Organizational Aesthetics 5(2): 77-95
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Life In Noah's Ark: Using Animal Figures As An Arts-Based Projective Technique In Group Work To Enhance Leadership Competence

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Abstract

Arts-based learning, a playful method for new insights and self-understanding, can be a tool by which leaders can develop better competence to meet individual and group challenges in working life. This article breaks new ground in reporting specifically on how identification with animal figures in a group setting can develop leaders' competence, offering a combined group and individual account of the same process. The aim is twofold: (1) Share the method and its implications in order to provide practical guidelines for those who wish to expand their use of arts-based methods in education and working life. (2) Present results from a course in leadership development, showing how process work with animal figures can foster creativity, reflexivity and improve leadership competence. The psychodynamics and anthropological aspects are discussed, comparing the individual and group processes to projective work done through sandplay and constellation work. In addition, the article indicates further confirmation of The Cycle of the Creative Quest, a model combining phases in the creative process with phases of learning.

Keywords: Arts-based learning, Projective techniques, Animal Figures, Creative processes Arts-based Action Research, Group work, Leadership competence, Reflexivity, work, Deep learning

* I am indebted to many when developing the method and writing this article. In particular I would like to thank the manager, who by sharing his personal notes added invaluable contributions to the text. Likewise this particular group's wholehearted participation, their spontaneous involvement reframed and reshaped my original plan and expanded the potential of the method. In addition I would like to thank my students for their trust and courage when I have invited them to join in creative exercises like this one. I would also like to thank my colleague and partner at this course, Erik Eggen, as collaboration with him added important perspectives and secured the quality of this leadership training course. I am also grateful for the support I have had in my writing process. Here backing from Helle Margrete Meltzer, Sebastian Meltzer, the editor and reviewers challenged me to clarify and structure the text. I would also like to thank my colleagues at HiOA for giving me moral and financial support.

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To meet the challenges of working life, leaders ideally need to be personally fulfilled, in touch with their inner characters, and able to draw on their own inner resources and personal creativity (Mishlove, 1988). Goleman proposes the need for emotional intelligence in the workplace: "in terms of managing our own career, there may be nothing more essential than recognizing our deepest feelings about what we do – and what changes might make us more truly satisfied with our work" (Goleman, 1995:171). Self-insight is the key to this process, suggesting that leaders need to understand themselves, their motivations, interests and abilities in order to enhance own and others' career growth, improve their own performance and build effective teams (London, 2014).

Arts-based learning may be a tool by which leaders can meet some of these challenges. In working life these methods can represent a deep, particular and playful way of expressing personal and professional issues, an approach that can foster human growth and bring a sense of meaning and wholeness to life. Artistic work and production can help leaders express the inexpressible and deepen their understanding of their potential and experience of the world (Austring & Sørensen, 2010). These methods - by encouraging a retreat away from immediate, quotidian concerns - can give fresh insights and self-understanding, increase leaders' freedom of choice and enhance their ability to deal with the unknown. By making their feelings, thoughts, experiences, values and beliefs visible, they are offered a way to know themselves from a new perspective and an opportunity to transform that perspective (Malchiodi, 2007:21).

A growing number of practitioners argue that arts-based methods can contribute to a more holistic approach to management and leadership that supplements more traditional logical and rational ways of understanding the world (Scharmer & Kaeufer, 2010; Taylor & Ladkin, 2009). In a group setting, this type of work can strengthen individual and group resources and offer new ways to approach personal and professional development, offering methods that engage participants' feelings and emotional intelligence (Anthony & Cohler, 1987; Dewey, 1934; Scharmer & Kaeufer, 2010). Scharmer and Kaeufer, for example, describe how they, in their work with managers from commercial and non-profit organizations, found that "both the processes and the products of the arts provide training tools that help leaders assess the current challenges in atypical and productive ways" (Scharmer & Kaeufer, 2010:22).

Springborg's (2014) research has shown that arts-based methods have a far greater success rate than traditional methods in addressing intractable problems. In one group of managers, 80% gained new insight through aesthetic inquiry involving poetry, photography, and drawing, with the result that they could turn problems they perceived as unsolvable into solvable ones. By comparison, in a control group using more traditional methods, 85% gained increased clarity about their problem, but only 15% succeeded in insights deeming the problem solved. Springborg's research showed that "(1) creating new metaphors for a problem based on different sensory metaphors enabled the participants to *import behaviour* from contexts unrelated to the problematic situation and (2) focusing on sensory experience enabled participants to remove judgments about self or others" (2014:4) – providing the basis for successful resolutions.

