



The Process of Bisociation at the Heart of the Ideas Factory

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The Process of Bisociation, at the Heart of the Ideas Factory. The Case of a Managerial Innovation

Research Seminar

University of Ljubljana, School of Economics and Business

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Forthcoming in *Innovations - Revue d'économie et de management de l'innovation/Journal of Innovation Economics & Management*, 2023/4

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Link Creativity ↔ Innovation, a stake

- **Psychology** *Amabile, 1996, 1997; Lubart, Bourgeois-Bougrine, 2019; Bonnardel, Lubart, 2019*
Management *Hatchuel et al., 2013; Sarooghi et al., 2015; Cohendet et al., 2017; Perry-Smith, Mannucci, 2017; Parmentier, 2019; Parmentier et al., 2021a, 2021b...*
Special Iss. *Gestion–RIG 2013; Organization Studies 2014; TIM Review 2015; Innovations 2021; Research in the Sociology of Organizations 2021...*
- **Common issue: idea generation**
/ex. Cohendet et al. (2017): general model of the idea development process
- **Bisociation** (*Koestler, 1964/2011*): idea generation mechanism that appears secondary, even invisible and yet present
- **Little-explored mechanism in Management Science**
Success in other disciplines + practitioners literature (*google...*)

Bisociation

Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation*, 1964

- Writer, journalist, Hungarian-British (1905-1983)
 - numerous books in politics, science and creativity
 - author of a wellknown novel *Darkness at noon* (1940)
- *The Act of Creation* (1964) and the concept of bisociation have initiated a lot of research in Sciences of Education & Cognitive Sciences
- Ambition: fundamental pattern of creative activities
- Three fields: logic of humor, scientific discovery, artistic originality

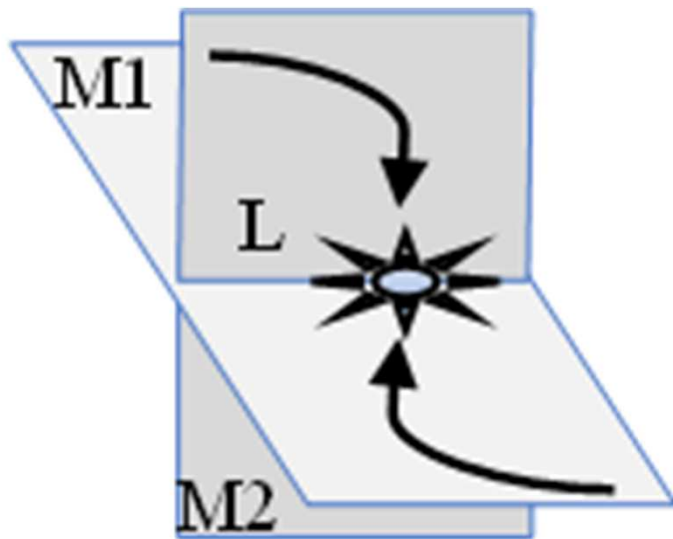
Bisociation #2

Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation*, 1964

- Bisociation: “*The perceiving of a situation or idea, L, in two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference, M1 and M2*” (p. 35)
- Reference frame or matrix (pp. 38-42): “*any ability, habit, or skill, any pattern of ordered behaviour governed by a 'code' of fixed rules*”
- Novelty = sudden collidness of two matrices of thought and action previously foreign to each other (pp. 84, 111)
- A “*transitory state of unstable equilibrium where the balance of both emotion and thought is disturbed*”, a “*creative instability*” (p. 36)

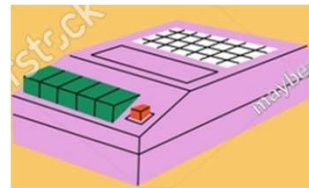
Bisociation #3 Intersection of matrices *(Koestler, 2011, p. 20)*

Famous example



Event “L” is bisociated
with two contexts M1 & M2

M1



X

M2



=> L: Walkman (Sony 1979)

