

Imagination for Individual and Collective Soul: Guest-Editorial for Special Section

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ABSTRACT

In this guest-editorial for a special section on “Imagination and organizational lives: Exploring the liminality of the human experience”, we situate the questions that informed our call for contributions that would outline a different space in which MSR conversations could be stretched, enriched and nurtured in a meaningful way. We hope to encourage imaginative, creative, and soulful questions, musings and reactions to the core proposition outlined, in different poetic ways, by our contributing authors: that art, body, dreams, and bold daring rawness are core to the human experience; and that they are key to imagining how organizations could be managed in a way congruent with the spiritual liveliness of whole, complex, and interconnected beings.

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Introduction

We invite you to enter a different space. We invite you to suspend disbelief, suspend notions of expertise, suspend ideas around ‘reason’, and enter a space where reality is whimsical, creative, shape-shifting and somewhat *other* than what our mind is used to. We invite you into a space of surprise, where you are allowed to be challenged, even to get a little confused or lost along the way, and to trust the cues nonetheless. This is the path of the imagination – never linear (*why should it be?*), never finite (*how could it be?*), and always connected to the flow of life. Rest assured, we are heading somewhere, we just need to take the long winding road – no, we **MUST** take the long winding road to get there. A road that brings us to a space of possibilities, of images not-yet-born, of experiences not-yet-felt, of connections just unfolding as we speak.

This is the context for the three papers that compose the following special section of the JMSR on the theme: “Imagination and organizational lives: Exploring the liminality of the human experience”. In this guest-editorial, we will situate the questions that led us to call for imaginative explorations of the human experience, and we will weave together the threads of each of the contributions that heeded our call to outline a different space in which MSR

conversations could be stretched, enriched and nurtured. We hope to contextualize how the creativity and uniqueness of the contributors' papers offers a fresh perspective to consider what lies at the heart of the MSR field – in theory and in practice. We hope to encourage imaginative, creative, and soulful questions, musings and reactions to the core proposition outlined, in different poetic ways, by our contributing authors: that art, body, dreams, and bold daring rawness are core to the human experience; and that they are key to imagining how organizations could be managed in a way congruent with the spiritual liveliness of whole, complex, and interconnected beings.

Calling for imaginative explorations

[When] we lose our faith in human possibility, our imagination shrinks, we dare not hope, and we leave our neighbours languishing in mental hospitals and substandard housing, in stifling cities and classrooms with a pall of death over them. Social projects get ignited from images of their possibility.

(Ulanov & Ulanov, 2008, p. 8)

The premise of the call for this special section is our positioning that imagination is both an essential human need and an essential human capability. This need and capability, we argue, enable individuals to shape and understand their experiences in work organizations as well as in social communities. The process of shaping and understanding our experience through the imagination, in turn, keeps us connected to the soul, to the essence of life as it manifests here, now and across time, both individually and collectively. From our standpoint, one of the most precious offerings of the MSR field is that it calls our attention to the fundamentality of a spiritual worldview when critically exploring human affairs: to truly examine, explore and understand how human beings are, what they do, how they do it – be it managing, organizing, planning, strategizing, protesting, praying, leading, reflecting, teaching, facilitating, hurting or healing – we have to hold space for spirit and soul, in some shape or form. If we do not hold that soulful space, we cannot truly claim to offer a comprehensive analysis of our world and of ourselves. In turn, we risk missing or dismissing important *other* possibilities of being, of relating, of enacting – possibilities we so direly need at present as the planet aches.

Pragmatically, imagination is a function of the mind that forms and activates mental images that may or may not be reflective of real-life occurrences (Rozuel, 2012). In other words, imagination allows us to go deeper within as well as beyond our perceived reality, that is, the reality of our senses and our reason (Norris, 1980). Imagination is therefore key to generating spaces and stories that nurture the deep human need for meaning, for connection, and for development (Rozuel, 2014). Imagination also showcases our innate human capability to engage, to enact, and to transform (Ulanov & Ulanov, 2008; Werhane, 1999). Carl G. Jung (1964) notes that without imagination, we are left helpless when facing the unexpected, when routine answers fail to apply and when conceptual elaborations fail to address practical problems:

Imagination and intuition are vital to our understanding. And though the usual popular opinion is that they are chiefly valuable to poets and artists ..., they are in fact equally vital in all the higher grades of sciences. Here they play an increasingly important role, which supplements that of the 'rational' intellect and its application to a specific problem.

(Jung, 1964, p. 82)

In this way, the imagination effectively broadens and deepens the realm of the possible, providing we succeed in creating the proper space for its expression, a space of opportunity rather than anxiety (Pateman, 1997, p. 4). Imagination at once excites, inspires, and frightens. It can also distort or shake us as much as it can create beauty, and sometimes there is no telling which (moral) path it may take (Seabright & Schminke, 2002). Either way, "the imagination brings completion" to our sense of self and to our overall human experience: "Properly understood, the imagination is perhaps our most reliable way of bringing the world of the unconscious into some degree of consciousness" and of tapping into a field of unknown potential (Ulanov & Ulanov, 2008, p. 3). As Cornelius Castoriadis (1992, p. 4) argues, the "unbridled imagination, defunctionalized imagination ... provides the conditions for reflective thought to exist". Furthermore, imagination is the necessary component of a quantum interpretation of organizational systems (Pavlovich, 2020) which invites us to enter spaces that transcend the known and embrace an intuitive model of engagement and co-creation through spiritual resonance (Laszlo, 2020; Sandra & Nandram, 2020).