In this paper I will show how I used one particular arts-based projective technique, animal figures, in a leadership training course involving high-level executives. Arts-based projective techniques are described as a gut-felt knowing where "the output of artistic endeavors

allows the participants to reveal inner thoughts and feelings that may not be accessible through more conventional" modes (Taylor & Ladkin, 2009: 56). This projection of self opens towards a field of experience founded in a three-way exchange between our inner and outer world and an object, helping create a "potential space" opening us to our imagination and creativity (Winnicott, 1971).

Likewise, transferring everyday behavior and feelings into a new context, by choosing an animal figure, placing and moving one's figure on a joint tabletop as part of a group process, can create new metaphors and offer insights that facilitate change. The value of this approach will be shown through a case history where an executive manager, through his personal notes, shares how identification with an animal figure in a group work gave him insights and made him more aware of how he acted in his professional practice. His notes show how he was able to observe his emotions and sensations when feeling vulnerable, without acting out. Furthermore, his notes indicate how these experiences enhanced his attentiveness and listening skills; insights that increased his reflexivity and improved his leadership practice.

This particular exercise enhanced the group's creativity and strengthened their sense of group affiliation. I will share how the participants' engagement and their spontaneous individual and group interventions reframed and reshaped the original plan and expanded the potential of the method.

My aim in this article is twofold: (1) Share the method and its implications in order to provide practical guidelines for those who wish to expand their use of arts-based methods in education and working life. (2) Present results from a course in leadership development, showing how process work with animal figures can foster creativity, reflexivity and improve leadership competence.

Methodology

Being a researcher and educator

Arts-based action research. According to Schön, action research is about being able to reframe a problem and reshape a situation by trying to adapt the situation to the frame, "done through a web of moves, discovered consequences, implications, appreciations, and further moves, where individual moves yield phenomena to be understood, problems to be solved, or opportunities to be exploited" (Schön, 1991:130).

Leavy proposes that art work can be effective for communicating the emotional aspects of social life, and that arts-based methods can be useful in identity-based research as they challenge stereotypes, develop empathy, promote awareness and stimulate dialogue (Leavy, 2009). She suggests that "arts-based researchers are not 'discovering' new research tools; they are *carving* them" (2009:1). According to her, these researchers speak from the heart of their relationship to their work, and sculpt tools that open towards a more holistic, integrated perspective, "a space within research where passion and rigor boldly intersect out in the open" (2009:1). Further, Leavy claims that an arts-based research practice, attentive to *process* and the emphasis of *meaning* and *doing,* are particularly useful in projects that seek to *describe, explore,* or *discover.*

Wilson and Flicker (2014) argue that arts-based methods are consistent with the goals of action research, as the process in arts-based action research is not considered as an isolated accomplishment in itself, but rather as a starting point for further examination, reflection, understanding and change. Both approaches stress "participatory engagement

and collaborative partnerships in the research process, empowerment, co-learning, capacity building, and community-based action towards social transformation" (Wilson & Flicker, 2014:60).

Pedagogy of vulnerability. Successful leadership requires a complex balancing of a leader's inner and outer self, and leadership development often involves helping strike that balance. In arts-based approaches both the process and the result implicates a balance of inward looking and outward-focused expressivity and communication (Betensky, 1995; Malchiodi, 2007; Taylor & Ladkin, 2009). This psychological process can be challenging; a continual balancing of feelings of security with those of anxiety (Moxnes, 2012). The more personal and sincere the exchange, the greater the risks, as being vulnerable involves "a risk of self-disclosure, risk of change, risk of not knowing, risk of failing – to deep learning" (Brantmeier, 2013:96).

The use of arts-based methods in a workplace travels a fraught line between work-for-workplace and work-for-personal therapy. Here the intent is not to go deep into the private history of the individual, but to address issues related to the individual's work, using creative expression, play, and reflection as ways to discover resources, develop skills, and gain new perspectives and understanding. This production however, constantly balancing between feelings of uncertainty and vulnerability, can be emotionally challenging for leaders with little or no experience in creative process work. In order to form and use images constructively, endure the process of creation and transformation, they need to feel safe enough to emerge (McNiff, 1998; Winnicott, 1971). According to Antonacopoulou, the potential for a lasting impact of training and education lies in creating space and time to experience learning at a pitch of engagement where it's possible "to *feel safe being vulnerable*" (2014:89).

When guiding non-artist leaders in developmental processes, and in order to foster a holding and safe environment in a group and help them contain negative projections or feelings, the group facilitator needs to embrace self-development (Rebillot & Key, 1993). Brantmeier recommends likewise that teachers in higher education should cultivate a pedagogy of vulnerability, challenging their frames of knowing and feeling, and welcoming vulnerability through deep sharing and critical self-dialogue (Brantmeier, 2013). In addition Meltzer proposes that "the facilitator's interest and experience in artistic work and arts-based learning processes is vital to avoid this educational approach being intellectualized or taken out of context" (2015c: 66), suggesting that the individual or group only can evolve to the level of the practitioner who is leading the process.

