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BODY of KNOWLEDGE

Joint improvisation as interaction ritual

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Improvised joint action feels good, sometimes even great when the participants experience highly rewarding “group flows”. In this presentation, I analyze the emergence of the positive affective phenomenology of improvised joint action in several domains such as various forms of art improvisation, improvisational music therapies for children with autism or schizophrenia, and social and political movements with the sociological interaction ritual theory of Randall Collins (2004). The understanding of joint improvisation as interaction ritual allows us to see how the shared affective experience of the participants builds up from several ingredients that include structural, intentional, and embodied elements. These are the participants’ bodily co-presence and physical separation from others; their joint attention to the joint activity; an initial shared mood among the participants; and their mutual awareness of the shared focus of attention. The initial affects intensify during the joint activity into an intrinsically pleasant collective effervescence in the group’s interaction ritual through emotional contagion and rhythmic synchronization of the participants’ bodily and behavioral processes as well as through the participants’ awareness of their shared experience. Improvised joint action involves more variation than typical rituals, but both are patterned social interactions in which the alignment of participatory, either synchronic or complementary, individual actions within the joint activity yields affective rewards to the participants, as shown by several empirical studies. Another difference to rituals is that in some cases of joint improvisation, the initial shared mood may emerge only from the affective rewards of bodily and behavioral synchrony and coordination. Another source of shared affects in joint improvisation is the activity itself, such as a successful performance of a difficult part of it. In social activism, improvised joint actions are often motivated by the participants’ collective emotions that by constitution involve extensive bodily and behavioral synchrony.