Imagination defines human possibility more than the qualities of reason and logic and, as such, provides ways to regenerate our ethical engagements and to re-instill much-needed spiritual meaning when organizations and institutions fail to serve humanity. With these ideas in mind, we define imagination as a flow that moves freely across diverse fields of social communities, inspiring individuals to move as well. When the imagination is present and engaged, boundaries shift and new thresholds appear, opening a space for individuals to meet with one another in different ways (Becker, 1994; Fischlin et al., 2013; Street, 2019). The result can be a deeper exploration of meaning that inform creative and unique human experiences (Rozuel, 2014; Bleuer et al., 2018). This liminal 'in-between' quality of the imagination makes it a precious, yet under-researched and possibly under-appreciated, resource for the development of soulful, dynamic, nurturing, and resilient organizations and organizational members (Fotaki et al., 2020; Hayes et al., 2015; Komporezos-Athanasidou & Fotaki, 2015).

In this purview, we invited colleagues in the MSR field and beyond to share their imaginative explorations of what it means to be human in the context of organizations: be they workers, managers, leaders, community members, social change agents, organizational tricksters, or wounded healers. We called for papers engaging with the richness and diversity of imagination to help us understand complex realities and transcend what may be perceived as limitations. We expected and welcomed contributions that would take us elsewhere, beyond the known paths, before returning us to our familiar organizational grounds with fresh eyes. Our intent in doing so was twofold. Firstly, defining, delineating, and exploring the scope of imagination in human experiences allows us to question dominant knowledge paradigms based on reason alone, and to discuss more openly what an intuitive and

imaginative model of science can look like (Thompson, 2018). In this regard, we aimed to open a space for imaginative reflections on the personal and “direct-intuitive experiences” (Pavlovich, 2020, p. 299) of spiritual meaning and guidance, and for creative explorations of how they help us make sense of – and possibly transcend – our organizational and social realities. Secondly, our focus on welcoming cross-disciplinary and creative contributions aligned with the recognition that studies in workplace spirituality entail a greater degree of creative and intuitive enquiries, what Braud (2009) labels transpersonal approaches. Imagination features prominently if we are to tackle uroboric dragons and explore multi-dimensional spheres of meaning while simply being equipped with a flashlight!

Heeding the call

Three papers eventually emerged from confined spaces and “socially distanced” exchanges to form this special section. Each contribution offers a unique, cross-disciplinary view on how imagination sustains our understanding of ourselves and of our lives as organizational and as social change agents.

In the first paper “Imagination for action: Nurturing professional values and guiding good actions”, Aleksandra Webb makes a case for a greater appreciation of imagination as a way to not only reframe but also rebuild a socio-economic reality that preserves “spiritual food for humanity”. Building upon field data, she articulates the significance of the arts sector in society, and illustrates how the arts sector leaders interviewed have negotiated the tension created by the commercialization of arts and a funding crisis without compromising their core values and their commitment to the sector’s essence. She demonstrates the process through which leaders came to terms with the new reality (a shock, a freeze) before engaging as a community to support their shared experience of an “arts ecology”. This example of imagination harnessed to support action and social change is further encapsulated by her own visual and poetic reflection on the courage to dream something else, something other.

The authors of the second paper also make a compelling argument for the place of the arts in eliciting social change and greater consciousness. In “Developing imagination and creativity in a music and arts-based program”, Claudia Saldaña, Marie Isela Maier and Beverley Argus-Calvo invite us to witness the value of the arts for underserved communities and outline how critically important focused and long-term organizational partnerships are in supporting innovative programs targeting the heart and soul of youth. Drawing on an ethnographic study, they take us on a journey to the museum to explore how children engage with music learning and arts exposure, and how this experience provides them with a richer emotional and spiritual container. Considering how much interest is given to inclusion and diversity in management discourse today, this paper effectively questions whether there is so much more we could do simply by imagining different partnerships and more sustainable commitments driven by genuine social care rather than political or economic priorities.

A return to genuine care lies at the heart of the third paper making up this special section. Writing from her experience as a psychotherapist, educator and researcher, Alexandra Fidyk ponders how to bring renewal to our ways of being in community as we recover from the collective injury of the pandemic. In “Rehabilitation of imagination for renewing group life”,

she draws upon trauma-based literature as well as the works of C.G. Jung to reflect upon the scale of the loss and the disembodiment experienced by many. She argues that imagination – through poetry, embodied experience, or other means – offers us a way to reconnect with unconscious resources and to re-engage with one another in the social and physical world in a newly regulated manner. She suggests that these insights are especially valuable in the context of organizational life which relies excessively on cognitive functioning, to the detriment of the adaptive opportunities accessible through instincts, emotions and imagination when we face stress, dysregulation and uncertainty. In this process, again, imagination reconnects us to the soul.

We hope you enjoy the papers, and we look forward to more imaginative conversations!

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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