In this context my professional training and personal experience from the field of art, teaching and art-therapy has become useful. As an arts-based action researcher and educator I practice critical self-reflection as part of the lived curriculum. Through many years of training I have developed my sensitivity and ability to distinguish between issues that might need to be addressed separately in therapy and issues that can be seen and solved on-sight as part of the individual or group process. I am reflective-in-action and seek "both to *understand* the situation and *change it*" (Schön, 1991:132). The way I learn, teach, and conduct my research and work as a facilitator, is closely connected to my professional training, with all three domains being creative, reflexive, open-ended practices welcoming improvisation in response to changing circumstances. The way I approach my work and reflect on the process is described in this article.

The course and the participants

In this article I describe part of a process that took place at a tailor-made course called Creative Communication at Oslo and Akershus University College (OAUC). Internal company survey results at a large contracting and property company had identified a demand for a course different from the mainstream. Managers, working as teachers and counsellors at the company's internal course centre, felt a need to develop their creative skills and improve their ability to motivate their own course participants.

The course was designed as a block-study course with three modules within half a year, offered outside campus, each module lasting two to three days. It was designed together with a colleague who had extensive training and experience as leader, teacher, coach and consultant in organizational management. I conducted and facilitated the arts-based methods. Close collaboration with my colleague "bridged" the gap between the world and language of the arts with that of management and leadership.

At this course the participants, in addition to being engineers or researchers, were in different job fields in the company. Eleven in all, the group included both genders (5 women, 6 men) and were aged between 30 and 65. The training program was funded by their firm, meaning they received time-off to attend the modules. When I refer to managers or participants in this paper I refer to this group.

Different arts-based methods were introduced and used to enforce the themes within each module. Between the modules the participants were challenged to use arts-based methods and implement creative exercises at home and in their workplace. Issues to be addressed at the course included challenges and hindrances in their existing jobs, the quality of workplace communication and interaction, future career potentials and possibilities - topics examined through arts-based methods and reflection.

The participants worked with clay, painting, drawing, creative writing, mindfulness, and body work. In addition they used tools such as drawing logs, visual images, stories, and animal figures. In order to experience creative processes, increase reflexivity and weave the different parts of the course together, they participated in longitudinal creative work, returning repeatedly to the same media. This could be continuous work with their drawing logs, repetitive painting on the same canvas or process work with animal figures. The work with the animal figures took place in the second module.

Developing the method

Animal figures represent one of my favourite arts-based methods when working with group dynamics. The last twenty years I have used these figures in private counselling and therapy sessions with clients (Meltzer, 2015a, b). They also represent one out of many arts-based methods I have used over a period of seven years in my work at OAUC. Here I have used animal figures at the part-time courses in Creative Communication, with groups of students in other fields of studies, my colleagues, and at seminars and meetings outside campus. Whether the figures are wild, domestic, fantasy or prehistoric animals, reptiles, fish or other water creatures, birds or insects, I will refer to all of them in this paper as "animal figures".

The way I use animal figures is inspired from taking part in a private group where we for several years on a weekly basis experimented with constellation work. This therapeutic approach aims to discover hidden (and sometimes destructive) dynamics in family settings, and to activate healing resources (Hellinger & ten Høvel, 1999). The method, developed by

psychotherapist Bert Hellinger, is a form of group therapy where "a client identifies an issue, a problem, or a symptom, and describes what he or she is seeking as a resolution" (Franke, 2003:19).

In constellation work, the group participants are chosen by the client or the facilitator to represent important people in the client's life. These people are placed on the floor in accordance with the client's inner image of the relationship between them. Later the perspectives are broadened by asking the different representatives for feedback about physical sensations and feelings they might experience when they personify these individuals. As the process unfolds, the initial constellation might be changed by adjusting the different participants' placements on the floor.

Experiences and ideas from this work made me explore how I could transfer this group method to my work with individual clients in art therapy. Over the years I had collected a large number of animal figures as a tool in play therapy with children. I now found that these figures served well in my work with teenagers and adults when we were looking into family or group matters. In this work I discovered a new and exciting methodology, as the use of animal figures facilitated an exploration of the same principles as in constellation work.

