

MUSIC AS A METAPHOR FOR ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

Saku Mantere *, John A.A.Sillince**, Virpi Hämäläinen***

* HANKEN, The Swedish School of Economics and Business Administration, Department of Management and Organization, Perhonkatu 6, FIN-00100, Finland. E-mail: Saku.Mantere@hanken.fi

** Aston Business School, Aston University, Birmingham, B4 7ET, UK. Tel. 44 (0)121 359 3611 extension 5028, Fax 44 (0)121 359 5271, Email j.a.a.sillince@aston.ac.uk

*** Helsinki University of Technology, Department of Industrial Engineering and Management, P.O.Box 5500, FIN-02015 HUT, Finland. E-mail: Virpi.Hamalainen@tkk.fi

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STRUCTURED ABSTRACT

Purpose of this paper

To explore a musical metaphor in making organizational change a potentially pleasurable experience to participants.

Design/methodology/approach

We begin by challenging ideological assumptions behind classical change metaphors. To build an alternative, we employ musical semiotics to understand the core dimensions in a musical experience.

Findings

We discuss the dynamics of tension and resolution in the different dimensions of musical experience.

What is original/value of paper

Our discussion regarding the dynamics of tension and resolution in musical experience help the reader to make sense of how an individual organizational member can understand, structure and control the experience of organizational change.

Key Words: Organizational change, music, metaphor, improvisation

Categorization: Conceptual paper

Introduction

The metaphor of music has many similarities with organizational change. Like music, organizational change moves through time, building and releasing *tension* in organizational members. While several musical metaphors have been utilized in organization studies, for instance strategic dissonance (e.g. Burgelman and Grove, 1996), jazz improvisation (Senge, 1994; Hatch, 1999; Humphreys, Brown and Hatch, 2003; Moorman and Miner, 1998a, 1998b; Weick, 1998; Barrett, 2000), polyphony (Barry and Elmes, 1997; Hazen, 1993), and musical time (Albert and Bell, 2002), the emancipatory potential of the musical metaphor in reducing the pain caused by change to an individual organizational member has not been utilized. We are motivated by the possibility to avoid making painful change a self-fulfilling prophecy (Weick, 1995).

Yet, often a great deal of pain and discomfort *are* involved in change, which would seem to fit poorly with the musical metaphor. In this paper, we will argue that music can also act as a sense-making device that allows the controlling of the experience of pain through the structuring of the change experience. We argue that the ability to structure change discomfort, particularly through structuring time, is a powerful way of controlling it.

MUSIC CHALLENGES PAINFUL CHANGE

The classical assumption in organization theory (e.g. Lewin, 1951; Schein, 1985) has been that individuals seek stability in their organization, and that change is therefore regarded as *painful*. The metaphorical language used in theorizing about organizations guides the way we think about organizations (Morgan, 1997; Wood, 2002). Metaphor analysis is useful for creating new viewpoints on phenomena governed by prominent theories. By uncovering the metaphors behind a prominent theory, we may challenge the assumptions taken for granted in the theory (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Palmer and Dunford, 1996). In other words, metaphors are powerful linguistic vehicles of

emancipation because of their capability for creative deconstruction (Boje, 2001; Morgan, 1997). The pain of organizational change relies on the metaphor used for making sense of change. The choice of the change metaphor implicitly communicates an ideology that frames our understanding of change. It may even promote unnecessary suffering in organizations.

Our use of the music metaphor is postmodern in its aims – we firmly believe that the role of new metaphors is not the creation of another dominant metaphor to surpass others, but the enriching of our viewpoints regarding organizations (Morgan, 1993) and the understanding of transcendent experiences by organization members (Gustavsson, 2001).

From pain to tension

Musical semiotics is an area of research interested in discovering the symbol systems found in music (Tarasti, 1994). We will focus our attention in musical semiotics in our search of tools for structuring, understanding and controlling the variety of experiences the building and resolving of tension creates. Focusing on musicological concepts instead of music in general helps us find a path on what could otherwise be too wide a field – indeed the variety of music is overwhelming.

