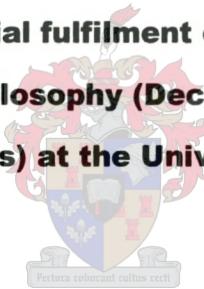


SENSING AND ORGANISING

AN INTERPRETATION OF THE THOUGHT OF KARL E. WEICK

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**Thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
degree of Master in Philosophy (Decision Making, Knowledge
Dynamics and Values) at the University of Stellenbosch**



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Declaration

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this thesis is my own original work and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it at any university for a degree.

Date: 21 February 2005

Summary

The focus in this thesis is on sensemaking in organisations and the aim was to offer an interpretation of the thought of Karl E. Weick. The interpretation subsequently consists of a description and discussion of concepts, underlying theories and paradigmatic perspectives that are integrated into and deployed in Weick's sensemaking framework.

After a description and definition of sensemaking terms and concepts, it is argued that a process cosmology forms the ground theory in Weick's sensemaking framework. In order to elucidate this interpretation, the organic model of the world of Bergson and Whitehead is introduced. Special attention is given to pragmatism's underlying process ontology and themes which social constructionism, symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology share in common with pragmatism. The aim is to show how these perspectives and themes are taken up in Weick's sensemaking in organisations and organisational theory.

A failure to make sense is both consequential and existential. This aspect of Weick's thought is discussed in the context of Bergson's process cosmology. It is followed by a description and discussion of Weick's use of systems theory with special attention given to Weick's concept of 'enactment'.

How and why does an organisation become what it becomes? This question is addressed in the context of a description and discussion of complexity theory. A core concept in both complexity theory and Weick's thought is self-organisation. The aim is to show how sensemaking appears on systems level.

Finally, this thesis attempts to address the question of the relationship between organisation and organising and how both terms are to be understood in terms of Weick's ontological view of the world. This aim is to show that Weick's understanding of "the" organisation (noun) can be conceived of as an abstraction and organisation (verb – 'organising') in terms of relating and as process in becoming and how he thereby gives social construction an ontological twist. The conclusion reached is that, in the type of world Weick describes, it makes sense to make sense.

OPSOMMING

Hierdie tesis fokus op ‘sensemaking’ in organisasies – om die dubbelsinnige, onduidelike en onverwagse meer duidelik, begryplik and redelik te maak vir persone om te weet wat besig is om te gebeur en gepaste aksies te neem. Die doel was derhalwe ‘n interpretasie van die denke van Karl E. Weick. Die interpretasie omvat gevolglik ‘n beskrywing en bespreking van konsepte, teorieë en paradigmatische perspektiewe wat Weick in sy sensemaking raamwerk integreer en ontplooi.

Ná ‘n definiëring en beskrywing van terme en konsepte word geargumenteer dat ‘n proses beskouing van die werklikheid Weick se sensemaking raamwerk onderlê. Hierdie interpretasie word toegelig met ‘n bespreking en beskrywing van die organisiese model van Bergson en Whitehead, sowel as die proses ontologie onderliggend aan pragmatisme. Gevolglik kom pragmatisme, sosiale konstruksionisme, simboliese interaksionisme en etnometodologie aan die orde. Verskeie temas word beskryf en bespreek in die konteks van sensemaking en organisasie-teorie.

‘n Mislukking in sensemaking het nuwe gevolge en is dit ook eksistensieël van aard. Hierdie aspek van Weick se denke word beskryf en bespreek in die konteks van Bergson se proses kosmologie en word die interpretasie opgevolg met ‘n bespreking van sisteem-teorie. Hoe en waarom verander organisasies wanneer hulle verander? Die antwoord op hierdie vraag kom aan die orde in die konteks van ‘n bespreking van kompleksiteits-teorie. ‘n Kern konsep in beide Weick se sensemaking en kompleksiteits-teorie is self-organisasie. ‘n Baie belangrike doel is om aan te dui hoe sensemaking voorkom en plaasvind op sisteem-vlak.

Ten slotte poog die tesis om die verband tussen organisasie en organisering in Weick se denke meer verstaanbaar te maak. Die argument hier is dat Weick se verstaan van “die” organisasie (selfstandige naamwoord) as ‘n abstraksie en organisasie (werkwoord) in terme van relasies en proses in wording geïnterpreteer kan word, en Weick sodoende ‘n ontologiese kinkel in die verstaan van sosiale konstruksionisme teweeg bring. Die slotsom tot waartoe in hierdie studie gekom word is dat, in die wêreld wat Weick beskryf, maak dit ‘sense’ om ‘sense’ te maak.

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The names of two people deserve special mention here. I sincerely thank Professor Johann Kinghorn for his guidance and support throughout the programme and his stimulating ideas and suggestions, and René to whom I owe more than can be expressed in words.

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Biographical Sketch of Karl. E Weick¹

1. Karl E. Weick, PhD, is the Rensis Likert Collegiate Professor of Organisational Behaviour and Psychology, and Professor of Psychology at the University of Michigan Business School.
 - a. His graduate level teaching is focused on the craft of scholarship, social psychology of organising and micro foundations of organisation studies.
 - b. His executive education teaching is focused on the management of uncertainty through sensemaking and improvisation.
2. His research interests include such topics as how people make sense of confusing events, puzzlement and fascination, the effects of stress on thinking and imagination, the social psychology of organising and improvisation, organisational sensemaking under pressure, high reliability performance, continuous change, learning moments in organisations, social commitment, small wins as the embodiment of wisdom, and the linkages between theory and practice.
3. Karl Weick started his career with a strong educational background. He earned an undergraduate degree from Wittenberg University in 1958, a MA in Psychology from Ohio State University in 1960, and his doctorate degree from Ohio State University in 1962.
4. While working in a variety of universities, Dr. Weick found the time to publish more than eighty different journal articles, presented over two hundred papers and publish six books. To add to his accomplishments, he has received eleven academic awards.
5. The shift in our culture to break away from rules and structure, has allowed Dr. Weick to study differences.
 - a. To begin working, he says, all he needs is some kind of difference, something that attracts attention.
 - b. His “finding situations” can be understood in terms of: “Until you act, you can’t know what I think until I see what I say”.
 - c. He says, “To know my contexts, therefore is to know my work...I was struck by the frequency with which I seem to study what happens when people don’t understand what is going on. My concern is not déjà vu (I’ve been here before), but rather, vuje de (I have never been here before and have not an idea where I am). Consider the evidence...”²
6. Dr. Weick’s interests, aside from writing and editing, include jazz big bands, railroading and photography.
7. Dr. Weick’s most significant contributions are considered to lie in the fields of sensemaking in organisations, management and organisational theory, the social psychology of organising, communication and information theory.

¹ Kaye 2000; Prelip 2000; Weick 1995

² Lundberg 1999: 9

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Problem statements, assumptions and central theses, aim and intended contribution, approach

1. **Problem Statements, Assumptions and Central Thesis**

If the *Social Psychology of Organizing*³ can be considered to be Weick's 'magnum opus' on organising, then *Sensemaking in Organizations*⁴ can be taken as his 'magnum opus' on sensemaking. The first (he refers to it as the "organizing book")⁵ embodies his "theorising"; his attempt to talk about organisations. The picture that emerges is one in which organising is essential for collective sensemaking. Sensibility, the quality of the sense that is made by an organisation, in other words, is dependent on a particular type of organising. In the second, the picture is reversed. The way an organisation organises itself is dependent on the type and quality of the sense being made. It is reasonable to say, then, to organise means to make sense, and to make sense, is to organise and is this what is meant when Weick⁶ says that both these processes "are cut from the same cloth". This understanding, this "subtle" switch, is the first area that needs clarification for the student interested in sensemaking in organisations, as it is not readily evident in itself.

To an attentive student of sensemaking, it becomes quickly clear that Weick reformulates almost every standard assumption about organisation and management in organisational theory.⁷ As he expresses it, "I will discuss reformulations throughout

³ 1979

⁴ 1995

⁵ 2001: 5

⁶ 1995: 82

⁷ Although they are too numerous to cite, the interested reader is invited to consider the following examples: (1) decisions are the products of sensemaking (1995: 10-11; 2001: 4, 106); an outcome comes before a decision (2001: 191); (2) action precedes thought; believing is seeing (1995: 133; 2001: 226); (3) process precedes structure (2001: 299); (4) organisations exists largely in the mind (2001: 308); (5) improvisation is a natural form of organisational life; it is the negation of foresight and the pre-planned (1995: 30; 2001: 285, 352); (6) strategy is defined as "good luck rationalised in hindsight" (1995: 28-29; 2001: 307); (7) goals are discovered in retrospect (2001: 7); (8) design is equal to improvisation and self-design (2001: 58); there is no such things as "the" design; organisational design is social (2001: 65, 71); the practical implication of this argument is to do away with the top-management team (1995: 117); (9) behavioural control is meaningless and control over performance is apt to

the book...” [that is, *Sensemaking in Organizations*]. The issue becomes problematic since the basis of such new formulations is not readily self-evident.

The second problem relates to Weick’s multi-/interdisciplinary approach to his subject matter. He uses insights from disciplines such as organisational theory, organisational behaviour, social and cognitive psychology, anthropology, sociology and the complexity sciences; theoretical perspectives such as systems theory (cybernetics and autopoiesis), sociological theory (symbolic interactionism, activity theory, ethnomethodology, social constructionist theory, frame theory, organic theory and dialectical method), and philosophical perspectives such as process, pragmatism, existentialism, phenomenology and idealism.⁸ As such, his multidisciplinary approach draws on the knowledge of several disciplines, each of which provides a different perspective on a problem, issue or argument. In contrast, in his interdisciplinary⁹ approach Weick draws on the specialised knowledge, concepts or tools of these disciplines and integrates these pieces to create new knowledge or deeper understanding. As an interdisciplinary scholar then, having drawn on appropriate disciplinary insights, Weick reconfigures them in novel ways, not only to address a question at hand, but combines the disciplinary insights in such a way that the resulting understanding is greater than simply the sum of its disciplinary parts. However, as Thompson & Newell¹⁰ have noted, integration is not always neat and tidy, it may indeed be “messy”. The third problem thus relates to the complexity of subject matter. It can become a problem if a student has to become familiar with concepts and approaches across disciplines, the result of which is often a feeling of incoherence or

fail (1995: 72-73; 2001: 77); (10) The idea of an individual manager is a fiction (1979: 8, 15; 2001: 70); (11) managers do not create cultures; they emerge (2001: 78); (12) orderliness is a mixture of order and chaos (2001: 194); (13) defining a problem is when the problem starts; “problem” does not necessarily imply “solution” (1995: 88-90; 2001: 426); (14) there is no such thing as “the” organisation (1995: 69, 74-75; 2001: 65, 184), and (15) it is an illusion to assume that organisations are rational (2001: xi).

⁸ The reader should note that the aim here is merely to point toward the interdisciplinarity and multidisciplinary aspects of his thought. References are provided in the subsequent chapters and the contexts to which they pertain.

⁹ *Interdisciplinary study* may be defined as “a process of answering a question, solving a problem, or addressing a topic that is too broad or complex to be dealt with adequately by a single discipline or profession” (Thompson & Newell 1998: 3).

¹⁰ 1998: 3

loss at making necessary and important theoretical connections in the context of real and pressing time constraints.¹¹

Despite the fact that Weick's major work on sensemaking has been described as "artful" and "masterfully" constructed, as "the clearest, most complete and interesting statement of sensemaking in organisations available",¹² it makes for difficult reading and understanding and for developing a coherent picture of the whole as the style of writing disperses the core ideas all through the whole. The impression is one of continuity, of new ideas constantly flowing into a single stream of thought and, therefore, inconclusiveness.¹³ However, it should be interpreted as an approach in line with Weick's fundamental arguments about organising and sensemaking, that is, to keep action, thinking and communication going. It is in utter contrast to people's deeply nurtured tendency to bring things to conclusion, or finality. As, for example, when they approach 'problems' as something to be solved, once and for all.

The fourth problem relates to the central thesis of this study, namely, an inconsistent picture of sensemaking in literature. On the one hand there is an emphasis on and recognition of the failure of sensemaking in organisations and crises environments, and on the other hand, a huge gap in the understanding of the particular mindset, paradigm or perspective required by the sensemaking framework, especially the aspect of ontology consistent with that framework and the conceptualisation of organisations. The contention of this thesis is that the inconsistency can be bridged if Weick's thought and thinking is understood in terms of his overall ontology and cosmological outlook. Part of the problem can be seen in what both Drucker¹⁴ and Senge¹⁵ so forcefully argued, namely, that while it is possible to use new terminology, it is also possible at the same time to still think within the context of old models. The result is that, not only until a crisis hits, do people realise that they have been acting on old and outmoded assumptions – despite espoused theories.

¹¹ Thompson & Newell 1998

¹² See backcover of *Sensemaking in Organisations* (1995)

¹³ It is acknowledged that this description might be the subjective opinion of only one individual, and that others may find the style of writing both interesting and challenging – which it is indeed!

¹⁴ 1999: 1-40

¹⁵ 1990: 8-9

2. **Aim and Intended Contribution of this Study**

With the statement of problems, assumptions and central thesis expressed, the aim of this study emerges. From Weick's various writings it is clear that different theories are integrated and deployed in his theorising about organisations and sensemaking. What is not so clear, are the sources from which those theories derived from. Whereas it is possible to have accessed Weick's theorising from the point of various disciplinary perspectives, such as Psychology, Sociology or Management Science, or conceptual topics such as decision making, problem solving, leadership, management functions, strategy and knowledge dynamics, the approach chosen here is through 'wholes'. In other words, in relation to the thesis the aim is to inquire how larger frameworks inform the parts (theories) in order to see how the parts inform the whole (the sensemaking framework).

To substantiate this approach, it is useful to see how Beach¹⁶ differentiates among paradigms, theories and models. Although the terms are often used interchangeable, they are not the same thing. In fact, as he points out, they are hierarchically related: paradigms are the most general – like philosophical and ideological frameworks or worldviews. Theories are more specific, based on the paradigm and designed to describe what happens in one of the many realms of events encompassed by the paradigm. Models are even more specific, in that it provides the mechanisms by which events occur in a particular part of the theory's realm. Of the three, models come and go, theories give way when only evidence is overwhelmingly against them, and paradigms stay put until a radically better idea comes along.

The picture that emerges from this depiction is that paradigms (worldviews, philosophy and ideology) inform theory that informs models. The choice of paradigms as the main themes of study thus follows Beach's depiction. The choice of paradigms, of pragmatism, existentialism, systems theory and complexity theory all share one cosmological outlook in common, namely, process philosophy, despite different approaches, emphases and nuances in the thinking of the proponents of the respective meta-perspectives. It thus follows that it is impossible to understand Weick from a

¹⁶ 1997

single paradigm, and that the best approach is to take his cosmology as a point of departure, then paradigms to theories.

It needs to be said that no other researcher is approaching the topic in the manner stated above.¹⁷ The aim and intended contribution of this study is therefore stated as follows: (1) to bridge the problems discussed under point 1 above; (2) to locate and describe and discuss four major paradigms in Weick's narratives and to show how they are taken up in the theories deployed by Weick, consistent with his overall cosmology. This will allow clarification of the sensemaking framework and, in conclusion (3) to show how Weick's understanding of organisation (noun) can be conceived of as an abstraction, and organisation (verb) in terms of relating, a process in perpetual becoming and social construction – never final, never complete – and that organisation and organising are essentially one and the same thing. As a thought leader on organisational matters, Weick opens up understanding of the inherent complexity and ambiguity of real-world organisations. The grasping of Weick's thought as expressed in his sensemaking framework would place managers and leaders in a position to revise their mental models as these ideas have substantial implications for their practices as participants in everyday organisational life.

3. **Approach**

Since the unit of analysis is the sensemaking perspective of Karl E. Weick, the four major works that will be incorporated into this study are *The Social Psychology of Organizing*,¹⁸ *Sensemaking in Organizations*,¹⁹ *Making Sense of the Organization*²⁰ (it comprises sixteen of his manuscripts that first appeared in other sources) and *Managing the Unexpected*²¹ (co-authored with Kathleen M Sutcliffe).

¹⁷ Databases at the libraries of the University of Stellenbosch and Rand Afrikaans University, the Internet (Google, MSN and Looksmart) was searched for the past twenty months for articles and books, which explicitly used the words sensemaking and or Karl E Weick.

¹⁸ 1979

¹⁹ 1995

²⁰ 2001

²¹ 2001

Because the unit of analysis is Weick's thought and thinking as embodied in narrative, the approach chosen for this study is interpretation. Dent and Powley,²² for example, contend that "knowing that an idea occurs in a paper may carry more information about the author's perspective than does the frequency at which the idea occurs". The interpretive approach chosen for this study differs from content analysis, in that it is an attempt to capture *ideas* rather than words. Content analysis as often described²³ is inadequate for this purpose because it is overly reductionistic, for example. The approach here, however, endeavours to balance the whole and the part and focuses on content-within-context, rather than just content.

An interpretive approach allows the researcher to be the instrument of data collection, analysis and interpretation. In this regard, Miles and Huberman²⁴ suggest four characteristics critical to the trustworthiness of the author as coder: (1) the degree of familiarity with the phenomenon and context; (2) a strong interest in the conceptual area; (3) an ability to take a multi-disciplinary approach; and (4) good investigative skills. In any research approach, the author is a source of bias; therefore, the role and assumptions of the author have been made explicit in this study.²⁵ The author not only has experience in hermeneutics, but also knowledge of organisational life and practical management experience consistent with what is necessary to conduct this study.

On a most fundamental level, Weick opens up understanding of three things: (1) an overall cosmology and/or worldview is indispensable to people as it has consequences for how they deal and cope with in the world of everyday organisational life; (2) the importance of a discussion of 'the world' in organisations, that is, the matter of ontology, and (3) by drawing on so many and diverse theoretical perspectives, Weick is demonstrating that no point of view is in itself complete, that a collective process of thought is the means by which understanding can be enriched.

To summarise, Weick's sensemaking in organisations poses certain problems for the student interested in sensemaking. In order to open up appropriate understanding of

²² 1988, in Dent & Powley 2001: 6

²³ Weber 1985

²⁴ 1984

²⁵ They can be seen in the problem formulations, the assumptions about Weick's process ontology and the methodology chosen for this study.

Weick's sensemaking framework, this study will aim to clarify: (1) The intertwining of organising and sensemaking; (2) Weick's theorising in terms of his cosmological outlook, the paradigms that are informed by that outlook and the theoretical perspectives derived from it and deployed in the sensemaking perspective; (3) the complexity of subject matter; and (4) to overcome the possibility of misinterpretation and consequently inconsistent application of Weick's sensemaking framework in literature.

It will therefore be appropriate to begin this inquiry into and interpretation of Weick's thought with a description of sensemaking.

CHAPTER 2

SENSEMAKING DESCRIBED

The sensemaking perspective, paradigm, mindset, sensemaking and two meanings of 'meaning'

The topic and theory of *sensemaking* in organisations forms part of the field of organisational science, broadly defined as organisational behaviour, organisational theory, human resource management and business strategy.²⁶ The focus of this chapter is on Weick's sensemaking theory as a 'perspective', 'paradigm', 'mindset', and the concept of 'sensemaking' and 'meaning'. The aim is to create some sort of understanding of the sense in which Weick is using these terms.

1. The Sensemaking Perspective

The dictionary meaning of the term *perspective* states that "it is a mental picture of the relative importance of things"²⁷ and "the relative importance of events from a specific point of view".²⁸ It is linked to the idea of "looking closely, to see through". Broadly speaking, then, in this sense it means a way of looking at and thinking about things or events from a specific point of view. Thus the issue here is Weick's point of view, his mental picture and what it is all about.

Weick²⁹ states that the sensemaking perspective "is a frame of mind about frames of mind". As such it means a way of looking at and thinking about other kinds of looking and thinking, as a support for other kinds of thinking and states of mind, in the form of a set of principles or processes by which ideas can be evaluated. It therefore also means, firstly, to make sense of how other people make sense and construct meaning about things happening around them. Secondly, as will become clear during this study, it relates to Weick's view of the world as being malleable, unpredictable and turbulent. In other words, his mental picture of the world and reality forms the frame in which he casts his formulation of sensemaking and organisational life.

²⁶ Weick 1995: vii

²⁷ The Oxford Dictionary 1983: 487

²⁸ Collier's Dictionary 1977: 752

²⁹ 1995: xii

Since people invest actions, objects, events and utterances with subjective meaning that helps make their world intelligible to themselves,³⁰ what is important from a sensemaking perspective, is *how, why, what* and *with what effect* people construct what they construct.

2. **The Sensemaking Paradigm**

In his discussion of the sensemaking paradigm, Weick refers to Firestone³¹ who stated that paradigms are revealed in textbooks, lectures and research experiments of the exemplars representing a specific scientific community, and “by studying them and by practicing with them, the members of the corresponding community learn their trade”. However, herein lies a trap. To understand this is to note that while Weick argues that the content of sensemaking can be embodied in frames, he also argues that they represent a set of simplifying heuristics rather than an algorithm.³²

Algorithms refer to a sequence of operations that may be repeated over and over again that, in theory, guarantee the solution to a problem or satisfied a condition. However, unlike computers, the human mind does not specialise in high-speed computations of multitudinous possible combinations. The limits of working memory allows for only a few operations at any one time. In order to overcome this limitation, humans make use of *heuristics* – informal, intuitive, speculative strategies (“mental shortcuts”) that sometimes lead to an effective solution and sometimes not.³³ In other words, the sensemaking paradigm must not be construed as something that offers or guarantees final answers or solutions. It registers recognition of human limitations.

It is useful to take cognisance of a few additional points about paradigms as discussed by Weick in the context of what others have to say on the topic:³⁴

- When people agree on a paradigm, they are more likely to agree on its existence than on its rules or rationalised form.

³⁰ Weick 1995: 14

³¹ 1990 (in Weick 1995: 119)

³² 1995: xii, 118

³³ Sternberg 2003: 367

³⁴ Weick 1995: 120-121

- Because paradigms are transmitted in discrete artefacts rather than a coherent formulation, the collection of artefacts can be interpreted differently. Differences trigger new interpretation.
- Paradigms are preserved in the exemplars and exemplars take the form of representative anecdotes. There exist gaps between exemplars in a paradigm.
- Exemplars take the form of stories, as collections of illustrations of how theories are applied conceptually, observationally and instrumentally to representative organisational problems.
- Theories within a paradigm provide a frame within which sense is made.

The conclusion reached is that Weick wishes the sensemaking student to view the sensemaking framework in terms of the points highlighted above.

3. **The Sensemaking Mindset**

Weick argues that a focus on sensemaking induces a *mindset*³⁵ focused on *process* (note the singular). If ‘mindset’ is taken to mean one’s resolve, one’s mind being set on something, a focus, an approach and commitment, it is found that, in addition to a commitment to process, Weick is also arguing for a commitment to accept *change* and *holism*. It is therefore useful to take a closer look at this type of mindset in order to deepen understanding of the sensemaking framework.

(1) **Mindset committed to and focussed on process**

(a) *In organisations*. Process theorists define organisational processes as consisting of multiple events. Abbott,³⁶ for example, states that “every process theory argues for patterned sequences of events” and Mackenzie³⁷ defines a process as “a time dependent sequence of elements governed by a rule called a process law”, with the following components:

- The entities involved in performing the process;
- The elements used to describe the steps in a process;
- The relationship between every pair of these elements;
- The links to other processes; and

³⁵ 1995: 13, 191-196

³⁶ 1990: 375

³⁷ 1986: 45

- The resource characteristics of the elements.

In this view, an event is a process that signals or sets off the transition from one process to another. Mackenzie recognises that in an organisation there are *multiple* events, *chains* of events, *parallel* events and *exogenous* events. There are *adjacent* events and *sequences* of events that may be mutually causally interdependent³⁸ – all affected by broader fields or environmental factors.