Group interaction and challenges on intra- or interpersonal levels could be studied indirectly in a more playful and humorous way by encouraging a client to choose animal figures as transferred representatives for themselves and other people that might be involved. The chosen animals were placed on a tabletop in accordance with how the client felt these individuals related to each other. Examining the characteristics of the different animal figures, setting words to the projections they might carry and exploring their interrelationship, enabled the client to see a situation, previously perceived as challenging, from a new angle.

In this work I experienced how the use of animal figures contributed in creating new metaphors giving needed insights into problematic situations; insights that made change possible. Experiences from this work inspired me to modify, adjust, and experiment with how I could use animal figures in group work.

Animal figures in group work

Initially the process with the animal figures at this course was planned as a silent on-going exercise running alongside the main program. The first day the participants were invited to place a chosen animal figure on a joint stage; a cloth on a tabletop. At the end of the different course sessions, and before having a break, the participants were encouraged to be mindful and attentive towards possible changes that might have taken place in group dynamics - perhaps an enlarged feeling of connection to others in the group, or the opposite - and if these changes could be expressed by moving their animal figures. Once the participants had established their animals' new placement they continued to work with other themes in the course program. They were however, encouraged to record their experiences from the exercise in their individual logs.

The original intention with these repeated moves was to enhance the individual participant's self-observation and reflexivity and to increase their awareness and sensitivity towards their personal, but changing sense of group affiliation. The moves were to be done in silence, without additional comments or sharing. In this way the exercise evolved around how the individual participant perceived his or her position in the group – being part of the "scene" together with the other "figures" – without knowing what the others were expressing. Apart

from the introduction to the exercise and an initial sharing with a partner the first day, a joint sharing was planned as part of the closure on the third day.

Choosing an animal figure

As a start, each participant was asked to close their eyes and visualize an animal figure that could reflect their working identity and their role in this particular group at that time. When they had "discovered" their animal, they found a physical copy of it among a large spectrum of animal figures from all parts of the world, near 200 in all. If the animal they identified had already been taken by someone else, participants chose another animal figure resembling their choice as a physical "stand-in", e.g., a lion if the tiger had been taken, or a mule if the horse was already tied up.

Next, participants were encouraged to examine their envisioned animal figures with a partner by answering the following questions:

a) What do they know about this animal from real life? Here they put words to the knowledge they have about this actual animal, if it is domestic or wild, a creature living in our time or a prehistoric or fantasy figure, where they live, food etc.
b) What do they project into this specific animal if they use their fantasy? Where does this animal live, what kind of life does it lead, what is its sex, age, special abilities etc.?
c) In what way do the qualities they project into this animal figure reflect something about their personal and professional identity (such as character traits or how they relate to others)?

Placing the animal figures on a stage

In order to create a boundary, the animals were placed on a neutral cloth on a tabletop. This "stage" was kept plain to keep the animals' "meetings" as open and unscripted as possible. As in constellation work placing and moving the animals on the stage challenged the participants to be attentive, as they needed to study and compare their own and the other animals' sizes, their postures, placements, and directions – and the associated feelings generated. Should their animals be placed in the centre of the scene or on the edge? Was the animal standing up, lying down, or on top of someone else? Did they face other animals or were they standing with their heads turned away? What about the distance between them? Were they placed closely together or far apart? One restriction, however, was that the participants were only allowed to move their own figure, meaning that if others, for instance, placed their figures "too close" or uncomfortably on top, they were free to move away.

Documenting the process

The animal figures were moved repeatedly on the stage through the following days. In order to document the process, and before a new session started, I photographed the stage, documenting the different moves that had taken place. The photos of the continually moving figures were combined with the date, time of day, and the theme the participants had been working with in the previous session. These series of photographs were to be presented to the participants at the end of the course as part of the final reflection of the intra- and interpersonal movements that had taken place in the group.

The data in this paper are based on my photo documentation and log notes and reports from course participants.

Results

When the participants wrote their reports after the modules, their focus could be very different. Many of them referred to the work with animal figures, but mainly as part of their overall experiences. To one of the participants however, the work with the animal figures became especially significant. He later described this process thoroughly in his report, expressing how the work with animal figures had been one of the exercises that had had the greatest impact on his leadership competence. He shared how he had become "more conscious, aware and confident in his everyday life and work". I have had this participant's consent to use his personally communicated notes, describing his thoughts and emotional encounters when working with the figures.

His comments will be presented together with a selection of photos of the stage, illustrating the shifting placement of the figures during the breaks. The photos and text are presented systematically according to the described events. I will also include comments from other participants and share some of my own reflections. The following results will show to what degree the participants projected personal characteristics into the figures, where our voices shifted, sometimes describing them as objects living lives of their own. The reader is asked to pay special attention to the owl figure in the photos, as this was the animal he chose and presented in his testimony.