In musicology, an experience is not discussed in terms of pain and pleasure, but in terms of *tension* and *resolution*. The musicological concepts of tension and resolution are well suited for understanding because they are essentially temporal in nature. The creation of tension is a central element in creating a musical experience. In his theory of musical semiotics, Tarasti (1994: 23) argues that to understand tension in music, we need to understand three dimensions. First, there is the unfolding of music in *time*, how music moves from state x to state y, conforming or not conforming with the expectations of the hearer. Second, we also need to understand the relationships between the actual musical states in a non-temporal, *categorical* sense, i.e. how x differs from y. Third, we also need to understand the *actoriality* of the musical movement, the ‘will’ or ‘purpose’, which moves the music

forward from state to state. Tension may result from each of the three dimensions. It can result from the music moving against the hearer's expectations (temporal dimension). It can result from perceived conflicts between different musical states (categorical dimension). It can also result from perceived puzzlement concerning the purpose of the current movement (actorial dimension). Tension is the force that creates the energy of the piece, moves it forward. Tension reflects the "primal energetic nature of music" (Tarasti, 1994: 21).

Tension and resolution have prominent psychological counterparts. Cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) argues that individuals make decisions that resolve tensions caused by holding contradictory beliefs. The metaphoric use of the musical concept *dissonance* is illuminating here: arriving at a situation in which one's beliefs conflict resembles the emotion aroused by a dissonant chord in a musical piece.

If we were to rely solely on cognitive dissonance theory, we would end up claiming that tensions produce exclusively *negative* emotions: for example, discomfort, anxiety, and frustration. But tension also causes positive emotions as can be observed in many realms in aesthetics: visual art, music and stories. The key component of any *story*, for instance, is the creation of a conflict, to be resolved by key actors in some way. The emotional equivalent of the conflict is the building of tension in the reader. In organization studies narratives are useful both as phenomena present in organizations such as providing a way of writing strategy (Barry and Elmes, 1997; Shaw, Brown and Bromiley, 1998) or of centering of a collective sense of identity (Boyce, 1995) as well as a form for theorizing about organizations (Czarniawska, 1998).

The jazz improvisation viewpoint on organizational change has already recognized the possibility of change being non-painful (Senge, 1994; Hatch, 1999; Moorman and Miner, 1998a, 1998b; Weick, 1998; Barrett, 2000). Improvisation has been discussed in relation to such issues as creativity (Bar-

rett, 1998), adaptation (Weick, 1998), learning (Moorman, Bassoff and Miner, 2001), collective individuality (Mirvis, 1998), and strategy crafting (Crossan, 1998). Organizational improvisation has been defined as the convergence of planning and execution (Moorman and Miner, 1998a).

Not all music is improvisational, however. The improvisational viewpoint captures only some of the strength of the musicological metaphor, the power of which has been scarcely explored in organization studies. A rare, recent exception is provided by Albert and Bell (2002) who employed a general musicological framework for studying a temporal question: when and how organizations should act in crisis situations.

To extend the discussion from improvisation to cover change in more generic terms, we will need the concept of control. A symphony orchestra and a jazz combo are archetypes for the *central* and *distributed* models for controlling change. The symphony orchestra acts as a metaphor for the centrally controlled model. Here a person or a group of persons “conducts”, following the linear instructions provided by the composer. The jazz band picture of organizational improvisation provides the metaphor for the distributed model. When power in communication is not centrally held, there will be performers, soloists taking the center stage while others support by comping (Hatch, 1999: 81). Jazz compositions provide a chord structure and melodic ideas, but act more as frameworks for improvisation than linear guidelines for performance, as is the case in the classical paradigm of music. The distributed and central models can be regarded as extremes on the same dimension: change usually contains elements from both models.

MUSIC HELPS TO CONTROL DISCOMFORT

The musicological metaphor provides an alternative to the simplistic notion of pain in the form of *tension* that change creates in organizational members. We have argued that such tensions can be experienced as exciting and invigorating as well as shocking or stressful. Yet, the musicological

metaphor can be helpful also in situations that *are clearly unpleasant*. Musical experience is essentially temporal, and temporal structuring can help us control unpleasant experiences. Musicological semiotics provides methods of structuring dynamic experience. Tarasti's temporal, categorical and actorial dimensions can be employed as key dimensions in this structuring.

