

Aesthetics and Connection

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Some fifteen years ago, Hans Hansen and I offered four ways that aesthetics was conceptualized within the field of organizational aesthetics, as epistemology, connection, criteria for judgements, and categories (Taylor & Hansen, 2005). In the decade and half since then, I have become more and more interested in the idea of aesthetics as connection, even as it also seems to me that the field has explored that idea the least of the four conceptions. During that same time, a variety of voices have started to speak of a lack of connection as the underlying crisis of all the rest of the crises of our time (e.g. Monbiot, 2017).

My own thinking on connection and aesthetics started with the idea that connection is the medium of the craft of leadership (Taylor, 2012; Taylor & Karanian, 2009). That is to say, if leadership is a craft in the way that glassblowing or woodworking are crafts, then in the same way that a glassblower works the medium of glass and a woodworker works the medium of wood, a leader works the medium of connection between people. I explored this idea in a week-long leadership class called *The Leadership Craft of Connecting* that I taught with Linda Naiman at the Banff Centre in November of 2017. In that week, two things became clear to me: first, the idea of the craft of leadership being based in working connection resonated with most leaders, and second, we had no theoretical or practical way to talk about connection.

Another important discovery for me was how much a lack of connection was a particularly western problem. One of the things we did during the week was engage in a series of long “campfire” conversations about connection, led by the Blackfoot scholar, Leroy Little Bear. Although it’s impossible to really summarize those conversations without doing them a great disservice, the takeaway for me was that my own conception of connection was based in a western ontology in which things and people were discrete entities with a durable permanence. In his indigenous ontology, people and things were all of a piece – inherently connected if you will, and it was all much more fluid. It made no sense for him to talk about working connection, because connection – between people, between him and the mountains, and so on – connection simply was. Connection was the natural state of things, talking about connection was like fish talking about water.

In Search of a Theory of Aesthetics and Connection

I tend to start with theory because I am primarily a theorist. However, I also believe that theory must translate into practice – indeed nothing is more useful in practice than good theory. For me, the theoretical relationship between aesthetics and connection goes back to Rafael Ramirez’s (1991) work that built upon Bateson’s (1979) idea that aesthetic experience resonated with the pattern that connects mind and nature. In a similar way, Sandelands (1998) argued that artistic forms expressed our sense of being part of our group or put more simply, how we are connected to others. This thinking establishes aesthetic experience as

being fundamentally about connection, whether that is connection to the wider world, or connection to our fellow humans, but it tells a little about the nature of connection other than that our experience of it is primarily aesthetic or to put it more simply, we feel connection in a direct sensory way.

If we turn to McGilchrist's (2009) summary of the psychology and neuroscience literatures to explain how our brain works, we find a different and perhaps more precise idea of what connection as aesthetics means. McGilchrist describes two distinct ways in which we pay attention to the world. The first is right-brain attention, which is holistic, constantly scanning for new information from the senses, and works to make meaning and find connection. The second is the left-brain attention that takes information that has been framed by the meaning making of the right-brain attention and works out how to manipulate things in the world for people's own benefits and uses. Creed, Taylor, & Hudson (2019) refer to the right-brain attention as the aesthetic mode and the left-brain attention as the analytic mode. This thinking suggests that our felt sense of connection comes from right-brain attention.

Within the organizational studies literature, the most significant thinking on connection comes from Dutton and her colleagues (Dutton, 2003; Dutton & Heaphy, 2003; Stephens, Heaphy, & Dutton, 2011) who define "High-quality connection" as short-term interactions between people, which differ from relationships which are longer in duration. This thinking opens the doors to distinguish between other adjacent concepts. We may disagree that connection is a short-term interaction, but any comprehensive theory of connection should be clear about how connection is related to other things, such as relationships, love, group identity, trust, and so on. Connection may well be the sort of concept that has multiple different meanings which share a family resemblance (much like aesthetics (Welsch, 1996)).

Where Dutton's work is about connection to other people, Bateson's work reminds us that we can connect to the natural world, to places. Although there has not been a lot of organizational work on place (Ropo & Salovaara, 2018; Ropo, Salovaara, Sauer, & De Paoli, 2015 are notable exceptions) connection to place should be part of a comprehensive theory of connection. Additionally, connection to self is at the heart of many spiritual traditions, including Buddhism (Goldstein, 1983), the Jesuit spiritual exercises (Coghlan, 2004), and American transcendentalism (Emerson, 1903) and should be included.

As I think about these different fragments of theorizing, I have an idea that it might be possible to bring them together using the framework of institutional aesthetics (Creed et al., 2019). My idea is that connection is based in our personal aesthetics. The more that we share a personal aesthetic with someone else, the more connected to them we feel. We feel connected to a place because it resonates with our personal aesthetic. Our personal aesthetics come from our own history of interacting with people, institutions, and places and the ways we have learned to make meaning in those interactions. Of course, this idea is a long way from being a full-blown, comprehensive theory of connection – but I think it could become one. My intuition is that its usefulness would largely depend on how we might operationalize personal aesthetics (see Taylor, 2019 for some initial thoughts on how to do that) and the heuristics for action based in that, which brings up my next topic, the craft of working connection.