The owl and the teacup

As the aim of the course was to address their personal work issues, the participants formulated their present-day situation, challenges, and goals. In his report the manager conveyed how he, as a security seeking person, disliking conflict, felt discomfort when introducing change in the organization. With reference to situations involving disagreement, uncertainty, and conflict he presented a threefold goal: (1) awareness of what was taking place, (2) attentiveness to and acceptance of his feeling of discomfort, and (3) ability to reflect upon what made him master (or not master) past difficulties, and how he accordingly could adjust his attitudes and thought patterns.

Initially, when the participants were encouraged to choose an animal figure, he picked up an owl. When describing the owl according to the three step approach he wrote the following:

a) General knowledge: "The owl has the possibility to get a good overview. He has an extremely good hunting instinct, and when he needs food he concentrates his energy".
b) Projected thoughts: "To me this owl's personal qualities represents someone who is aware of his surroundings, being warm, calm, security seeking, cautious, thoughtful, and reflective. He feels uncomfortable by being too visible and hides when he needs to".
c) Relevance according to his working identity and role in the group: "With reference to my profession as a team leader, the owl represents a person with a good overview. Another important issue, and a large part of my job as a leader, is to be empathic, caring and build confidence. These qualities can be challenged when I have to initiate change in the organization".

Later he wrote: "As a person, beyond the work done with the animal figures, I am typically someone who is either very 'on' or very 'off'. When I am 'on', a usual behavioural pattern can be that I am curious and visit other animals, striving to create trust (through physical nearness). When the 'owl' is 'off', it withdraws and reflects, rests and gathers strength in order to re-enter again in a strong 'on' mode".

When encouraged to place his figure together with the other animals on the stage, he surprisingly, and outside the given instructions, seized a teacup from "offstage" and placed it in the center of the scene with the owl on top. He later described the placing of the cup on the scene as a spontaneous act. In his notes he wrote: "Subconsciously I took the lead. By introducing a cup I changed the scene and made a centre. By placing the owl on the top of the cup I gained access to one of my owl qualities: to sit high and have an overview of the landscape".



Photo 1: Day 1: 12.00 am. The stage is set and the owl has been placed on top of the teacup, in the picture encircled by a blue ring

In the continuation, the group worked with different themes, returning to the stage in each break to consider whether they felt like moving their animals. Some changes took place during the first afternoon. As the cup represented a new, freestanding element outside the given "rules of the exercise", there were no restrictions as to how it was to be used or moved. When the owl was moved from the teacup to join the other animals on the tablecloth, the other participants felt free to use the cup to their own liking. The teacup was moved to the outskirts of the scene, and a beetle was placed on top of it.



Photo 2: Day 1: 6.30 pm. The owl is lying in the handle of the cup, and a beetle is sitting on top

Confrontation

The on-going moves of the figures, sometimes perceived as accidental, can offer deep meaning if a joint sharing takes place. In this group it happened spontaneously, as the

group the second morning was challenged to discuss and reflect on their group process without the attendance of me and my colleague. We were following the process from the side-line. After a short discussion the group fetched the table with the animal figures and placed it in the centre with themselves around. The coming hour they shared their experiences with each other, using the animal figures as metaphors to describe, explore and discover their ways of being together.



Photo 3: Day 2: 9.00 am. The group has gathered round the table with their figures

In this sharing, the participants' perspectives were conveyed through the lens of their animals, using them as transferred parts of themselves to express their thoughts and feelings. With reference to the manager's introduction of the teacup, several group participants came forward with their reactions. Later he reflected on the group's feedback: "I can see that my spontaneous, but subconscious action (introducing the teacup) created a wide range of signals and interpretations and generated a lot of discussions in the group. My impulsive act affected the group members in different ways: some saw the cup as a centre, others did not notice it, while a third group experienced it as a disturbing element".

Through this exercise the manager experienced how he, through his creative, but subconscious initiative - introducing the teacup to the scene - had challenged himself and the given instructions or rules. He could have held back his desire to place the teacup on the scene. Nevertheless, his listening to and acting on his subconscious impulses turned out to be essential to his process, as he through these acts and the following confrontation, gained new insights regarding his personal and professional identity.

In his notes he reflected on how the group's feedback affected him: "When their disapproval of the cup came up in the discussion, I noticed how my body went into a standby mode, generating a need in me to defend my action. I felt the opposition and sensed how it created energy in me. This was a difficult and uncomfortable situation". Despite feelings of discomfort however, the manager – by exploring the situation from the "owl's" standpoint - succeeded in keeping emotional balance. Instead of acting out, he kept mindful, was attentive in the moment and both felt and watched his feelings. In his report he shared how he, instead of acting out in self-defence, practiced containing the build-up of emotions in his body, being attentive to his physical sensations and thought patterns. He expressed: "There is a good possibility for development and change if you are aware of your body and thought patterns in different situations".