A painful encounter with a dentist's drill can help us understand the power of *temporal* structuring as a sensemaking device that allows for the control of unpleasant experiences. When the dentist tells me: "It will only be a minute now, I am soon ready to start filling the cavity", I feel I am in control of my pain, because I have access of the duration which I still have to endure. Over longer periods of discomfort, we often come up with structuring schemas to help us divide duration into more tangible portions. For instance, the first author of this paper noticed during his first marathon, that after passing the half-way mark, he started generating thoughts such as: "I only have 20 kilometers left. I have run that distance many times before." After passing $\frac{3}{4}$ of the distance, his thoughts were: "Only ten kilometers (puff)... I run ten kilometers three times a week (puff)..." The physical distances represent the time left to endure discomfort. Breaking time into tangible portions, and connecting them to previous experiences (*categorical* structuring) helped the first author to control the painful experience, controlling the dynamics of tension and resolution. All in all, the possibility of boasting to oneself and to others of running the marathon, a powerful institution used to measure one's strength of will, also helped to him endure the ordeal, by giving it a purpose (*actorial* structuring).

Musicological tools for structuring change experience

To understand how exactly music structures experience, it is helpful to look at the essential tools that composers, improvisers and musical performers have at their disposal. Instead of shaping their substance with a hammer and chisel, as a sculptor would, composers, improvisers and performers

deal with such things as *form, volume, harmony, rhythm, and texture*. We have illustrated the tools they use and their equivalents in organizational life in Table I below. Understanding these dimensions helps us to understand how musical experience structures sensemaking and sense of control in various areas of organizational change.

--- Take in Table I ---

Form

Musical form is the favorite dimension of traditional musicologists. Form is the macrostructure of a musical piece, and as such it is the place to start looking for a “storyline”. According to Tarasti (1994: 23), form, as the “tension from beginning to end” is instrumental in creating the narrative of a musical piece. A composer creates the experience of a complete musical piece by introducing, developing and reintroducing themes, creating structures, surprising and satisfying the listener. It is almost as if there is a plot to the music in terms of its form. In jazz music, an improvising soloist uses the same methods to create the ‘arc’ of her or his solo, as is illustrated in master guitarist Jim Hall’s description of his favorite guitar solo (“*Grand Slam*” by Charlie Christian):

“Christian’s solo is like a terrific short story. It has a great opening phrase which really gets your attention; it leaves plenty of space for the listener to get involved; it surprises you, it develops beautifully, it has direction, it ends perfectly and it’s all played with amazing clarity. What more can you ask?” (Hall, 2001)

Here are some elements of form then – initial tension-raising part, sparse structure which invites imaginative augmentation by the listener, surprise, repetition of the tension in different forms, progression to an ending which ‘completes the piece’ by resolving a tension. The *temporal* process of

organizational change can be understood through the roles of tension and resolution in different stages of the process.

The narrative power of a musical piece or performance lies in the wholeness of its arc: the dynamics of tension are warranted as performing a role in the complete piece – they make sense as completing the piece. The dynamics arouse emotion *at the time* that they are experienced but have a meaning only through the *completion* of the piece. In organizational life the dichotomy between the ongoing flow of experience and the discrete projects that structure it has been widely discussed. This is what Weick (1995) is speaking about in terms of the ongoing flow of sensemaking being structured into *projects*, or Harré and Secord (1972) and Weick (1995) speaking of *episodes* that structure individual lives and sensemaking.

Albert and Bell (2002) emphasize the importance of the musical form: both in terms of varying the tonic and the general structure of the piece. They argue that varying the structure in an unexpected direction may divert and redirect an “inevitable”, dramatic conclusion. The discussion demonstrates the power of musical form in explaining the underlying dramatic structure people expect from the temporal succession of organizational events. Musical form is a hidden network of expectation against which sensemaking of events takes place. Isabella (1990) discovered that managers’ sensemaking toward change consisted of discrete *stages*. The stages of anticipation and confirmation can be regarded as representing the *initiation* of change, while the stages of culmination and aftermath represent its *completion*. What is not discussed in Isabella’s model is the gradual buildup of the change, the stage in which the transformation is *ongoing*.

