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## **The Applicability of Aesthetic Knowledge in Organizational Decision Making Processes**

**Thomas Keenan, Anne Pisarski and Jennifer Bartlett**

### **ABSTRACT**

We argue that aesthetic knowledge, which is a form of tacit knowledge of beauty and related concepts, is an important, yet under-researched, topic in the study of organizational decision making processes. The significance of aesthetic knowledge for decision making processes is derived from its universal application by humans to commonplace practices; its use as the basis of decision criteria in complex situations to which the effective application of logic and reason is difficult; and its role both in assisting cognition in general and in enabling the choice of solutions generated from rational decision making processes. Despite its importance, the empirical research examining the application of aesthetic knowledge in organizational decision making processes is limited. Further detailed study of aesthetic knowledge in the context of organizational decision making processes is required to extend the recent movement in the field aimed at examining the role that extrarational, human-centered factors play in organizational decisions.

### **Keywords:**

Decision making processes; aesthetic knowledge

## **The Applicability of Aesthetic Knowledge in Organizational Decision Making Processes**

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It is our aim in this paper to explore the applicability of tacit knowledge in organizational decision making processes, focusing specifically on the application of aesthetic knowledge (as a form of tacit knowledge) in these processes. We argue that aesthetic knowledge is an important concept in decision making processes, as it is a form of sensory knowing that is a universal attribute of humans, and one which is applied on an everyday basis to commonplace practices, including decision making (Davey, 1989; Dean, Ottensmeyer, & Ramirez, 1997; Edman, 1928/39; Featherstone, 2007; Hammermeister, 2002; Saito, 2001; Taylor, 2000). Further, aesthetic knowledge is significant for decision making processes in organizations, given its potential use as the ultimate basis of the criteria on which decisions are made in complex and unpredictable situations to which the application of logic and reason is difficult (Agor, 1986; Davey, 1989). Finally, the role of aesthetic knowledge both in assisting cognition in general (Hansen, Ropo, & Sauer, 2007; Ramirez, 2005) and in enabling the choice among multiple solutions derived from rational decision making processes (Hansen et al., 2007) provides additional impetus for considering aesthetic knowledge in the context of decision making in organizations. Despite this importance, no empirical research has been conducted examining the application of aesthetic knowledge in organizational decision making processes.

We begin this paper by exploring the existing theory of decision making processes and the application of tacit knowledge in decision making. As part of this exploration, we define our conceptualizations of both 'decision' and 'knowledge'. Given the contested nature of these

terms, we believe that this is important for contextualizing our discussion. We then consider the nature of aesthetic knowledge, and the existing literature on aesthetics and decision making, to explain our understanding of aesthetic knowledge, and to demonstrate the lack of existing empirical research examining aesthetic knowledge and decision making processes. We conclude by reiterating the importance of considering aesthetic knowledge in organizational decision making processes as part of the recent movement in the field against “dehumanizing” decision making (Langley, Mintzberg, Pitcher, Posada, & Saint-Macary, 1995), and the increased attention researchers are paying to “extrarational”, tacit knowledges in the study of decision making processes in organizations (e.g. Agor, 1986; Brockmann & Anthony, 2002; Langley et al., 1995; McKenzie, van Winkelen, & Grewal, 2011; Simon, 1987). While the literature suggests a potential role for the application of aesthetic knowledge in decision making processes in organizations, we argue that detailed empirical research is required to establish effectively the exact nature of this role. Such research would, we maintain, make a significant contribution to the theory and practice of decision making processes in organizations.

### **ORGANIZATIONAL DECISION MAKING PROCESSES**

Decision making processes represent a significant area of interest for both researchers and practitioners within the field of organizational studies. This interest is based primarily on the assumption that all organizations and their activities are derived from the decisions made by members of those organizations; and that the efficacy of these decisions determines the success or failure of an organization (Choo, 1998). A ‘decision’ is “a commitment to a course of action that is intended to yield results that are satisfying for specified individuals” (Yates & Tschirhart, 2006, cf. Langley et al., 1995: 261). To arrive at this commitment to action, decision makers

must engage in processes aimed at first establishing and then choosing among various options relating to the matter under consideration (Choo, 1998). An extensive variety of decisions regarding every aspect of an organization is made by individuals and groups within organizations on a moment-by-moment basis.