Later the same day, however, it could seem as though he used the owl figure to express an indirect reflection of his feelings. After an exercise where the participants had examined their individual physical placement when part of a "group body", the owl was moved away from the other animal figures. This moving away could represent a new metaphor, creating an illustration of his need to be "off"; to withdraw, reflect, rest, and gather strength "in order to re-enter again in a strong 'on' mode".



Photo 4: Day 2: 4.00 pm. The owl figure is placed in the outskirts of the group

In later reflections on his leadership practise and self-knowledge he referred to the review and group discussion the second morning as one of the factors that had had the greatest impact on him. As a manager he sometimes needed to spearhead organizational changes, provoking resistance that he took personally. The spontaneous impulse of adding the teacup to the scene enabled him to see that "having the courage to introduce new elements that challenge 'the truths' and the rules in a situation, can be provocative, but also create new opportunities". Through this process he gained insights that helped him master and adjust his attitude and thought patterns and thereby accomplish the goals he had set for himself.

Flow- Reflection

After the sharing and confrontation in the morning, however, the release of energy caused an interesting change, affecting the participants' creativity, illustrated through their attitude towards the teacup. During the second and third day, the manager noted how several of them used the cup as a natural part of the scene, "as a place of recovery, a place for withdrawal and rest, a place one could get an overview, a place one could seek shelter, etc.". In addition, spontaneous humour and playfulness came into expression: The third morning several of the animal figures (including the owl) were missing. Some participants had, the evening before, let themselves into the closed room and put their figures to "sleep" under the tablecloth. As "the owners" appeared for the morning session, the figures turned up again, and were described as refreshed and ready for a new day.



Photo 5: Day 3: 8.30 am: A third of the animals were missing

General findings - individual and group interaction

This particular exercise began when the participants chose their animal figures. Sometimes participants might question or even suppress their instinctual choice of animal and chose a "stand in" more to their liking. The reason might be a need to identify themselves with animals they experience as strong or positive, as it can be challenging to pick an animal that might carry negative projections (perhaps a shark, crocodile, hyena, or frog). It can likewise perplex or provoke vulnerability to choose an animal that turns out to be the odd one out in a group, an animal none of the other figures naturally relate to, either because they are from prehistory, a fantasy figure, or from a complete different continent or element. To my experience – when this is the case – participants still seem to end up finding deep meaning when examining the qualities they project into their "stand in" animal.

Two individuals might associate and project different qualities and abilities into the same animal. For some, the fox can be sly and the hare lurking with fear. For others the fox might be experienced as lonely and the hare above all an animal that runs fast. It is the meaning for the individual who chose the animal that is paramount here.

When it comes to placing the animals on the scene, the figures often start off by being spread out with a lot of space around them (as seen in photo 1). Some have their heads turned towards the centre, some are turned away. During a course, with the repeated possibility of shifting their position, the figures' movements demonstrate the participants perceived group feeling and its evolution. In these different placings the feeling of vulnerability can be experienced and expressed in different ways. Here the animal figures can be used as a tool to test new ways of being in a group – for example, by placing one's animal next to a member of a species that in nature might be lethal. In this group one participant shared how she challenged herself by placing her giraffe next to a tiger, describing it as "a great feeling although a bit dangerous".

In another example, one of the other participants, who chose a wolf to represent himself, shared the reason for his positioning: "By placing myself (the wolf) on the outskirts (of the scene) in order to look into the group, I find that I look into myself and see myself as a one that builds bridges in order to understand myself and others". To others, this placement might be interpreted as someone experiencing themselves as "a lonely wolf", radically apart from the group. To this person however, the choice of a wolf and its peripheral placement on the scene gave him an opportunity to create a new metaphor, enlightening himself and the others in the joint sharing why he, also in real life, needed some distance to others.

In this and similar group sessions addressing participants' personal and professional issues, I found that the animal figures gradually tend to move towards each other, ending up standing closer together and mutually facing the centre of the stage (e.g., photo 6). This feeling of group affiliation was described by one of the participants at this course, who wrote: "The use of animals brought us much closer together. The task of being creative and presenting ourselves to the group members in areas where we are challenged made us far less foreign to one another. I shall be careful to say that I know some of the others in the group very well after this; but nevertheless, my confidence in everyone is considerably larger than what I normally experience with equals that I only have met a few times. The use of animals, when we finally understood how they could be used to show how we feel about the group, clearly confirmed a sense of belonging and trust in each other in this process".