For Weick the idea of *process* implies impermanence, which means a concern with flows, with flux (change) and momentary appearances.³⁹ In this regard, he uses the metaphor of “streams” to portray the continuous flux associated with organisational processes. The image is not one of a single viscous flow that moves at a constant rate, but that of “multiple, heterogeneous flows of diverse viscosity moving at variable rates”.⁴⁰ The picture that emerges through this discussion is that streams, flows and change are thus the essence of what managers manage for Weick, the ongoing flow of actions and words, punctuated by events.

(b) *In sensemaking and organising.* Sensemaking is grounded in personal identity, retrospect, salient cues, ongoing projects, plausibility, enactment of sensible environments and social context. Weick states that “all seven can be crudely represented as a sequence (people concerned with *identity* in the *context of others* engage *ongoing* events from which they extract *cues* and make *plausible* sense *retrospectively*, all the while *enacting* more or less order into those ongoing events)”.⁴¹ It is in this context of the seven properties of sensemaking that it can be seen how organisations and sensemaking processes are “cut from the same cloth”.⁴² As process, both organising and sensemaking are attempts to impose order in ongoing flows in organisations and as people attempt to make collectively sense of the meaning of what is happening around them. It is of utmost importance to note that sensemaking and organising are *not* two separate processes, sensemaking “and” organising, but indeed a single process. As Weick puts it, it is organising *as* sensemaking, organising *through*

³⁸ 1986: 46-47

³⁹ 1979: 44

⁴⁰ 1979: 42

⁴¹ 1995: 18

⁴² 1995: 82

sensemaking and organising *for* sensemaking.⁴³ It is therefore reasonable to say that people make collectively sense in terms of the sensemaking processes and organise, in terms of the same processes, to make collectively sense.

If sensemaking and organising is taken to be a single process, together with what has been highlighted in subsection (1) (a) above, it becomes apparent that both organising and sensemaking operates in the service of ongoing adjustment to change. It is in this context that Weick and Quinn's⁴⁴ distinction between *episodic* and *continuous* change becomes more than relevant. Episodic change could be viewed as discontinuous and intermittent and change that is continuous, as evolving and incremental. Episodic change is driven by inertia and the inability of organisations to keep up, while continuous change is driven by alertness and the inability of organisations to remain stable. They stated that, however, when change is continuous, a different mindset is necessary and refers to one possibility as suggested by Marshack⁴⁵ derived from Confucian thought: "*cyclical assumption* (patterns of ebb and flow repeat themselves); *processional assumption* (movement involves an orderly sequence through a cycle and departures cause disequilibrium); *journey assumption* (interventions are to restore equilibrium and balance); *appropriateness assumption* (correct action maintains harmony), and *change assumption* (nothing remains the same forever)".

Their review of organisational change and development thus serves as a challenge to gain acceptance of continuous change as change never starts because it never stops. This becomes even more significant when it is noticed that Weick argues in the same breath that "Sensemaking never stops. The reason it never starts is that pure duration never stops".⁴⁶ One of the key aspects of process is the fact that it is ongoing. Although the ongoing stream may take rapid turns and even be interrupted, it still remains *one continuous flow*. It is therefore no surprise that Weick argues that people are always in the middle of things and that flows are the constants of sensemaking.⁴⁷

⁴³ 2001: 95

⁴⁴ 1999

⁴⁵ 1993 (in Weick & Quinn 1999: 13)

⁴⁶ 1995: 43

⁴⁷ 1995: 43

(2) **A Mindset committed to holism**

It is significant that Weick,⁴⁸ in the context of his discussion of a “mindset for sensemaking”, refers to Emerson’s essay “The American Scholar” where he said, “[T]he scholar loses no hour which the man lives”, and Mills’ point when he said, “The most admirable thinkers within the scholarly community you have chosen to join do not split their work from their lives. They seem to take both too seriously to allow such dissociation, and they want to use each for the enrichment of the other”. He also cites a poem written by a doctoral student in order to focus the same point that she too “took her work and life too seriously to split them”. In other words, sensemaking is not a program, something people can start on Monday, drop on Friday and take up on Sunday again. It is the ongoing process that sensemaking addresses – it is life, and it requires commitment.

What Weick is proposing here, through the three aforementioned examples, is an holistic approach to life instead of a separatist mindset and that he suggests that people’s general way of thinking of the totality is crucial for overall order of the human mind itself. If people think of the totality as constituted of independent fragments, then it is how their minds will tend to operate, but if they could include everything coherently, as undivided and unbroken, and without a border, then their minds will tend to move in a similar way, and from this will flow an orderly action within the whole.

Weick⁴⁹ states explicitly that the sensemaking processes are set apart from other explanatory processes such as ‘understanding’, ‘interpretation’ and ‘attribution’. It is therefore useful to inquire what these processes entail and how they differ from sensemaking in order to develop a sense of the uniqueness of the concept of ‘sensemaking’. The aim is to show that sensemaking is a meta-cognitive process that not only demands a higher level of engagement by the actor, but also that sensemaking is ‘more than the sum of its parts’ or components.

⁴⁸ 1995: 191-193

⁴⁹ 1995: 17

4. 'Sensemaking'

(1) *Sensemaking and understanding*. To 'understand' may mean "to grasp the meaning or significance of; to comprehend and be clear about; to be thoroughly familiar with an individual's judgement and specific interpretation".⁵⁰ It may also mean "to know how someone feels and why they behave the way they do, and feel sympathy for them"⁵¹ or, to put oneself "in the shoes, the situation and the skin"⁵² of another person. As such, both meanings of "understanding" imply or denote that understanding is thorough, total and fully certain and that the spectator can penetrate the thinking of the actor. No such assumptions are to be found in the sensemaking framework. In fact, Ryle⁵³ argues that minds are impenetrable to one another.

It is noteworthy that Weick argues, just as Ryle,⁵⁴ for example, that what the spectator actually finds is merely what the actor is inventing. In other words, although people may think that they understand another person's situation or an event, it can never be complete, once and for all,⁵⁵ as something that may count for all times and all occasions. Understanding essentially involves interpretation that cannot be reduced to knowledge, in a traditional sense. This also means that understanding is never "mere reconstruction" of some original meaning.⁵⁶

What sets sensemaking apart from understanding, then, is that not only is sensemaking an ongoing process, but sensemaking is also *the* process of *rearranging our understanding of experience* so that we can know what has happened, what is happening and can predict what will happen. In this sense, sensemaking is constructing knowledge of oneself and the world⁵⁷ and, as such, is creating coherence out of people's experience.

⁵⁰ Colliers Dictionary 1997: 1084

⁵¹ Longman Active Study Dictionary 1998: 724

⁵² Ryle 1949: 54

⁵³ Ryle 1949: 55. See also Weick 2001: 401.

⁵⁴ 1949: 54

⁵⁵ Ryle 1949: 55

⁵⁶ cf. Gadamer 1975: 311

⁵⁷ This view is also called 'constructivism' – see Drath & Palus 1994: 3.

(2) *Sensemaking and interpretation.* Weick argues that ‘interpretation’ is a component of sensemaking.⁵⁸ In other words, sensemaking is something more than mere reading; it is also about authoring. While ‘interpretation’ and its concomitant processes of explanation and translation assumes special knowledge, something “out there” waiting to be discovered, sensemaking in contrast, refers to what is placed “there” and invented by the actor. When sensemaking discovers, it does so in retrospect; when it translates, it makes the ambiguous and equivocal sensible, that is, it explains how the subjective becomes more tangible⁵⁹ (clear, definite for noticing), how something is made reasonable, how meaning is constructed⁶⁰ and the “out there” is invented⁶¹ – literally.⁶² In other words, “making” refers to something the actor actively does and creates (“enacts”), and as such, makes it possible for people “to see what they think”.⁶³

(3) *Sensemaking and attribution.* Byron and Byrne⁶⁴ define “attribution” as “the process through which we seek to identify the causes of others’ behaviour”, and argue in this regard that the *Why?*-question is the central attributional task people face in countless life situations. People want to know *why* others have acted as they have, or *why* events have turned out in a particular way.

Whereas attribution theory is mainly beset with *behaviour* and the causes thereof, sensemaking in contrast, shifts the emphasis toward *events* and the *interruption* of life lived in ongoing projects in order to give *meaning*, purpose and direction to the organisation.⁶⁵ As Drath and Palus⁶⁶ pointed out, if there is one thing all people share – across all cultures, geography and time – it is “the ability, and the hunger, to make things make sense”.

⁵⁸ 1995: 7

⁵⁹ Weick 1995: 14

⁶⁰ Weick 1995: 6-16

⁶¹ Weick 1995: 13-14

⁶² Weick 1995: 4, 15-16. It is important to note that Weick argues that sensemaking is not a metaphor.

⁶³ Weick 1995: 30

⁶⁴ 1991: 16, 57, 84

⁶⁵ Weick 1995: 4, 100-105

⁶⁶ 1994: 2

From a sensemaking perspective, then, the emphasis is not so much the seeking of causes and the why of the behaviour of people that is important, but the *why*, the *what* and *with what effect* people construct what they construct. In other words, the emphasis is rather on meta-cognitive and interactive processes between people that shape subjectivity, such as intersubjectivity.

5. **Meaning**

Bolman and Deal⁶⁷ asserts that meaning is a human being's most basic need. In a general sense, it has been observed that whenever there are questions that cannot be answered, problems that cannot be solved and events that are not understood, people vest objects, utterances and actions with subjective meaning that helps make their world intelligible.⁶⁸ In striving to make the world understandable and manageable, they often make sense of the complexity of everyday life by reading into things the meanings they wish to see. Similarly, people respond to the meanings they give to things, not to the things themselves. As a result, the meaning of an object or event is often far more powerful than the reality. Hence, the significance of Bolman and Deal's assertion that organisational events and processes are important more for what they express or mean than for what they produce.

In sensemaking in organisations, mainly two distinct aspects of the meaning of the word 'meaning' is detected: the first is the *sense* (called *Sinn* by Frege)⁶⁹ or the *significance* of that which words point to or designate, and the second, meaning in its *existential* sense. The first aspect roughly parallels connotation and denotation.⁷⁰ Abel⁷¹ states that reference is how language bites into the world, as a distinctly human activity, and unlike thinking, it is public. The most elementary way in which to refer is to name or label. In this section the aim is to discuss the first from a social constructionist point of view and the second from an existential point of view.

(1) *Meaning and social constructionism.* The first aspect of *meaning* refers to the way people refer to and make sense of things or events that people perceive or

⁶⁷ 1991: 309

⁶⁸ Weick 1995: 14

⁶⁹ Abel 1976: 67

⁷⁰ Abel 1976: 67-68

⁷¹ 1976: 66-67

experience, be it an object, an interruption, a sudden change in work routine or a crisis. In this sense, people want to know what it means, what it implies and how they can deal with it. The *know* is of primary concern here, since it refers to, from a social constructionist point that which people construct, invent or create themselves. That which they construct becomes their reality, and as has been pointed out, from a sensemaking perspective, the concern is with the *what*, the *why* and *with what effects* people construct what they construct.

The “reality” that people construct in everyday organisational life is, in other words, a matter of ontology and epistemology. In this respect, Weick draws on what Berger and Luckmann⁷² mean by knowledge, what the individual and organisation take to be real about the everyday world in which they live. As they stated it, “...the sociology of knowledge must first of all concern itself with what people ‘know’ as ‘reality’ in their everyday, non- or pre-theoretical lives...common sense knowledge...It is precisely this knowledge that constitutes the fabric of meanings without which no society could exist”.⁷³ In short, their interest is not in the status of knowledge, but to understand how *a sense of reality* is constructed and maintained, regardless of whether this “reality” is valid or not. The obvious point is that any reality can be taken to be valid by those who “inhabit” it.

Burr⁷⁴ identifies four basic assumptions of the constructionist position (all of which feature in Weick’s sensemaking framework): (a) a critical stance toward taken-for-granted knowledge. The world does not present itself objectively to the observer, but is known through experience, which is largely influenced by language; (b) the categories in language used to classify and describe things emerge from social interaction within a group of people at a particular time and a particular place. Understanding is thus situational and contextual; (c) knowledge is sustained through social process. How reality is understood at a given moment is determined by the conventions of communication in force at that time; and (d) knowledge and action go together. Ontology (reality) is thus constructed by interconnected patterns of communication

⁷² 1967

⁷³ 1967: 15

⁷⁴ 1995

behaviour and reality is defined not so much by individual acts, but by complex and organised patterns of ongoing actions.

From these assumptions, attention is focused on just two important points. Firstly, social constructionism has a relativist epistemology. That is:

- *Semantic relativism*. The meaning of words is specific to languages, or vocabularies,⁷⁵ and cannot be translated without loss of meaning.
- *Ontological relativism*. The existence of a thing is tied to a conceptual scheme, which may be real for some people, but not others. Reality therefore is a negotiated accomplishment.⁷⁶
- *Epistemological relativism*. Theories are historically and contextually situated; it is best understood when located in the conditions of their emergence.

Secondly, social construction of reality stems from an epistemological position - not an explanatory theory. It is an approach that focuses on *meaning* because its epistemological position dictates that meaning is all that people really can claim to know about. It is called *social constructionism* because it aims to account for the ways in which phenomena are socially constructed.

To translate all this into Weickian⁷⁷ terminology: language actually constructs the world and the self through the course of its use; people do not respond to physical objects and events themselves, but to the *meaning* of events; it is not the experience that is meaningful, but the meaning people attached to it; meaning is not a property of objects and events themselves, but a construction; people generate that which they interpret, and meanings and understandings arise from communication between people. In the words of Paul Cilliers⁷⁸, meaning is conferred not by a one-to-one correspondence of a symbol with some external object, but by the relationships between the components of the system itself. It is the result of a process, of 'between' as opposed to 'within', in an active and complex system.

⁷⁵ 1995: 4, 106-109

⁷⁶ Abel 1976: 41; see also Weick 1995: 15

⁷⁷ 1995: 14-16, 25-27

⁷⁸ 1998: 11, 124

In stating that meaning is a “composite of language, imagination and action that has worked in the past but may not work in the future”,⁷⁹ Weick cautions his readers to remember that in a changing world that is difficult to know and predict, it is important to hold retained meanings lightly. It is through sensemaking that people structure the unknown, and if they do not look “*too closely*”,⁸⁰ the world makes sense and things are under control. In other words, people can take a socially constructed world as a stable world (however, as will be seen later, it is only momentary stability).

(2) *Existential meaning.* In existential meaning, the emphasis shifts from the social construction of reality as in the minds of people and how to make sense of the world, to the *meaning or significance of life* itself. When this type of meaning breaks down, people refer to it as an *existential crisis*, or what Weick calls a *cosmological episode*.⁸¹ In other words, it is not the narrow species of meaning that resides in language.

Weick borrows the term “cosmology” from philosophy, a branch of philosophy subsumed under metaphysics, which combines rational speculation and scientific evidence to understand the universe as a totality of phenomena. As such, cosmology is the ultimate macro perspective, directed at issues of time, space, change, cause-and-effect relations and contingency. A person’s cosmological view refers, in other words, to an integrated whole, how the person thinks the world hangs together. In its deepest sense, it means that which people take for granted; they assume that is the way the world works – how things cohere and how change and order unfold. But, as Weick points out, everyday cosmologies are subject to disruption, and when severely disrupted, a cosmological episode occurs. That is when all meaning is lost, suddenly, and life itself becomes meaningless. What makes such an episode so shattering is that both the sense of what is occurring and the means to rebuild that sense collapse together.

The same point is also emphasised by Boisen,⁸² albeit from within a different context. In his scheme of things, an existential crisis refers to the upsetting of foundations upon

⁷⁹ Weick 2001: 357

⁸⁰ Weick 1995: 170

⁸¹ 2001: 105

⁸² In Aden & Ellens 1990: 209-210; Boisen’s context was the hospital and the psychology of religion his subject matter.

which critical judgements are made. By the word *foundation* he means the individual's "philosophy of life". A person's philosophy of life he conceptualised to be the entire system of meanings that influences and determines all reactions and all thinking. It signifies the individual's orientation with reference to the world, self-conception, purpose in life, loyalties and values, and system of beliefs and attitudes.

It is therefore no surprise that Weick⁸³ grounds sensemaking on the first most important characteristic or property of sensemaking, namely, *identity*. The construction of identity aside, in its deepest sense it is an existential issue, as it represents the totality of how people think of themselves and their place in the world. It is this importance that Weick⁸⁴ stipulates when he says, "I make sense of whatever happens around me by asking, what implications do these events have for *who* I will be...what the situation means is defined by *who* I will become while dealing with it or what or *who* I represent". Finally, in the words of Weick, "Sensemaking matters. A failure in sensemaking is *consequential and existential. It throws into question the nature of the self and the world...*"⁸⁵ In its most dramatic form then, "sensemaking deals with the issue of *how* to accept the diversity and mutation of the world while retaining the mind's power of analogy and unity *so that this changing world shall not become meaningless*".⁸⁶

5. Summary

This chapter discussed Weick's sensemaking theoretical framework from the standpoint of perspective, of paradigm and mindset. Meaning was described from a social constructionist as well as from an existential perspective. Several themes bind these aspects together, namely, a particular view of the world, an emphasis on the malleability, unpredictability and turbulence of the environment, and process – the interdependency of elements and the ongoing and continuous flow of events and the need to make sense of interruptions in that flow. The emphasis is on *making*, the process of arranging people's understanding of experience so that they can know what

⁸³ 1995: 18-24

⁸⁴ 1995: 23-24

⁸⁵ 1995: 14 (emphasis added)

⁸⁶ 1995: 171 (emphasis added)

has happened, and what is happening. As such, it is a matter of invention, of constructing knowledge (epistemology) of themselves and their world (ontology).

It has become necessary, at this point, to ask where the sensemaking perspective, paradigm and mindset derive from? The central argument in this thesis is that Weick demonstrates a distinctively process view of reality. The first can be called an *organic* view of the world, linked to his conceptualisation of *organising*;⁸⁷ while the second, a *psychological* process view of reality can be linked to his conceptualisation of *sensemaking*.⁸⁸ Thus, in light of what has been described and discussed so far in this chapter, Weick's thought must be seen as a unity – people (collectively) organise in terms of the sense they make, and organise to make better sense. Conversely, people (collectively) make sense in terms of their organising, and make sense to better organise – it is therefore a single process. Put differently, what can be regarded as social processes of organising, is psychological in nature, and what can be regarded as psychological organising processes, is social in nature.

Both the organic and psychological processes will become clearer in the chapters that are to follow. It is to the organic process model of Bergson⁸⁹ and Whitehead's⁹⁰ that we turn to first in the next chapter.

⁸⁷ See *The Social Psychology of Organising* (1979).

⁸⁸ See *Sensemaking in Organisations* (1995).

⁸⁹ 1974 (1946)

⁹⁰ 1978

CHAPTER 3

PROCESS COSMOLOGY AS GROUND THEORY IN SENSEMAKING IN ORGANISATIONS

Introduction to process philosophy, Bergson and Whitehead

Weick⁹¹ states that sensemaking induces a mindset to focus on *process* and that sensemaking is, after all, about the *world*. The aim in this chapter is to show that the guiding idea behind Weick's approach⁹² to sensemaking is that the world and, by implication the organisation, is best understood in terms of ontological categories such as processes, events and occurrences, rather than things and substances – of modes of *change* rather than fixed stabilities. Rescher⁹³ points out that for 'processists', change of every sort – physical, organic, psychological – is the pervasive and predominant feature of the real.

In the twentieth century, 'process philosophy' has been strongly associated with names such as Leibniz, Bergson, Whitehead, Hartshorne, Weiss, Alexander, Morgan and Ushenko.⁹⁴ Because both the *organic* and *psychological* process view of reality are central aspects of Weick's thought, the organic model of the world as embodied in the thought of Bergson⁹⁵ and Whitehead⁹⁶ will be the focus in the chapter, while the psychological process model, in the context of pragmatism, will be discussed in the next. This chapter thus describes the ground theory in sensemaking in organisations, in light of which the rest of this project will make sense. It must be kept in mind that, like any philosophical tendency, process philosophy is fundamentally complex and has internal variations.⁹⁷

⁹¹ 1995: 13, 132

⁹² Note that this chapter merely lays the ground for what is to follow. Weick's process thinking will become clearer in the subsequent chapters.

⁹³ 2002: 1

⁹⁴ Rescher 2002: 2

⁹⁵ 1974

⁹⁶ 1978

⁹⁷ Rescher (2002: 5) points out that the unity is not doctrinal but thematic.

1. Introduction to Process Cosmology

According to Butler,⁹⁸ the three great problems of philosophy are the problems of reality, knowledge and value. He stated it as follows: (1) The problem of *reality*: What is the nature of the universe in which people live? Or in the last analysis, what is real? The branch of philosophy that deals with this great problem is named *metaphysics* (nowadays sometimes referred to as *ontology*). (2) The problem of *knowledge*: How do people know what is real? How do they come by their knowledge and how can they be sure it is true, not error or illusion? The area in philosophy devoted to solving this problem is named *epistemology*. (3) The third great problem, the problem of *value*, is this: What are the important values desired in living? Are they rooted in reality, and how can they be realised in human experience? The branch of philosophy that deals with such questions as these is named *axiology*.

The branch in metaphysics that deals with the character of the world and the beliefs as to the organisation and orderly arrangement of the various parts of the universe, is concerned with *cosmology*. The things that are to be taken into consideration in cosmology include the nature of time and space, change, contingency and causality. Weick⁹⁹ describes cosmology as the ultimate macro perspective, and added that cosmology issues are not just the handiwork of philosophers, but of all people.

Just when modern science was reaching its most impressive heights of achievement, two bold speculative philosophers called into question the basic assumptions of the scientific mode of thought. Neither Bergson¹⁰⁰ nor Whitehead¹⁰¹ wished to deny the considerable contributions made by the scientific method; what concerned them primarily was a philosophical question, namely, whether reality, the basic nature of things, was what science assumed it to be. During the last half of the nineteenth century, and the early decades of the twentieth, the major assumption of science was that nature consists of material objects located in space. Matter is the final irreducible stuff out of which all things were formed. The model for thinking was the machine model. All the particular things in nature were parts of a large mechanism. This means

⁹⁸ 1968: 13

⁹⁹ 2001: 105; see also, e.g. Bergson's *The Creative Mind* (1974).

¹⁰⁰ 1974

¹⁰¹ 1978

that each part could in time be described with mathematical exactness, since material objects moved in space in accordance with precise rules or laws. Things were related to each other in a tight sequence of cause and effect. As parts of a tightly organised cosmic machine, humans were thought of as being wholly determined, as cogs in a wheel, as possessing little, if any, freedom of will.

Bergson¹⁰² and Whitehead¹⁰³ questioned these assumptions. They wondered whether nature really consist of inert material objects, whether the intellect is capable to discover an “out there” and whether there can be any novelty in nature if the basic reality is material and organised in a tight mechanism. Science itself had recently developed the theory of evolution, which made the mechanical model of nature less and less plausible. While Whitehead moved from science to metaphysics, drawing out many of the implications of the emerging new physics, Bergson had no intention of rejecting science, but thought that the two could enrich each other.

It is useful to point out that the notion of a *process view* of reality is an ancient one, going back at least to the Greek theoretician Heraclitus of Ephesus who depicted the world as a manifold of opposed forces joined in mutual rivalry, interlocked in constant strife and conflict. Fire for him, was the most fundamental and unchanging elemental force in nature; for “fire” was the destroyer and transformer of things. To illustrate the changeability of all things that so pervades our world, he said that “one cannot step twice into the same river”.¹⁰⁴ As Heraclitus saw it, reality is at bottom not a constellation of things at all, but one of processes; for him it meant that people must avoid at all costs the fallacy of substantialising nature into perduring things (substances) because it is not stable things but fundamental forces and the varied and fluctuating activities which they produce that make up this world of humans. Process is fundamental: the river is not an object, but an ever-changing flow; the sun is not a thing, but a flaming fire. Consequently, everything is process, activity and change – everything that is, is the *process of becoming*.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² 1974

¹⁰³ 1978

¹⁰⁴ Rescher 2002: 2

¹⁰⁵ cf. Bohm 1980: 61ff.