The *initiation* of the change is the beginning of a musical piece in which a musical theme is introduced. One organizational example might be found in the initiation of a project in which the project’s main goals are presented. Tension is built in subjects in the form of expectations and curios-

ity, fear and insecurity, capturing attention. That tension must be carefully judged and must not be too fear-inducing. For example, Armenakis & Harris (2002: 181) found that an acceptance speech by an incoming change agent “was better articulated as “here is why change will be good” rather than the traditional “this is why we need to change”. The *ongoing* stage of a project is where the actual work is done, where mastery over surprising challenges is achieved. In this stage minute details are experienced as a state of absorption, yet the whole (e.g. major objectives) is rarely experienced, i.e. “the forest is not seen for the trees” giving rise to temporary confusion. Tension is thus built and resolved in a minute form. The significance of the change as a whole should emerge at the *completion* stage, in which the pieces are fitted together, and sense is made in retrospect (Beeson & Davis, 2000). Tension is resolved on a grand scale.

Volume

The second dimension in music, which the musician can work with is the intensity of the music itself, changing in time. By controlling the volume of the piece the performer or a composer can affect the listener’s musical experience in a very tangible manner, stimulating emotions in quite a non-cognitive way. Volume can be used to awaken the listener or co-performer by a sudden explosion (e.g. the fortissimo intended to wake dozing ladies in Haydn’s 94th *symphony*) or slowly capture their attention in a longer development (e.g. the gradual buildup of volume in Ravel’s *Bolero*).

In organizational life volume can be controlled by methods that affect experiences in a similarly tangible and forceful way: controlling resource intensity for instance. Perceptions of how plentiful resources are at different stages directly affect styles of working: thin resources pose a challenge that has to be overcome, while rich resources can act as a show of trust. The scale of rewards and compensation made available by the organization indicates the importance of a particular individual or task. Tension is increased when resource reduction is seen as out of one’s control, and a feeling

of regaining control over resources, when the project starts to make a profit, is a form of resolution. The intensity of communication about change is another method for affecting the volume of change. The amount and style of communication affects how often change is present in the thoughts of the participants.

Harmony: Consonance and dissonance

The third dimension at the musician's disposal is harmony. By harmony, we refer not only to consonance, but also to dissonance, more specifically, to the interplay of the two. By controlling the interplay of notes she or he creates dissonance, discussed above, and consonance and thus tension and resolution. In music as in organizations, controlling harmony only makes sense in context, i.e. the character of chords is ultimately judged in relation to other chords. In harmony the relation of different notes can be approached in an analytical manner.

In organizations, different *arguments* are connected in an interplay that creates change, through consensus and dissent (Ford and Ford, 1995; Sillince, 2000; Dooley and Fryxell, 1999). The focus of interest is the process in which different arguments interconnect: arguments may connect into a coherent theory that provides satisfying closure on an issue, or they may be opposed and may leave matters open and undecided in a most unsatisfying manner. Organization members may intelligently reinterpret and contest meanings: "As subordinates deconstructed the dominant language of change and created new understandings of teamwork among themselves, they were placed in a stronger position to shape the interpretive frames of their immediate managers" (Francis and Sinclair, 2003: 703). The concept of *polyphony* (Barry and Elmes, 1997: 444; Hazen, 1993) is therefore a further element by which to extend the musical metaphor. In polyphony there are multiple voices, some conflicting, some converging.

Rhythm

The fourth dimension for the musician to make use of is rhythm. The tools a composer uses when working with rhythm are the tempo and meter of the piece, as well as rhythmic patterns. Just as with volume, rhythm is an element that affects the listener in a very engaging and direct manner. The listener can be engulfed in the rhythm, becoming absorbed. Indeed, rhythm is the musical dimension most directly related to *body*. Whereas form is often a dimension discerned by cerebral analysis in retrospect, rhythm is physical and felt in the present.

Rhythm has a powerful presence in organizations in the form of temporal patterns and the division of time. Albert and Bell (2002) argue that a change in temporal signature is a powerful tool for redirecting how organizational actions and events unfold. For instance, dispersed teams which communicate using communication technology need a regular rhythm of face to face meetings and telephone calls in order to work alone the rest of the time, suggesting that rhythm has a reassuring quality (Maznevski and Chudoba, 2000).