Photo 6: Day 3: At the closure of the course. The animal figures are gathered in the centre of the stage facing each other.

This course took place some years ago. Later I learned that the participants still meet up and keep in contact with each other despite differences in gender, age, and position, working in diverse parts of the company and in different parts of the country. Partaking in the course established a sense of belonging and a long-lasting confidence and trust among participants, building friendships. They have asked for "follow-up" courses, and colleagues in the same firm have asked to be offered similar courses.

The impact – sculpting new research methods

Even though I beforehand had hoped that the sessions with animal figures would enrich group interaction, I was taken by surprise when the participants included the stage with animal figures in their group discussion. By doing this they demonstrated how they intuitively felt that the scene represented a relevant externalization and materialization of their feeling of the group's here and now. As they beforehand had not shared their thoughts and feelings about their moves on the scene, this step indicated a shift from individual to group consciousness. Later, when reading their reports, I learned how important it had been to include the animal figures in their group discussion on both an individual and group level. This way of indirect communication was perceived as easier when facing challenging issues, as animals, in comparison to humans, naturally express themselves freely, spontaneously,

and unselfconsciously – always true to themselves. Likewise, exchanging thoughts and experiences at this point brought more clarity and understanding about their individual roles and actions.

In the example described here, the discussion and reactions in the group were not experienced as something separate, but as part of the group process. The sharing - involving confrontation and challenge - took place within a limited space and time. The tablecloth defined a free but yet protected domain, different from the lived reality of their working lives - an area for adventure, fantasy, and imagination. Within this limited, but safe space, experiences of emotional turbulence and vulnerability were easier to handle and could, despite feelings of chaos and combat, be a field of understanding and change.

For me as an arts-based action researcher, the events that took place in this group changed how I later would plan, instruct and conduct this exercise. The group's spontaneous action showed me how this exercise could be transformed from a parallel, silent and partly subconscious process of individual moves to a conscious group interaction. The open and direct dialog mid-way - sharing their domain of actions through their animal figures – became an arena for deep sharing and critical self-reflection. Through this process roles and interactions were clarified, facilitating a heightened awareness of themselves and others. Witnessing the process that took place, understanding the impact of involving the group mid-way in each other's process, reinforced my appreciation of the method and gave me valuable insight when I later planned and used this arts-based learning method.

Discussion

The aim of this paper has been to describe in rather large detail what was done, the process, and how the use of animal figures can foster creativity, reflexivity and improve leadership competence. The main finding was that using animal figures as part of an art-based approach to developmental work within a group works. These results might inspire others to be innovative in their work with group dynamics.

To the best of my knowledge no one else has described the use of animal figures in the setting of leadership courses. I have systematically searched for literature describing this arts-based approach. All in all I found one essay, referring to an educational context where participants' used barnyard animal sounds as an arts-based method to raise awareness of majority and minority voices in the group. As this article was not especially relevant, I have reached across various disciplines when discussing the tools, method, and process.

The tools - using animal figures as transitional objects in projective work

In prehistory humans did not see themselves apart from the other creatures they lived among. Cave paintings often portray semi-human beings in animal disguise, figures with no absolute difference between the human and the animal (Clottes & Lewis-Williams, 1998). According to Jung these animations symbolize man's primitive and instinctual nature and "must be explained as the projection of more or less distinct content of the unconscious into the stone" (Jung, 1964:234).

Our close link to other living creatures makes it easy for most of us to project thoughts and feelings into animals. No matter how much we in our modern world cloak ourselves in civilization, we still respond, as in prehistory, on an intuitive level to the natural world. Despite a larger gap between animals and humans, we have individual connections to, associations with, and stories of animals (Høgh, 1996).

Meister Eckhart conveyed that an image can represent a threshold leading to new dimensions of meaning: "When the soul wants to experience something, she throws out an image in front of her and then steps into it" (Ronneberg & Martin, 2010:6) . As an animal figure can be bearer of a specific message and provide a clue to resolving a problem or a course of action, it can, when used in this way, cause a stirring in the psyche, a movement that can herald a new stage, a new understanding (Andrews, 1999; Case, 2005; Jung et al., 1964).

We respond to three-dimensional animal figures similar to how we react to live animals, as they represent objects with a body like ourselves; indeed, the figures can be antennae for our symbolic and cultural sense of the animal. Engaging these figures can be described like "welcoming another little person into the room, because of our tendency to see ourselves in another animal (via) personification" (Case, 2005:36). Choosing a figure, identifying with it through imaginative thinking, investing it with significance, and treating it as if it is filled with the invested characteristics, creates a figure with a life of its own (Case, 2005). According to Winnicott (1971) this is where fantasy begins, when the nature of the object is seen as a thing in itself and not as a projection.

