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USING SENSE-MAKING IN PHENOMENOLOGICAL RESEARCH

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ESSENCE OF PROJECT:
This project is located in the area of Studies of Religions. I was interested to discover how contemporary Roman Catholics construe their religiousness. My intention was to examine a wide range of Catholic experiencing, specifically in situations where people felt dissonance between their experience and their understanding of church teachings and practices. It was hoped that patterns would emerge in individuals' communicative moves that would demonstrate the ways in which communication was being blocked/facilitated. Communication was understood not only as that which pertains to individuals and externals but also those processes internal to the person by which they realign values, needs and the symbolic worlds available to them. The project is my PhD thesis (and I've passed!) A Sense-Making timeline interview was used (A copy of the outline appears at the end of this precis). Sense-Making theory was discussed and elaborated upon in order to include specific attention to, and interpretation of, the place of embodiment in people's meaning-making as well as its effects on interpretation and decision making in the research process. The specific questions addressed were: **1)** How do Catholics move to reduce the tension that arises when their life process is blocked or stopped by their understanding of church teaching and/or practice? **2)** What elements of experience play a role in forming the spirituality of people who were raised Catholics? **3)** Is there a relationship between bodily and material experience and a person's formation of their spirituality? **4)** Is there a relationship between bodily and material experience and people's ethical conduct in the context of religiousness? **5)** What form does this relationship take?

THE REASONS I TOOK THIS ROAD:
One of the most prominent features in the research literature concerning Catholics is the observation that the experiences of laity, and women in particular, are not being adequately or accurately represented in the discourses of theology and morality. In fact those experiences are not perceived to be legitimate grounds for theorising. Celibate males hold a distinct hegemony in the production of Catholic discourse. This state of affairs is a symptom of a symbolic cosmos that encapsulates a gendered value system whereby the male is God-father-to-be-obeyed and the 'spiritual' is somehow distinct from and more valued than the 'bodily'. All structures of functioning and consciousness are dualistically patterned;body/mind, female/male, nature/culture, sex/spirit. People may collude in their own oppression. It is therefore important to examine individual experiences systematically in order to discover what is generally held by believers to be unique and sacred in their lifeworlds, and how they consider these things are being violated. With Sense-Making Methodology one can bypass the mind-body dualism and access and describe many constellations of experience-ing. At the

same time the Sense-Making interview data allows one to make both diachronic (chronological, procedural) and synchronic (cross-sectional, outcome focused) readings of the data. I was able to identify experiential moments at which people's Sense-Making processes were disrupted or blocked and compare those moments across generations as well as across persons in diverse social locations - thus the possibility of identifying at what points rigid imperatives affect people most severely as well as how these experiences become a factor in people's intentionality and agency.

THE BEST OF WHAT I HAVE ACHIEVED:

As Sense-Making theory illustrates, people focus differently when they describe situations, even when given a specific situational context from which to work. I was able to describe eight prototypical experiences of arrested movement that Catholics experienced in their relationships to the church. Findings suggest that Catholic moral discourse typically fails believers at particular points in the lifecourse; at about eight years of age, at puberty, when leaving school and when becoming sexually active. At these times participants indicated that the questions they were asking did not attract answers adequate to their levels of reasoning. For example at age eight a person might have queried the teaching that exhorted them not to enter churches of other faiths because Catholicism is the only true religion. Or, around puberty, a person might have felt let down by the fact that discussion of sexuality was explicitly avoided in Human development classes. On leaving school many found themselves outside of the closed Catholic environment for the first time. They struggled as they discovered a need to argue for the value of their Catholic faith but found that they had only been given asserions of belief to work with. Any questioning about issues was sanctioned, questioning per se was believed to be a sign of weak faith. Further, Catholic doctrine did not offer practical guidance for what Foucault has described as 'technologies of self' as do such systems as Buddhist meditation or Yoga.