2. Henri Bergson

All of Bergson's (1859-1941)¹⁰⁶ work is concerned with duration, movement and ongoing process in all things – the reality of change. His work implies a continued striving after adaptation to reality. For him the world is duration; the world is evolution. He saw through the discovery of biological evolution that something new is produced all the time, nature is no scene of dull uniformity, with no fixed pattern repeating itself mechanically as in physical causation. What was revolutionary, was Bergson's idea about the nature of existence. For him nature was in flux (or in Greek phraseology, *becoming*), as an ongoing process of change, as opposed to a mechanical, permanent, unchanging substance. His contribution to philosophy then, was this new conception of existence as change in time, as duration, as the free, creative moment in life.

Bergson made a very important distinction between the subject matter of physical science and the study of life. Whereas one can study matter as real, and is aware of the real as separate from oneself (Descartes), Bergson maintained that life is not the same as matter, and the person is aware of that directly in himself. Consciousness is an indivisible process; its parts mutually penetrate each other. The sense of the whole is present throughout. Here in experience was the pattern Bergson saw applicable to life everywhere – duration as the significant aspect of existence. He thought of the *self* in terms of continual mobility, “for our past follows us, it swells incessantly with the present that it picks up on its way; and consciousness means memory”.¹⁰⁷ In ourselves, memory is the vehicle of duration. The person possesses memory and is therefore not at the mercy of the present or impulse. By means of memory, existence is made continuous. Ideas such as these also give people a more accurate notion of *time* – as real, continuous time, as compared with the “spacialised” time created by the intellect.¹⁰⁸ For Bergson, the intellect slices in what in reality is an ongoing and continuous flow.¹⁰⁹ People's desires and actions are not momentary; they carry with them their entire past. Their thoughts, by contrast, are more selective.

¹⁰⁶ 1974; see also Stumph 1982: 384-388

¹⁰⁷ Stumph 1982: 385

¹⁰⁸ Stumph 1982: 386

¹⁰⁹ Durant 1961: 464

Another signal point of originality in Bergson was his suggestion of a new mode of knowing. Whereas the intellectual faculties of the person developed as an instrument of action in the service of successful adaptation to the world in as far as it is an orderly, ‘law-abiding’ cause and effect, the evolutionary process had turned up another sort of agency of successful adaptation, as a supplement to scientific knowledge, and Bergson called this capacity and the knowledge it yields, *intuition*.¹¹⁰ For him, the true nature of things is apprehended by intuition – to “seize from within”.¹¹¹ It is useful to note in this regard that knowing signifies immediate consciousness, a vision that is scarcely distinguishable from the object seen.¹¹² Most important of all, says Bergson, to think intuitively is to think in duration.

Concepts he considered to be static, one-sided. When people try to analyse anything, they distort and deform it; they get one view but not another; they freeze the thing in time and fail to understand the thing’s growth, its development, its life.¹¹³ Analysis is lifeless and at best proceeds by taking successive points of view. But it is, of necessity, always dissatisfied, for there are infinite angles, endless movements. Bergson not only rejects the idea of simple things, simple facts and simple sensations, but the very idea of facts, things and sensations in philosophy. His basic ontology is ontology of change, not the change of this thing or that property but change as such, change as the whole. Through intuition people see things in their wholeness and time, as “the things” embody oppositions that justify opposing viewpoints. He therefore views the intellect as an emergent property of the relations among the various parts in the organism.

To summarise, Bergson was obviously trying to get people to see something else – to see the functional unity of an organism – which requires that any variation in one part must be accompanied by variations throughout the organism – to see what life is and means, and was bound to emphasise the aspects of experience ignored or neglected in the scientific thinking of his day. It made people to think, too, more seriously about the meaning of time and the creative possibilities of life.

¹¹⁰ 1994

¹¹¹ Solomon & Higgins 1996: 265

¹¹² cf. Weick 1995: 24-26

¹¹³ Bergson 1974

3. Alfred North Whitehead

Whitehead (1861-1947)¹¹⁴ reacted, as Bergson had, against the analytic mode of thought, which assumed that facts exist in isolation from other facts. Much of Whitehead's philosophy was written from a sense of contrast between the variable, superficial elements that stand out clearly in human experience, and the persistent, dimly felt background that is basic but hard to describe. His main theme was that "connectedness is the essence of all things".¹¹⁵ He insisted that all actual entities are able to being interconnected in a stream of experience. In describing Wordsworth's romantic reaction against the scientific mentality, he goes on to say that "neither physical nature nor life can be understood unless we fuse them together as essential factors in the composition of really real things whose interconnections and individual characters constitute the universe".¹¹⁶ He was repulsed by the fact that scientific analysis had left something important out: intuitions and life itself.

The Newtonian conception of natural fact, which Whitehead saw as "a high abstraction" from our concrete experience of nature, convinced him that it should be corrected and replaced by a broader cosmology, which he expanded into a metaphysics of process.¹¹⁷ He was also very critical of Hume's notion of experience as a discrete series of sense-impressions and ideas.¹¹⁸ An occasion of experience, is rather, an organic unity of feeling;¹¹⁹ it is a process, a *concrecence*¹²⁰ of past experiences and of

¹¹⁴ 1978

¹¹⁵ Stumph 1982: 389

¹¹⁶ Stumph 1982: 389

¹¹⁷ He referred to his philosophy as a *philosophy of organism* or an *organic philosophy* and may be described as a metaphysical pluralism in that he sees reality as consisting of a multiplicity of actual entities or occasions. His philosophy is also subjectivist since it accepts that knowledge of subjective reality is based on inference from subjective modes of perception (Scott 2003). Whitehead himself explains that his philosophy is the inversion of that of Kant. For Kant the world emerges from the subject; for the philosophy of organism, the subject emerges from the world (Irvine 2003).

¹¹⁸ 1978

¹¹⁹ *Feeling* is the integration of an actual entity or occasion into the internal constitution of a subject (Scott 2003). They are *vectors*, for they feel for what is there and transform it into what is here (Suchar 2000).

¹²⁰ Whitehead 1978: 24-26. Whitehead defines *concrecence* as a process in which prehensions are integrated into a fully determinate feeling or satisfaction. A satisfaction is a unity of physical or mental operation attained by an actual entity. The nature of each actual entity is bipolar, physical and mental and the concrecence of each involves the integration of the physical and mental. It is important to note that Whitehead's philosophy is

external qualities and energies, which are appropriated – in Whitehead’s technical language, *prehended*¹²¹ – into its own private unity. The experient, as physical, unconsciously feels its environment as causally efficacious upon it; as mental, the experient makes a novel integrative response, so that it is a partially self-creative process, an aesthetical achievement. There is no unchanging substance underlying this process of becoming, and there is no process devoid of intrinsic value, that is, of a pattern of feeling. He therefore explains the various kinds of things in the world in terms of contrasts, repetitions, divisions and unions among the prehensions involved. His concept of experience as an active integrating process is designed to overcome all dualisms of modern philosophy.

In discussing Newton who followed Democritus in assuming that the nature of things consists of individual bits of matter existing in space, Whitehead admits that it is possible to locate an individual part, but only through a process of abstraction. To abstract means to lift something out of its concrete environment. To mistake the abstraction for the concrete is the error that Whitehead calls the “fallacy of misplaced concreteness”.¹²² Such things as the instants of time, points in space, or independent particles of matter are helpful concepts for scientific thought, but when they are taken as descriptions of ultimate reality, they are distortions of concrete reality¹²³. His own

concerned with two levels of meaning and reality: (1) the formal structure of actual entities (or occasions), and (2) the *givenness* of the world in which actual entities or occasions occur. For him, givenness is potentiality. Givenness is the definiteness of actuality, which both excludes and includes potentiality. Each actual entity is in the process of becoming another actual entity. Even more important to note, is that an actual entity may become an object of prehension for another actual entity. Actual entities may become objects of prehension by a process of either “causal” or “presentational” objectification. In causal objectification an object is directly perceived and in presentational objectification an object is indirectly perceived as a result of a direct perception of an actual entity. Both “causal efficacy” and “presentational immediacy” are modes of perception. Causal efficacy is a direct perception of prior (past) actual occasions which are causally related to a subsequent actual occasion, and presentational immediacy is a direct perception of present actual occasions, which may lead to a process of integrating these occasions with actual occasions in the past (Scott 2003).

¹²¹ Contrasts (or patterned entities) are modes of synthesis of entities in one prehension (Whitehead 1978: 22).

Prehensions are physical or mental representations of actual entities or occasions.

¹²² 1978; see Stumph (1983: 390-391, 394) for a more detailed description.

¹²³ As Whitehead himself puts it, “In a certain sense, everything is everywhere at all times. For every location involves an aspect of itself in every other location. Thus every spatio-temporal standpoint mirrors the world”. Further, every-real-life object may be understood as a similarly constructed series of events and processes. As Irvine (2003: 3) points out, underlying his work is the idea that, if philosophy is to be successful, it must

formulation of the units of reality differs in two ways from those of Democritus and Newton, namely, in their content and their relations to each other. For the term atom he substituted *actual entities* or its equivalent *actual occasions*. For Whitehead, actual entities are chunks in the life of nature and as such, never exist in isolation. They permit people to view nature as a living organism.

Whitehead saw in human consciousness a good example of an actual occasion. In consciousness, past occasions is connected to our immediate occasion of experience, which suggests “the connectedness of all occasions in nature”.¹²⁴ But an actual occasion is not to be understood as a material thing, it is best understood as an experience. As such, these occasions do not exist, they happen. The difference is that merely to exist implies no change, whereas to happen suggests a dynamic alteration. Whitehead’s actual occasions represent continually changing entities, this change coming about through the impact of entities upon each other.¹²⁵ When considering a person having an experience, the usual way to think is that there is a permanent subject, on the one hand, and something “out there”, on the other. However, Whitehead argues that subject and object are both in a continual process of change and that every experience the subject has affects the subject. In other words, Whitehead’s actual entities have no permanent identity or history. They are always in the process of becoming.¹²⁶ They feel the impact of other actual occasions and absorb them internally. If they (the occasions) take on a determinative form or character they become actuality, and when they do, they “perish”. *Perishing*¹²⁷ is what Whitehead means by memory or causality, that with the passage of time something of the past is preserved in the present.

The term *prehension* also describes how the elements of actual entities are related to each other and how these entities are further related to other entities. Since nothing in the world is unrelated, Whitehead’s stated that every prehension consists of three

explain the connection between the objective descriptions of the world and the everyday world of subjective experience.

¹²⁴ Stumph 1982: 391

¹²⁵ Stumph 1982: 392

¹²⁶ Scott 2003

¹²⁷ Stumph 1982: 392

factors: the “subject” that is prehending, the “datum that is prehended” and the “subjective form”, which is how the subject prehends the datum.¹²⁸ For the purposes here, it is necessary to note that while people can distinguish between physical and conceptual feelings (for example, emotions, valuations, purposes and consciousness), they do not imply the older dualism of mind (thought) and body (extension) – as in Descartes’ thinking. To insist on their separation is to again commit the fallacy of misplacement. This fallacy, it will be recalled, is committed when one mistakes an abstraction for the concrete. For Whitehead, both the body and mind forms a society, or *nexūs* (contextual unity). They are sets of actual entities, and they can be organised into something like, for example, a *body politic* (the abstraction), where only the citizens are the concrete reality.

To summarise Whitehead’s *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*,¹²⁹ Whitehead visualised reality as a continual process in which actual entities are constantly becoming, a process in which *what* an actual entity becomes depends on *how* it becomes. Here he places the emphasis on creativity, the fundamental characteristic of the process of nature – a conjoined action of all entities in “novel togetherness”, embodied in the term “concrecence”. Instead of focusing on material objects, people should focus on *events*, conceived of as not static instants (or “snapshots”) but rather as moments in a process of realisation.¹³⁰ Instead of inanimate objects, Whitehead concentrates on the notion of organism, “an event, coming into being through patterns”. An organism is not a mechanism. It functions through time; it is vibrant, not static. The category he uses to describe this activity, is *creativity*. Since nature is itself creative, novel and imaginative, people have to, accordingly, perpetually invent new and changing language, a poetic language, to capture the evolving patterns of reality.

The process approach has been a particularly important development in and for American philosophy, especially owing to its increasingly close linkage to pragmatism in such thinkers as Peirce, James and Dewey. It is to pragmatism that we now turn to.

¹²⁸ Stumph 1982: 393

¹²⁹ 1978

¹³⁰ cf. Weick 1995: 32-33

CHAPTER 4

PRAGMATISM AND SENSEMAKING IN ORGANISATIONS

Introduction to pragmatism and its roots, symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, pragmatism and Weick in organisational theory, process ontology, social constructionism, the self, experience and action, practical reason and context, communication and meaning, relating

The following five theoretical frameworks feature strongly throughout the work of Weick: the symbolic interactionism of Mead¹³¹ and Blumer,¹³² the ethnomethodology of Garfinkel¹³³ (which arose out of the phenomenology of Schutz¹³⁴), the frame analysis of Goffman¹³⁵ and the social construction of reality of Berger and Luckmann.¹³⁶ What bind them together are their roots in the philosophy of pragmatism. It is therefore not surprising to find that they all share the same emphasis and focus, namely, the sociology of everyday life, which includes how people make sense of their world and meaning, action and experience, interaction, communication and relationships, practical knowledge, context, humanity's place in the world and reality (process, evolution and social construction). The aim in this chapter is to show how some of its central ideas are integrated into the thought of Weick and deployed in his theory of sensemaking in organisations.

¹³¹ Weick (1995: 41) states that *symbolic interactionism* is the "unofficial theory of sensemaking". Mead argued that mind and self arise and develop within the social process. To use the image of symbolic interactionism is to ensure that one remains sensitive to the ways in which people actively shape each other's meanings and sensemaking processes.

¹³² It was Blumer who coined the term *symbolic interactionism* (Ritzer 2000). For a discussion of Blumer's arguments in Weick, see 1995: 37, 40, 42-43.

¹³³ Weick 1979: 150-151, 195, 200; 1995: 12-14, 24, 51, 67, 94-95; 2001: 20-21. Weick acknowledges the continuing influence of *ethnomethodology* on the study of organisational sensemaking (1995: 24).

¹³⁴ Weick 1979: 46, 194, 198; 1995: 24-26, 28, 41, 67

¹³⁵ Weick 1979: 171-173; 1995: 35, 51

¹³⁶ Weick 1995: 67, 123-125. Berger & Luckmann (1967: 27-29) acknowledge the influence of both Schutz and Mead on their work in *The Social Construction of Reality*. Ritzer (2000: 338) also indicates that the symbolic interactionism was influenced by the pragmatists.

The focus and discussion in this chapter is pragmatism and social constructivism in organisational theory in general, and to symbolic interactionism and ethno-methodology as developed and applied by Weick in sensemaking in the organisation in particular.

Before proceeding with the discussion, it is important to understand something more about pragmatism as a philosophical perspective.

1. Introduction to Pragmatism and its Roots

William James called *pragmatism* “a new name for an old way of thinking”.¹³⁷ Solomon and Higgins¹³⁸ stated that it was James who attempted to bridge the old and new worlds by establishing a fully American version of what in Europe was being coined “phenomenology” (the science of experience). The names commonly associated with the rise of pragmatism in America are Charles S. Peirce, William James and John Dewey. Butler¹³⁹ regards Peirce as the originator of the single root idea from which pragmatism has grown, and states that James popularised the idea and lent it some shades of meaning never intended by Peirce. Dewey developed a full-fledged philosophy, radically experimental, and building out of it an inclusive worldview with its own peculiar implications for every phase of life.

Yet pragmatism did not spring from nowhere; it has roots in the past and some of them are ancient. Two of the earliest appearances of beliefs found in the pragmatism of today occurred in the teachings of Heraclitus and Protagoras.¹⁴⁰ In the previous chapter it was noted that Heraclitus stress the fact of change in the world; he rejected dualisms (so-called opposites) – for him their appearances pass into one another; everything is in a state of flux, constant movement and process of becoming. ‘Thinghood’ or essences, he also did not regard as adequate categories for understanding this ever-flowing reality. What is seen to be dichotomies or opposing forces (subject/object, mind/body, means/end, knowledge/practice, for example) he argued are interrelated

¹³⁷ Butler 1968: 361

¹³⁸ 1996: 259

¹³⁹ 1968

¹⁴⁰ Butler 1968

and should be joined together.¹⁴¹ In other words, the rejection of a sharp dichotomy parallels the relationship between part and whole.

Torn between the total change of Heraclitus, on the one hand, and the total unchanged of Parmenides, on the other, the sneaking suspicion that nothing could be certainly known to be true, grew on the Sophists until it became their true conviction. Protagoras, however, agreed with Heraclitus that all things change. He, for instance, defined knowledge as sense perception.¹⁴² One phase of the eternal flux, he held, is comprised of the stimulations arising from the world that impinge upon people and evoke a response. Neither stimulus and response, nor the resultant sense perception can be considered a representation of the world. All are but phases in constant flux. Each sense perception is the nearest approach to genuine knowledge that the person can have. And therefore the saying for which Protagoras is most famous, “man is the measure of all things”.¹⁴³ That is, whatever perceptions a person may have at a given time, those perceptions are true for him or her.

Pragmatism is equally distrustful of knowledge. It seeks to provide no basis for certainty in knowledge. For pragmatists the social mind,¹⁴⁴ by virtue of its ability to experiment, is the measure of all things. However, sense perception, pragmatism holds, is neither passive nor purely receptive. In sensory relations with the world, people are actively engaged in a give-and-take with the world; people are doing things to the world and/or objects at the same time that they are doing things to people, impressing or stimulating them. It is therefore not true that the senses are merely gateways, when sensation is an avenue of active relation with the world.

Butler¹⁴⁵ points out that the inductive method of Francis Bacon was another influence on pragmatism. While by no means identical with pragmatism, it occupies an important place in that school of thought in that it doubts the validity of all

¹⁴¹ Joas 1993

¹⁴² Butler 1968: 356

¹⁴³ Butler 1968: 357

¹⁴⁴ Pragmatist cognitive psychology recognises ‘social mind’ and is thus closer to social psychology. Mead was influenced by ‘psychological behaviourism’ and referred to his basic concern as ‘social behaviour’ (Ritzer 2000: 239-240).

¹⁴⁵ 1968: 360

generalisations and rather seizes upon particulars. Each new situation is taken as unique and therefore to be faced freshly, without superimposing generalisations upon it.

Perhaps the most influential figure looming in the background of pragmatism is Kant.¹⁴⁶ Kant's patient analysis of the knowledge process did not yield any sure content regarding the nature of the thing-in-itself. He brought empiricism and rationalism together by arguing that the individual mind was endowed with a set of primitive categories through which it experienced the world. Peirce, having been an avid student of Kant, sought to bridge the gap between subjective processes of the mind and the objective realities of the world.¹⁴⁷ He saw knowledge as social rather than strictly cognitive, a step that led him to develop a semiotic approach to knowledge.

Pragmatism can also be seen as a species of the New England "transcendentalists" who were direct descendants of Kant and Hegel.¹⁴⁸ Beside Thoreau, the most famous transcendentalist who had an essential influence on pragmatism, is Emerson.¹⁴⁹ Not only did he write his doctoral dissertation on Kant, but has he also, because of being mystic in orientation emphasised humanity's union with nature and the importance of intuitive insight over logical reasoning.

Not only was the pragmatists heavily influenced by Darwin,¹⁵⁰ but were they also fierce opponents of Darwinism of the day because it focused more on natural-selection than interaction with the environment. The evolutionary psychology of James, Dewey and Mead emphasised the way individuals solved problems and adapted to environmental demands.

Finally, there is the influence of Aristotle.¹⁵¹ Where pragmatists differ from him is at the point where he defines objects by their essences (substances) instead of

¹⁴⁶ Butler 1968

¹⁴⁷ Butler 1968

¹⁴⁸ Solomon & Higgins 1996: 239-240

¹⁴⁹ Solomon & Higgins 1996

¹⁵⁰ Butler 1968; Stumph 1982

¹⁵¹ Butler 1968: 388-390

relationships. They were in agreement with him as far as he emphasised active engagement with the world and the social and political nature of being human.

2. **Symbolic Interactionism**

Lewis and Smith¹⁵² distinguish between two branches of pragmatism – “philosophical realism” (associated with Mead) and “nominalist pragmatism” (associated with James and Dewey). While Ritzer¹⁵³ is of the opinion that Mead is the most important thinker in the history of symbolic interactionism, it was actually one of his students, Herbert Blumer,¹⁵⁴ who established *symbolic interactionism* and coined the term. In Lewis and Smith’s¹⁵⁵ view, Blumer was influenced more by the *nominalist approach*, the position of which is that although micro-level phenomena exist, they do not have “independent and determining effects upon the consciousness of and behaviour of individuals”. The difference between them is essentially what Mead called his basic concern, social behaviourism and Blumer’s move toward “psychical interaction...the psychical interactionist holds that the meanings of symbols are not universal and objective; rather meanings are individual and subjective in that they are attached to the symbols by the receiver according to whatever he or she chooses to interpret them”.¹⁵⁶

(1) *Basic principles of symbolic interactionism.* The principles¹⁵⁷ of symbolic interactionism can be summarised as follows: (1) Human beings are endowed with thought; the capacity for thought is shaped by social interaction; (2) through social interaction people learn the meaning and symbols that allow them to exercise their capacity for thought; the meanings and symbols allow people to carry on action and interaction: (3) people are able to modify and alter the meanings and symbols that they use in action and interaction on the basis of their interpretation of the situation; (4) people are able to reflect on their options, examine possible courses of action and choose an option, and (5) the intertwined patterns of action and interaction make up groups and societies. Each of these principles will be briefly discussed next.

¹⁵² 1980

¹⁵³ 2000

¹⁵⁴ Ritzer 2000

¹⁵⁵ 1980: 24

¹⁵⁶ Lewis & Smith 1980: 172

¹⁵⁷ Ritzer 2000: 357

(i) *Capacity for thought.* While the symbolic interactionists recognise that the ability to think is embedded in the mind, for them the mind is not a thing; the mind is originating in the socialisation of consciousness. They also conceive of the mind as a continuing process.¹⁵⁸

(ii) *Thinking and interaction.* While they recognise that people have a general capacity for thought, the view of the interactionists is that the capacity for thought needs to be shaped and refined through a process of *socialisation*.¹⁵⁹ A central tenet of the interactionists is that symbolic interaction requires mental processes, and in relation to objects, it is not so much what is “out there” that is of importance, but the way they are defined by people. As Blumer¹⁶⁰ said: “The nature of an object...consists of the meaning that it has for the person for whom it is an object”.

(iii) *Meanings and language.* Symbolic interactionists conceive of language as a vast system of symbols. Whereas *signs* stand for themselves (for example, the gesture of an angry dog) “*symbols* are social objects used to represent (or ‘stand for’, ‘take the place of’) whatever people agree they shall represent”.¹⁶¹ Words are symbols because they are used to stand for things. Words make all other symbols possible. What is of importance, is that meaning stems not from solitary mental processes but from interaction – it is in essence a social activity. What connects the “symbolic” and “interaction” is communication.

(iv) *Action and choices.* Symbolic interactionists’ primary concern is with the impact of meanings and symbols on human action and interaction. For them, social action means acting with others in mind.¹⁶² In other words, people act in a process of mutual influence. Since actors have the ability to form new meanings, they have the autonomy and ability to make choices. This creative ability is underscored by Weick¹⁶³ in his reference to Thomas and Thomas who stated: “If men defines situations as real they are real in their consequences”. Here, Weick alerts his readers to the fact that

¹⁵⁸ Ritzer 2000

¹⁵⁹ Ritzer 2000

¹⁶⁰ 1969: 11

¹⁶¹ Charon 1998: 47

¹⁶² Ritzer 2000

¹⁶³ 1995: 66

subjective bases of action have non-subjective results, that groups vary in their definitions of a situation, and that a situation determines behaviour.