Bisociation #4

- Koestler evokes different periods:
 - *incubation, spark, verification*, supposed to follow (31, 207, 219, 252-253)
 - *ripeness*: supposed to precede, condition for success (108-110, 118-120)
- ➔ However: no clear and unambiguous formulation
- Sometimes, bisociation = only bisociative act (spark)
sometimes = the three periods 😞
- No overall synthesis with all the periods, nor diagram of the whole mechanism
- Some authors suggest a mechanism with the 4 periods (Cohendet, 2023)

Objective: opening the black box of bisociation

- Case: “little” innovation (*Gardner, 2001*) in management
 - Cultural company, budget balance threatened
 - Manager invents unusual management technique
 - => exit from crisis (*Chabrilat et al., 2021*)
- Overcoming crisis period: how?
Innovation: why?
- Results:
 - characterize bisociation mechanism as a process
 - clarify and carefully describe the steps
 - address the issue of triggering, largely ignored

Recent mobilization in Management

El Sawy, Pauchant, 1988: role of cognitive frame change in the formation of emerging strategies among entrepreneurs

Action & entrepreneurial opportunities	Absorptive Capacity	Creativity
Smith & Di Gregorio (2002) <i>Entrepreneur Action in Identifying opportunities</i>	Zahra & George (2002) <i>One of the dimensions of absorptive capacity</i>	Bilton, Cumings, 2010, 2014, 2015 <i>Management of creativity</i>
Ireland et al., 2003	Todorova, Durisin, 2007	Zhu et al., 2014
Ko, Butler, 2006, 2007	Litchfield, Gentry, 2010	Cohendet, Simon, 2015
Tang et al., 2012	Amabilé et al., 2012	Cohendet 2016
Bolland, 2017		Massé, 2016
Kier, McMullen, 2018		Cohendet et al. 2017
		Mo et al., 2019
		Garel, 2021

Four limitations identified in these works

- 1) Metaphorical Use: identification of matrices of thought that collide, without specifying modalities of confrontation
- 2) Static Usage, very few works treat bisociation from a temporal angle, a result always observed a posteriori, in an “already there” which says nothing about its progress, nor why it occurred
- 3) Ambiguity between ‘mechanism of bisociation’ and ‘bisociative act’ in itself = particular moment of creative spark
- 4) Forgetting: only retains 'thought matrix', ignores the 'action matrix' aspect, yet it's a concrete activity carried out by an individual operating in a given context and time

Positioning / Methodology

- Single case study (*Yin, 2017*)
 - company in danger, new managerial technique (manager)
- Grounded Theory (*Glaser, Strauss, 1967 ; Suddaby, 2006*)
 - minimal frame: the bisociation (Koestler)
 - along the way: pragmatist approach (Dewey), Logic of Inquiry (1938)
- An asset: knowledge of the field, “involved expert” (*Lièvre, Rix-Lièvre, 2013*)
- Ethnographic Approach (*Van Maanen, 2011*)
 - 13 months 2014-2015 ; observant participation (*Peretz, 2004*); informal and semi-structured interviews, interview of explicitation (*Vermesch*); documentary analysis, successive versions of the new managerial technique

The Case: *Le Cabestan*, Live Music Show Venue

- Relatively simple environment
- Large Province Town
- Budget 800 K€, 55% own revenue / 45% public funding
- 10 employees + intermittents workers depending on the program
- 50 shows, audience 30 000 /year
- Small organization, an entrepreneur in relationship with:
 - its Chief Financial Officer (CFO) & its teams (permanent + intermittent)
 - public financing actors
 - private co-producing actors

The Story in 5 Times

#1 Starting Situation

- Reopening after 6 years of work, company under reconstruction
- Main concern: regain the lost links with show coproducers
Regain previous level of activity (nb of shows, spectators, turnover)

“(...) I lost ground. I no longer have “X...” [a big private producer]; after the work, I lost ground and the economy caught up with me. It’s an analysis and awareness in real time (...) there are new players, (...) I myself have lost ground”

- Relies on the stock of public fundings previously acquired (guaranteed resources) to ensure stability

#2 change in public financing rules => shock

- Sudden change in public financing rules  public funding
- Addition 2 instabilities : links with coproducers + public funding
- Distraught manager, perception of extreme danger, react quickly
“How do you expect me to get there, [it] puts me in a situation of double danger confronting each other.”