The Craft of Working Connection

Craft brings together instrumental purpose and aesthetics, caring about both. Craft brings together, technical knowledge, aesthetic sensibilities, and deliberate practice. For example, a master wood worker has a life time of knowledge about different types of wood, including their strength, brittleness, and so on. They also have highly developed aesthetic sensibilities

about how their creations should look and feel. And finally, the craft master has developed both of these through years of deliberate practice. In order to lay the ground work for developing heuristics for practicing a craft of connection, we need to consider all three areas in more depth.

Technical/Analytic Knowledge of Connection

There are a variety of different ways to develop analytical knowledge about connection. The field of psychology could offer a model of the antecedents of connection with others based in the idea of universal human needs for attention, belongingness, attachment, and being seen. This could suggest simple heuristics such as a leader who wants to enhance connection should work to make sure that others felt like they are being seen and heard, or to put it even more simply, “pay attention to people”. We might also seek to define different ways in which we connect, such as through shared elements of our identity. Conceptions of in-group and out-group dynamics might offer insight into how connections based on group membership function. This might lead to the simple heuristic that as a leader I should find common ground – some way in which we are part of the same group – with others in order to provide a basis for connection. Of course, the leader’s task is to not simply create connection, but to work that connection in service of accomplishing something. Does this imply that connection is malleable and that a skilled leader can work a connection that was originally based in playing golf together into a connection that is about fighting for social justice together?

The field of neuroscience and the discovery of mirror neurons might also provide a basis for conceptualizing connection. Mirror neurons are the part of the brain that has been directly linked with empathy, the way in which we experience or feel things that are happening others as if they were happening to us. Perhaps connection is fundamentally based in this ability to feel things the way that others do? The increased connection we experience with close kinship and cultural relations (Dunbar, 2018; Parkinson, Kleinbaum, & Wheatley, 2018) comes from a similarity in how we experience things and express that experience. That is to say, I can feel what you’re feeling and connect with you to the degree that I tend to respond to things in the same way. At a more cognitive level, this would suggest that we tend to connect better with people who have similar frames for making sense of the world – that is if you are a scientist, you will connect with other scientists because you interpret the world through a similar frame. The base in neuroscience would open the doors to laboratory exploration of connection. We might even go farther to suggest that connection could be defined in terms of how similarly our brains react to the same stimulus. At a more practical level, this might suggest the heuristic that there is no substitute for time spent together to create connection. The more time we spend together, the more experiences we have in common, the more our brains will react in the same ways?

Another approach could be to consider the behaviors associated with connection – how do we signal connection to each other, what do we do to enhance connection, what do we do that decreases connection? For example, how do laughter and humor affect connection? One idea is that laughter may be used to convey a message that if presented seriously would be disconnecting, but when presented with laughter sustains connection. Another might be that we can only laugh about something together if connection already exists, thus connection is a pre-condition for shared humor. How do leaders use humor to work connection? Clearly the relationship between laughter and connection is complex and subtle, but it might also be central to creating a rich set of heuristics for working connection.

Still another approach would be to consider what prevents or inhibits connection. Piers Ibbotson (2008) draws upon his work as an actor and director in the theater to suggest that status games (Johnstone, 1979) inhibit connection and how part of how actors and directors

create ensemble is to consciously not play status games. Taylor (2013, 2015) argues that these status games are the micro-dynamics of power relationships and learning how to recognize and work them is critical for establishing the connections at the heart of authentic leadership. Power dynamics might well be only one of many things that inhibit connection. Cultural differences, personality differences, and communication styles could all be understood in terms of how they can inhibit connection. Work in cultural competence, matching communication styles, and awareness of personality differences could be the basis of a set of heuristics for working connection.

In all of this conceptualization work, it is important to keep in mind not only connection to others, but also connection to self and to place. Many of the approaches discussed above, such as working from psychological constructs to looking at the micro-dynamics of power may be ill suited to conceptualizing how we connect to ourselves and to places.

Aesthetic Sensibilities & Language

In order to work with connection, leaders need to develop their aesthetic sensibilities and their ability to articulate the aesthetics of connection. That means that simply describing connection as stronger or weaker is not enough. The arts have evolved their own languages to describe the aesthetic aspects of the art and the same needs to happen for leaders to be able to work deliberately with connection.