(2) *The Self*. To symbolic interactionists, the self is of enormous importance. According to Ritzer¹⁶⁴, all sociological processes and events revolve around that hub. It is therefore of great significance, in this regard, that Weick¹⁶⁵ grounds his seven properties of sensemaking in identity construction as the first in a sequence of a process. Mead¹⁶⁶ states that, “Emergence involves reorganisation [and that] reorganisation brings in something that was not there before. The first time oxygen and hydrogen come together, water appears. Now water is a combination of hydrogen and oxygen, but water was not there before in the separate elements”. It is in terms of this description that Weick conceptualises the self as in essence a synthesis or merge and emergent property of a dialectical process.¹⁶⁷ In other words, to properly conceive of the self, it is necessary to see the self as pure process and, hence, neither as an object or a subject. As will be seen later, it is also in essence a social psychological process.

In his talking about organisation from a macro-level perspective, Weick¹⁶⁸ uses Wiley’s argument that there are three levels of sensemaking “above” the individual “I” subjective level. The first is the “I-You” – intersubjective level, then the “we/us” – generic subjective level and finally the extrasubjective – cultural level. Here the concern is with the “individual”, and in this regard draws attention to two aspects from Weick’s discussion, in order to strengthen the argument given so far: (1) movement from one level to the next takes place through, in and by means of organising (that serves as a bridge between forms of socialising), that is, self-organising social interaction, and (2) each new level above the “individual” level is a synthesis, a merge or emergent out of a dialectical process between two or more social processes.

The first point to note is that the individual’s self consists of an “I” (the reflective aspect) in interaction with the “me” (the generalised other – to use Mead’s¹⁶⁹ words).

¹⁶⁴ 2000

¹⁶⁵ 1995: 17ff.

¹⁶⁶ 1962: 198

¹⁶⁷ cf. Weick 1995: 71; 2001: 113

¹⁶⁸ 1995: 70-75

¹⁶⁹ 1962: 175

When the *I* adopts the *Me* a synthesis occurs, called the *self*. In other words, in the spirit of thesis-antithesis-synthesis, this constitutes an *ongoing* dialectical process of becoming – never final, never complete. To elucidate the point, people are capable of wearing many ‘hats’, playing out various roles at different times and switching between roles with little apparent effort. What it means, from a sensemaking perspective, is that what a situation will have meant to a person is dictated by the identity he/she adopts in dealing with it. And that is a negotiation and organising process, cognitively and socially, between the “I” and “me” (generalised other), that in turn gives the person a new synthesised self, able to deal with each new situation, repetitively and continuously. It therefore makes sense when Weick¹⁷⁰ argues that the more selves people have access to, the less the likelihood that they will find themselves surprised or astonished when confronted with the unexpected.

It is also important to note that sensemaking is never solitary because what a person does internally is contingent on others – even if sensemaking occurs only in the mind of a single individual. Any single sensemaker is a “parliament of selves”,¹⁷¹ hence, Weick’s statement that individual sensemaking is something of an oxymoron.¹⁷²

Finally, if the self is not a thing, then it must be an abstraction of that which is in essence a process of becoming. Mead¹⁷³ consistently argues that, not only is consciousness not a thing, but also mental images, meaning and mind. All these processes are social phenomena; as such, *emergent phenomena* that arise out of interaction *between* people. Goffman’s¹⁷⁴ study of the self confirms Mead’s argument. In other words, the self is not an organic thing that has a specific location; neither is the self the possession of an actor, but a process of relating between an actor and “the other”. And as such, the process may also be seen as a communication process with oneself and others, while at the same time interpreting and handling of meanings.

To summarise this section, when people are looking at individual behaviour in organisations, they are actually seeing two entities: the individual as himself and the

¹⁷⁰ 1995: 24

¹⁷¹ Weick 1995: 18

¹⁷² 1995: 80

¹⁷³ 1962: 75, 77, 112, 267, 332; cf. Weick 1994: 41

¹⁷⁴ 1959: 252-253

individual as representative of his collectivity. The self is a social construct out of interaction and organising (communication and interpreting) processes. Thus, identities shift and change as situations change; it is fluid as the self that is in a perpetual process of becoming.

3. **Ethnomethodology**

Although ethnomethodology was “invented” by Herbert Garfinkel in the late 1940s, it was only systematised with the publication of his *Studies in Ethnomethodology* in 1967.¹⁷⁵ Given its Greek roots, the term *ethnomethodology* literally means the “methods”¹⁷⁶ that people use on a daily basis to accomplish their everyday lives.

Zimmerman and Wieder¹⁷⁷ point out that ethnomethodologists are not concerned with causal explanations of observably regular, patterned, repetitive actions by some kind of analysis from the actor’s view. They are concerned with how members of society go about the task of *seeing, describing* and *explaining* order in the world in which they live. Simply stated, ethnomethodology means the study of the ways in which people make sense of their social world.

Since Weick¹⁷⁸ has acknowledged the continuing influence of ethnomethodology on sensemaking, it becomes necessary to briefly discuss the central principles in ethnomethodology.

(1) *The everyday world as an accomplishment.* For the ethnomethodologist, the world of everyday life is seen as an *ongoing* accomplishment.¹⁷⁹ Whereas symbolic interactionists regard social order as something that is created and recreated everyday in the multiplicity of interaction situations – the “negotiated order” – the process of definition, interpretation and negotiation, ethnomethodologists in contrast, start out with the assumption that social order is illusory.¹⁸⁰ They believe that social life merely appears to be orderly; in reality it is potentially chaotic. A closer look at Weick seems to reflect the same understanding. Although he argues that a socially constructed world

¹⁷⁵ Timasheff & Theodorson 1976: 300-301

¹⁷⁶ Ritzer 2000: 381

¹⁷⁷ 1970: 289

¹⁷⁸ See footnote 133 on p. 37 of this study.

¹⁷⁹ Garfinkel 1991

¹⁸⁰ Poore 2000

is a stable world,¹⁸¹ the impression that he leaves is that, that may be just an appearance - the world makes sense and is under control if people do not look “*too closely*”.¹⁸² Weick, in the spirit of the ethnomethodologists, also argues that order is enacted into the world,¹⁸³ and that sensemaking focuses attention upon the idea that the reality of everyday life must be seen as an ongoing accomplishment¹⁸⁴ through symbolic processes reality is created and sustained.¹⁸⁵

(2) *Practical reason and context.* People are seen by ethnomethodologists as rational, but they are using “practical reasoning”, not formal logic, in accomplishing their everyday lives.¹⁸⁶ This is in line with pragmatism’s model of practical reason¹⁸⁷ or, as Weick refers to it in sensemaking in organisations, “reasonableness”.¹⁸⁸ Practical reason suggests that individuals do act in an intentional and purposeful manner, but that the cognitive processes often departs from contemporary textbook accounts of analytical rationality. The point is that practical reason works in quite different ways than suggested by analytical rationality.

Practical reason suggests that people make decisions in situationally-specific contexts under conditions heavily laden with the associations drawn from past experience. Hence, practical reason implies a “situational rationality”.¹⁸⁹ What is clear, however, is that this rationality considers people “skilled” decision makers that have to draw on past experiences that influence reasoned judgement in present situations. Skilful judgement comes, in part, through pattern recognition, analogical reason and intuition with a more limited place for analytical reason and logic.¹⁹⁰ Skilful judgement is also

¹⁸¹ 1995: 154

¹⁸² 1995: 170

¹⁸³ 2001: 6

¹⁸⁴ 2001: 106

¹⁸⁵ 2001: 11

¹⁸⁶ Ritzer 2000

¹⁸⁷ Note that Toulmin (2001: 110) makes a distinction between *rationality* and *reasonableness*. *Reasonableness* is equated with practical reason.

¹⁸⁸ 1995: 57, 60-61

¹⁸⁹ On “situated rationality” see Manning (1988: 266) and Weick (2001: 259-279). One of Goffman’s (in Manning 1992: 10-11) basic themes is “situational propriety”, the idea that the meaning of actions is linked to context and that we cannot understand behaviour without knowledge of the situation.

¹⁹⁰ For a discussion resembling a self-fulfilling prophecy, see Weick 2001: 391-393.

very close to “craft knowledge”¹⁹¹ – practical knowledge – knowledge developed through what Weick refers to as ‘trial and error’ learning,¹⁹² and is at least partly tacit.¹⁹³ What is important for the purposes here, is to note is that the model of skilful craft judgement and knowledge corresponds closely with Weick’s¹⁹⁴ description of ‘improvisation’ – the ability to refashion prior solutions for new situations. In other words, reflexivity reflects the creative action of the present, the ability to improvise by drawing on the resources from the past while at the same time transcending the past.

(3) *Retrospective sensemaking.* Ethnomethodologists have been particularly interested in how facts are made sensible in retrospect. In Weick¹⁹⁵ we have noted Garfinkel’s study, in the context of jury decisions, how people define retrospectively the decision that have been made and so justify a course of action. The core of retrospective sensemaking entails a particular process in the social construction of reality. The idea here is that the meaning of behaviour, in this case past behaviour, is continually re-evaluated based on the exigencies of current situations and typified understandings.

What is of significance for the purposes of this study is that Weick¹⁹⁶ cast his discussion of retrospective sensemaking in the context of process philosophy. The importance of it is captured by the concept of time as pure duration. Pure duration is “a coming-to-be and passing away that has no contours, no boundaries and no differentiation”.¹⁹⁷ Whenever people punctuate (focusing their attention) on something in the ongoing stream of experience, they abstract from this experience. But, what is perceived is in reality a past world. Although some moments in this continuous flow are retained in memory (that serves as a bridge between the past and future), it cannot be recalled without distortion.¹⁹⁸ In other words, the meaning of an event or passed

¹⁹¹ Majone 1989

¹⁹² Weick 2001: 193, 330-331. For a discussion of trial and error learning, see ch. 6 of this study.

¹⁹³ On “tacit knowledge”, see Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995).

¹⁹⁴ 2001: 62-64. Weick uses the concepts of *bricolage* and *bricoleur* in a fascinating portrait of the importance of improvisation in organisational studies.

¹⁹⁵ 1995: 10-11. For a comprehensive discussion of *retrospective* sensemaking, see Weick 1995: 24-30.

¹⁹⁶ 1995: 24-30

¹⁹⁷ Schutz 1967 (in Weick 1995: 25)

¹⁹⁸ Weick 1995: 28-29

object has only constructed, and reconstructed meaning. Finally, as Weick¹⁹⁹ points out, the “feeling” of order, clarity and rationality is an important goal of sensemaking, which means that once this feeling is achieved, further retrospective processing stops. However, the world still goes on. It is for this reason that Weick cautions that people should hold their retained meanings lightly.²⁰⁰

4. **Pragmatism and Weick in Organisational Theory**

(1) *Experience and action.* The hallmark of pragmatism is experience. In fact, it was James who coined the phrase “stream of experience”.²⁰¹ At the core of the pragmatism perspective that links experience, knowledge and problem solving (as with life) into a stream of situations that humans confront that requires a solution (adaptation), is Darwin’s model of living evolving organisations.²⁰² On the one side there are experiences that become part of people’s past, a reservoir of habit, routine, pattern recognition and emotion to solve future problems; and on the other side, there is an active mind that actively organises experience. The mind operates through conceptual and symbolic structures that mediate between past experience and imagined future, and the distinctive characteristic of the mind is reflexivity.²⁰³ its ability to consciously reflect upon and manipulate its own and symbolic structure. The balance between the two is a variable one, but pragmatists and Weick²⁰⁴ suggest that experience prevails until people confront intractable or anomalous problems.

Pragmatism treats knowledge as social as well as personal. Although knowledge is largely viewed as intersubjective (as opposed to subjective), individuals must test this knowledge against personal experience. Furthermore, pragmatists and Weick²⁰⁵ posits that groups, such as organisations, are bound together by similar or shared experience. The conceptual and symbolic structure of the mind is paralleled by knowledge as a social construction stored in diaries, memories and imagination.²⁰⁶ Reflexivity at the

¹⁹⁹ 1995: 29

²⁰⁰ 2001: 357

²⁰¹ Solomon & Higgins 1996: 259; Weick 1995: 25

²⁰² Butler 1968: 373-375; Solomon & Higgins 1996: 262

²⁰³ Wiley 1994 (ch. 4) discusses the pragmatist versions of reflexivity.

²⁰⁴ 1995: 2-3

²⁰⁵ 1995: 188-189

²⁰⁶ Weick 2001: 71

organisational level, then, refers to dialogue, meeting and deliberation about shared knowledge. From the pragmatist perspective this constitutes an intersubjective process: while individuals make their private experiences and ideas available to others, they may also at the same time appropriate the experiences and ideas of others.

This model also implies ongoing action.²⁰⁷ Dewey states that “acting is ongoing, as is the experiencing that is integral to it. Action is mainly routine; interrupted routine action, usually by some sort of blockage that is usually environmental or situational in source, precipitates mental processes that involve a review of imagined options, the making of choices among them that leads to the reorganisation and continuance of action. Transformation through interaction – of lines of action, objects, environment, self and the world – is central to this theory of action”.²⁰⁸ To solve problems people encounter in the present, they must be able to imagine possible futures. In this regard Weick²⁰⁹ argues that action in the present mediates between past experience and imagined future.

(2) *Emotion and images.* That imagery occupies a large place in pragmatism and sensemaking theory²¹⁰ is a matter that has been rarely appreciated in organisational theory. Alongside an affinity with the role of imagery, pragmatism also emphasises the importance of emotion in cognitive reasoning. As Kosslyn²¹¹ notes, “Imagery is a basic form of cognition and plays a central role in many human activities – ranging from navigation to memory to creative problem solving”.

(3) *Knowledge, reflexivity and social constructionism.* From a pragmatist perspective, how is knowledge produced? Both the pragmatist and sensemaking framework’s emphasis on an active mind and on the collective and social structure of

²⁰⁷ Weick 1995: 13ff. & 156ff.

²⁰⁸ in Strauss 1993: 3. See also Weick 1995:43-45.

²⁰⁹ 1995: 13. This reflects Peirce’s model of the iteration between observation and speculation (abduction). Scheff (1997: 41-42) states Peirce’s position as follows: “General intelligence requires both deduction and induction, a rapid movement between imagination and observation. Peirce called this *abduction*. He was referring to this movement between imagination and reality”.

²¹⁰ Strati 1999; Weick 1995: 4, 125-126, 171

²¹¹ 1994: 1. She also notes that imagery played a major role in theories of mental events until psychology and philosophy parted ways. The centrality of imagery and the imagined event in cognition found a central place in the philosophy of Mead (Sadoski & Paivio 2001).

knowledge is strongly grounded in “social constructionism”.²¹² However, there are some clear limits to this constructionism. First, pragmatism does not deny the existence of an external world. Second, pragmatism takes a stand against the argument that social constructs are merely arbitrary social conventions that posits an underlying idea of power. Although pragmatism does not oppose the idea of power, it does not treat this as an. This is perhaps so because the pragmatist’s considers rugged reality as the best ground where ideas can be tested and experience can be found to be real.

Social constructionists hold that social conventions, including institutions and organisations, have a conceptual and symbolic structure.²¹³ Pragmatists therefore focus on the interaction between how concepts are formed in the mind in relation to the symbolic meanings of institutions.²¹⁴ Pragmatism’s anti-formalistic stance toward institutions and external objects (as with all objectivism) leads to the view that they are subject to conscious manipulation. They are products of social convention but ‘dead’ until acted upon.

The interaction between the ‘internal’ conceptualisation of the mind with ‘external’ conceptual structures may lead the inquirer to the idea that the ‘external’ depends for its existence on the powers of the mind. This idea moved Simon²¹⁵ to develop a computer model of the organisation based on the information-processing processes of the human mind. However, Simon’s information-processing model can be critiqued as overly mechanistic since it not only absence the social aspect of organisation, but also because its conceptualisation of decision making is based on normative decision logic.²¹⁶ What Simon’s model has in common with pragmatism is the view that rationality can also appear at group level. Hutchins,²¹⁷ for example, has used Simon’s information-processing model to demonstrate how interpretations based on distributed cognitions are formed. The relevant ideas are associated with ‘connectionism’ and ‘neural networks’.

²¹² Weick 1995: 67, 123-125. See also Berger & Luckman 1967.

²¹³ Cicourel 1968

²¹⁴ Garfinkel 1967

²¹⁵ 1976. See also Sternberg 2003: 13.

²¹⁶ Shapira 1997: 3-4

²¹⁷ 1995

The basic idea is that knowledge in very large networks of very simple processing units resides in patterns of connections, and not individualised local symbols. Weick and Robert's²¹⁸ description of *heedful interrelating* captures the idea that patterns of heedful interrelating is an ongoing social process that can be internalised and recapitulated by individuals as they move in and out of the collective. Not only does heedful action allow for adaptation to change, but does it also allow the organisation to understand more and respond with fewer errors.²¹⁹

Dewey's brand of pragmatism he called *instrumentalism* that places emphasis on practise and learning by doing.²²⁰ Not only is experience and learning associated with practical doing, but so also intelligence. He considers intelligence a *habit*²²¹ by which the human organism adapt to its environment. But habits do not purely refer to simple mechanical stimulus-response behaviour; they are ways of thinking about the environment.

In the field of organisational learning Argyris and Schön²²² distinguishes between *single loop* and *double loop* learning. They describe single loop learning as the ability to review performance based on feedback to an existing set of conceptual structures and double loop learning as the ability to reflect on performance in order to improve and change conceptual structures prior to action. In terms of reflexivity, they constitute frames – social constructs – that organise people's perception. Weick²²³ also conceptualises Argyris' *theories-in-action* and *espoused theories* as frames through which people perceive the environment and asserts that "theories of action are for organisations what cognitive structures are for individuals".

Through a pragmatist lens 'ends-means' are often indistinct and inseparably intertwined.²²⁴ Pragmatists and Weick²²⁵ are also of the opinion that mental models are

²¹⁸ 2001: 259-280

²¹⁹ Weick & Roberts 2001: 260

²²⁰ Solomon & Higgins 1996: 262

²²¹ See James' discussion of habit in Allport 1961: 1-17.

²²² 1978: 352-371

²²³ 1995: 121-124

²²⁴ Strauss 1993: 55

²²⁵ 2001: 14, 71, 112

continually revisable in light of experience and manipulable through imagination. In line with the constructionist view, an empirical understanding of the world as well as people's values, are considered constructs that need to be tested against experience. Values are also subject to endless revision, just as all empirical claims.²²⁶ In light of his positivist stance on reality, Simon²²⁷ sought a theory by which to distinguish between fact and value, and means and ends. To this end, he adopted a hierarchical model of organisation. James March,²²⁸ however, has been much more attentive to the intertwining of ends and means, and he as well as Weick²²⁹ argued that *play* was a much more appropriate image to capture the interaction of ends and means. In child's play, means and ends are interactive and is it difficult to separate them from each other. Play also depends more on imagination and improvisation. March moved away from the hierarchical model of organisation and developed the *garbage can theory* of organisation instead, and combined it with an *anarchical model* of organisational structure.²³⁰

(4) *Communication and Meaning*. For pragmatism as well as for Weick,²³¹ symbols mediate both the internal cognitive process known as thinking and the intersubjective process known as social interaction. As one of the founders of semiotics (the meaning of ideas), Peirce,²³² rejected empiricism and the position that ideas were simply epiphenomena of sensory information. For him, meaning derived not from intuition but by experience or experiment. He was also of the opinion that meaning could be stabilised through ongoing conversation that is public and social, and not private or individual. Although Mead was more directly influenced by Dewey and James than by Peirce, it is significant that he arrived at a framework similar to that of Peirce. Wiley²³³ has pointed out that Mead's concept of the *self* mainly derives from semiotics.

²²⁶ cf. Weick 1995: 158-160

²²⁷ Luthans 1992: 496

²²⁸ 1988: 253-265

²²⁹ 2001: 416-417

²³⁰ cf. Weick 1995: 144, 160-161

²³¹ 1995: 74-75; 2001: 11, 20

²³² Butler 1968: 366

²³³ 1994

Pragmatism shares with Weick²³⁴ as well as with anthropology, sociology and social psychology the assumption that human behaviour is fundamentally social in nature. In organisation theory, that assumption leads back to the *Human Relations School* of Elton Mayo²³⁵ that grew out of the Hawthorne Studies conducted between 1926 and 1932. The critical intellectual figure in emphasising the social nature of organisation was a social anthropologist named Lloyd Warner,²³⁶ and under his influence the interpretation of the Hawthorne Studies emphasised the importance of informal social organisation and social norms. This emphasis led to seeing organisations as a community. This perspective led to Barnard's²³⁷ emphasis on informal organisation and his stress on the participative aspects of leadership and authority, ideas he held in common with Follet.²³⁸ The emphasis the Human Relations School placed informal relationships and organisation is also reflected in connectionism and the "embeddedness"²³⁹ of social action.

As has been noted earlier, central to social order, pragmatism emphasise signs and symbols in communication.²⁴⁰ Although Simon's model of organisations approximates a pragmatist model of communication, March²⁴¹ raised critique against the view of information as a simple commodity. Manning²⁴² described the idea of *coding* – interpretation and translation of a message, as "messy work". This idea, a hermeneutic (interpretive) approach to communication, can be linked to pragmatism's treating of *meaning* as a problem. While pragmatism emphasise active problem solving, the semiotic perspective adds the insight that all actions are signs, irrespective of whether intended or not. It is information, but this information requires interpretation. From symbolic interactionist, ethnomethodological and phenomenological perspectives, the mutual intelligibility of people's actions is a problem. The question then is, how is

²³⁴ 1995: 38-43

²³⁵ 1945, in Ivancevich & Matteson 1992: 5-7

²³⁶ Gillespie 1991

²³⁷ 1938

²³⁸ 1924

²³⁹ Granovetter 1985: 481-510

²⁴⁰ Duncan (1962) has elucidated "communication" as one of the central aspects of pragmatist philosophy.

²⁴¹ 1994

²⁴² 1988

social order produced? Strauss et al.²⁴³ has developed a symbolic interactionist perspective on organisations that treat the meaning systems of organisations as *negotiated orders*. Following Garfinkel²⁴⁴ and ethnomethodologists, Weick²⁴⁵ has also treated shared understanding as problematic which led them to put an emphasis on face-to-face interaction.

Pragmatism's incorporation of the semiotic view on language is also linked to practical reason. In this regard, Toulmin²⁴⁶ highlights the rhetorical basis of rationality, emphasising the importance of argumentation in social deliberation. Majone²⁴⁷ makes a similar point to the effect that policy analysis has less to do with proof and argumentation or tradition that defines rationality not in instrumental terms, than about providing acceptable reasons in order to justify choices and actions. This rhetorical view of rationality also acknowledges the role of ethical judgements and emotion in reason. Forester²⁴⁸ emphasises the importance of *stories*²⁴⁹ in context of a discussion of planning processes in order to communicate lessons from past experience, ethical judgements and emotional sensitivity.

It is worth noting here that pragmatism also gives language a central place in cognitive psychology.²⁵⁰ Cognitive psychology, however, adopts a more computational view on language as functional. In line with Dewey and Mead's position on aesthetic experience, pragmatism also clearly reflects an affinity with poetic language. This aspect of pragmatism is seen in Burke's²⁵¹ argument that poetry is "weighted" language as opposed to "neutral" technical language. Its purpose is to persuade through emotions, feelings and images. Although the combination of utilitarian and poetic language goes hand-in-hand with the current emphasis on narratives in social

²⁴³ 1963

²⁴⁴ 1967

²⁴⁵ 1995

²⁴⁶ 2001

²⁴⁷ 1989

²⁴⁸ 2000

²⁴⁹ See also Weick 1995: 127-131

²⁵⁰ Eysenck & Keane 2000; Sternberg 2003

²⁵¹ 1984

analysis, it is useful to note that Weick²⁵² argues in this regard that despite the fact that the word “sensemaking” may have an informal poetic flavour, it should “not mask the fact that it is literally just what it says it is”.