Beginning of incubation according to Koestler

Manager initiates reflection on new rule, without any solution
= 1st framework of thought and action (‘M1’)

#3 A manager in search

- Dejected, puts aside concerns about public financing, resumes strategic reflection on commercial relations with co-producers
- Works on usual co-production contract (profit sharing)
“One day, I have time, I take the slip sheet, I go over it to the millimeter, I struggle a little, I start to make it my own, (...) I take time, I get into it, I sweat, 7am, the silence, the cold sweat...”

Incubation still in progress.

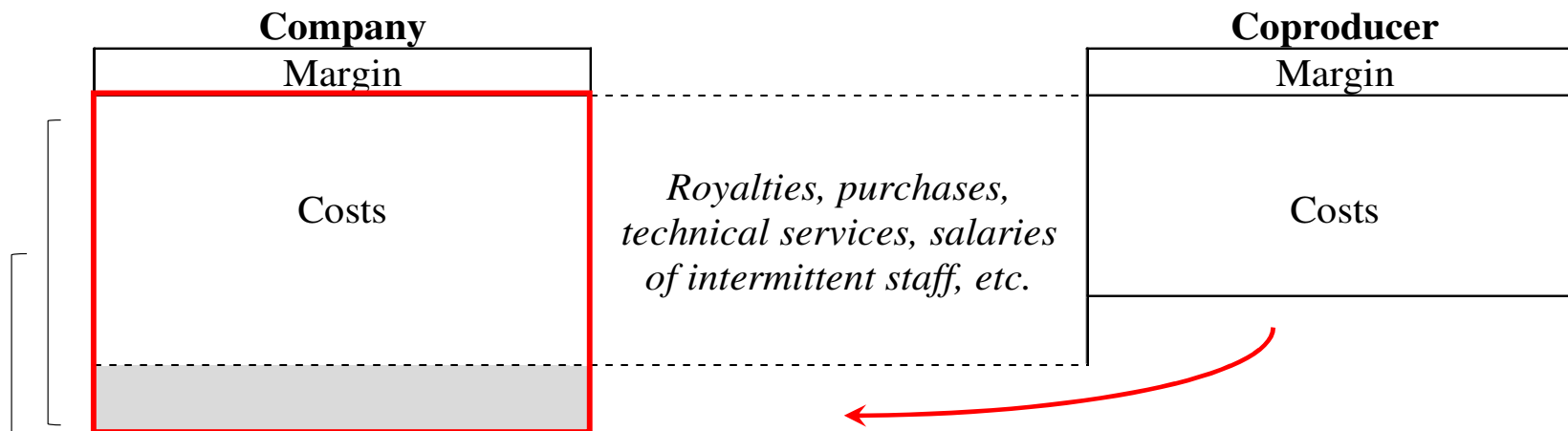
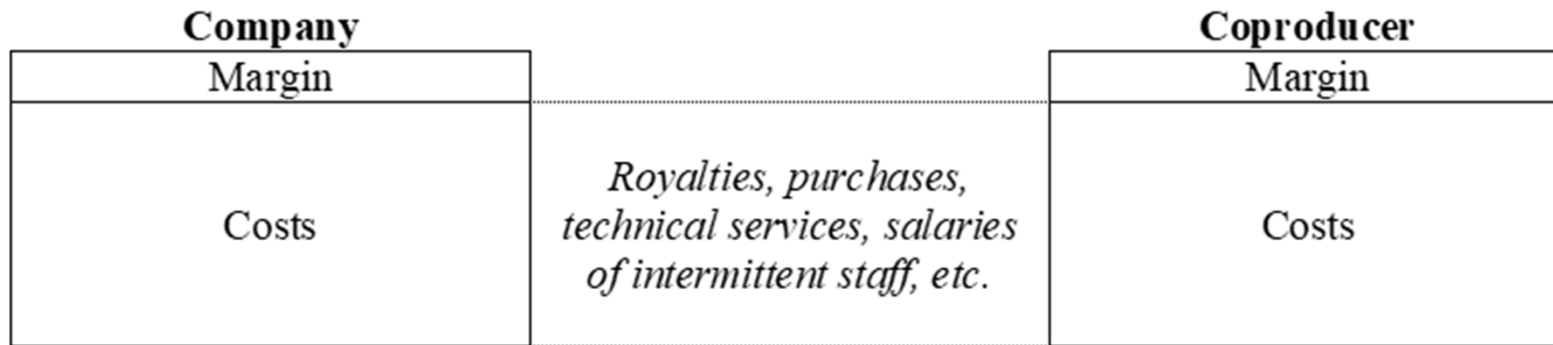
Reflections on redefining commercial contracts to attract co-producers = 2nd framework of thought and action (‘M2’).