Rhythm in organizations could be described as the temporal, embodied element in the micro processes of change. The tools associated with rhythm are those that affect the temporal structure of work: milestones, deadlines, timetables, and cycles – the classical tools of project management. People tend to stick to certain rhythms, while organizational planning is built on recurring cycles. It has even been argued that people have a biological ‘project’ clock (Gersick, 1988; 1989), giving them a shared sense of the flow of time in the project episode. This shared sense of the flow of time culminates in the symbolically important half-way stage, which is at the boundary of prospective and retrospective time orientations, and which triggers self-questioning and renewed urgency. The routines people stick to contribute both to stability and the ability to adapt (Feldman and Rafaeli, 2002). Routines act as a supporting structure that allows the organizational members a foothold

when a different footing is called for.

Polyrhythm is a phenomenon found in various forms of ethnic music: from African tribal dances to Indonesian gamelan music. Polyrhythm is created when multiple rhythms coexist, interlocking and branching from one another. As with polyphony, polyrhythm finds its counterparts in organizational life, especially in the project-oriented organizations of today: in multiple projects coinciding to create entrainment (Ancona and Chong, 1996; McGrath and Kelly, 1986) and in multiple timetables and cycles intersecting. Entrainment can involve interlinked processes which are mutually supportive. On the other hand, processes can be in conflict. In the case of the Waco siege (Albert and Bell, 2002), the negotiation process was only loosely coupled with a military process. Each had its own pacing logic and this meant that although sometimes the threat of military force was mutually supportive because it added to negotiation strength, there were times (when the waiting time got too long, when promises were broken, when military force would at least seem as if something was being done) when the authorities considered negotiation to have failed. In this case the two entrained processes became competing and conflicting.

Texture

Texture is the final dimension at the musician's disposal. This dimension is the most neglected one in the discussion of organizational change. The typical method of a composer in affecting the *texture* of a piece is the choice of *instrumentation*: will the piece be played by a symphony orchestra, a solo pianist, or a punk band. Texture can be further affected by giving guidelines to instrumentalists in how to play the piece. Whereas harmony was discussed in terms of the process of interplay of arguments and contents, in instrumentation our main interest is the interplay of the texture of the individual *voices* themselves, drawing the most out of the uniqueness of the distinctive characteristics of the voices. In some instances the concept of voice can be extended to cover a distinctive per-

former instead of an instrument. This is especially fruitful in improvisational music.

In organizations the distinctive voices of personalities, institutional positions, and interest groups have to coexist. “Employees spiritually questioning the modus operandi of contemporary production organizations may use their dissident spiritualizing practices and ‘charisma’ toward new demand-setting in organizational life” (Casey, 2004: 77). The essential question is how personalities and styles can interact in creating fruitful change. Central factors such as the homogeneity of culture (Martin, 1992) or company philosophy (Barney and Stewart, 2000) determine whether stylistic differences are accepted as a source of richness or whether cultural unity is the key issue. An example of organizational control of texture is ‘emotional labour’ (Hochschild, 1983). Service organizations require their employees to internalize and project a plausible persona that establishes rapport with the customer.

Who is the musical subject?

Pain induced by change can be controlled through understanding the dynamic between musicological micro and macro dimensions. But who is it that controls the pain? Is the musicological metaphor created to satisfy the ideological control of a managerial mastermind? We claim that our model has multiple uses. Like most theories in organization studies, it can no doubt be used by managers. Yet, it also has emancipatory potential. We propose that when many organizational stakeholders are regarded as musicians in a change effort, the metaphor enables organizational members to use voice in the shared musical experience, as well as offers alternative modes of confronting change helpful for controlling discomfort.

There is a significant dividing line between *micro* and *macro* in our five dimensions. *Form* is a macro level dimension while the others are more or less on the micro level. A postmodern view (e.g. Hazen, 1993; Boje, 1995) suggests that organizations consist of multiple voices (or texts) in-

stead of one “grand narrative” (Lyotard, 1985). If our musicological metaphor were to rely solely on the dimension of form, we would end up with a model reminiscent of many popular management models, representing a pre-set symphony without any improvisation, without texture, individual experience, or micro processes. In many popular management models, change is engineered on the organizational level of analysis using visions, goals, strategies and so on.