(5) *Process ontology*. To understand pragmatism as a philosophy, a starting point is to look at its underlying ontology. It can be described as both relational and a process ontology.²⁵³ To pragmatists²⁵⁴ and Weick²⁵⁵ reality does not exist “out there”; it is, instead, actively created or invented as people act in and toward the world. Relational ontology posits the view that social beings are to be understood in terms of their relationships rather than in substance terminology and or categories. Hosking²⁵⁶ and Mauws²⁵⁷ elaborate this argument from a pragmatist perspective. It is essentially a holistic view of the world, a whole in which the parts are in constant interaction to prevent either too tight and or too loose coupling. As James²⁵⁸ wrote: “The great point is to notice that the oneness and the manyness are absolutely co-ordinate here. Neither is primordial or more essential or excellent than the other”.

Pragmatism’s ontology also appears in organisation theory and Weick’s sensemaking theory.²⁵⁹ It is commonly acknowledged that systems theory is the older version of this relational perspective. Emphasis is placed on patterns of interrelationships that exist among the parts of an organisation. It is widely recognised that Simon’s²⁶⁰ systems view and his analysis of hierarchy as a network has had far-reaching influence on organisation theory. Structural contingency theory²⁶¹ argued that tasks can be organised into different structures and postulated that efficiency and survival depends on a fit between structure and context. Morgan’s²⁶² discussion of the distinction between the mechanistic and organic types of organisations reflects not only an

²⁵² 1995: 16

²⁵³ Butler 1968

²⁵⁴ Hewitt 1984

²⁵⁵ We discuss this aspect of Weick’s thinking in chapter 8 of this study.

²⁵⁶ 1999

²⁵⁷ 1996

²⁵⁸ 1907

²⁵⁹ For a discussion of Weick’s connection with systems theory, see chapter 5 of this study.

²⁶⁰ 1985

²⁶¹ Morgan 1997

²⁶² 1997

emphasis on Weber's bureaucratic conceptualisation on the one hand, and the concept of flatter organisation on the other, but has the systems concept also been strongly influenced by open systems²⁶³ and Weick's²⁶⁴ tightly and loosely coupled perspectives.

A newer systems perspective is network theory. Eccles and Nohria²⁶⁵ have shown that the literature on network theory took off during the late 1980's. It is noteworthy that pragmatism is also close to Homan and Blau's²⁶⁶ exchange perspective developed in sociology. The process of *reciprocity* – of “give and take” or *exchange* – in social life is a longstanding scholarly concern. The basic analytical unit employed in this approach is the face-to-face interactions of individuals. This perspective led Pfeffer and Salancik²⁶⁷ to develop a model of organisations as open systems. At the core of this model is an emphasis on the interaction between an organisation and its environment. This interactive model has found favouritism with pragmatists since it lays heavy emphasis on social interaction and the influence of reciprocal influence.

Another pragmatist theme that derives from its underlying process and relational ontology, is the preference of triads over dyads.²⁶⁸ This is apparent in Peirce's emphasis on the tripartite semiotic scheme of sign-object-interpretant and Mead's²⁶⁹ ideas about “third parties” as mediators of social consciousness and his analysis of the “generalised other”. At the core of the relationship ontology is process since the emphasis is on ongoing interaction through which order and meaning is realised. It is for this reason that process ontology does not take substance as its point of departure.²⁷⁰ It is rather that beings and events are always in a process of unfolding. The point is not that everything dissolves into ‘nothingness’, but rather that meaning and unity out of interaction and relations. It is thus no real than substance ontology.

²⁶³ Katz & Kahn 1966; cf. Weick 1995: 70

²⁶⁴ 1979; 1995; for an excellent exposition, see 2001: 380-401

²⁶⁵ 1992

²⁶⁶ in Ritzer 2000: 407-441; Timasheff & Theodorson 1976: 340-350

²⁶⁷ 1978

²⁶⁸ It also ties back to the influence of Simmel (in Ritzer 2000: 152-156). See also Timasheff & Theodorson 1976: 120-126. A triad has a potential existence independent of each of its members. If one member leaves it does not automatically cease to exist as in the case of the dyad.

²⁶⁹ Ritzer 2000: 353-355

²⁷⁰ It has been indicated and discussed in chapter 3 of this study.

Various versions of process theories can be detected organisational theory. Indeed, as our thesis in this study has already demonstrated, Weick's social psychology clearly reflects a process view of reality. Suffice to say here is that Weick developed the most explicit process ontology for organisational theory in his *The Social Psychology of Organizing*.²⁷¹ In this regard, he argues that organisation theory should focus on *organising* rather than *organisation*.²⁷² He not only combines process and interrelationships, but also argues that control in organisations is accomplished by interaction and not by people.²⁷³ He argues the merits of his preference of triads over dyads as the basic unit of analysis in organisation theory.²⁷⁴

A pluralistic perspective is also detected in pragmatism in that it acknowledges the fact that different experiences is elicited from same types of stimulus and that people will follow different routes to solve perceived problems.²⁷⁵ Both pragmatism and Weick acknowledge the influence of socialisation as one of the primary processes by which people form perceptions of reality. Finally, as has been noted earlier, pragmatism balances the parts and the whole. Taken together, pragmatism comes naturally to the embedding of small groups in larger networks. If this group-oriented perspective is combined with an action-oriented perspective, the result is process and pluralism.

A pluralist and process model of organisational decision making is also reflected in the writings of theorists from the Carnegie School in organisation theory.²⁷⁶ This is seen, for example, in Simon's model of information-processing and organisational decision making. March and Simon²⁷⁷ developed the idea that the organisation is a coalition and also a site for conflicting preferences and politics. Such ideas eventuated in what has come to be called a 'garbage-can decision process'. In a garbage-can process, it is assumed that there are exogenous time-dependent arrivals of choice opportunities, problems, solutions and decision makers. Problems and choices are attached to choices, and thus to each other, not because of their means-end linkage but in terms of

²⁷¹ 1979

²⁷² Weick's idea of organisation and organising is elaborated on in chapter 9 of this study.

²⁷³ 1979: 8

²⁷⁴ 1979: 137-138

²⁷⁵ Butler 1968

²⁷⁶ Shapira 1999

²⁷⁷ 1993

their temporal proximity. At the limit, almost any solution can be associated with any problem. The temporal pooling is, however, constrained by social and organisational structures.

Observations of the disorderliness in organisational decision making have led some people to argue that there are very little order to it, that is best described as random. A more common position, however, is that the ways in which organisations bring order to disorder is less hierarchical and less based on means-ends chains than is anticipated by conventional theories. There is order, but it is not conventional order. Goffman's²⁷⁸ *dramaturgical model* also offers a model close to the interactive perspective of pragmatism. Whereas in a play parts are "scripted", the pragmatists place more emphasis on interpretation and improvisation. Roles, such as leadership are seen as emerging phenomena from self-organising processes.²⁷⁹ Weick uses Jazz orchestras and improvisation theatre to illustrate the same point. What is central to the theatrical performance is that it is embodied communication.²⁸⁰ Thus, if the communication stops there is no organisation. The central idea in the dramaturgical process approach is that everyday life, and by implication organisational life, must be understood as a performance.

It is thus not difficult to see how everyday organisational performance correlates with the interdependence in theatrical drama. While avoiding the more scripted or teleological aspects of dramatic narrative, it can also be seen that performances begin to cohere into narratives because of the interactional development of mutual expectations. Manning²⁸¹ puts forth a "two selves thesis" to describe this aspect of Goffman's thinking; people have both a "performance self" and a hidden, "cynical self". People expect the 'me' to perform in a particular way, just as the 'me' expect them to perform in a certain way. The "performance" perspective, thus appear to be most useful in Weick²⁸² for studying micro-dynamics of social processes.

²⁷⁸ 1959

²⁷⁹ See also Weick 1979 & 2001

²⁸⁰ See Weick 1995: 75

²⁸¹ 1992

²⁸² 2001: 181, 198, 286-297, 351; note Weick's concept of the "orchestral organisation".

As noted earlier, Darwin's somewhat modified evolutionary process model plays a central role in pragmatism. Pragmatism thus embraces an evolutionary model of organisational reality in which groups and individuals constantly face the challenge of adapting to a changing environment in order to survive. It therefore reflects a huge problem solving component. Not only must ideas be tested against experience, but can ideas also be retained for future use.²⁸³ This argument has strong affinities with Weick's claim that "enacted information" (based on selective attention to past experience) is the input to subsequent cycles of evolutionary "selection" and "retention".²⁸⁴ Weick's model of the psychology of organising also emphasises trial and error learning.²⁸⁵

Pragmatism's strong stand on relationships and pluralism brings Darwin's theory of evolution right into the center of organisational analysis.²⁸⁶ In addition to the underlying process ontology is also the evolutionary model that emphasise mutual interaction and reciprocal interaction for survival. Haverman and Rao²⁸⁷ have shown that a number of organisations had success with the evolutionary perspective. However, what all these models and perspectives stress is the open systems view of organisations, best understood as ongoing processes rather than collections of parts.

Another process vies with which pragmatism has strong affinities is *complexity theory*.²⁸⁸ At the core of this theory is the idea of emergence and self-organisation processes, in view of which order emerges out of dynamic interaction.²⁸⁹ Self-organisation also correlates strongly with *connectionist* models in psychology.²⁹⁰ These models explain self-organisation as emerging from spontaneous interaction between parts rather than central control. Weick and Roberts²⁹¹ use this study to

²⁸³ For a discussion on "retention" from a sensemaking perspective in the context of organisations as cognitive maps, see Weick 2001: 237-302, 305-354

²⁸⁴ 1979

²⁸⁵ See also Nelson & Winter 1982

²⁸⁶ Morgan 1997: 60ff.

²⁸⁷ 1997

²⁸⁸ We discuss complexity theory in ch. 7 of this study.

²⁸⁹ Kauffman 1993, 1995; Holland 1998. See also Stacey et al. 2000.

²⁹⁰ Cilliers 1998; Morgan 1997; Sternberg 2003

²⁹¹ 2001: 259-279

develop a connectionist model of organisations as *collective minds*. Their model builds on the notion of social ‘heed’ and on Hutchin’s²⁹² model of learning via distributed cognition. However, Weick points out that connectionism is a shaky theory on which to erect a theory of organisational mind, the reason being that there is no turnover of units as is found in organisations. What makes this model attractive to pragmatists is the appearance of order on a collective level due to incremental action on the local level.

It is useful to conclude this section of the discussion by briefly drawing attention to the concept of ‘problem’ in Weick’s thought. Whereas pragmatism lays heavy emphasis on problem solving, for Weick ‘problem’ does not necessary imply something that needs to be solved. As he expresses it, “Ironically, people often can’t solve problems unless they think they aren’t problems”.²⁹³ In this regard he points to the implication of Smith’s²⁹⁴ definition that problems are conceptual entities that are designed rather than discovered. If problems, it means they will be addressed with a person’s general cognitive resources, especially reflective thought. It therefore requires “rich language”, as it affords rich reflective thought. The whole point is, to label something as a problem is a cognitive act. Form a sensemaking perspective it means, once something is labelled a problem, that is when the problem starts.²⁹⁵

To summarise, this chapter has focused discussion on a number of themes in pragmatism, symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology and social constructionism that also strongly feature in Weick’s thought and, hence, in the sensemaking framework. The aim was to show that they all have one common root, namely, pragmatism. They also share the same view of reality, that of a relational and process ontology. In the next chapter, we continue with the central thesis in this study by focusing on Weick’s thought from the perspective of existentialism.

²⁹² 1995

²⁹³ 2001: 427

²⁹⁴ 1995: 89

²⁹⁵ Weick 1995: 90

CHAPTER 5

EXISTENTIALISM AND SENSEMAKING IN ORGANISATIONS

Introduction to existentialism, existentialism distinguished from related types of philosophy, phenomenology, idealism and existential themes

In chapter I, a link between Weick's sensemaking in organisations and existentialism has already been established with the discussion of *meaning* in its existential sense. This chapter serves as an expansion of the thesis that Weick's sensemaking theory can also be understood from an existential perspective.

According to Patka,²⁹⁶ philosophers may be divided into two categories, each of them representing either *logos* – the *idea* – or *bios* – *life* and *existence*. Almost at any historical period “rational intellectualists” are found, defending the priority and the primacy of *logos* and creating systems of philosophy such as idealism or rationalism. On the other hand, there are others who demanded more importance for and attention to the fate of the human existent with all his/her existential concerns demanding some solution. The latter have been known as *philosophers of life*, or *existentialists*. It is in this sense that Weick can be understood as a “philosopher of life”. Having said that, it is acknowledged that there may perhaps be some opposition to the association of Weick with existentialism. Instead, the argument to be put forward here is that Weick can with all due respect be described as a ‘social existentialist’. In other words, it is perhaps more appropriate to describe Weick as an existentialist that focuses primarily on the social psychological process of sensemaking as an outgrowth of people's ongoing (collective) struggle for existence.²⁹⁷

He²⁹⁸ argues, for instance, against the idea of deconstructionists that an organisation be viewed as a text. To argue that the bulk of organisational life is captured by the metaphor of reading texts is to ignore most of the living that goes into that life. Thus,

²⁹⁶ 1972

²⁹⁷ Where to draw the line between individual and social is still an unresolved tension. See Weick 1995: 6.

²⁹⁸ 1995: 15-16

the focus will be on existential themes shared by Weick and to distinguish existentialism from related types of philosophy. Matters that are of great interest to the philosophers of life are questions about the nature of the world, people's place in it, action, heed, practical knowledge, feeling and intuition, decision making and commitment, the self and identity, meaning and the tragic elements in life. Some of these themes will also be discussed in the context of Bergson's process cosmological view.

1. **Introduction to Existentialism**

Macquarrie²⁹⁹ argues that existentialism be viewed as a "style of philosophising" rather than as a single philosophy, since it has no common body of doctrine to which all existentialists subscribe, comparable to idealism or other schools of thought. It is a style that may lead those who adopt it to very different convictions about the world and people's lives in it. Yet, however different the styles may be in the way they "do philosophy", they all tend to concentrate attention on some common themes – on some more than others. For the existentialist, people are never just part of the cosmos but always stand to it in a relationship of tension with possibilities for tragic conflict. One theme that recurs in the writings of its practitioners, is the emotional life of the human being and the tragic elements in human existence – what they referred to as the "human condition".³⁰⁰ Where older schools of philosophy have been dominated by the narrower kinds of rationalism, the feelings, imagination and intuition that has been considered irrelevant to philosophy's task, or even a hindrance, the existentialists claim that it is precisely through these that people are involved in their world and can learn some things about it.

Existentialism, then, is presented as a theory that affirms the primacy, or priority, of existence.³⁰¹ For them as for Weick³⁰² "existence precedes essence". Shinn³⁰³ argues that existentialism turns from abstract essences formed by the mind and focuses on concrete, existing realities – the diversified and chaotic stuff of the world and the

²⁹⁹ 1972

³⁰⁰ Macquarrie 1972: 17

³⁰¹ Foulquié 1950

³⁰² 2001: 96; see also Sartre (in Kaufmann: 1956: 290-291)

³⁰³ 1968

struggling, striving selves of our experience – rather than abstract ideas that have been mistaken for existent reality.³⁰⁴ It asserts that the actor perceives life more intensely than the spectator, that any speculation detached from involvement gives a fraudulent conception of actual existence.

2. **Existentialism Distinguished from Related Types of Philosophy**

Macquarrie³⁰⁵ also points out that, while most existentialists are phenomenologists there are phenomenologists that are not existentialists. And, although there are also strong ties between existentialists and phenomenologists, idealists, empiricists and pragmatists, there are some material differences between them. The focus in this section will be to discuss some overlaps and differences between the different philosophical approaches.

(1) *Phenomenology*. It seems that phenomenology has offered existentialists with the kind of methodology they need to pursue their investigation into human existence.³⁰⁶ A major source of existentialism is the phenomenology of Husserl. The core of this philosophy is description, an effort at improving understanding of ourselves and our world by means of careful description of experience.³⁰⁷ The focus is on a detailed description of the essence of a phenomenon as it is given to consciousness. To ensure accuracy of description, it is necessary to clear the mind of presuppositions and prejudices, and it is likewise necessary to stay within the bounds of description and resist the move from description to inference. However, as Macquarrie³⁰⁸ argued, this proves to be a very difficult undertaking. How can any person be sure that s/he has screened out all her or his presuppositions or beliefs on any subject? Or how can any person ascertain where description ends and inference or interpretation begins?

It is important to note that neither Heidegger nor the other existentialists have simply taken over Husserl's phenomenology in the form in which he taught it.³⁰⁹ They have

³⁰⁴ cf. Whitehead's concept of "misplaced concreteness" discussed in chapter 3 of this study.

³⁰⁵ 1972

³⁰⁶ Patka 1972

³⁰⁷ Boeree 2000

³⁰⁸ 1972: 22

³⁰⁹ Solomon & Higgins 1996

developed phenomenology to suit their own purposes. One sharp difference between phenomenology and existentialism is phenomenology's emphasis in *essence* ("toward the thing!" – their motto)³¹⁰ and that of existentialism on *existence*. Another important difference is that where phenomenology emphasises *standing back* from the realm of experienced existence in order to understand it, existentialists urge thorough-going engagement and involvement.³¹¹ Both Heidegger and Sartre reject the idea that behind phenomena there could be "an utterly inaccessible thing in itself".³¹² For Heidegger, as for Weick, "speech brings to light".³¹³ Speech articulates the phenomena, so that phenomenology is letting be seen that which shows itself. It lets people see the phenomenon in such a way that obstructions are removed and make structures and interconnections known that had hitherto been concealed or not brought into the light.³¹⁴ For Sartre, who rejects the dualism between a phenomenon and the mysterious thing in itself, the phenomenon is simply a coordinated series of manifestations.³¹⁵

(2) *Empiricism*. Although both existentialism and empiricism make common cause against earlier rationalism that (has) prevailed in English-speaking countries, this is also the point where resemblances end. While the empiricists place the emphasis on the outward and sense-experience, the existentialists turn inward for their data. It represents itself in two modes of knowing: the empiricist knows by observation and the existentialist by engagement, action or participation. This existentialist principle features strongly in Weick's emphasis on action,³¹⁶ his arguments that action precedes thought³¹⁷ and that thought more than often stands in the way of action.³¹⁸ Whereas the empiricists claim that knowledge provides them with objectivity and universality,

³¹⁰ Safranski 1998: 72

³¹¹ Stumph 1982

³¹² Macquarrie 1972: 24

³¹³ Weick states that "we are linguistic beings" and meaning is given to life by language (2001: 3). We also note that Weick places a high premium on "words" (1995: 106ff.), "rich language" (1995: 3, 106ff.) and "vocabulary" (1995: 4, 106ff.; 2001: 20, 96).

³¹⁴ in Macquarrie 1972

³¹⁵ in Kaufmann 1956: 222-311

³¹⁶ 1995: 4, 32, 155-168; 2001: 75-76, 225. The central point for Weick is "that when people act, they bring events and structures into existence and set them in motion" (2001: 225), and "People find what's going on first making something happen. Doing something is the key. Until I say something..." (2001: 445)

³¹⁷ 1995: 168; 2001: 7, 85, 95, 189, 195, 224-226

³¹⁸ 1995: 108; 2001: 26

existentialists reply that objectification and abstraction distort the living concrete reality.³¹⁹ The only empirical stance the existentialists have is the fact that they will avoid referring to “man” by designating the existent in the ontological term of *Dasein* (Heidegger).³²⁰

(3) *Pragmatism and existential “rebels”*. Both existentialism and pragmatism protest against abstract intellectualism; both emphasise the relation of belief to action,³²¹ both acknowledge the risk of faith as an attitude about decisions,³²² and both look for confirmation or falsification.³²³ Despite these resemblances, there are profound differences between them. The main difference is that pragmatists are usually optimists and are very little aware of the tragic and frustrating side of life (with the exception of James) as expressed in most existential writings. It is in this sense that Weick puts himself squarely in the existentialist camp.³²⁴ It would only seem fair to say, in light of what he has to say, that his interests are an outgrowth of his own deep-seated desire to understand life and make sense of the world in which people engage an “ongoing struggle for existence”.³²⁵

Macquarrie³²⁶ asserts that existentialists are usually rebels against the establishment – in any field – in that they struggle against the accepted authorities and the traditional canons. Although the term *rebel* may be too strong a word to apply to Weick’s style of theorising (*unconventional* is perhaps more appropriate), it is evident to the attentive student that he “recasts”, “reformulates” or “deconstructs” almost every standard and readily accepted textbook assumption in organisational theory.³²⁷ It is in this context that he³²⁸ argues, for example, that resistance to change is an unfortunate mindset and that we should rather talk of “confronting” in contrast to “oppose” or “combat”. In

³¹⁹ Macquarrie 1972

³²⁰ Macquarrie 1972: 28

³²¹ see also Weick 1995: 133-154

³²² Although it is not our purpose here to discuss organisational decision making, it is useful to note what Weick (1995: 159) has to say about decision making and its implications for identity in an existential context.

³²³ Macquarrie 1972

³²⁴ See our discussion of ‘meaning’ in ch. 2 of this study.

³²⁵ 2001: 5, 96, 98

³²⁶ 1972: 31

³²⁷ See p. 9 in this study for an abbreviated list of some of these “reformulations”.

³²⁸ 1995: 33-34

other words, reformulation for him is the means to create the opportunity for integration, dialogue and the meeting of difference.

3. **Phenomenology, Idealism and Weick**

Existentialists reject idealism. Scruton³²⁹ argues that idealism is used of a variety of positions. He pointed out that Berkeley, for instance, attempted to show that people have no grounds for believing in anything, save the existence of ideas and whatever perceives or conceives them. By idea, Berkeley meant any mental state, whether perception, thought or sensation – in short, anything that would cause a person to look inward. Berkeley was quite honest about what he was trying to say: there is no physical world, and nothing exists except minds. This honesty earned him the label “subjective idealist”. However, Scruton³³⁰ also registers another kind of idealism, namely, ‘objective idealism’. The objective idealist believes that reality is in some sense independent of mind; it is objective in relation to the subject who perceives it. But this type of idealist also believes that reality is organised mentally: it gains its character through the process whereby it is known.

Phenomenology starts with phenomena, appearances, which people experience. As such, for the phenomenologists nothing is really, or merely as it appears to be. Husserl developed the term *reduction* to refer to a manner of performing a perception – a conscious process, in such a way that attention is focused not on what is perceived but on the process of perception. This term also serves the function of *bracketing out* what a thing is by focusing on how it presents itself to consciousness.³³¹ Phenomenology shows that people’s perceptions and thoughts operate differently to what is commonly assumed. Ultimately, bracketing means suspending judgement about the true nature or ultimate reality of the experience (or world), even whether or not it exists.³³² Solomon and Higgins³³³ pointed out that Husserl was, while rebelling against Hegel’s dialectical pluralism, also an idealist (“with many qualifications”) in that he believed that the world was constituted by consciousness. Although he never doubted the existence of

³²⁹ 1994

³³⁰ 1994: 24

³³¹ Safranski 1998

³³² Boeree 2000

³³³ 1996

the material world for a moment, he did insist that consciousness is people's only access to the world and that knowledge comes through experience.³³⁴ This argument is also in line with that of Macquarrie.³³⁵

Safranski³³⁶ is of the opinion that Husserl wished to demonstrate that the entire external world is already present within the person and that people are not an empty vessel into which the external world is poured, but that they are invariably *relating* to something. For him, as for Weick, to be conscious, is always to be conscious of something.³³⁷ It is important to note, as Solomon and Higgins pointed out, for Husserl "the thing in itself" never meant a contrast between appearance and some underlying reality, between a phenomenon and "thing in itself". For Husserl the problem starts when one supposes that what one experiences is not, or might not be, the truth. This reflects his realist position, that things perceived are, in other words, not to be taken as merely objects of consciousness, but the things themselves. Solomon and Higgins³³⁸ further argue that Husserl developed his phenomenology as a method for finding and guaranteeing objective truth, and in so doing, defended his perspective against relativism.