#4 Crisis at the top and unexpected solution: bisociative spark

- Heated discussion with CFO on the induced effects of the new contract: too much work and too many gifts for the co-producers!
- Pb public funding always in the manager's mind;
However, change in co-production contract resonates with public funding constraints and generates positive effect

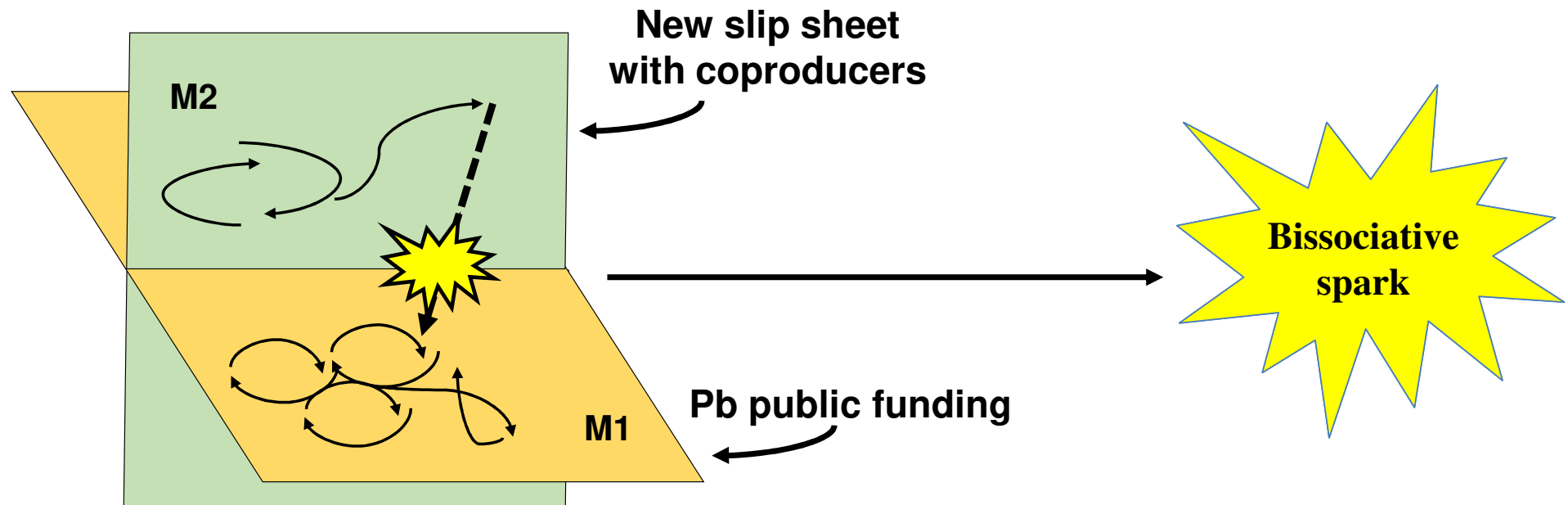
“After a while, I noticed... but in fact, there is something that is doing us a service, looks better, and suddenly, and yes, it is extremely useful and good for us!”

