Sensemaking in organizations: by Karl E. Weick (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1995), 231 pp.

Article *in* Scandinavian Journal of Management · March 1997

DOI: 10.1016/S0956-5221(97)86666-3

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Pergamon

Scand. J. Mgmt, Vol. 13, No. 1, pp. 113–120, 1997
Published by Elsevier Science Ltd. Printed in Great Britain
0956–5221/97 $17.00 + 0.00

BOOK REVIEWS

Sensemaking in Organizations, by Karl E. Weick (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1995), 231 pp.

Karl Weick's new book has arrived! Those of us who have been waiting since 1979 for a follow-up to *The Social Psychology of Organizing*, and appeasing our hunger with articles appearing at regular intervals, are satisfied at last. Another unique opportunity for enjoyment and learning is at hand.

The author's new book is about organizational sensemaking, as compared with (albeit not necessarily opposed to) interpretation, or — to stick to the same vocabulary — sense-giving and sense-taking. This distinction which is new and perhaps startling in organization theory, has been honored in other contexts. Thus Rorty speaks of "habit" and "inquiry" (after Dewey), or inference and imagination, or translation and language learning, stressing that it is always a matter of degree (1991, p. 94). Eco (1979), on the other hand, contrasts meaning (which requires redundancy) with information (which heralds ambiguity). In the first of these pairs, things are already meaningful, and it is enough to connect a new element (a cue in Weick's vocabulary) to an existing frame. In the second, there is no frame, or at least no obvious connection presents itself, and one has to be created. This is sensemaking.

I am situating Weick in the company of Rorty, the pragmatist philosopher, and Eco, the literary theorist, because pragmatism and literature are very visible in *Sensemaking*. The book is not only *about* sensemaking, however, it is a sensemaking book. It constructs a novel understanding of crucial aspects of organizing.

Seven properties of organizational sensemaking are explored: "identity, retrospect, enactment, social contact, ongoing events, cues, and plausibility" (p. 3). We recognize most of these from Weick's earlier writings, but here they are all brought together. After discussing plausibility (which in organizational practice is much more important than accuracy — the fetish of perception studies), Weick summarizes the most important aspects of sensemaking as follows:

> If accuracy is nice but not necessary in sensemaking, than what is necessary? The answer is, something that preserves plausibility and coherence, something that is reasonable and memorable, something that embodies past experience and expectations, something which resonates with other people, something that can be constructed retrospectively but also can be used prospectively, something that captures both feeling and thought, something that allows for embellishment to fit current oddities, something that is fun to contrast. In short, what is necessary in sensemaking is a good story. (pp. 60–61)

This, in Weick's opinion, is what is most needed "... in an equivocal, postmodern world, infused with the politics of interpretation and conflicting interests" (p. 61). Such a postulate is consistent with another, which we also know from his earlier work: the postulate of requisite variety, which suggests that complex objects must be met by complex models. Although stories simplify the world, and are therefore useful as guides for action, they simplify it less than the kind of formal models which we learned to reverse as true science.

Scientists may not always make sense, but practitioners constantly try to. Even though sensemaking is an ongoing activity, it is not always equally intensive. After all, there are routines, stereotypes, "received ideas" and inherited truths. The activity of sensemaking increases with sense-breaking, if I may put it like that. Ruptures and discontinuities, shocks and interruptions, all provide good opportunities for sensemaking. Sensemaking thus approaches what in ethnomethodology is called "repair", but with a wider meaning. While ethnomethodologists focus on the breaks in the social tissue, Weick focuses on the breaks in the narrative tissue. Perhaps these are one and the same.

Weick expects criticism from the postmodern corner, where the usual claim is that ruptures and discontinuities and thus sensemaking are *la condition humaine*, that these are all there is. There should be no difficulty in accommodating such a statement if its opposite is accepted as well. The paradox of the human condition is that disruptions are as constant as the urge to prevent them and to patch them up. Although no repetition is ever the same, no new sense is ever completely original, either, since all ideas are here all the time (Merton, 1985). Neither sensemaking nor sense-giving or sense-taking — that is, the distribution of ready-made meaning — ever stop. But there are clearly certain periods in life, or certain circumstances around organizing, which give precedence to one or the other. Teeth-brushing is a mechanical routine, but an encounter with an electric tooth brush can suddenly problematize what has previously been taken for granted, perhaps leading to an act of an intense sensemaking.

What does sensemaking consist of? The connection of two elements. To adopt Weick's vocabulary, inspired by Goffman, we can speak of a frame (which is relatively large and lasting), a cue (which is smaller and tentative), and a connection. The frames can be usefully conceived as inherited vocabularies: those of society (ideologies), of organization (taken-for-granted premises), of work (shared norms), of individual life projects (theories of action) and of tradition (histories).

As regards this last, the frame of tradition, Weick makes an interesting observation which I would like to contend. He says: "The odd twist in traditions is that concrete human action, know-how embodied in practice, persists and is transmitted only if it becomes symbolic" (p. 115). This statement, coming from one of the few organization theorists who has paid heed to technology in recent years, shows once again how correct Latour (1993) was in claiming that technical objects are seriously discriminated in our culture. To begin with, action is preserved and perpetuated in machines* which carry out the actions previously, or alternatively, performed by humans. Furthermore, this fragile but fantastic machine which is the human body, is able to remember its actions without translating them into symbols. As to carrying this kind of knowledge across generations, Maurice Bloch (1994) tells us repeatedly that much enculturation occurs through bodily co-presence, through proximity and unreflective imitation. "Knowledge how" can be carried over the generations (of humans and non-humans), although it requires physical proximity which "knowledge about" does not have to have.