It is acknowledged that Weick can also be typified as both phenomenologist and idealist, and it is clear that he theorises from both perspectives.³³⁹ It is important to bear in mind, however, that for Weick, life consists of one continuous stream of experience (note the singular).³⁴⁰ In this regard, it is difficult to understand Weick's position without understanding his concept of time. In referring to Schutz (the sociological phenomenologist) and Hartshorne (the process philosophical-theologian),³⁴¹ he postulates that time exists in two distinct forms: as pure duration and as discrete segments. The only time that people are conscious of the pure duration of time is when they "step outside the stream of experience and direct attention to it" (the

³³⁴ Solomon & Higgins 1996: 248-249

³³⁵ 1972: 23

³³⁶ 1998: 75

³³⁷ 1995: 55

³³⁸ 1996: 252

³³⁹ We elaborate on this aspect of Weick's thought in ch. 8 of this study.

³⁴⁰ 1995: 25

³⁴¹ 1995: 24-25; we elaborate on *time* in ch. 8 of this study.

phenomenological position).³⁴² As he argues, to cope with pure duration, people create breaks in the stream and impose categories on those portions that are set apart (bracketed).³⁴³ However, from a sensemaking perspective, when people bracket, they not only bracket out important aspects that influences sensemaking, but also then act “as if” there is something out there to be discovered – “as if” there is something “out there” (the realist position). The point Weick labours is that the “out there” is invented (the idealist and constructionist positions) and enacted. An enacted world, however, is a real world for Weick. Reactors, pipes, valves exist, their existence is not questioned, but their meaning, their significance and content is.³⁴⁴ The “trick is to conceptualise these things, not so much as ‘out there’, but ‘in here’ where perception, relating and interaction are the tools for cognising them in ways that facilitate action”.³⁴⁵ These objects are inconsequential until acted upon. The challenge is therefore to grasp both aspects of their simultaneity: the materialisation of ideas and the symbolic and practical aspects of things. In other words, the enacted (invented) world is a socially constructed world, not a by-product, after-thought or accident. What is first and foremost in sensemaking then, is action, and not conceptual pictures of the world.³⁴⁶

Although Weick adopts a subjectivist stance toward reality, he defends his position against Burrell and Morgan’s³⁴⁷ accusation, for example, that people who stress a subjectivist stance denies the existence of structures and concrete reality, yet, when operationalising their ideas within an empirical context frequently smuggles in a realist position through the backdoor. Weick’s explains that the central insight of enactive sensemaking is that action is “an ongoing input-output cycle in which subjective interpretations of externally situated information become themselves objectified via behaviour. This continual objective-subjective-objective transformation makes it possible eventually to generate interpretations that are shared by several people. Over time, individual cognitive structures thus become part of a socially reinforced view of the world. The cyclical nature of interpretive activity implies, then, that the material

³⁴² 1995: 25

³⁴³ There is no result *of* process, only *in* process; any descriptions are only moments in a process (1995: 33)

³⁴⁴ 2001: 226

³⁴⁵ Czarniawska-Joerges (in Weick 1995: 165)

³⁴⁶ 1995: 36

³⁴⁷ 1995: 34

and cognitive aspects are thickly interwoven”.³⁴⁸ In other words, people oscillate ontologically because that is what is helping them to understand other people and their worlds. Finally, as Weick puts it, “If people have multiple identities and deal with multiple realities, why should we expect them to be ontological purists?”.³⁴⁹

4. **Existential Themes**

(1) *The problem of knowledge.* Existentialism or the philosophy of life is a vigorous “no” against two previous philosophic systems, positivism and Hegelian idealism as the ultimate expression and extreme case of rationalism and intellectualism. Both systems have one common assumption: the “absolute primacy and superiority of man’s reason and intellect over the rest of [human being’s] psychic disposition, such as imagination, feelings and intuition. Existentialists contend that *logos* (reason) alone cannot account for the complexity of *bios* (life or being)”.³⁵⁰

Patka³⁵¹ argues that on the theoretical level, all idealists maintain the principle of immanence as their fundamental thesis. Following Kant’s account of the make-up and the functioning of pure reason, all modern idealists teach man’s failure to know reality in itself. Human beings only know the internal object of knowledge whose being consists in being known. Idealists maintain that there is no objective reality independent of the knowing subject, and there is no way to break through the belt of subjectivity into a region of transcendent or metaphysical reality. As such, the subject becomes the center and the creative source of all reality. In Hegel, “Reason” has become deified and for existentialists it came to mean the devaluation of the person.³⁵²

What follows is a description of the anti-intellectualist attitude of the existentialists first, and then an analysis of their kind of knowledge, *intuition*, as proposed by Bergson.

According to existentialists, pragmatists and the sensemaking perspective, the person’s intellect is meant by nature to be nothing more than a practical tool³⁵³ or instrument for

³⁴⁸ 1995: 78-79

³⁴⁹ 1995: 35

³⁵⁰ Patka 1972: 14-15

³⁵¹ 1972

³⁵² Patka 1972

³⁵³ Patka 1972: 16-17; Rorty 1989: 3-22; Weick 1995: 57, 165, 175, 182-183

the adaptation of an everchanging reality to the needs for practical action. This is accomplished by freezing the fluid reality in the forms of static immobility required for successful manipulation³⁵⁴ of reality. Objects are created by substituting the person's logical categories for Bergson's *élan vital*³⁵⁵ of original reality. Evolution, said Bergson³⁵⁶, is best explained in terms of a vital impulse, the *élan vital*, which drives all organisms toward constantly more complex and higher modes of organisation. The intellect clears the ground selectively by imposing arbitrarily upon the amorphous reality of changing phenomena its own logical forms, such as identity, relation, cause, effect, regularity, consistency, and so forth. In other words, it is pragmatic action, and the intellect appears, therefore, as the organising power subjected to the demands of pragmatic needs and concerns.

Patka³⁵⁷ pointed out that there are several conclusions existentialists draw from their assumptions about the nature of the intellect: the process of knowledge is not conformity to an intelligible order of beings; it is not correspondence between the subject and object of knowledge either. The person's intellect does not discover, reveal or unravel objective truth; it is, instead, confined to the concerns of pragmatic projection into the future demands imposed on it by the imperative of efficient doing and making. Given this predominance of useful activism over the detached analysis of pure reason in the make-up of the person, it appears to be untrue to claim any privileged situation for the person's reaching power. In the words of Bergson, "action dominates knowledge".³⁵⁸ Consequently, people's universal concepts do not represent "essences" of known objects; they only answer to a merely practical question about what use is made of known things.

Thus, the value of intellectual knowledge becomes necessarily objective and relative, insofar as it is specified by the organic needs of active subjects. Being relative, it also means it is imperfect and deficient in character. It is also just "symbolic" in the sense

³⁵⁴ For a discussion of sensemaking as "manipulation", see Weick 1995: 135, 162-168

³⁵⁵ The essential interior element of all living beings, the creative power that moves in unbroken continuity through all things – Stumph 1982: 387

³⁵⁶ See chapter 2 of this study.

³⁵⁷ 1972: 17

³⁵⁸ Patka 1972: 18

of adapting and thereby distorting reality understood as a constant flux, or change and creative evolution. It is in this context that Weick argues that language is action, it creates, rather than just describe reality. Words³⁵⁹ and the choice of words matter.³⁶⁰ Arguments, negotiation and meetings are necessary, since words and language impose discreet labels on subject matter or impose discrete boundaries on the continuity of the phenomenal world, and since there is always slippage between words and what they refer to. “Words approximate the territory; they never map it perfectly. That is why sensemaking never stops”.³⁶¹

Intuition is what existentialists call their type of knowledge.³⁶² As have been noted in chapter 3, Bergson introduces intuition as a form of “intellectual sympathy”. The psychological process through which intuition as an act of knowledge takes its form, is a single total, and dynamic attitude directed at the totality of being in the constant process of becoming and evolving. The proper object of intuition is not restricted to an object or particular “aspect” of the real; it encompasses the real without freezing it in separate pieces of particular information. It is aimed at the mutual copenetration of the knower with the known. In this regard Weick³⁶³ argues that enactment is actually a mutual creation, of people-world-people, and illustrates with the example from Follet’s³⁶⁴ farmer neighbour. In planting an apple-seed and watering, fertilising and pruning it, a person releases energy in it, and it in turn, in the person. It is not only an interdependent activity but also an ongoing codetermination. What is important to note, however, is that behaviour here is not a relating of object to subject as such, but of two activities in relationship. Thus the duality of subject-object relationship is eliminated.

To elaborate on the elimination of duality, Weick³⁶⁵ also reasons that society and individuals are not – they *do not* – denote two separate phenomena; they are simply

³⁵⁹ 1995: 44

³⁶⁰ 1995: 107, 183

³⁶¹ 1995: 107

³⁶² Patka 1972: 19

³⁶³ 1995: 32

³⁶⁴ 1924

³⁶⁵ 2001: 11

collective (society) and distributive (individuals) of the same thing.³⁶⁶ In the same vein he refers to organisational designers that draw sharp boundaries between organisations and environments, and states that what they miss “is the arbitrariness of the line separating organisation from environment. They miss this because they neglect the ways in which people construct environments that supposedly outrun them”.³⁶⁷ He quotes Vaill³⁶⁸ who argued, “How is it, then, that we are unable to look at organisation design for what they are – highly imperfect and tentative representations of what the world should be like...”.

For Weick, the problem is with the “*the*” before environment, and in this regard points out that much of the talk about environments faced by organisations suffers from “misplaced concreteness”³⁶⁹. People assume the existence of boundaries, insides and outsides, inputs and outputs and consequently, a “the” is imported to imply a unique, objective environment that exists independent of actors. The *the* causes people to act “as if” it knows the environment, what and where it is, and forget that “the environment is located in the mind of the actor and is imposed by him on experience in order to make that experience more meaningful”.³⁷⁰ In other words, there is nothing that is singular or fixed. “The word *environment* suggests that this singular, fixed something is set apart from the individual. Both implications are nonsense”.³⁷¹

What Weick is saying here, is that there are no two separate realities – of society/individuals, of organisations/environments and of organisational/everyday life. Both aspects are only one reality, part of one continuous flow. The closest people can come to the environment is the moments that they punctuate, the portions that are bracketed and separated out of the flow of the stream of experience and divided into units.

For existentialists the outcome of the subject-object identification is described as the emergence of a new reality, apprehended in its totality as a living *becoming*. There is

³⁶⁶ cf. Whitehead’s argument of the same point in chapter 3 of this study.

³⁶⁷ 2001: 84

³⁶⁸ 2001: 87

³⁶⁹ 2001: 184

³⁷⁰ 2001: 185; the topic of organisations existing in the minds of people is discussed in ch. 9 of this study.

³⁷¹ 1995: 31-32

only one deficiency, namely, communication. Since concepts are mere instrumentalities, the existentialist must make use of metaphor, analogy and symbolic imagery. Weick³⁷² illustrates the importance of the link between words and the images it inspires in his discussion of “the Battered-Child Syndrome”. Patka³⁷³ draws attention to the literary style of existentialists, in that they believe that the use of verbs and adjectives is better able to illustrate certain aspects of reality than nouns. Weick also argues to the same effect and states that the world of nouns is a world of fixed and static things, “a perfectly consistent world of structures. The trouble is, there is not much in organisations that correspond to that”.³⁷⁴ Verbs for Weick,³⁷⁵ in other words capture the idea of action and he states that people who think with verbs are more likely to accept life as ongoing events into which they are thrown.

To summarise this section, both existentialists and Weick argue that it is the mind that organises and unifies raw data of sense experience. Both believe that activity (meetings, argument and socialising, for example) dominates knowledge and makes rationality possible, though it never reaches into the things themselves. The difference is perhaps that Weick places more emphasis on social interaction, although existentialists do not negate “being-with-others”.³⁷⁶ As Patka³⁷⁷ also points out, for Bergson, nature takes care rather of society than the individual. The individual is just a cell in the social organism without any detachment or independence of it.

(2) *Thrownness and Complexity*. Existentialists have a definite preference for the new, the original, the atypical and emotionally charged complexity of situations in which the true existential condition of the person is manifested at its best. Patka³⁷⁸ informs us in his examination of existentialism that, “being aggressive thinkers, they choose rather the problematic, exceptional, marginal, at times even the eccentric contents of human life...their emotional dispositions condition them to be prepared to expect and experience the irrational, dangerous and disrupting dimensions of

³⁷² 1995: 1-4

³⁷³ 1972

³⁷⁴ 1995: 188

³⁷⁵ 1995: 188

³⁷⁶ Macquarrie 1972: 102-123

³⁷⁷ 1972: 41

³⁷⁸ 1972: 21

existence”, and adds that all these attitudes are reinforced by a profound dislike of and contempt for the well organised, conservative, traditional and “philistine” way of life led by the majority. The starting point for existentialists is existence, as has been noted, “existence in its critical situations, or at its limits, where these limits and even what lies beyond them are lit up and disclosed”³⁷⁹, and it is in *situations* that the existentialist claims her/his ontological insights, or vision of being.³⁸⁰

Of great significance is to note that the whole of Weick’s discussion of sensemaking in organisations, his organisational theorising and research are marked by one particular and definite setting, namely, that of interruption and the unexpected, disparity and confusion, ambiguity and uncertainty, turbulence and complexity, the unexplainable and inexplicable, of stress and crises, of multiple realities and interpretations, of action and enactment, of shock and emotional arousal – all in the context of organisational and everyday life – where “people are always thrown into the middle of things where projects never seem to start even though they always seem to be interrupted”.³⁸¹ For Weick, then, an unfolding crisis is the setting to watch the dynamics of sensemaking, and in this regard he states that it may be one reason why his work “looks so much like ambulance chasing”.³⁸² “To know my contexts, therefore is to know my work... I was struck by the frequency with which I seem to study what happens when people don’t understand what is going on. My concern is not *déjà vu* (I’ve been here before), but rather, *vujà de* (I have never been here before and have not an idea where I am). Consider the evidence...”.³⁸³

What all these settings preserve is the flow, continuity, and dynamic change that are associated with the process model of sensemaking³⁸⁴ and they all share one question in

³⁷⁹ Macquarrie 1972: 243

³⁸⁰ Compare Weick’s dissertation research discussed in 2001: ix-xii. He states that it is in the complex mixture of prospective and retrospective sensemaking that ontology and epistemology are woven together out of cognitive necessity – that is, to be able to make sense, deal with the world and to justify what they are doing.

³⁸¹ 1995: 43-49; 83-105

³⁸² 2001: 178

³⁸³ Lundberg 1999: 7

³⁸⁴ Weick 1995: 80

common, namely, “what is going on here?”. They could perhaps be best described as settings of *high-discretion*³⁸⁵ that combine high uncertainty with robust interpretation.

It is in this context that Weick also points to the destructive side of deconstructionism that undermines the faith and belief necessary to get sensemaking started. “If there are multiple meanings that collapse under scrutiny, why bother with sensemaking at all?”, he asked.³⁸⁶ In this regard, he points to James’ question, “Is life worth living?”, and the answer is we can make either yes or no valid.³⁸⁷ “Sensemaking, after all, is about the world”,³⁸⁸ and a failure to make sense is consequential and existential. A failure to make sense “throws into question the nature of self and the world”.³⁸⁹ It therefore matters.

Heidegger³⁹⁰ suggests that the world gets “lit up” for us when something goes wrong and, so to speak, *shocks* us into awareness of the instrumental complex that all the time we take for granted. We are sometimes made aware, suddenly and unpleasantly, of the vast interlocking apparatus on which life has come to depend, for instance, when a heavy storm or a strike paralyses a company. Weick quotes Schroeder et al.³⁹¹ who stated that shock stimulates people’s action thresholds to pay attention and initiate *novel* action. “People frequently see things differently when they are shocked into attention, whether the shock is one out of necessity, opportunity, or threat”. It is for this reason that the world, though the necessary condition for people’s existence can also constitute a threat to existence.

It is also important to note that Weick³⁹² argues that to watch jazz improvisation unfold, is to have palpable contact with the “human condition”. He observes that there is a new urgency in organisational studies to understand improvisation and learning that is symptomatic of a growing societal concern about how to cope with discontinuity, multiple commitments, interruptions and transient purposes that dissolve

³⁸⁵ Weick 1995: 176-177

³⁸⁶ 1995: 38

³⁸⁷ 1995: 38

³⁸⁸ Weick 1995: 132

³⁸⁹ 1995: 14

³⁹⁰ in Macquiritte 1972

³⁹¹ 1995: 84-85

³⁹² 2001: 297

without warning. His idea is that living itself is an exercise in improvisation. People compose their lives, and in this regard he quotes Mary Catherine Bateson's³⁹³ moving composite description of "life as improvisation":

"I have been interested in the arts of improvisation...(the idea of life as an improvisatory art) started from a disgruntled reflection upon my own life as a sort of desperate improvisation in which I was constantly trying to make something coherent from conflicting elements to fit rapidly changing settings...Improvisation can be either a last resort or an established way of evoking creativity...Much biography of exceptional people is built around the image of a quest, a journey through a timeless landscape toward an end that is specific, even though it is not fully known...(These assumptions are increasingly inappropriate today because) fluidity and discontinuity are central to the reality in which we live....As a result, the ability to shift from one preoccupation to another, to divide one's attention, to improvise in new circumstances, has always been important to women".

To summarise, Weick argues that people see many of the themes of thrownness, ongoing experience, being in the middle as they move closer to organisations. He therefore expresses the caution to remain sensitive to the reality of continuity, thrownness and flows, and to remember that streams of problems, solutions, people and choices flow through organisations and converge and diverge *independent of human intention*.³⁹⁴

(3) *Description of the world and reality*. What is *the* world? This question seems to always include the point of view of the person who is talking about the world. It does not stand for something independent of those who talk about it, but rather for the total environment as they are aware of it in Weickian terminology, as they mentally or socially construct it. In this sense, the world is not just everything "that is", but that which people construct as a setting in which to live. Again, as Macquarrie³⁹⁵ points out, "This is not to be taken for a moment in the sense of some kind of subjective idealism, as if the material universe depended on its existence on the minds that perceive it". To see the world is to see it from a human point of view; in that sense it becomes obvious that there are as many worlds as there are points of view.

³⁹³ 2001: 297

³⁹⁴ 1995: 44

³⁹⁵ 1972: 79

Furthermore, then, there is no world apart from the human mind that constitutes it. And to put the matter in yet another way, persons are nothing apart from their environment.

Another way the existentialist refers to *the* world, is the world of everyday life – the daily life of routines, tasks and duties. It is a practically oriented view of the world and concerned with “the satisfaction of ordinary human needs”.³⁹⁶ In his discussion of the self, self-concept and identity, Weick³⁹⁷ identifies three primary existential needs: “(a) the need for self-enhancement, as reflected in seeking and maintaining a positive cognitive and affective state about the self; (b) the self-efficacy motive, the need to see oneself as competent and efficacious; and (c) the need for self-consistency, which is the desire to sense and experience coherence and continuity”. From a practical concern, a ‘thing’ is viewed primarily in a pragmatic way, which means that the world of everyday existence is an instrumental world. The notion of ‘thing-in-itself’, inert, indifferent is certainly remote from everyday existing. To say “concern” is to say, in the existential sense, that people are not content to “leave things lying around”³⁹⁸, and in the sensemaking sense, in organisational life people do not “take things for granted”.³⁹⁹

It is significant that Weick⁴⁰⁰ takes the existential term “concern” from Heidegger’s German *Fürsorge*⁴⁰¹ (translated as “care” or “heed”), instead of *Besorgen*, to describe collective mind in organisations as “heedful interrelating” in order to focus the importance of “mind as disposition to heed”, or “a propensity to act in a certain manner or style”. He points out that “heed” is not itself a behaviour, but rather refers to the way behaviours are assembled. “People act heedfully when they act more or less carefully, critically, consistently, purposefully, attentively, studiously, vigilantly, conscientiously, pertinaciously”.⁴⁰² Instruments are inter-locking. They imply one another, in systems and sub-systems. A pen implies paper; the paper implies a social

³⁹⁶ Macquarrie 1972: 83

³⁹⁷ 1995: 20-24

³⁹⁸ Macquarrie 1972: 84

³⁹⁹ Weick 1995: 63

⁴⁰⁰ 2001: 263

⁴⁰¹ Moenkemeyer (in Patka 1972: 102)

⁴⁰² Ryle 1949: 151 (in Weick 2001: 263)

postal system and the postal system implies transportation. Today, as often heard, people live in the context of a world of immense complexity where everything seems to affect everything else. What articulates this world and gives significance to each single item within it is human concern.

From the discussion so far, it is clear that existentialists are not positivists;⁴⁰³ if they are distrustful of rational metaphysics, it does not follow they reject all metaphysics. So, to raise the question of the person is to raise the questions of the world. Some existentialists may avoid the word *metaphysics*, some may even reject it, but they may be found to substitute it for *ontology*, and engaging in a type of inquiry akin to metaphysics.⁴⁰⁴ What has also been noticed is that an existentialist's ontology takes as its starting point 'existence'. The existentialist would doubtless claim some 'truth' for his/her ontological vision, but it is not truth that is provable – it may be plausible.⁴⁰⁵ The only kind of testing is to ask others to participate in the vision ("the moment of immediate consciousness"),⁴⁰⁶ and then learn whether they reach the same ontological insight. And even if something can be said to be known and to receive by direct or indirect impression, it is known only in a context and from a point of view. Even if other people can be brought in to share the ontological vision, the relativity of an historical situation is not removed. The existentialist claims, then, even if a glimpse of reality is granted to persons, language too may run out, and only indirectly can anything be said about reality.⁴⁰⁷ Risk and commitment, in other words, are involved when people decide what they will take for real and what for unreal. There is no ontology that is final or adequate. Existentialism therefore lives in a tension between belief and doubt.

It is in this respect that Weick's⁴⁰⁸ discussion of *wisdom* has more than a little bearing. He refers to Meacham's argument, for example, that "wisdom is an attitude". "To be wise is not to know particular facts but to know without excessive confidence or

⁴⁰³ See Weick 1979: 26, for example.

⁴⁰⁴ Macquarrie 1972: 241

⁴⁰⁵ cf. Weick 1995: 55-61

⁴⁰⁶ Weick 1995: 24-25

⁴⁰⁷ Macquarrie 1972

⁴⁰⁸ 2001: 112-113; 368-369; 391-393

excessive cautiousness...Wisdom is an attitude taken by persons toward the beliefs, values, knowledge, information, abilities, and skills that are held, a tendency to doubt that these are necessary true or valid and to doubt that they are an exhaustive set of those things that could be known".⁴⁰⁹ Extreme caution and extreme confidence, then, can both destroy what an organisation most need in changing times, namely curiosity, openness and complex sensing. Overconfidence shuns curiosity because it has the feeling of knowing everything there is to know about something and doubt shuns curiosity out of fear that it would deepen uncertainty – both positions are closed-minded, which means neither makes good judgements. It is in this sense that wisdom, which avoids extremes, improves adaptability.⁴¹⁰ It is also useful to note that wisdom refers to an attitude toward knowledge; not the substance of knowledge itself.⁴¹¹

It is perhaps necessary at this point to take a look at what Weick himself explicitly has to say about the world and reality.