Research into decision making in organizational contexts has been conducted from a broad range of theoretical perspectives, including psychology, sociology, economics, anthropology and management (Gore, Banks, Millward, & Kyriakidou, 2006). Langley et al. (1995: 260) argue that the theoretical models that have emerged from this varied research have “been stuck along a continuum between the cerebral rationality of the stage theories at one end and the apparent irrationality of the theory of organized anarchies at the other”. Organizational decision making research was focused initially on staged or ‘rational’ decision making processes. These theories are derived primarily from the work of Barnard (1938) and are often referred to as ‘rational’ or ‘optimizing’ models of decision making. *Rational* models involve the use of reason in decision making processes to arrive at a result which produces the optimal outcome as identified by the decision makers (Cray, Inglis, & Freeman, 2007). The primary rational model is based around a clearly defined and staged decision making process involving defining a problem, identifying appropriate decision criteria, allocating weight to each criterion, developing alternative solutions to the problem, evaluating each solution against the weighted criteria, and selecting the ‘best’ (i.e. optimal) alternative (Harrison, 1999). This model is based on a particular set of assumptions, namely that the nature of the problem that is identified is apparent; the solution options are known and understood; the decision criteria preferences of decision makers

are clear and consistent; there is an absence of time constraints; and the ‘best’ alternative is that which results in “maximum payoff” (March, 1994).

The key model at the *organized anarchy* end of the spectrum is the “garbage can” model of decision making (Cohen, March, & Olson, 1972). This model suggests that the decision making is a complex, ambiguous and chaotic process consisting of four elements – problems, solutions, participants and choice opportunities (Cray et al., 2007). Each of these elements exists concurrently in an organizational context; and when a decision situation arises, existing “problems and solutions become linked in random or serendipitous ways driven by the hazards and vagaries of participation in choices” (Langley et al., 1995: 263). This model represents a reactionary conceptualisation of decision making compared to the proactive nature of the rational model (Cray et al., 2007).

Existing decision making models have been the subject of repeated and varied criticism. The primary basis of the criticism of the rational model is the rejection of the assumptions which underpin the model. It can be argued, for example, that there are very few situations which conform to the stability, predictability, simplicity, clarity and temporal assumptions on which the rational model is based. Rather, decisions are often made in complex situations, characterised by incomplete knowledge and high levels of uncertainty relating to both the goals being pursued and the consequences of choice options (Robbins, Millett, Cacioppe, & Waters-Marsh, 2001). The ‘myth of rationality’ – that is, the inability of humans to act in the completely rational manner underpinning the rational model – has also been a basis for criticism. Simon (1957) was the first

theorist to suggest that humans make decisions under the constraints of “bounded rationality”.

He argued that

[t]he capacity of the human mind for formulating and solving complex problems is small compared with the size of the problems whose solution is required for objectively rational behavior in the real world – or even for a reasonable approximation to such objective rationality (Simon, 1957: 198).

In particular, limited time and mental capacity, incomplete knowledge, value and purpose conflicts and biases among decision participants (especially in an organizational context), and the complexity of many decision situations render complete rationality impossible (Buchanan & O'Connell, 2006; Choo, 1998; Cray et al., 2007). Rather, decision makers often attempt to simplify decision making processes by relying on “routines, rules and heuristics... in order to reduce uncertainty and cope with complexity” (Choo, 1998: 12, cf. Tversky & Kahneman, 1974) to arrive at a ‘satisficing’ solution – that is, one that is ‘good enough’, as opposed to ‘optimal’ (Robbins et al., 2001). In an organizational context, these “routines, rules and heuristics” are often derived from expertise in a particular field (Gore et al., 2006).