People adopted varying positions with respect to church teaching and practice, it was not simply a matter of staying or leaving. A complex set of factors contributed to their relationship to the church including; the degree to which their deviance from role descriptions laid down by Catholic dogma became visible to the worshipping community, their own dispositions acquired through early socialisation and later embedded in iterative behaviours, their perceptions, varying motivations and volitions, their sexual orientation and their social location in the Catholic hierarchy (nun, priest lay man, lay woman, single person). Further there were common communicative procedures adopted by individuals regardless of the specific kind of situation movement state they described. These were: questioning, judging, removing assent, relocating and symbolic re-aligning. There were also communicative procedure-ings notable by their virtual absence, in particular: mediating and compromising.

WHAT HAS BEEN HELPFUL:

The focus of phenomenology, at least since Husserl, has been to discover patterns in the ways people structure meaning from their experiences. Sense-Making theory, developed in a verbal/language communication framework, may be read in ways that lead us to acquiring a cognitive episteme, erasing, ignoring, or simply not noticing or giving sufficient weight to affective and spiritual ways of knowing. These are enduring themes in phenomenology. Sense-Making Methodology, however, permits us to access any aspect of experience. For a model of experience that can be used to discuss and interpret S-M interviewing data in terms of affective and spiritual ways of knowing I combine the insights of Madjamika Buddhist philosophy and of the sociology of emotions literature. Varela, Thompson and Rosch (1993) argue that Madjamikan philosophy has never become abstract, dualised or separated from pragmatics. Buddhists of this persuasion observe that at any moment the mind is tied to its object by five aggregates; body, feelings and sensations, dispositions, perceptions, and motivations and volitions.

These aggregates of experience can be operationalised in the Sense-Making interview structure. But Buddhism is not without its cognitive leanings. To complete the model of experience I overlay this typology with a theory of emotionality. Affect has been characterised in a number of ways in the sociology of emotions literature, the main point of contention being over the definitions of and the relationships between feelings, sense-ings and emote-ings. Denzin maintains that a firm distinction must be made between sensible feelings and all other feelings that the person may feel and experience (1984: 126). He elaborates a stratification model of emotionality (1984: 113-120). The notion of emotionality refers to the ways sensations-feelings-emotions integrate in lived experience. According to Denzin, five levels of functioning may be distinguished which address four levels of body; these are: **i)** sensible feeling in particular parts of the body, body sensations or states - the physical body; **ii)** pain, consciousness and body for person; the body is given consciousness through intentional focusing - the physical body; **iii)** feelings of the lived body - nausea, sorrow, despair, joy - accompanied by complexes of sensible feelings - the phenomenological body; **iv)** intentional value feelings towards intentional objects of feelings - have a value quality, they are external to lived emotional experience and remain after specific instances of anger, fear, etc have passed. These feelings form part of the interpretive framework. Intentional value feelings signal the moral values a person holds towards herself, her inner lived sensible feelings and inner moral feelings - the enacted body-for-the-person; **v)** feelings of the self and the moral person - originate in the stream of consciousness in ego or self in everyday or phenomenological levels. They are not feelings produced by the person directly nor derived from particular values, lived emotional experiences or sensible feelings as such- the enacted body-for-others.