The picture of the world that Weick carries across is that the world is not a tidy place. People live in a turbulent, transient world, he says.⁴¹² If people think they can either save or understand this world, they are kidding themselves.⁴¹³ Weick states that his own desire to understand the world has led him to attribute the same desire to the world itself. "Thus, I view organisations as collections of people trying to make sense of what is happening around them...we inhabit a reality in which it makes sense to make sense".⁴¹⁴

In his discussion of the nature of sensemaking, he draws an analogy between the game Mastermind and cartography⁴¹⁵ and, in so doing, challenging everyone to examine their own cosmology and overall view of the world as it has implications for beliefs and expectations that are both consequential and existential. The world is not pre-ordered ("preformed") for us to know a priori what the exact building blocks are, or

⁴⁰⁹ 2001: 112-113

⁴¹⁰ 2001: 113

⁴¹¹ 2001: 368

⁴¹² 2001: 73, 21

⁴¹³ 2001: 5

⁴¹⁴ 2001: 3

⁴¹⁵ 2001: 8-9

going to be. If that had been the case, there would have been no place for maps, mapmakers, or meaning. It is the job of the sensemaker to convert a world of experience into an intelligible world. In other words, order in the world is something of people's making (actions) – rooted in imagination and human need – it is not dictated to them. The problem is that the terrain keeps changing; the task is to carve some moments of momentary stability out of continuous flow. Therefore, "For mapmakers the idea of a pre-ordered world has no place or meaning".⁴¹⁶

For Weick the world is neither meaningless nor meaningful either. "Meaning and its absence are given to life by language and imagination".⁴¹⁷ Reality is created and sustained through symbolic processes (language). Symbols, from a sensemaking perspective, assume principal significance as constructs through which individuals concretise and give meaningful forms to their everyday lives. Sensemaking is the "meaningful linkage of symbols and activity, that enables people to come to terms with the on-going struggle for existence",⁴¹⁸ he says. Reality of everyday life is an ongoing accomplishment, as has been noted in the discussion of symbolic interactionism, which takes particular shape and form as people attempt to create order. "Individuals are not seen as living *in*, and acting out their lives in relation *to*, a wider reality, so much as creating and sustaining images of a wider reality, in part to rationalise what they are doing".⁴¹⁹ In other words, people realise their reality by "reading into" their situation patterns of significant meaning. Reality "out there" is therefore only really out there as it is "in here".

Reality is also a matter of interpretation. People define situations as real; they pay attention to some things and ignore others, which depends on many variables, such as emotions and feelings, prior experience, beliefs, expectations and values. Weick⁴²⁰ refers to Shalin's quote of James' pragmatist dictum that, "We need only in cold blood ACT as if the thing in question were real, and keep acting if it were real, and it will infallibly end by growing in such a connection with our life that it will become real".

⁴¹⁶ 2001: 9

⁴¹⁷ 2001: 3

⁴¹⁸ 2001: 98

⁴¹⁹ 2001: 11

⁴²⁰ 2001: 12

In using Garfinkel's⁴²¹ “documentary method”, Weick states that it serves as a linkage between concrete events and meaningful forms. While the symbol speaks to the here and now and the larger social scene, the documentary method is the means by which these two worlds are connected.

Reality is also treated by Weick as a metaphor. It means that “reality” is only one means by which people attempt to make sense out of a stream of experience that flows by them. He⁴²² states, “Literally, to enact an environment can mean to create the appearance of an environment” or to “stimulate an environment for the sake of representation”. He⁴²³ also quotes Bateson to illustrate the same argument: “An explorer can never know what he is exploring until it has been explored”. The equivalence of that is that an organisation can never know “what it thinks or wants until it sees what it does”. “Know what I think” is the outcome and conclusion of an effort at sensemaking and the activity of *seeing* what a person has said implies organising, in meaningful ways, raw data of letters and words.

To conclude this chapter, a summary of Bergson's⁴²⁴ thought as it relates to the topics discussed here under existentialism and sensemaking in organisations is offered. We will do so with the help of Patka.⁴²⁵

Below the superficial layer of consciousness awareness of the world, of solidified objects, is an intimate region apprehended as the uninterrupted flux or succession of conscious states, which can be best described as “concrete duration” or “life” itself engaged in the process of dynamic unfolding. The essential characteristics of this intimate experience are described by Bergson in terms of a continual flow of experiences in which the totality of one's existence is identified as the copenetration of past, present and projected future. There is no break in the chain of inner experiences, since any previous state announces the subsequent that, in its turn, still contains its predecessor. What he argues is that the inwardness of life is an irreversible process in which something new (novelty) always emerges.

⁴²¹ 2001: 20-23

⁴²² 2001: 188

⁴²³ 2001: 189

⁴²⁴ 1974

⁴²⁵ 1972

Life as spontaneous conation (striving) is radically opposed to all static methods of interpretation. Reality should be described and interpreted “after the model of the reality of our own person”, that is, as constant flux and change. As has been seen in Weick,⁴²⁶ this schematic organisation of reality serves the purpose of preparing the field for manipulation of and control over reality by action. Instead of discovering the purely pragmatic bent of practical thinking, philosophers of previous schools believed that it reveals essences, structures of a given reality, or world of objects “out there”. They consequently failed to discover the true intention of nature. It is people’s constant conation to develop a new point of view by trying to see reality in the perspective of a continuous, uninterrupted duration and succession. For this reason, for the existentialist as well as for Weick, reality is restricted to experiences of personal existence, whose depths must be explored through action and intuition.

The philosophy of life then, tends to be the descriptive analysis of human existence, since one is thrown into a hostile world, the *habitat* for the “human condition” or situation. “Existence” is *the* problem, in fact, the only problem of “existentialism”. Existence precedes essence.

We now turn to systems thinking in continuance of our analysis of Weick’s thought and in line with the central thesis of this study.

⁴²⁶ 1995: 162-168

CHAPTER 6

SYSTEMS THEORY AND SENSEMAKING IN ORGANISATIONS

Introduction to cybernetics, cybernetic ontology and epistemology, Weick's evolutionary model, organisation as closed system, requisite variety, trial-and-error learning, enactment and cognitive mapping

The principles of emergence, self-organisation, organising, connectivity, co-evolution and interdependence are all familiar from systems theory. It is clear from a study of Weick's sensemaking framework that he does not isolate one principle or characteristic and concentrate on it in exclusion of the others. The approach taken in this chapter argues for a deeper understanding of Weick's sensemaking theoretical framework by focusing on several characteristics and philosophical assumptions of cybernetics as systems theory and to show the deep ties between them. Cybernetics and the theory of autopoietic systems are chosen because it links to the central thesis of this study. In this chapter Weick's argument of a complex system as a closed system is also discussed in order to highlight the significance of 'enactment' and since it can be better understood from a closed system rather than an open systems perspective.

1. Introduction to Cybernetics

Systems thinking was the focus of study during the 1930s to 1950s of a number of scholars working in related areas. The related areas covered systems of control, the development of computer language, and the development of a new science of mind in reaction to behaviourism, namely cognitivism. The new systems theories developed along three pathways over much the same period of time: the *general systems theory* of von Bertalanffy⁴²⁷ and Boulding,⁴²⁸ *cybernetics* of Wiener⁴²⁹ and Ashby,⁴³⁰ and

⁴²⁷ 1968

⁴²⁸ 1956

⁴²⁹ 1948

⁴³⁰ 1952; 1956

systems dynamics of Forrester.⁴³¹ Stacey et al.⁴³² argue that it was engineers who brought with them the notion of control that took the lead in developing the theories of cybernetic systems and system dynamics, while biologists, concerned with biological mechanism, developed general systems theory.

Cybernetics was first introduced by the mathematician Wiener,⁴³³ as the science of communication and control in the animal and machine (to which might now be added: in society and individual human beings). It grew out of Shannon and Weaver's⁴³⁴ information theory, which was designed to optimise the transmission of information through communication channels and the feedback concept used in engineering control systems. In its present incarnation of "second-order cybernetics", its emphasis is on how observers construct models of the systems with which they interact.⁴³⁵ Cybernetics proposes a revolution with respect to the linear, mechanistic models of traditional Newtonian science and the positivist viewpoint developed in science.

Heylighen⁴³⁶ describes cybernetics not only as a way of thinking about systems, but as a worldview, officially referred to as an "evolutionary-systemic worldview", with an ontology that is related to the organic process model of Bergson and Whitehead. Its historical origin, he states, can be traced back even further to the development from Kant to Schopenhauer. This worldview comprises concepts and principles developed in cybernetics, systems theory and the theory of evolution. It serves as a framework that guides action, that ties everything together, that allows people to understand society, the world and their place in it. It also provides a picture of the whole, in particular how to understand and cope with complexity and change.

Turchin et al.⁴³⁷ describe the philosophy that underpins the evolutionary-systemic worldview. It is on that description that this study focuses on in the next subsection.

⁴³¹ 1969

⁴³² 2000

⁴³³ Heylighen 1997

⁴³⁴ 1949

⁴³⁵ Heylighen 1997

⁴³⁶ 1997

⁴³⁷ 1993

2. **Cybernetic Ontology and Epistemology**

While being aware that ontology and metaphysics are sometimes considered to be identical, Heylighen⁴³⁸ describes the differences as follows: *Metaphysics* is the branch of philosophy that specifies the most fundamental categories of existence, the elementary substances or structures out of which the world is made and seeks to answer the question, “what is the nature of reality?”. *Ontology*, the theory of being itself, analyses the most general and abstract concepts or distinctions that underlie every more specific description of any phenomena in the world, for example, time, space, process, cause and effect and system. He also argues that an agent using a particular model will only be able to perceive that part of the world that his/her ontology is able to represent. In a sense, then, only the things contained in a person’s ontology can exist for that agent. In that way, ontology becomes the basic level of a knowledge representation scheme.

Heylighen et al.⁴³⁹ also postulate that in a traditional systems philosophy, *organising* might be seen as the fundamental principle of being, rather than matter or the laws of nature. It is significant that Weick⁴⁴⁰ argues that it is useful to think about his organising formulation as a *metatheory*, as “a general set of prescriptions for anyone developing his own theory of organisations”. As such, his organising principle is his theory about organisation. But it should also be interpreted to serve the purpose of connecting both theory and reality. From the perspective of a *constructive*⁴⁴¹ evolutionary-systemic philosophy, the essence is the *process* through which *organisation* is created. For this reason, its ontology starts with *actions*, rather than from static objects, particles, energy or ideas. Heylighen et al.⁴⁴² also argue that these actions are the “primitive” elements, the building blocks of their vision of reality, and therefore remained undefined. Actions are neither general nor deterministic but involve the element of freedom. A sequence of actions constitutes a process. It has already been noted that Weick⁴⁴³ argues that sensemaking is understood as a process

⁴³⁸ 1995

⁴³⁹ 1997

⁴⁴⁰ 1979: 235

⁴⁴¹ Turchin et al. 1993

⁴⁴² 1997

⁴⁴³ 1995: 17-18

grounded in seven properties or characteristics, that each of the seven characteristics incorporate action and context, which are key aspects of sensemaking, and that all seven can be represented “crudely” as a sequence.

Heylighen et al.⁴⁴⁴ go on to say that relative stable systems are constructed through evolutionary processes and the mechanisms of variation and selection. This leads to the spontaneous emergence of more complex organisations during evolution. The development sequence provides the cyberneticists with a basis for their cosmology. Not only does self-organisation make the existence of an external designer or director superfluous, but is the whole more than the sum of the parts in such systems. The behaviour of parts is at the same time constraint or directed by the behaviour of the whole. A fundamental type of emergence is the “meta-system transition”, the movement from one level of control to another, while increasing the overall freedom and adaptivity of the system. The description of this type of systems dynamic resonates with Weick’s⁴⁴⁵ discussion of organisations⁴⁴⁶ and sensemaking as a central activity in the construction of both “the” organisation and “the” environment it confronts, the transition from one adaptive social form to the next and the movement of sensemaking between social forms, and organising as bridging process during transitions and movements.

Cyberneticists also consider language as a material to create models of reality, or the world. The job language has, is organisation of experience that serves as predictions about future events. As such, for language to be good at this task, it needs not be put in a direct and simple correspondence with the observable reality. For example, when Thales said that all is water, he did not mean it quite literally; his “water” should be read as ‘fluid’, some abstract substance which can change its form and is infinitely divisible. When language is understood in instrumental terms by which humans organise reality, then the correspondence theory of truth becomes quite unnecessary. Cyberneticists therefore use the term epistemology for the language based description and the term ontology for the phenomenological experience or manifestation of the consequences of the description. Ontology might therefore be considered as “purely”

⁴⁴⁴ 1997: 1-2

⁴⁴⁵ 1995: 69ff.

⁴⁴⁶ Note the absence of the article “the” in front of *organisations*.

semantic – epistemology has both “syntactic” (the description itself) and “semantic” (the ontological interpretation) aspects. This view of language and truth is also a feature in the thought of Weick,⁴⁴⁷ as his discussions of and references to concepts like ‘plausibility’, ‘coherence’, ‘instrumentality’ and ‘linguistic beings’ reflect.

A cyberneticists view of knowledge is described as both a *pragmatic* and *evolutionary* epistemology.⁴⁴⁸ According to pragmatic epistemology, knowledge consists of models that attempt to represent the environment in such a way as to maximally simplify problem solving. While pragmatic epistemology does not give a clear answer where knowledge or models come from, there is the implicit assumption that models are built from parts of other models and empirical data on the basis of *trail-and-error* complemented with some heuristics or intuition. Evolutionary epistemology, then, assumes that knowledge is constructed by the subject or group of subjects as an *ongoing* process in order to adapt to their environment in the broad sense. Pragmatism also incorporates the view of knowledge from a social constructivist point of view, in that it attracts attention to communication, negotiation and social processes and sees consensus between different subjects as the criterion to judge knowledge. Again, from a constructionist point of view, cyberneticists consider cognition to serve an adaptive and organisation function of the experiential world, and not the discovery of an objective ontological reality.

A review of constructivism reveals that it has its roots in Kant’s synthesis of rationalism and empiricism, which postulates that the subject has no direct access to external reality, and can only develop knowledge by using in-built cognitive principles (“categories”) to organise experience. In cybernetics, constructivism has been elaborated by von Foerster⁴⁴⁹ and further developed by Maturana and Varela,⁴⁵⁰ who see knowledge as a necessary component of the process of autopoiesis (“self-reference” or “self-production”) characterising living organisms. Maturana and Varela’s primary distinction of the biological roots of understanding is that they propose a way of seeing cognition not as representation of the world “out there”, but

⁴⁴⁷ 1995: 55-60; 57, 60, 67, 90, 107-109; 2001: 3, 9, 20, 96

⁴⁴⁸ Heylighen 1993

⁴⁴⁹ 1984

⁴⁵⁰ 1987

rather as an on-going bringing forth of a world through the process of living itself. Autopoiesis is consequently viewed as a process in which the organism and individual remain in a continuous structural coupling. They also define language as “an ongoing process that only exists as *linguaging*, not as isolated items of behaviour”.⁴⁵¹ As far as causality is concerned, cyberneticists make mutually causal assumptions and remind us that there is always circularity between action and experience.⁴⁵²

The discussion so far is an attempt to sketch a broad outline of the cybernetic evolutionary-systemic meta-theory with a few cursory references to Weick in order to establish a link between the two perspectives. The next section continues the discussion with a specific focus on certain aspects of Weick’s thought in order to make this connection more solid.

3. **The Cybernetic worldview and Weick’s Evolutionary Model**

An analysis of Weick’s thought within the context of cybernetics, reflect a view of an organisation as a living evolving system⁴⁵³ that not so much interacts with an environment as creating/inventing its own environment, and that both organisation and environment evolve out of interaction and are mutually constructed. Weick therefore refers to organisation as an activity system that generates action⁴⁵⁴, as a self-correcting system⁴⁵⁵ that is constituted by consciousness through interaction, relationship and interdependence. The emphasis in this description shifts therefore to flows,⁴⁵⁶ process,⁴⁵⁷ adaptation and adaptability,⁴⁵⁸ creativity, innovation and invention, and learning. It is in the context of this understanding that his discussion of ontology⁴⁵⁹ and epistemology⁴⁶⁰ takes a form that resembles that of the cybernetic systems view of reality construction and evolution of life. This argument will be elucidated by focusing

⁴⁵¹ 1987: 210

⁴⁵² See Maturana & Varela 1987: 26, 48-49, 244

⁴⁵³ 2001: 211

⁴⁵⁴ 1995: 134

⁴⁵⁵ 2001: 194

⁴⁵⁶ 1979: 120

⁴⁵⁷ 2001: 81

⁴⁵⁸ 2001: 380-401

⁴⁵⁹ 1995: 30-38; 2001: ix-xi

⁴⁶⁰ 1995: 69, 121-123, 125

briefly on Weick's own evolutionary model of organisation and his concepts of enactment, the law of requisite variety, trial-and-error learning and cause and cognitive maps.

(1) *Weick's evolutionary model.* Evolution is about change. In this respect, it is important to note that Weick⁴⁶¹ emphasises evolution as change, as opposed to toward change. In other words, the emphasis is on “raw change” or the process of change instead of the outcomes of these processes. He⁴⁶² describes the essential ideas in his evolutionary model of organisation as follows: (a) three processes are responsible for evolution – variation, selection and retention; (b) variations are haphazard, are selected and retained that enhance adaptation; (c) variation and retention are opposed; (d) planning or external guidance is unnecessary to explain the course of evolution; (e) variation increases complexity that tends to curb rather than promote variations; (f) any order is established in hindsight or retrospect and not foresight; (g) evolution is essentially opportunistic – current advantages outweigh long-term disadvantages; (h) characteristics are judged adaptive; and (j) evolution can be thought of as a winnowing model.

These ideas are contained in the simple recipe of *organising*, namely, enactment-selection-retention.⁴⁶³ It is significant that Weick consistently applies this model throughout his writings when discussing organisational life. It is also interesting to note that sixteen of his papers in various academic Journals are grouped in his *Making Sense of the Organization*⁴⁶⁴ under the headings of “Enactment”, “Selection” and “Retention”. In tune with the cybernetic evolutionary-systemic view of life and organisation, then, it is notable that Weick argues that the sensemaking process starts with action (enactment), then selection (interpretation)⁴⁶⁵ and then retention (memory and cognitive mapping).

⁴⁶¹ 1979: 120

⁴⁶² 1979: 122-126

⁴⁶³ Weick 1979: 2001: 189

⁴⁶⁴ 2001

⁴⁶⁵ Although it is not our purpose here, it is useful to note that Weick (2001: 237-284) is also discussing the organisation as an interpreting system.

(2) *Learning, requisite variety and cognitive mapping.* Weick⁴⁶⁶ states that an evolutionary epistemology is implicit in sensemaking, and in this regard argues that enactment, viewed as the generation and bracketing of raw data, can also be described using imagery associated with that epistemology.⁴⁶⁷ If we think of the trial and error image then enactment is pure trial, with no judgement of error made, and perception of error is then a selection activity. Error becomes associated with parsing the ongoing stream of experience under the constraint of retained wisdom. In other words, people make sense on a small scale by a stable process of collective trial and error that resembles an evolutionary system.

From Weick's description of the evolutionary epistemology, it is reasonable to conclude that the central idea is that of action, in that people learn by doing and that knowledge is built up as people respond to the situations they encounter. The learning takes the form of a trial-and-error sequence (Weick describes trial and error learning as "the most reliable tool for learning"),⁴⁶⁸ which includes both defensive action (as organisations adjust themselves to reality) and offensive action (as organisations improve fits between themselves and environments).

Through enactment (trial and error learning) people actually engage in a process of mapping their territory and a process of constructing mental models for the purposes of coping with the environment and for future use. The *cognitive map*, the knowledge structures and mental models provide meaningful frames that facilitate sensemaking.⁴⁶⁹ Although all these things are constructed through action and are transmittable through images in memory, beliefs and documents of what actions took place when things happened, there is one thing that cannot be transmitted and that is action itself. Once action is performed, it ceases to exist. That means that know-how embodied in practice can also only be transmitted if it takes on symbolic meaning. As Weick puts it, the more attention is paid to descriptions, "the better able successors will be to benefit from the experience of predecessors."⁴⁷⁰

⁴⁶⁶ 1995: 67

⁴⁶⁷ 2001: 193

⁴⁶⁸ 2001: 449

⁴⁶⁹ 1995: 121

⁴⁷⁰ 1995: 126

Weick states that reasonableness, not accuracy, is the topic of interest in enacting sensemaking.⁴⁷¹ The issue is the pragmatic sensible rather than the strictly logical. If environments are enacted then there is no such thing as representation, that is true or false, there simply are only versions that are more or less reasonable. Discussions about the way things really are, about who is right and who is wrong, will shift to questions such as “What did we do? What senses can we make of those actions? What didn’t we do?”.

Another idea that links into the ideas of evolutionary theory so far discussed, is the *law of requisite variety* – a cybernetic concept and principle developed by Ross Ashby.⁴⁷² This law states “that the variety within a system must be at least as great as the environmental variety against which it is attempting to regulate itself. Put more succinctly, only variety can regulate variety”.⁴⁷³ Requisite variety simply means that organisations have to be preoccupied with keeping sufficient diversity inside the organisation to sense accurately the variety present in ecological changes outside it. Weick, who states that requisite variety has been a central assumption throughout his work, defines it as “complicate yourself if you want to understand complicated environments”.⁴⁷⁴ Applied to organisations the implications is that organisational processes that are applied to equivocal inputs must themselves be equivocal. If a simple process is applied to complicated data, then only a small portion of that data will be registered, attended to and made unequivocal. Therefore, most of the input will remain untouched and will remain a puzzle to people concerning what is up and why they are unable to manage it.

Weick⁴⁷⁵ makes the point that it is the unwillingness to disrupt order, ironically, that makes it impossible for an organisation to create order. If people will engage the unequivocal but are unwilling to participate in the equivocal, then their survival becomes problematic. To put it slightly differently, the three properties, many elements, independence of elements and weak internal constraints (loose coupling and

⁴⁷¹ 2001: 195

⁴⁷² see also Morgan 1997: 112

⁴⁷³ Buckley 1968 (in Weick 1979: 188)

⁴⁷⁴ 1995: 56

⁴⁷⁵ 1979

autonomy) are the properties associated with a good medium that registers accurately the things to which it is exposed. And it is the detailed registering that has to occur if an equivocal input is to be dealt with in all its variety.

4. **Complex Organisation as Closed System**

Weick's understanding of complex systems differs in two important respects from the views of the philosopher, Paul Cilliers, namely: (a) in the application of insights from chaos theory,⁴⁷⁶ and (b) complex systems as closed systems. The focus in this subsection is therefore two-fold: Firstly, to discuss the concept of "sensitivity to initial conditions" in chaos theory⁴⁷⁷ and the importance of this insight for sensemaking theory, and secondly, to discuss Weick's idea of the organisation as a closed system in the context of Maturana and Varela's theory of autopoiesis.

(1) *Initial conditions.* In discussing the relationship between chaos and complexity theory, Cilliers⁴⁷⁸ laid down some valid reasons why chaos theory does not help people to understand the dynamics of complex systems, but then asserts that "a sensitivity to initial conditions, for example, is *not* such an important issue".⁴⁷⁹ This assertion is something sensemaking radically differs from. In fact, in sensemaking theory, it is one of *the* issues in complex systems. A few examples will suffice.

In discussing the collapse of sensemaking in 'The Mann Gulch Disaster'⁴⁸⁰ in which 13 young men lost their lives, Weick uses the disaster to illustrate a gap in current understanding of organisations. In the context of discussing the spread of a "small fire" and the attitude of wisdom, he quotes what Maclean calls "the first principle of reality: 'little things suddenly and literally can become big as hell, the ordinary can suddenly become monstrous, and the upgulf breezes can suddenly turn to murder'".⁴⁸¹

⁴⁷⁶ The inclusion of chaos theory in a discussion under systems theory and cybernetics is purely pragmatic. It simply flows from Cilliers' (1998: ix) rejection of chaos theory's "initial conditions" in the context of a discussion of complexity and complex systems.

⁴⁷⁷ Gleick 1997

⁴⁷⁸ 1998: ix

⁴⁷⁹ Emphasis added.

⁴⁸⁰ 2001: 100-121

⁴⁸¹ 2001: 112

Weick⁴⁸² argues similarly in the context of self-fulfilling prophecies, and of what is imagined is implied, that small-scale, micro behavioural commitments can have macro consequences, and since social structure is acted into the world, it imposes order on that world. Weick⁴⁸³ also illustrates how improvisation shares an important property of chaos theory. Finally, Weick and Sutcliffe,⁴⁸⁴ recently published an entire book to emphasise the importance of mindfulness in organisational complexity, and argues to the effect that much of organisational troubles develop into the uncontrollable because of the overwhelming tendency to respond to weak signals with a weak response.