After discussing the five frames, Weick mentions only one connecting device, namely the narrative. Far from disagreeing that this is indeed the most important way of connecting cues to frames, I would nevertheless have welcomed further excursions into connecting modes: syntagmatic (andandand) versus paradigmatic (ororor), different syntagmatic modes (the premodern narrative versus modern tables, lists, and taxonomies) etc. One of my reasons for wanting this is

*A remark on p. 171 seems to be acknowledging this development: "Technology may reduce the size of this symbolic residual . . .".

that the author himself, while praising the virtue of the narrative, is clearly fond of lists and categorizations. Perhaps the rationale behind focusing exclusively on stories is that some of the non-narrative forms of expression are briefly mentioned in the next chapter, where Weick discusses argumentation. Moreover, the asymmetry could be seen as a kind of historical justice: after all, one of the main points of his book is that stories — that powerful medium of organizing — have been largely neglected in organization theory.

Sensemaking, Weick goes on to say, can be driven by beliefs or by actions. Beliefs shape what people see, and give form to the actions they take. Disparity of beliefs in any social context leads to argument, which is one form of sensemaking. Beliefs can also be projected onto the future, thus forming expectations. In discussing this last point, Weick retrieves Merton's notion of the "self-fulfilling prophecy" from the garbage-can of erroneous perceptions into which it was dumped (among others, by its author) as a "fundamental act of sensemaking" (p. 148).

Action-driven sensemaking, in organizational practice irrevocably connected with the belief-driven kind, generally assumes two forms: creating commitment and manipulating the world. In connection with the first, Weick observes that, interestingly enough, organized anarchies are the ones which excel at creating commitment, as there is in them a continuous need for sensemaking, unrelieved by routines, standard operating procedures or organizational memories.

The main bulk of this book is dedicated to a historical review of studies of sensemaking. The last chapter looks into the future and appeals for more field studies of sensemaking in organizational practice, in a greater variety of contexts. It also contains seven pieces of advice for practitioners which *must* be read — if for no other reason than because they show that advice can be formulated in a way that is neither simplistic nor patronizing.

The above is thus a short reconstruction of the frame of Weick's book. What is unavoidably lost in such a rendition is the wealth of details, illustrations and examples which fill every nook and cranny of this frame. And no wonder, considering the sources of inspiration: Weick wanders easily between social psychology and ethnomethodology, the social sciences and humanities, the academic disciplines and the arts. Every reader is bound to find something new, puzzling, interesting. There is, for example, a witty critique of Burrell and Morgan's classification of paradigms from 1979, in defense of hybridizing (pp. 34–35).

My favorite is a study reported on pp. 83–84, by Alex Bavelas, in which two people, A and B, were shown slides of healthy and sick cells. They were told to guess which were which, were given feedback, and were then required to infer the rules of discrimination. While A's feedback was correct, B received simply the same feedback as A, which was sometimes correct and sometimes not. When allowed to discuss their inferences at a break, A presented a simple and correct theory, while B, working desperately with the inconsistent information, developed a complex and intricate theory of discrimination rules. Back to their tasks, A's performance deteriorated, as he was clearly trying to use B's sophisticated theory, which impressed him more than his own. (I assume that they were men although, as is usual in psychology stories, no gender cues were given).

This story, taken seriously, could lead to the demise of the institution of education as we know it. I prefer a more optimistic reading: that beauty and complexity win the day. In fact, this conclusion can be easily applied to Weick's book as a whole.

The book ends with a poem by William Meredith ("What I Remember the Writers Telling Me When I Was Young") which takes up several questions of importance to all writing, social science included. One is the need for distancing. As a result of the humanistic critique, we learned to interpret "distancing" as a closing of the heart and ear to human suffering, of turning an icy gaze on the fires of life, of becoming alien to our brethren. Who knows whether it was ever

intended that way? Perhaps it was, and at any rate interpretations always abound. But how about "distancing" as a wonderful flight of the imagination, as a journey like Gulliver's or of Alice's, as a metaphorical attempt to estrange oneself from a familiar world in order to better appreciate its wonders — and reveal its cruelties. I once spoke of "anthropology as a frame of mind" (1993), and I hope that I am not misinterpreting Weick's intentions when I read his "mindset" in this light. Sentimentalizing will not help the world; keen attention to the details of life, and to the way these are made sense of, might.

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Gender, Managers, and Organizations, by Yvonne Due Billing and Mats Alvesson (Berlin: Walter du Gruyter, 1994), 260 pp., ISBN 3-11-012984-1.

Gender, Managers, and Organizations by Yvonne Due Billing and Mats Alvesson provides, as stated on the back cover, a general introduction as well as an overview and a critical discussion of theory and research on gender, feminism, women in management and organizational studies. This is a topic which is much discussed in the popular debate and it bears the stamp of political correctness. These circumstances explain the great number of so-called experts and consultants who are producing courses, lectures, books and articles on different aspects of gender-and-management or, women-and-management. It is therefore of great importance that solid research is done and published, to alleviate the worst of the misunderstandings.

The topic of this book embraces fields of knowledge that have until now been divided between different disciplines and angles, which put the questions differently. The authors take a broad approach to incorporate both working life, society, organizational characteristics and actors on different hiearchical levels. Their main interest is in managers at the middle level.

The book is divided into three parts. The first presents *Gender perspectives*, the second *Three case studies* and the last *Discussion and reflections*. The part on gender perspective is needed as a background to the case studies. The organizational realities cannot be understood without some knowledge about the position of women (and men) in society and on the labour market. The gender division in education and work is presented in words and figures. Various models and theories for understanding the construction of gender differences are presented and discussed. These are of very different kinds: macro-sociological explanatory models, including a Marxist approach, the concept of patriarchy and the dual systems theory, middle-range and micro-sociological explanatory models, organizational culture models and role theories, the theory, of