper reflection and access to otherwise subconscious understanding of corporate situations. Thai culture and language give priority to embodied feelings and emotions over cognition. Thai language uses a variety of metaphorical descriptions, and among those, body metaphors are prevalent. One example can be discovered in the word '*khao jai*' which translates into English as to 'understand' but the literal translation is 'enter heart'. The Thai word for heart, *jai*, is used as a metonym for person in Thai language, but heart can also refer to different modes of thinking, feeling, and social relationships (Berendt & Tanita 2011). The importance of heart metaphors in Thai language can be deduced from the sheer number of expressions which include the word heart. Moore (2006) compiled a list of over 700 Thai expressions which include the word *jai*. The importance and the use of metaphors in Thai language have been studied extensively – see Bamber 1987; Juntanamalaga 1992; Vongvipanond 1994; Ukosakul 2000; Singnoi 2006; Berendt & Tanita 2011.

Our proposed experiment will consist of several stages. Firstly, participants will be asked to build a model of their individual view of a perceived problem in their organization. Individuals will then narrate their interpretation of their own model with colleagues (story-telling) and will answer questions related to the model (reflective conversation - encouraged by the moderator or by other group members). In the second stage, group members will combine individual models to form a

combined view of the perceived problem. At this point the group will spend some time building and discussing their consolidated understanding of the perceived problem (framing). In the third stage, the group will use their consolidated understanding of the problem to develop possible solutions.

We expect Thai participants to have a natural preference for using their hands as instruments for creating knowledge in a visual form. We also expect that the manipulation of objects and materials will stimulate discursive interaction between participants and thereby create new insights regarding the current situation in the organization. The activity carried out with their hands gives participants an opportunity to 'embody' their thoughts through the use of metaphors. Participants will subsequently have an opportunity to share their inner pictures of the situation through narrative expression and storytelling. Other participants will be invited to comment and ask questions and this in turn will create a shared understanding and construct collective meaning. Kase, Slocum & Zhang (2011) argue that Asians are inductive thinkers who value concrete experience and practical applications over theoretical analysis. Building on this preference we expect that the use of inductive interventions such as collaboratively constructing physical analogues of mental images will provide us with access to subjective interpretations of Thai organizational practices.

## CONCLUSIONS

Our paper proposes a new approach for indigenously relevant Asian management research. Our proposition is that in order to overcome Western bias and promote indigenously relevant research it is necessary to overcome or transcend tacit and explicit Cartesian assumptions. In particular, we see that challenging the denigration of body and corporeal understanding is important in cultures where 'mind over body' is not philosophically and culturally entrenched. Our solution is to combine embodied, discursive and cognitive techniques in a method we call Critical Incidents of Narrative episodes (CINE). We introduce the CINE method with its emphasis on cognition, discourse and embodiment as a tool for researchers for surfacing "embodied performances" (Statler et al. 2008: 136), in other words patterns of human action as perceived in an indigenous context. We have outlined this proposed methodology, reviewed the implications for its operationalisation and assessed associated advantages, issues, problems and limitations. We encourage researchers to use this method heuristically and

inventively in pursuit of a more holistic and indigenously relevant approach to international management research.

Our pilot study will be conducted in Thailand, a country where language and culture show a strong preference for corporeal and intuitive understanding of reality. Thai language with its multitude of body metaphors seems to lend itself to the use of embodied techniques. Our aim is to make non-cognitive aspects visible by providing our Thai practitioners with 3-dimensional objects which allow them to engage in collective sense-making. Our emphasis on techniques which help to surface corporeal understanding (feeling) in combination with narrative and storytelling techniques (talking) and shared negotiation of meaning (thinking) seems to us particularly appropriate for exploring subjective experiences and uncovering indigenous Thai perspectives. We will report on the findings of our pilot study during the ANZAM conference presentation.

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