Langley et al. (1995) offer criticisms of both extremes of the decision making continuum. While they accept the untenable nature of the rational model, they also reject the complete anarchical view of decision making as proposed by the ‘garbage can’ metaphor, suggesting that it may result in the failure to consider “other important but as yet unexplained forms of order in the processes we call decisional” (Langley et al., 1995: 262). Langley et al. (1995) argue that the existing literature covering the entire continuum suffers from three key problems: reification, dehumanization, and isolation. *Reification* refers to the objective assumption of a clearly identifiable ‘decision’, which, they suggest, reflects the “bias towards viewing organizations as

mechanistic and bureaucratic” (Langley et al., 1995: 264). They argue that ‘decision’ is a construct, rather than an objective ‘thing’. *Dehumanization* is conceptualised as the propensity in the extant literature to remove humanity from the decision making process, especially in terms of emotion and imagination. Langley et al. (1995: 264) maintain that these “*arational* forces are ignored in almost all of the literature” [emphasis in original]. This lack of consideration of these ‘forces’ is problematic, as “decision making processes are driven by the emotion, imagination and memories of the decision makers and are punctuated by sudden crystallizations of thought” (Langley et al., 1995: 261). *Isolation* refers to the lack of consideration of the “collective reality” of organizational life (Langley et al., 1995: 264). Decision making is often viewed as an individual phenomenon, without considering effectively the role of extra-individual forces and collective action in decisions. Based on these criticisms of existing decision making theory, Langley et al. (1995) offer a “convergence” model of decision making. This model suggests that “instead of *a* decision appearing at *a* point in time, decision making follows a general trajectory... of gradual convergence on the image of some final action” (Langley et al., 1995: 266). This convergence process is guided by decision makers, who, as people, bring “extrarational” processes (i.e. subconscious processes of judgment, intuition, ‘insight’ and other tacit knowledges, such as, we argue, aesthetic knowledge) to bear as part of the decision making process.

The convergence model proposed by Langley et al. (1995) shares similarities with the *intuitive* model of decision making, which refers to an “unconscious process [of decision making] created out of distilled experience” (Robbins et al., 2001: 173). This model is not necessarily anti-rational; rather it may be entirely rational to apply this intuitive approach in



situations characterised by high uncertainty, a lack of precedence, unpredictable variables, limited knowledge, time and clarity, multiple possible solutions, and in instances when analytical data are useless. Under these conditions, we would argue that the only effective way of making a decision may be the subconscious application of the intuitive, tacit knowledge decision makers have as a result of their experience.

Despite the pervasiveness of rationality in both theory and practice as the ultimate desirable state for decision making processes in organizations, the literature clearly suggests that the rational ideal is unachievable. Langley et al. (1995) argue that accepting the anarchical position of the opposite end of the decision making theory continuum is also flawed. Rather than focusing on trying to improve the rationality of decision making processes, or abandoning the study of decision making processes to the forces of anarchy, the focus of research should be on the reality of what actually occurs when *people* engage in decision making processes in organizations. This necessarily means exploring the role of extrarational or non-rational processes (as provided for in the convergence and intuitive models) in decision making in an organizational context. While this has been achieved to a certain extent, especially in terms of intuition and emotion in decision making (see e.g. Agor, 1986; Simon, 1987), there has been no empirical consideration of the role of aesthetic knowledge as an extrarational force in decision making processes. This is a gap in existing decision making process theory which we argue needs to be addressed. Before we explore this argument specifically, however, it is necessary to consider the existing theory surrounding the application of tacit knowledge in decision making processes.

## TACIT KNOWLEDGE AND DECISION MAKING PROCESSES

In order to explore effectively the extant theory relating to the application of tacit knowledge in decision making processes, it is important to define what we mean by 'knowledge'. The traditional epistemological definition of knowledge *per se* is "justified true belief" (Nonaka, Toyama, & Konno, 2000; Steup, 1996). However, in applied terms, this definition is insufficient as it fails to address even the most fundamental cognitive, social and cultural issues of what knowledge 'is' and how it 'comes to be' (Nonaka et al., 2000). We have adopted a definition of knowledge (or knowing) based on Rooney and Schneider (2002) who suggest that knowledge is the result of the interrelated *processes* of knowing, which are an evolving and variable constellation of, for example, the conceptual, cognitive, intuitive, aesthetic, emotional, spiritual, axiological, political and motor bases to achievement that are an emergent property of relations, and that are justifiably regarded as a reliable basis for action.