Spark: new distribution of costs taken into account in the slip sheet (M2)
➔ rises % expenses for grant file and solves the initial public funding problem (M1)



Increase in the scope of Cabestan costs => maintains the amount of public funding (subsidy, calculation in %)

#4 (con't) M1, then M2, and... spark according to Koestler!



"Ultimately, this billing system that has been put in place is doing us a huge service. (...) And I who indirectly found a form of solution. (...), I didn't see it at the start... I reasoned about it in another business interest. In this form of response, I found lots of solutions. (...) I didn't see it coming! I was answering something else..."

#5 A happy manager: validation of new technique and satisfaction of public funders

- After a moment of doubt, CFO convinced!
“...an hour after [the heated discussion], it becomes: ‘go for it, this is the solution!’”
- 1st test of new commercial contract, submitted to a “friendly” coproducer => OK
- Public funder: new presentation of the grant file, in line with the new financing rule, approval
- Coproducers validate new contract, company strengthens its position

What can we learn from this story?

1. Effects of the mode of observation concomitant with action
2. Bisociation : a real process of generating new ideas
3. Composed of three steps that are not limited to the spark
4. Existence of a prior period of building up expertise => condition for success
5. Identifiable trigger

1/ Effects of the mode of observation concomitant with action

- Koestler used secondary data; sources = examples, anecdotes, historical studies, works on emotions...
- Previous works done with ex-post or retrospective data
- Observation in direct shows a process in its progress
- Avoids the pitfall of ex-post observation (“already there”)
- Allows to better understand the linking of steps and to account for them

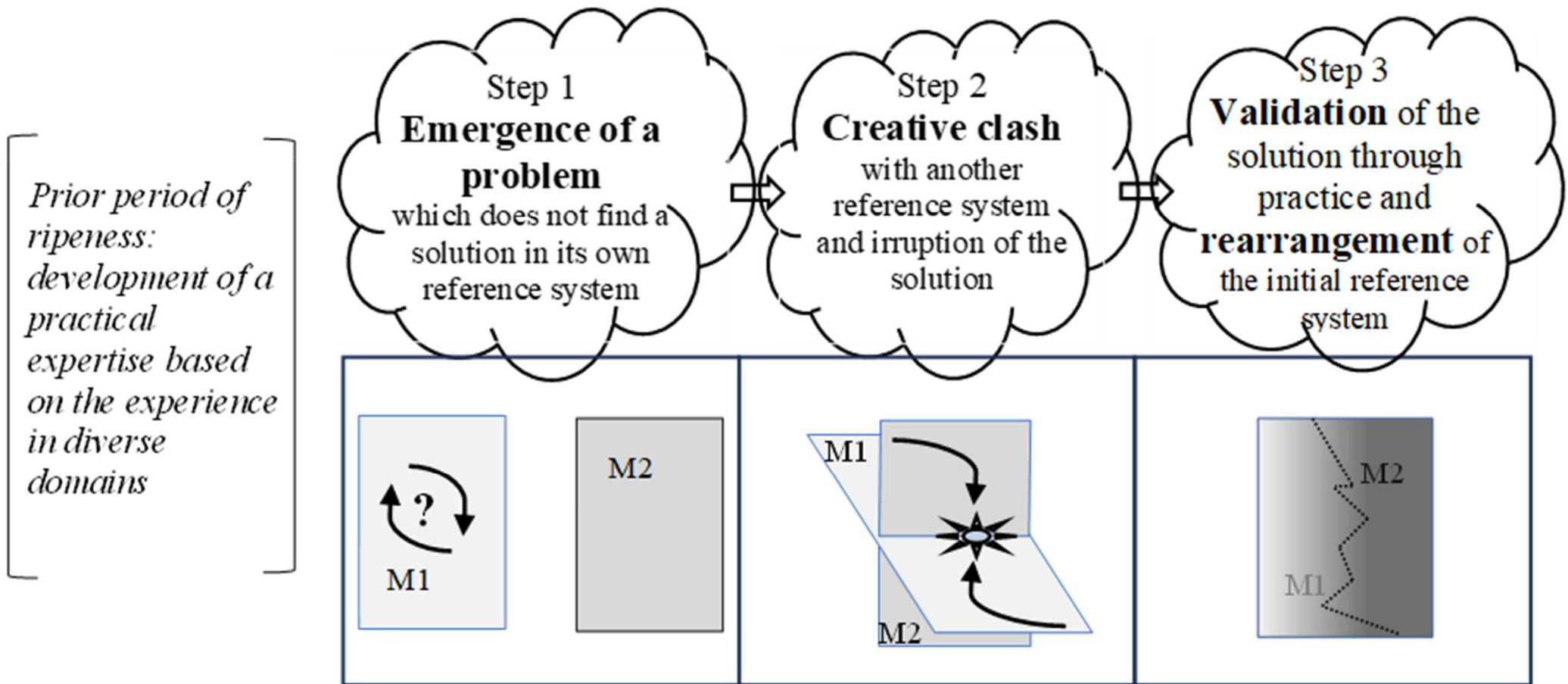
2/ The process of new ideas generation in 3 steps