When speaking about emotions and feelings, a distinction should be made between the modes and forms of emotions and feelings, between lived emotion as feelings of the lived body, the self and the moral person, and intentional value feelings which reference emotional abstractions and emotional ideals. The latter provide continuity and organisation to the person's life, both with self and others. "These value feelings infuse, animate, and haunt lived emotions" (Denzin, 1984: 127). As an example we could cite how the Catholic childhood sensations of incense, candlelight and music accompanying rituals serve to embed a certain kind of emotionality linked to ideals like communalism, familism and self-transcendence. Denzin's model of emotionality most closely contributes to the structures of experience I am using here, drawing connections between levels of body, mind and psyche. Reiterating, the five dimensions of experience outlined in an earlier section were body, feelings and sensations, perceptions, dispositions, and motivations and volitions. Denzin's 'intentional value feelings' clearly are implicated in volitions and motivations, but also arise from past experiences when dispositions were being constellated. Intentional value feelings inform the kinds of perceptions one articulates about a current situation. 'Lived emotion' pertains to body, feelings and sensations, and dispositions. Emotionality then, connected to sensible feelings, is not entirely socially constructed. It is this aspect of emotionality that is liable to resist imposed views of reality. Theorising embodiment through Denzin's concept of emotionality enabled me to provide a more complex picture of the relations between personal agency and collective might. For example in the Catholic study certain emotions such as anger or disappointment produced a cumulative effect and contributed to the communicative tactics employed by some participants. Some people were motivated by anger to keep challenging the system from within while others sought to remove themselves from anger generating contexts.

WHAT I HAVE STRUGGLED WITH:

I struggle mostly with how to describe theory and methodology in a way that does not increasingly erase embodiment from the research and interpretative process. How do

biological and emotional patterns contribute to the different/same senses individuals make of similar stimuli? How does embodiment affect the Sense-Making interview? For example, is it justified to neglect to mention in the reporting of our research methodologies that sexual offers from participants to researcher in the course of interviewing have affected both the data collected and decisions about continuing interviews? Further, I am taking issue with a sociological tradition which requires that work be presented in certain standardised ways. I am wondering what to do with the findings of my research. Do I test and build upon the typological categories of experience? Do I attempt to develop a theory of 'relative power domains'? Does this last question make sense?

WHAT WOULD HELP NOW:

Discussion about the ways I have perceived the gaps which appear in Sense-Making theory if one views it through a phenomenological framework, especially with respect to the points raised above. For example the Sense-Making metaphor of crossing the bridge by laying planks to get to the other side seems to provide a one dimensional view if one is thinking of Sense-Making as meaning-making. From a phenomenological point of view, while a person may be experiencing a gap in a cognitive sense, there are other dimensions of experience that continue to flow without interruption. For example one can think of affective and spiritual ways of knowing. The idea of circling the experience adds another dimension but it accesses affective and spiritual ways of knowing via a cognitive/reflective activity. What I am saying is, from a materialist perspective it helps to think of arrested situations as moments of discontinuity within continutiy. Reality is inherently discontinuous, as Dervin maintains, but to get a more complex picture one needs to view gaps against a broader flow. Possibly, we could consider reality as a hol(e)y fabric. I have conceived reality as entities and flow where entities are reified energy forms that we observe but which are also in the process of disintegrating back into flow.

PROJECT ABSTRACT:

The project examines the processes by which people who were raised in the Catholic tradition managed life situations in which personal experience was in conflict with their understandings of church teachings and practices. Forty Catholics participated in in-depth interviews. They described thoughts, feelings and spiritual know-ings in the process of managing personal integrity and identified connections between those perceptions and earlier life experiences. Participants represented a wide range of social positions and lifestyles and all lived in the Brisbane archdiocese in Queensland, Australia. Participants' tape recorded interviews were transcribed and analysed with a view to discovering not only the outcomes of their meaning-making, a synchronic reading, but also the procedural strategies they employed to move from one meaning structure to another, a diachronic reading. Analyses of people's situation definitions revealed eight different 'situation movement states' characterising the nature of their subjective experiences of power relations; these were; Barrier, Decision, Wash-out, Effete (a situation/tradition which is no longer vigorous or capable of effective action; decadent, degenerate), Problem, Spin-out, Drifting and Tight-rope. Individuals' reflections revealed points in their respective lifetimes at which the Catholic institution had failed them, intellectually, psychologically, spiritually and materially. The contested terrain was drawn across cultural and biological meanings pertaining to the lived body. I argue that it is in particular communicative strategies and the moral decision makings of everyday life that women and men demonstrate how contemporary social reality is negotiated in terms of Catholic values.

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