The importance of this definition is that it avoids some of the common ontological and epistemological flaws associated with the traditional understanding of the nature of knowledge, and consequently makes knowledge and its application more understandable as something that is researchable in an organizational context. Knowledge is often viewed as an objective 'thing', rather than the outcome of the active process of knowing (Graham & Rooney, 2001; Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000; Rooney, Hearn, Mandeville, & Joseph, 2003; Stacey, 2001). The definition proposed by Rooney and Schneider (2002) recognises that knowledge is the result of an essentially relational (including social) process of knowing, that it does not have an independent existence outside of this process, and that the unit of analysis should therefore be the (living) process rather than an inanimate object or highly abstracted nominalisation (Whitehead, 1978).

Knowledge is often conceptualised as having two distinct, but interrelated, forms – *explicit* and *tacit* (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Rooney & Schneider, 2005). Explicit knowledge is ‘objective’ knowledge which has been codified in a formal and systematic manner (e.g. as a technical instruction manual) (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). It is knowledge which is easily expressed in symbolic form (i.e. as words, numbers, diagrams etc.) and able to be communicated; and which readily lends itself to electronic processing, storage and manipulation (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Tacit knowledge is ‘subjective’ knowledge which is derived from peoples’ experience, ideals, values and emotions, and which is highly personal and context specific, and often difficult to formalise, express or share with others (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Polanyi, 1967). Tacit knowledge can be further divided into two sub-categories – technical tacit knowledge (i.e. know-how, craft, skills) and cognitive tacit knowledge (i.e. “schemata, mental modes, beliefs and perceptions so ingrained that we take them for granted” – Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995: 8). All knowledge can be classified according to these two broad dimensions.

Given that knowledge (both tacit and explicit) is the result of the relational process of knowing which provides a justifiable and reliable basis for *action*, and that a ‘decision’ refers to a commitment to a course of *action*, the importance of the application of knowledge in decision making becomes clear. We suggest that knowledge needs to be applied as part of the decision making process in order to provide a justifiable and reliable basis for the course of action that is committed to by those engaged in the decision making process. McKenzie et al. (2011: 421) acknowledge the importance of the application of knowledge in decision making processes, arguing that knowledge plays a particularly vital role as a tool to avoid “ill-informed decisions”.

Effective decisions require the application of accurate knowledge in a timely fashion. The nature of this knowledge will vary depending on the nature of the decision required and its focal topic:

Sound decisions require having the right knowledge in the right place at the right time, to be able to act effectively. “Right” knowledge may be different for every decision – some decisions require only surface knowledge, some require more investigation and an evidence base, some use tacit experience, and other creative insight, intuition and judgment (McKenzie et al., 2011: 31)<sup>1</sup>.

While knowledge of the substantive area in question is necessarily required for making effective decisions, Devine and Koslowski (1995), argue that procedural knowledge (i.e. knowledge of processes and procedures of decision making) is also required. They suggest further that the key source of these knowledges is practical experience, both in terms of the substantive area and in decision making as a practice.

Simon (1987) agrees that decisions in an organizational context require substantive knowledge of the organization’s specific functional domain, and industry and social environment contexts, as well as knowledge of decision making processes. However, he also considers the role of emotions and intuition in decision making, exploring how rational (analytic), non-rational (intuitive), and irrational (emotional) factors affect decision making processes in organizations. He concludes, in accordance with Barnard (1938), that in terms of decisions made by managers in organizations, senior managers tend to rely more on intuition than logic or reason. However, these apparently ‘non-logical’ decisions are based on knowledge and experience. Intuition relies on cognitive patterns, and judgments about the significance and value of those patterns, derived from experience, which are applied (often unconsciously) to situations. The application of these

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that McKenzie et al. (2011), like Langley et al. (1995), acknowledge the role of various tacit knowledges in decision making.

patterns often results in highly effective decisions, the reasons for which may be difficult to articulate in formal rational language.

Intuition (in particular) became a creditable aspect of decision making research in organizational studies in the 1980s. This arose from the need to consider alternatives to traditional rational approaches, which, as stated above, do not lend themselves to situations in which decisions have to be made in “a climate characterized by rapid change and at times also laden with crisis events” (Agor, 1986: 6). Research has established that senior managers/decision makers in organizations are more intuitive than their junior counterparts. The application of intuition, which is derived from experience and training, leads to decisions which often leave the decision maker with “a feeling of total harmony” (Agor, 1986: 10). As ‘harmony’ is an aesthetic concept, it would appear that ‘good’ intuitive decisions are those which appeal to the aesthetic knowledge of the decision maker as applied to the decision making process. This potential relationship between aesthetic knowledge and decision making has not yet been considered empirically in the organizational studies field.