- Step 1
“Emergence of a problem which does not find a solution in its own reference system” (*incubation*)
- Step 2
“Creative clash with another reference system and irruption of the solution” (*bissociative act*)
- Step 3
“Validation of the solution through practice and rearrangement of the initial reference system” (*stabilization*)

3/ Existence of a prior period of building up expertise => condition of success

- Prior proven practical experience and expertise in situations (*Amabile, 1997*), in both matrices of thought and action:
Handling co-production contracts / Building grant files
- => identify in a flash what, in its proposal for a new co-production contract, produces positive effects in the grant file
- Period of “ripeness” for Koestler
- But period without necessary link with the bisociation process,
it can exist without bisociation

New schematic of bisociation as a process



4/ The trigger of bisociation?

#1 The Theory of Inquiry (Dewey, 1938)

- New theoretical framework: pragmatism of Dewey (1938; Lorino 2018)
- Actor face event that subjectively breaks his equilibrium, experiencing an “*indeterminate situation*”
- = heavy and significant “*trouble*”, an existential questioning “*disturbed, troubled, ambiguous, confused, full of conflicting tendencies, obscure, etc.*”, “*complete panic*” (pp. 104-105)
- Vital to face it, he MUST do something => “*enters into inquiry*”
- Leading the inquiry = aim at transforming “*indeterminate situation*” => “*determinate situation*”

4/ The trigger of bisociation?

#2 Experiencing a trouble, entering into inquiry

- Why does a bisociation occur? Invisibilized question
- Ex-post, intention pre-exists and is always obvious
= innovate (*Cohendet et al., 2017; Parmentier et al., 2021*)
- Bisociation can only occur if the main actor enters into inquiry (Dewey), as he is heavily *troubled*, destabilized, losing his fundamental equilibrium
- Wants to modify the “*indeterminate situation*” he is facing

4/ The trigger of bisociation?

#3 In our case

- Announcement of change in public funding => addition of two instabilities
- Manager's world is collapsing, fundamentally destabilized, risks are vital, he can't leave it at that (“*cold sweats*”)
- Experiencing a heavy trouble, needs to restore his equilibrium => triggers the entering in inquiry and the start of bisociation
- Which is acting to find a solution
- If no “trouble” (Dewey’s meaning) for the main protagonist, nothing triggers, and no bisociation

Perspectives

- 1) Pursuing discussion with the general idea development model
(*Cohendet et al. 2017*)
- 2) Parallel with the pragmatist inquiry of Dewey
 - trouble, starting point of the inquiry: the 1st step of bisociation?
 - capacity of bisociation to remove indéterminacy?
- 3) Universal mechanism of idea generation (*Cohendet 2023*)
articulation C/K in CK theory, crossing domains with Triz method, etc.
- 4) Managerial aspects
 - raise awareness of the crossing mechanism of reference universes
 - objectify the actor's constraints
 - creative skills to develop (Amabile, 1997)?

Thanks for your attention