The animal figures in the exercise were used as transitional objects, existing in an in-between area, "an intermediate area of experience" between the inner and outer reality (Winnicott, 1971:14). "They connected the conscious with the subconscious, the concrete with the abstract, the part with the whole. These symbols can likewise connect reason with passion, the past with the present, the present with the future" (Ryce-Menuhin, 1993:33).

The method – "Life in Noah's Ark"

Sandplay represents one out of many ways of expression which traumatized children might chose in play therapy. The way I work with animal figures can in some ways resemble the therapeutic work done with a child in sandplay, as they both provide an opportunity to express the inexpressible through external metaphors. Like the tray of sand in sandplay, the cloth on the blank tabletop in work with animal figures creates a space for contemplation free of interference. This resonates with the quiet moves, a process enabling the participants to create new metaphors through an inward listening and focus. In a therapeutic setting the child intuitively chooses the most adequate language to express a problem or a situation. In order to meet the child and build an alliance, the trained therapist enters the play at the correct level of communication. Equally, the therapist in work with adult clients will "provide the space, the freedom, and protection for the person to do whatever they need to do without intrusion" (Bradway & McCoard, 1997:58).

Both sandplay and work with animal figures offer a stage for expression, using objects when inviting participants to join in on an adventurous process. This creative shift can expand one's understanding and "lift raw emotions to a new level: the transpersonal level of drama and ritual" (Rebillot & Key, 1993: 21). Seeing oneself in these contrasting frames can make room for "clarification and new insights, opening a possible letting-go of previous habitual thoughts and patterns of behaviour" (Meltzer, 2015c:61).

This group increased their awareness of their own and others' intentions and thoughts by using the animal figures as objects containing "contradictions (logical and/or moral) as well as unrealized possibilities that are not constrained by logic or the limitations of our current lives" (Taylor & Ladkin, 2009:58). Given the freedom to make different choices there is an opportunity to conceive profound changes in the future (Scharmer & Kaeufer, 2010).

Like in sandplay, the work with animal figures gives the participants a freedom of expression different from everyday working life, where they cannot necessarily say what they want, where "doing is more the whole person than saying" (Bradway & McCoard, 1997:41). The animals' placements and on-going moves can be seen as a non-verbal and transferred expression of the participants' experiences at that time. This contemplative space provides a possibility for a deeper connection to feelings and experiences that previously might have been difficult to pinpoint or articulate; a space where the different moves open towards new possibilities and other perspectives of the world. When working with an animal figure in this way "the knowing it embodies can be intellectualized into 'knowing in the head', and this knowing is now much richer, more nuanced, and more complete that it would otherwise be" (Taylor & Ladkin, 2009:58).

Play and imagination can facilitate introspection, giving participants a chance to explore and experiment with intra- and interpersonal patterns of behaviour in a symbolic and unthreatening way. Here the focus is on the figures and their moves, moves done in a defined but neutral space.

The process – "The Cycle of the Creative Quest"

In an earlier article I presented The Cycle of the Creative Quest, a model that combined my experiences as an artist and teacher with theoretical models (Meltzer, 2015c) explaining the creative process, phases in developmental work and learning. The article explained step by step the natural ebb and flow of intense emotional response that can arise when merging creative activity with phases of communication and reflection. The different stages in this model were exemplified with an artist's personally communicated notes of her thoughts and emotional encounters when working creatively. The present paper complements my earlier article as it exemplifies some of the same phases, this time described by a non-artist manager. The results showed how he, as a non-professional artist, through this arts-based approach to group work, experienced similar periods of confrontation and flow as an artist working creatively (Meltzer, 2015c).

Conclusion

I have presented how the use of animal figures, in combination with methods from sandplay and constellation work, can enhance managers' emotional intelligence and add new dimensions to the management-development field. The described process has confirmed success in the transfer of learning from one domain to another. Involving non-artist managers in creative expression and process work can be a way to seek inner change and personal growth. Identifying with an animal figure and joining in group creative communication creates new metaphors, enabling participants to import attitudes, behaviours and feelings from everyday life, but transposed into a new key. Seeing and sharing through the lens of an animal might be helpful in bringing into consciousness instinctual reaction patterns, offering new awareness, insights, and solutions to work challenges.

Observing and reflecting on how - and later sharing and listening to why - other group participants act and move as they do, can add new understanding and offer deep meaning towards individual actions and group interaction. These managers, with an increased awareness and understanding towards self and others, might recast contemporary work challenges and bring to life new and valuable ideas about work/life attitudes, behaviour and feelings.

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