Intuition may be viewed as a cognitive form of tacit experiential knowledge which is applied to decision making. Tacit knowledge is generally recognised as important in effective decision making (Brockmann & Anthony, 2002: 436). Brockmann and Anthony (2002) argue that tacit knowledge is particularly useful in complex and unstructured decision making processes. It is used by decision makers to “fill in gaps of missing information, make sense of the complex and abstract, distill numerous alternatives, and provide structure” (Brockmann & Anthony, 2002: 440).

While the role that certain extrarational factors such as emotions (e.g. McKenzie et al., 2011; Simon, 1987), intuition (e.g. Agor, 1986; Simon, 1987) and tacit knowledge (in general) (e.g. Brockmann & Anthony, 2002) play in decision making in organizations has been the subject of considerable research, there is virtually no empirical research that explores the relationship between aesthetic knowledge (as a specific form of tacit knowledge) and decision making in an organizational context. We argue that this is a significant deficiency in the current literature given the pervasive nature of the application of aesthetic knowledge in everyday practices (Saito, 2001), and its role as an aid to cognition and rational choice (Hansen et al., 2007; Ramirez, 2005), especially in complex and uncertain situations (Agor, 1986; Davey, 1989). In order to substantiate this argument further, it is important to consider fully the meaning of ‘aesthetic knowledge’ to demonstrate why knowledge of ‘beauty’ and related concepts is important for decision making in organizational contexts.

### **AESTHETIC KNOWLEDGE**

The term ‘aesthetic’, which is derived from the Greek word *aisthesis* (‘theory of perception’), refers to notions of beauty and related concepts such as taste, sublimity and pleasure (Bolz & Van Reijen, 1996; Leet, 2004; Strati, 1992; White, 1996). Prior to the rise of reason as the dominant philosophical force in modern societies, the cognitive, moral and aesthetic realms of understanding were closely related in such a way that “truth, goodness and beauty reciprocally defined one another” (Leet, 2004: 11).

The development of aesthetics as a movement in modern philosophy is credited to the eighteenth century German philosopher Baumgarten, who “developed aesthetics as one of the two components of [his] theory of knowledge. On one hand was logic, which looked at intellectual knowledge, and on the other hand was aesthetics, which looked at sensory knowledge” (Taylor, 2000: 304). Although Baumgarten’s aesthetics was originally designed as an extension of rationalism and as an aid to logic, he eventually distanced his aesthetics from reason and sought to assert the legitimacy of aesthetic knowledge (i.e. sensory or perceptual knowledge) within the dominant logico-rational knowledge framework of his time (Davey, 1989; Elgin, 1997; Hammermeister, 2002). Hammermeister (2002: 4) maintains that for Baumgarten, aesthetics “refers to a theory of sensibility as a gnoseological faculty, that is, a faculty that produces a certain kind of knowledge. Aesthetics is taken very literally as a defence of the relevance of sensual perception”. Therefore, Baumgarten’s conceptualisation of aesthetics presents it as a sensory epistemology – that is, a way of knowing the world through sensory experience (Dean et al., 1997).

Davey (1989) maintains that aesthetics or sensory knowing is, in fact, to where humans turn when logic and reason fail. Aesthetics has been increasingly recognised as an ‘activity’ that humans engage in on an everyday basis which involves the development of aesthetic sensibilities and their application to commonplace experiences of people, objects, institutions, practices and situations (Saito, 2001: 94, cf. Featherstone, 2007).