For the arts, there are technical terms that describe the phenomena in more or less objective ways, such as the terms used to describe prosody in poetry and literature, such as alliteration, meter, rhyme, and so on. For dance there is the language of viewpoints (Bogart & Landau, 2004) which includes, space, shape, timing, pace, and so on. There is also an acceptance of a much more subjective, and evocative language that communicates the felt experience.

Finding a language to express the aesthetics of connection may not be a simple task. For the modern theater Stanislavski (1936a) developed a language to describe acting. His insight was that focusing on verbs rather than the adjectives provided a way for actors to consistently reproduce believable human behavior on stage. This shows that it is not as simple as describing the phenomena, which is what adjectives allow us to do, but in order to work connection we need to find a way of describing it that also provides a way to directly work it. In theater this is the difference between seeing a performance and saying, "it was nice, but somehow I just wasn't really engaged" and seeing the same performance and saying, "the spine isn't clear for the protagonist, especially in the recognition scene directly before the scene du faire." The second statement may not make sense to someone who hasn't been trained in theatrical directing, but it offers an expression of the aesthetic experience of the performance in a way that is actionable by director and actors, while the first does not. There isn't a single language for theater – what Stanislavski call the "super problem" (1936a, b, 1961) is more or less the same thing that Clurman (1972) calls the "spine", although they are not exactly the same thing. What is needed for the craft of connection is masters such as Stanislavski and Clurman who are able to articulate their own practice.

Deliberate Practice

Craft masters become masters through years of deliberate practice (Ericsson & Pool, 2016; Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Römer, 1993). By looking at the features of deliberate practice we can start to see the challenge involved in becoming a master of working the craft of connection. First, to engage in deliberate practice there must be criteria for superior performance. This can be objective, such as the time it takes a sprinter to run 100 meters, or subjective such as in piano competitions, but they must be recognizable with a high level

of agreement for those in the field. Instinctively, we know exceptional connection when we see it, or more accurately feel it. But to judge it we would need to be able to know it when we see it between others, or between someone and themselves, or between someone and a place, which may also be possible, but is also a way in which the development of aesthetic sensibilities and language for connection is needed. However, as a starting place it may be enough to identify a lack connection and simply avoiding disconnection – as low of a bar as that is – could well be a step forward for many leaders.

Another feature that Ericsson identifies is that there are master teachers of the discipline. Part of deliberate practice is having someone who can tell you what you need to do to increase your skill, someone who can judge both how well you're doing and how to ask you to stretch to get better. Each step builds on previous skills. This is a process of working toward, well-defined, specific goals in a way that requires your full attention and concentration, and maximal effort, as you consistently work outside your comfort zone. The master gives you feedback and helps you modify what you are doing. It's not obvious that such masters exist in the world of leadership development, or if they do it is very difficult to know which developers are true masters and which are not. One does not need to be a great leader – a master of the craft – in order to become a leadership developer. Of course, being a craft master that can teach others is not exactly the same thing as being a great leader, nonetheless the point is that there are not established methods that craft masters can draw on to teach people to work connection through deliberate practice.

Although it is certainly easier to develop expertise through deliberate practice under the direction of a master, Ericsson's (Ericsson & Pool, 2016) description of his initial research on developing expertise is the story of a subject who learns to memorize long strings of numbers – without the direction of a master of the craft. The process is faster when there is a master, but craft mastery can be developed without it. One aspect of that craft mastery is the development of more detailed and effective mental representations. Thus, the analytic work described above could be a useful part of the effort to develop masters of the craft of connection.

The holy grail of course, is a comprehensive theory of connection that translates into both testable propositions and actionable heuristics. My intuition is that institutional aesthetics could provide an overarching frame, but for that to work there needs to be an articulation of what connection is which then leads to a language for talking about it. Would it make sense to talk about the depth or shallowness of connection or the texture of connection? Is connection always tied to its origin, that is family connection, versus a foxhole connection, versus team-mates connection? I don't know, but I feel very connected to the journey of seeking some answers and I hope that others will, too.

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Steve Taylor is a professor of leadership and creativity and the interim dean at the WPI Foisie Business School. His research is focused in two areas: organizational aesthetics and reflective practice. The former applies art-based scholarship and practice to management and organizations. The latter focuses on the ability to analyze our own actions and learn how to be more effective, ethical, and artful as managers and leaders. His research has been published in academic journals including *Organization Studies*, *Leadership Quarterly*, *Leadership*, *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, and *Journal of Management Studies*. Taylor is the author of the books: *Leadership Craft, Leadership Art; You're a Genius: Using Reflective Practice to Master the Craft of Leadership*; and *Staging organization: plays as critical commentaries on workplace life*. He is also the founding editor of the journal *Organizational Aesthetics*. Steve is a playwright, whose plays have been performed in England, France, Poland, Canada, Denmark, New Zealand, Italy, Australia, and the United States. He received a PhD in management from Boston College; an MA in performing arts from Emerson College; and a BS in humanities from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.