Form is necessary, however. Just as the *harmonic*, *volume*, *rhythmic* and *textural* elements of a musical performance have to be united into a perceived narrative of some sort, the micro dimensions of change should have a perceived uniting element, a text that is shared to some extent by the agents. The tools for operating with form are such elements as *strategic intent* (Hamel and Prahalad, 1994), *BHAG's* (big, hairy, audacious goals) (Collins and Porras, 1994), Kotter's (1996) *visions*, or *purpose* (Bartlett and Ghoshal, 1994) and *narratives* (Shaw, Brown and Bromiley, 1998). The common denominator for these leadership devices is that they present a desired temporal direction, explaining the past and thus laying the path for the future.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Can organizational change be a pleasing experience for organizational members? How can the discomfort of change be controlled through structured sensemaking? We have sought to answer this question by critically addressing the metaphorical roots of dominant change models, and by developing a framework of change consisting of five musicological dimensions. There remain a variety of exciting questions to be explored in relation to our topic, many of them empirical. The empirical questions are largely associated with ways of experiencing a change process in an organization. Is the topic of change associated with musical qualities and therefore potentially pleasant instead of only being regarded as uncomfortable? What kinds of aesthetic qualities are associated with organizational change? How do these qualities correspond to the five musicological dimensions? What

sorts of structuring techniques do practitioners employ when they experience change? Musicians and other professionals in the musical field would be interesting in terms of their metaphors concerning change. Organizations in which music is produced, for instance orchestras, bands, record companies or music schools would also be interesting venues of research in their change situations. Due to their evocative nature, metaphors can challenge dominant realities, but also substitute existing conceptualizations rather than provide alternatives for thinking (Morgan, 1993). Therefore, there is a need for reflexivity in the use of metaphors in order to be aware of the assumptions lying behind their use (Palmer and Dunford, 1996). As any metaphor possesses some weaknesses, our musicological metaphor also has its limitations. Although we attempt to provide a comprehensive account of organizational change, our musical framework leaves out those aspects of change that the metaphor is not able to overlap, such as situations that are highly traumatic to stakeholders. For instance, in situations where personnel cuts are made, speaking of change using the vocabulary of the collective musical experience would make a mockery of the situation.

Also, our intent has *not* been to suggest the musical metaphor as another hegemony to replace other metaphors. Indeed, claiming that “change is fun” could lead to horrendous results if such an attitude were taken as an only alternative, leading to implicit attitudes such as “change is fun and if not, you can leave”. Resisting, whistle-blowing and transforming identity are all ways of introducing changes of *harmony* by means of critical arguments. Sabotage, strikes or endangering deadlines are means of reducing the labour resource and hence *volume*. Angry exchanges and tacit distrust are means of changing *texture*. The musical metaphor is a tool with emancipatory potential, yet as all tools, it needs to be handled with care.

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Table I. Musicological and organizational elements of change

	Musicological tools	Organizational tools	How it controls tension
Form	Fulfilling and evading expectations in terms of introducing, developing and reintroducing themes, building a musical narrative with its twists and turns	Large goals (e.g. 'strategic intents', visions), sagas, legends (e.g. 'How we discovered our best product'), grand symbols (e.g. logos, values), rituals (e.g. annual strategy seminars), metaphors (e.g. 'We are the crew of this ship') and myths (e.g. 'how we got started')	Tension created by not knowing the outcome of the musical piece / the organizational action or project
Volume	Forte and pianissimo, staccato and legato, instrumentation	Resource intensity (e.g. downsizing with or without golden handshakes), workload (e.g. defining roles), communication intensity (e.g. metaphors used), risk taking (e.g. showing courage)	Tension created by the effort or force going into the music and the organizational resources being expended
Harmony	Consonance and dissonance	Artifacts (e.g. round table vs. opposite sides), rhetoric (e.g. appeal for unity vs. demonization), consensus (e.g. unanimity vs. split votes), conflict, crises (e.g. cognitive labeling of something as 'a crisis')	Tension created by the difference between musical or organizational voices and arguments
Rhythm	Patterns, tempo, meter	Cycles (e.g. budget period), plans (e.g. deadlines, timetables, milestones), projects	Tension created by the breaking of patterns or running out of time
Texture	Instrumentation, qualitative guidelines to instrumentalists and conductor	Personnel choices, distribution of power, roles, technology, communication styles, personality, values	Tension created by incongruity between musical instruments or organizational personalities