As ‘aesthetics’ refers to notions of beauty and its related concepts, and ‘knowledge’ is the outcome of the embedded, relational process of knowing, ‘aesthetic knowledge’ can be

conceptualised as a form of knowledge about beauty and its related concepts that emerges from peoples' embodied sensory experience of, and embedded relationships with, phenomena (e.g. themselves, other people, animate and inanimate objects, social and other situations etc.) (Ewenstein & Whyte, 2007; Fine, 1992; Ramirez, 2005; Ropo & Sauer, 2008; Strati, 1992, 1999, 2007; Taylor, 2000; White, 1996). Hansen et al. (2007: 546) argue that aesthetic knowledge "shapes and precedes all other forms of knowledge" as it forms the basis of the pattern recognition and construction that occur during ideation, which in turn precede the "more formal conceptualization processes involved in cognition" (Ramirez, 2005: 30). Not only does aesthetic knowledge precede effective cognition, it also acts as an aid to determination in rational thought processes. Davey (1989: 112) argues that the application of aesthetic knowledge enables people to make a choice among "endless rational possibilities", by allowing them to select the choice which is the most aesthetically pleasing. – that is, the one "in which, like Wittgenstein's form of life, everything coherently fits".

Aesthetic knowledge is a form of tacit knowledge. Strati (2007: 70) argues that the tacit nature of aesthetic knowledge is particularly evident in terms of everyday activities and practices in which "we are often aware of being able to do something but unable to describe analytically how we do it, to explain it scientifically, and thereby turn it into explicit rather than implicit and entirely personal knowledge". While aesthetic knowledge is somewhat of an ephemeral concept (Humphreys, Brown, & Hatch, 2003), it is generally recognised as an instinctive, universal human attribute that is shaped by each individual's historical, social and cultural context (Davey, 1989; Hammermeister, 2002; Ingram, 1991; Ottensmeyer, 1996; Paxman, 1992-93). Edman (1928/39) maintains that the use of aesthetic knowledge forms part of our everyday existence. As



such, aesthetic knowledge forms a valid object of research in organizational studies because organizations are comprised of people who do not leave their aesthetic knowledge at home when they come to work.

However, this does not mean that the *content* of aesthetic knowledge is universal (Bourdieu, 1987; Dean et al., 1997). Strati (1992: 577) argues that aesthetic knowledge is a “complex social phenomenon” that is produced and reproduced through social interaction (cf. Bourdieu, 1987). As such, aesthetic knowledge is, at least in part, socially constructed, and has a different level of importance and meaning for different people, social groups, industries and institutions (Bourdieu, 1987; Dean et al., 1997; Tschmuck, 2003).

### **AESTHETIC KNOWLEDGE AND DECISION MAKING RESEARCH**

There has been a burgeoning interest in the study of aesthetics in various fields in the past three decades. This is related to the perception of an aesthetic “boom” in the modern world, in which “[m]ore and more elements of reality are being aesthetically mantled and reality as a whole is coming to count increasingly as an aesthetic construction” (Welsch, 1996: 1). This recognition of the importance of aesthetics in everyday life is reflected in the growing body of research exploring aesthetics in an organizational context (e.g. Brady, 1996; Dean et al., 1997; Fine, 1992; Kersten, 2008; Ottensmeyer, 1996; Ramirez, 1996; Strati, 1992; Taylor, 2000; Taylor & Hansen, 2005; Warren, 2002). The serious consideration of aesthetics in organizational studies began only in the 1980’s, primarily as a reaction to the dominance of rationalism and positivism in the field, and the resultant “mentalization of organizational life”. However, given the nature of aesthetic knowledge as a universal human attribute, and Witz et al.’s (2003)

assertion that “[a]esthetics and organization are inseparable”, it is disappointing that it has not been more fully researched in an organizational context. Taylor and Hansen (2005: 1213) suggest that “[a]esthetic knowledge, like tacit knowledge, is routinely in use in organizations but has lacked adequate attention”.

Some specific consideration of aesthetics (as opposed to aesthetic knowledge) and decision making has occurred in an organizational context. Warren (2002: 228) maintains that in organizations, as in all aspects of human life, “our value judgments, preferences, tastes, choices and *decisions* are heavily influenced by aesthetic considerations” [emphasis added]. Dobson (2007: 41) argues that aesthetics form a “holistic justificatory mechanism for business decisions”, and, further, that the key decision criteria for modern business organizations should be “Is it profitable? Is it ethical? Is it beautiful?” (Dobson, 2007: 45). Drawing on Plato, he argues that good decisions are those which have a sense of beauty, and “which enhance the quality of life” (Dobson, 2007: 44, cf. Brady, 1996). For Dobson, the failure of decision makers to accept the need to apply aesthetics to decision making in organizations amounts to a denial of both the role of aesthetics in assisting decision makers to cope with the “chaotic and unpredictable” nature of reality, and the limits of applying purely rational processes to decisions (Dobson, 2007: 19). However, neither Warren (2002) nor Dobson (2007) has specifically considered the application of aesthetic knowledge to decision making processes through empirical research.

Strati (2000) also considers aesthetics in relation to decision making. He discusses the use of aesthetics as part of rhetorical strategies in strategic decision making, suggesting that both the

aesthetics of place and of the presentation of ideas may influence the outcomes of decision processes. While he also considers aesthetics in relation to an actual decision (which, e.g., may be characterised as a “beautiful decision” or “kitschy and tasteless”), he does not specifically explore the application of aesthetic knowledge to decision making processes.

Dean et al. (1997: 429) focus on the aesthetics of decision making processes themselves, which, they maintain, “may be seen as an aesthetic creation of the people enacting them”<sup>2</sup>. They argue that decision makers may experience beauty in terms of the decision process, suggesting as an example, that “the complexity, order and symmetry of spreadsheets and other representations of alternatives and information about them may be a source of pleasure to decision makers”. They call for further research on decision making from an aesthetic perspective, particularly focusing on the role of aesthetics as well as of reason and politics in decision making processes.

## CONCLUSION

Despite the extensive research of decision making processes in organizational studies, existing models fail to consider explicitly the role of aesthetic knowledge in these processes. We see this as problematic, as the application of aesthetic knowledge to phenomena is an essential part of what it is to be human; and people are the key decision making entities in organizations. Therefore, further research into the application of aesthetic knowledge in decision making processes in organizations is required. We see our call for this research as an extension of Langley et al.’s (1995) identification of the need to address the “dehumanization” of decision making theory in organizational studies. While the ‘convergence’ model of decision making

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Kersten (2008: 195) who suggests that “[o]rganizational decision making is affected by people’s aesthetic preferences for how decisions should be made”.

developed by Langley et al. (1995) based on their detailed criticism of the existing decision making models accounts for “extrarational” processes in decision making, it does not explore explicitly the role of aesthetic knowledge (an example of ‘extrarationality’) in decision making processes. The same criticism can be levied at the intuitive model of decision making.

The existing research clearly establishes that knowledge (substantive, procedural, etc.) plays a significant role in ensuring effective outcomes from decision making processes. While theorists have acknowledged the importance of tacit and intuitive knowledges in decision making processes, the relationship between aesthetic knowledge (as a specific form of tacit knowledge) and decision making has not been examined empirically. The existing literature on both extrarational forces in decision making and on aesthetic knowledge suggests a number of potential roles for the application of aesthetic knowledge in decision making processes. For example, Agor’s (1986) research of intuitive decision making suggests that aesthetic knowledge (e.g. as expressed in the concept of ‘harmony’) may be used as the ultimate determinant of the soundness and efficacy of decisions made in complex and uncertain situations characterised by rapid change and incomplete substantive knowledge. Davey’s (1989) conceptualisation of aesthetic knowledge as the place to where humans turn when logic and reason fail further suggests a role for the application of aesthetic knowledge in decision making situations which defy logical and rational analysis. Hansen et al. (2007) offer other, more fundamental roles for aesthetic knowledge as both the foundation for all effective cognition and as an aid for choice among the potential action options that arise during rational decision making processes (c.f. Davey, 1989). We do not, however, wish to speculate further on the role of the application of aesthetic knowledge in decision making processes. Rather, we argue that detailed empirical

research is required to explore this aspect of decision making processes in organizations. We suggest that such research would make an important contribution to the theory and practice of organizational decision making. In terms of organizational decision making theory, research into the application of aesthetic knowledge in decision making processes would enhance further our understanding of the role of extrarational forces in these processes. This research would also have important implications for decision making practice in organizations. Establishing the exact nature of the role of aesthetic knowledge in decision making would enhance managers' understanding of how effective decision making occurs, especially in complex environments. It would also assist them to identify and develop the skills and attributes required by organizational members for effective decision making.

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