Because the world is both unknowable and unpredictable, “Sensemaking is about small pockets of sense, often pragmatically helpful, that lie behind ‘larger’ understandings. When people act their way into their values, these moments are seldom epiphanies. Instead, they are usually small, everyday committing moments. These moments are the feedstock of sensemaking. That is why students of sensemaking get so worked up over the small acts that may have large consequences”.⁴⁸⁵

(2) *Autopoiesis and enactment*. Cilliers argues that complex systems are open systems,⁴⁸⁶ not closed off and that social systems interact with the ecosystem.⁴⁸⁷ Although Weick⁴⁸⁸ states that there is no theory of organisations that is characteristic of the sensemaking paradigm, he does add that there are ways to talk *about* organisations. One of his discussions of organisation occurs in the context of open systems.⁴⁸⁹ However, in explaining his ‘organising formulation’⁴⁹⁰ he also draws attention to a ‘subtlety’ “that should be mentioned lest the model should be misrepresented”, and that is that the organising model suggests that organisations can and do act like *closed systems*. The imagery that we have of open systems, he reasons, is that of interaction between “the” organisation and “the” environment. What is often

⁴⁸² 2001: 14-16

⁴⁸³ 2001: 289

⁴⁸⁴ 2001

⁴⁸⁵ Weick 2001: 96

⁴⁸⁶ 1998: 99

⁴⁸⁷ 1998: 122

⁴⁸⁸ 1995: 69

⁴⁸⁹ 1995: 70-71

⁴⁹⁰ 1979: 235-238

misunderstood is that organisations *enact* their environments, as their environments create them. Moreover, open systems models have also directed attention away from understanding how self-containment can persist – that is, “if an organisation can credits its retention in both the selection and enactment process, it can effectively seal itself off from ecological changes for long periods of time”.⁴⁹¹

It is necessary to labour Weick’s conceptualisation of enactment. It is important to understand why Weick purposely labelled the organisational equivalent of variation *enactment*, and that is to emphasise that people construct, rearrange, single out and demolish many “objective” features of their surroundings. When people act they unrandomise variables, insert vestiges of orderliness and literally create their own constraints. This holds true whether those constraints are in imagination or created in actuality. Again, this argument is in line with the cybernetic constructivist view of reality, which stress that reality is selectively perceived, rearranged cognitively and negotiated interpersonally. It therefore makes sense to argue that the social order exists precariously and has *no existence at all independent* of the person’s cognition. What the organising model highlight is that order imposed is order discovered, on the grounds that *action defines cognition*, also because the basic sensemaking device used within organisations is assumed to be talking to discover thinking. For Weick, action does not only precedes cognition,⁴⁹² but is it also his argument that cognition often stands in the way of action.⁴⁹³ In the sequence of action-thought, the talking is then the occasion for defining and articulating cognitions. The idea of reality as a social construction then puts the whole emphasis on a negotiated reality, while construction emphasises the idea that people put things “out there”. It is that initial implanting of reality that is preserved by the word *enactment*. The central idea of enactment is, therefore, that when people act, they bring events and structures into existence and set them in motion.

With regard to the theory of Maturana and Varela that autopoietic systems are closed systems, Morgan⁴⁹⁴ points out that the idea that living systems are open to the

⁴⁹¹ 1979: 239

⁴⁹² 2001: 224-225

⁴⁹³ 2001: 7, 85, 95; see also Rorty 1989: 12.

⁴⁹⁴ 1997: 253-254

environment, is in their view, the product of an attempt to make sense of such systems from *the standpoint of the observer*. To continue with Morgan, according to them living systems strive to maintain their own identity by subordinating all changes to the maintenance of their own organisation as a given set of relations. “They do so by engaging in circular patterns of interaction whereby change in one element of the system is coupled with changes elsewhere, setting up continuous patterns of interaction that are always self-referential. They are self-referential because a system cannot enter into interactions that are not specified in the pattern of relations that define its organisation”.⁴⁹⁵ What they are saying then, is that the ‘environment’ with which the organisation interacts, is really a reflection of its own organisation, or ‘idea’ of that ‘environment’. In other words, that environment, is not a separate environment (as Weick consistently argues), but one that is “in here” and enacted (as part of itself). Morgan also makes the important point that, in saying that living systems are closed and autonomous, Maturana and Varela are *not* saying that they are *isolated*. “The closure and autonomy to which they refer are organisational. They are saying that living systems close in on themselves to maintain stable patterns of relations and that it is this process of closure or self-reference that ultimately distinguishes a system as a system”.⁴⁹⁶

Although Morgan⁴⁹⁷ states that Weick’s idea of enactment as self-referential process is very consistent with the idea of autopoiesis, it is the contention in this thesis that neither enactment nor autopoiesis can be fully understood outside the process⁴⁹⁸ view of reality that underpins it, and which we have attempted to describe in this and the previous chapters. In addition to Morgan’s insights, it is useful to draw attention to another important insight as registered by Cary Wolfe.⁴⁹⁹

The key distinction for the theory of autopoiesis is the distinction between *organisation* (it signifies those relations that must be present in order for something to exist), and *structure* (which denotes the components and relations that actually

⁴⁹⁵ 1997: 253

⁴⁹⁶ 1997: 254

⁴⁹⁷ 1979: 256

⁴⁹⁸ For a more and readable exposition of process, see Bohm 1980.

⁴⁹⁹ in Rasch & Wolfe 2000: 180

constitute a particular unity and make its organisation real). The important point that she highlights is that all autopoietic systems are closed (self-referential) on the level of organisation but open to environmental perturbations on the level of structure.⁵⁰⁰ Information is therefore not a prespecified quantity that exists independently in the world and can act as the input to a cognitive system. The difference between a cognitive system and a poietic system in general, is that brains use processes that change themselves – “and this means we cannot separate such processes from the products they produce”.⁵⁰¹ As Varela et al.⁵⁰² put it, “Our intention is to bypass entirely this logical geography of inner versus outer by studying cognition not as recovery or projection but as embodied action”. In other words, a cognising system engages the ‘world’ only in terms of perturbations in its nervous system, which is “*operationally closed*” (its transformations only occurs within its bounds). To the extent that the nervous system recursively interconnects its components (as in our brains), the organism is capable of generating, maintaining and re-engaging its own states as if they were literal representations of external phenomena.

In addition to the above, the concept of ‘enactment’ also points to the following three insights. Firstly, it cautions us not to equate action with simple stimulus-response, action-reaction behaviour. It is rather that people actively construct/ organise/rearrange the environments cognitively, which is then acted out and subsequently “discovered” as the environment they wish to control. Secondly, the implicit message is that if organisations can control their perceptions, they are not slaves of “the” environment. If people want to change their environments they need to change their talk (to see what they think) and walk (their doing). If organisations impose limitations on themselves, they will surely enact those limitations into the environment. Finally, if ‘environment’ in open systems imagery is replaced with ‘world’⁵⁰³, a different picture emerges. It follows (a) that organisations are already and always in a world (reality/ontology), a world of its own making, and (b) it also reveals the source or location of that world, namely, the social psychological processes of relating as the embodiment of people

⁵⁰⁰ 2000: 180

⁵⁰¹ 2000: 180-18

⁵⁰² in Rasch & Wolfe 2000: 181

⁵⁰³ “World” here is not to be confused with planet earth or the natural world, but must be viewed as in the sense of “the world of science”, “the world of computers” or “the world of a mathematician”.

interaction (read ‘organisation’). To enlarge this picture, it is reasonable to say that an organisation continuously “performs” its own world and may thus be seen as life lived in ongoing projects. The world of the organisation is thus the result of what an organisation does and how it makes sense.

We can summarise this chapter by listing some common assumptions between the cybernetic systems approach, the theory of autopoietic systems and Weick.

- (a) *Holism*. People who claim to take a systems approach focus on the whole as their level of explanation, as opposed to a reductionist approach. In other words, an entity can be best understood by considering it in its entirety. Every system is a unit of many interdependencies, and when one division in the system is changed, the whole organism undergoes correlative changes in many dimensions at the same time.⁵⁰⁴
- (b) *Unit of analysis*. The level of analysis is relationships and patterns rather than entities. Entities only take on definition when they are in interaction with each other. Language captures reality and is an ongoing process that only exists as *linguaging*,⁵⁰⁵ not as isolated items of behaviour.
- (c) *Environment*. “The” organisation and environment are mutually constructed and there is no reality “out there” detached or distinct from the perceiver. The evaluation of whether there is knowledge is made always in relational context. There is no separation between producer and product. The being and doing of an autopoietic unity is inseparable.⁵⁰⁶
- (d) *Causality*. The emphasis is on the interpretation of data and feedback loops, which reminds us that there is always circularity between action and experience. Knowledge generation and sensemaking do not consist of linear explanation that begins with a solid starting point⁵⁰⁷ and develops to completion as everything becomes explained.
- (e) *Reflexivity and cognition*. The constant awareness that the phenomena of knowing cannot be taken as though they are “facts” or objects out there that people can

⁵⁰⁴ Maturana & Varela 1987

⁵⁰⁵ Maturana & Varela 1987

⁵⁰⁶ Maturana & Varela 1987: 48-49

⁵⁰⁷ Sensemaking never starts and it never stops (Weick 1995: 43); Maturana & Varela 1987: 244

grasp and then store in their heads. People are thinking beings and construct maps of reality. Maps are relative and reality is a product of achievement through negotiation and ongoing action.

(f) *Organising and organisation.* In the constructivist evolutionary-systemic view of reality and the world, *organisation* is seen as the fundamental principle in being, the essence of which is *process* through which this organisation is created. Therefore, the ontology starts from *actions*, and is entwined with a negotiated epistemology out of cognitive necessity (that is, to know what is happening and being able to deal with a situation).⁵⁰⁸

It is therefore reasonable to conclude by saying that both the systems view of cybernetics, autopoiesis and Weick's evolutionary model constitute a description of a cosmology and worldview. The next chapter continue with the discussion by focussing attention on complexity theory that also adopts a systems, process cosmology and ontology of reality.

⁵⁰⁸ Weick 2001: ix

CHAPTER 7

COMPLEXITY THEORY AND SENSEMAKING IN ORGANISATIONS

Introduction, complexity theory as interdisciplinary science and the organisation as a complex adaptive system, self-organisation at the edge of chaos, organisational sensemaking and organising

1. Introduction

In chapter 3 it has been pointed out that process thought has a long history. In our time, David Bohm,⁵⁰⁹ a theoretical physicist, has, like Heraclitus around 500 B.C., developed a theory that invites an understanding of the universe as a flowing and unbroken wholeness. Like Heraclitus, he argues a process view of the universe, that flux and change are fundamentals of reality. This theory suggests that in order to understand the secrets of the universe people have to understand the generative processes that link, what Bohm calls the ‘implicate’ and ‘explicate’ orders.

Petzinger⁵¹⁰ argues that complexity theory describes the world as it is – unpredictable, non-linear, uncertain and turbulent. As such, complexity theory provides a different explanation of the world than the Newtonian and Cartesian paradigms. Complexity theory, in other words, is not a methodology or “toolkit”, but a conceptual framework, a way of thinking about and a way of seeing the world (cosmology). It offers the following insights and challenges: to rethink the nature of order and organisation, small changes can have large effects, ordered patterns of activity emerge from spontaneous self-organisation, change is the product of tension between opposites, and how organisational life is formed and transformed by underlying processes that have a logic of their own. In sum, complexity theory provides a reason for studying complexity: it explains and thus helps people to understand the nature of the world and the organisations they live in. Its greatest affect is perhaps that it challenges almost

⁵⁰⁹ 1980

⁵¹⁰ 1999

every foundation on which existing theories of organisation is build. In this regard, it has also been noted that Weick reformulates almost every standard assumption about organisation and management in organisational theory.⁵¹¹

Since complexity theory and the sensemaking framework have much in common, such as a shared view of the world, systems theory and process thought (as will become apparent), this chapter will limit itself to one other commonality, and that is the answer to the question of how an organisation becomes what it becomes. To answer this question, the focus is on emergence and self-organisation at the edge of chaos (Weick's 'organising'), central concepts in both complexity and sensemaking theory. Of importance will be to explain how sensemaking appears on organisational level in the absence of outside interference.

It is perhaps useful, at this point, to briefly sketch a picture of the traditional notions of management in order to see what complexity and sensemaking theory are up to.

Briefly, as to *how* the organisation changes, the dominant view is that of the manager standing outside the organisation, as objective observer, able to design and control the organisational system by general rules, rational planning and structural controls. The purpose of which is to achieve organisational goals.⁵¹² The why of change is to maintain order (present and future), sameness, harmony, the control of activities and the predictability of outcomes, all considered to be the keys to success. In complexity theory as well as sensemaking in organisations the central alternative concept of causality is that of *self-organisation*. This view departs from the dominant discourse in which design, organising, directing, planning and controlling are seen as the very essence of the management role. According to this view, the creative development inherent in complex adaptive systems cannot be designed, planned or controlled. Weick⁵¹³ argues in this regard that any attempt to construct "the" design is doomed to failure because there is no such thing. He also argues that in a "self-organising organisation,"⁵¹⁴ the idea of an individual manager is a fiction; there is no such thing

⁵¹¹ See footnote 6 on p. 9-10 of this study.

⁵¹² van Niekerk 1988

⁵¹³ 2001: 65

⁵¹⁴ 2001: 4

because management work is profoundly social.⁵¹⁵ It therefore becomes important to examine precisely what self-organisation is.

2. **Complexity Theory as Interdisciplinary Science and the Organisation**

McKelvey⁵¹⁶ argues that Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) has become the ultimate interdisciplinary science focusing on how microstates self-organise into emergent aggregate structures and defined microstates for organisation scientists to mean “discrete random behavioural process events”. Others argue that complexity theory views organisations as complex adaptive systems (Weick⁵¹⁷: “adaptive social forms”) that co-evolve with the environment through the self-organising behaviour of autonomous agents navigating “fitness landscapes”⁵¹⁸ of opportunities and competitive dynamics.⁵¹⁹

While it is sometimes useful to refer to the *science of complexity*⁵²⁰ or simply the *complexity sciences* it is important to note that there is no single Theory of Complexity, but several theories arising from the various sciences of complexity, such as biology, chemistry, computer simulation, evolution, mathematics and physics. Those writing about complexity in human organisations usually draw on concepts to be found in the work on *complex adaptive systems* (Goodman⁵²¹, Kauffman⁵²² and Holland⁵²³), *dissipative structures* (Nicolis⁵²⁴ and Prigogine⁵²⁵), *autopoiesis* (Luhman,⁵²⁶ Maturana and Varela⁵²⁷), *chaos theory* (Gleick⁵²⁸) and *increasing returns*

⁵¹⁵ 1979: 8; 2001: 70

⁵¹⁶ 1999: 5, 7

⁵¹⁷ 1995: 72

⁵¹⁸ Kauffman 1995

⁵¹⁹ Coleman 1999

⁵²⁰ Stacey et al. 2000

⁵²¹ 1995

⁵²² 1993, 1995

⁵²³ 1998

⁵²⁴ 1994

⁵²⁵ 1990

⁵²⁶ 1990

⁵²⁷ 1987

⁵²⁸ 1997

in economics (Arthur⁵²⁹). In light of this, Sim⁵³⁰ states that we may consider complexity theory to be a more advanced version of chaos theory.

Since all living organisms are adaptive systems, for the purposes of this study, organisations will be referred to as complex adaptive *social* systems which suggest that human systems are fundamentally different from other complex systems because they have cognitive faculties that allow them to learn, make choices and to create and change rules of interaction. This view, in other words, differs from chaos theory which is based on the iteration of mathematical algorithms or simple sets of rules of interaction that remain stable. One implication is that, instead of using chaos or complexity as a metaphor or analogy to study human systems, they should be studied as CAS in their own right.

The essence of self-organisation is that system structure often appears without explicit pressure or interference from outside the system. This insight is captured in Stacey et al.'s⁵³¹ definition of *self-organisation* in a CAS as a “process in which local interaction between parts in an organisation produces emergent patterns of behaviour (or action) of a coherent kind in the whole, all in the absence of any design, grand plan or control”. In other words, the constraints on form (that is organisation) is internal to the system, resulting from the interactions among the components and usually independent of the physical nature of those components. What is also noteworthy is that the organisation can evolve in either time or space, maintain a stable form or show transient phenomena. General resource flows within self-organising systems are therefore to be expected although it is not critical to the concept itself.

Cilliers⁵³² adds another dimension to our understanding of CAS by making a distinction between systems that are “complex” and those that are “complicated”. He reasons that a system – despite the fact that it may consist of a large number of components – can be given a complete description in terms of its individual constituents. Such a system is merely *complicated*. Things like jumbo jets and computers are complicated, as opposed to complex. In a *complex system*, the

⁵²⁹ 2002

⁵³⁰ 2002

⁵³¹ 2000: 18

⁵³² 1998: viii-x

interaction between the system and its environment, are of such a nature that the system as a whole cannot be fully understood simply by analysing its components. Relationships in complex systems also shift and change as a result of self-organisation. If it is to be concluded that self-organisation is a property of only living systems, because of their capability to continually create, or recreate, themselves by transforming or replacing their components, then it is also reasonable to conclude that the system function depends on the nature and arrangements of the parts and that system function will change if parts are added, removed or rearranged.

Given the descriptions of CAS above, it is necessary to look at some of its other aspects as well. Internal to a CAS are agents. Depending on the level of analysis, an agent may represent an individual, a group or entire organisation. Agents have varying degrees of connectivity with other agents through which information and resources can flow. Agents possess schema that are both interpretive and behavioural. Schema may be shared amongst the collective (e.g. norms, meanings, values, beliefs and assumptions) or may be highly individualistic. Agents behave so as to increase the “fitness” of the system they belong to and fitness is typically a complex aggregate of both global and local states within the system.

Behaviour in a CAS is, however, induced by the simultaneous and parallel actions of agents within the system and not by a single entity. Thus, the system is referred to as self-organising if it undergoes a process whereby new emergent structures, patterns and properties arise without being imposed on the system. In other words, the behaviour of a CAS is emergent. While emergence means appearance of a property or feature not previously seen through the process of interaction and the spontaneous creation of order,⁵³³ it is critical to note that the spontaneous order is self-organisation. Furthermore, both the concept of emergence and of self-organisation are linked to the ‘whole’, which means that the system needs to be studied as a complete and interacting whole rather than as an assembly of distinct and separate elements. If the interaction stops, the whole will degenerate and emergence will cease to occur.

⁵³³ Kauffman 1993

With the introduction of ‘open systems’ imagery into organisational theory,⁵³⁴ it has become customary to refer to the interaction between an organisation (system) and its environment. As a result, it is now readily assumed that boundaries are recognisable and that the organisation is *adapting to* a supposedly detached or separate environment. However, while a CAS is a dynamic system able to change within and adapt to a changing environment, it is important to note that there is no dichotomy between a system and its environment in the sense that a system always *adapts to* a changing environment. As have already been seen in chapters 5 and 6 of this study, *enactment* places emphasis on reciprocal influence or the process of mutual transformation, and is it not only inextricably linked with emergence and self-organisation, but can it also not be designed or controlled. Enactment thus provides the insight that organisations actively construct (“enact”) an environment, in contrast to mere “adapting to” an environment, which subsequently constrain their actions.

To put it slightly different, control over the environment is about the controlling of cognitions. The reciprocal linkage between ecological change and enactment is intended to depict the subjective origin of organisational realities. Enactment and co-evolution can thus be thought of as endogenous when it applies to individuals and groups within the organisation and as exogenous when the organisation is interacting with the broader ecosystem. However, this may be seen as an oversimplification since boundaries between the organisation and ‘environment’ are not clear-cut or stable.

3. **Emergence and Self-Organisation at the Edge of Chaos**

Complexity theory writers consider the optimal region for rapidly improving adaptive fitness to take place at what is used as a metaphor for organisation, namely, the “edge of chaos”.⁵³⁵ Of interest, for the purposes of this study, is to explore the properties that enable emergent self-organisation to occur, the coupling between components and the place and nature of control.

The edge of chaos is described as the critical point of the system where a small change can either push the system into chaotic behaviour or lock the system into a fixed behaviour. It is also regarded as a phase change – a point at which the appearance of

⁵³⁴ Katz & Kahn 1966

⁵³⁵ e.g. Kauffman 1993

the system changes suddenly. In other words, the edge of chaos is a region between stable equilibrium and random chaos in a complex system.⁵³⁶ What gives those systems a sense of being alive is their movement between critical values, for example, between disorder/chaos and order/structure at some turning point. The edge of chaos is therefore seen as the critical point of the system, the state between stability and instability also described as the “paradox of stable instability”.⁵³⁷ It is at this point where the system tends to gravitate, given the change to do so. It is useful to note that the state or phase space means the total number of behavioural combinations available to the system. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that the possible number of states will grow rapidly with complexity.

One characteristic of systems at the edge of chaos is the coupling between agents and systems. What is regarded as “healthy” coupling (or ties) seems to be a balance between neither too tight nor too loose and this, described as “equivalent to walls separating attractors”,⁵³⁸ contains the spread of change through a system when it is at the edge of chaos. It is this very coupling that is neither too tight or too loose that causes the combined stability and fluidity (coherence) of a system’s structure and behaviour. It is in this context that Marion’s⁵³⁹ argument that self-organising interaction seeks order or coherent pattern that is characterised by causality of a formative and transformative kind, becomes particularly relevant. While ‘formative’ refers to the number and strengths of connection between entities as the cause of the patterns of behaviour in a system, ‘transformative’ refers to the inherent ability of interacting, self-organising agents to produce truly novel, emergent and coherent form that is in some respects similar, but in others radically different. In Kauffman’s⁵⁴⁰ scheme form emerges through self-organising processes and is in perpetual construction. Based on this, it is reasonable to say that the paradoxical quality of the edge of chaos is characterised by a seeking of order/coherence/stability while in a state far from equilibrium as the result of interacting or self-organising processes.

⁵³⁶ Goodwin 1994; Holland 1998; Kauffman 1993, 1995; Marion 1999

⁵³⁷ Stacey et al. 2000: 112

⁵³⁸ Stacey et al. 2000: 137

⁵³⁹ 1999

⁵⁴⁰ 1995

In organisational terms the edge of chaos as metaphor for organisations means neither too little nor too much structure and the balance between relative independence and relative interdependence between parts. This aspect of an organisation also becomes apparent in Coleman's⁵⁴¹ argument that few and strong ties produce stability and many and weak ties produce instability. Coleman also argues that values and belief systems, for example, is equivalent to tight controls and management's confidence and trust as equivalent to loose controls.

What too loose and too tight ties/controls refer to, then, is the degree of connectivity between the parts of a system and the parts and the system as a whole. In other words, for self-organisation to occur, the system must be neither too sparsely connected (so that units are independent or isolated) nor too richly connected (so that parts are so absorbed that it leaves them with no sense of freedom or autonomy). This concurs with Coleman's⁵⁴² argument that the space for creativity and innovation is a dialectical state of tension between over-control and chaos. If a system behaves only chaotically it panics and is useless. On the other hand, if the system is too stable it stagnates and is also handicapped. It can therefore be concluded that what the issue of coupling or connectivity in essence implies, is that the degree and nature of the coupling between parts in a system will affect its responsiveness to changes within and outside the system.

Kauffman⁵⁴³ demonstrates in his computer simulations of the evolution of life that a system consisting of a large number of entities, or agents, acting randomly with each other, is likely to evolve into a connected, autocatalytic (self-organising) system in a relatively short period of time. In other words, as entities interact randomly with each other, some entities play a part in the construction of others, the process of catalysis. In terms of causality, this means that entity A plays a part in the construction of B, which plays a part in the construction of C, which plays a part in the construction of A. This is in contrast to traditional linear thinking according to which a cause A results in effect B. In other words, in circular or mutual causality the understanding is that A cannot do things to B without being itself affected. By implication, since everything is

⁵⁴¹ 1999: 33-41

⁵⁴² 1999: 35, 40

⁵⁴³ 1995: 74-77

related to everything else in the organisation, like a spider-web, it is reasonable to say that not only will cause and effect relationships be difficult to identify, but will they seldom remain stable because of repeated change and innovation. Novelty will therefore emerge in radically unpredictable ways.

The whole aspect of control and stability through self-organising processes at the edge of chaos makes the idea of an internal subject controlling the behaviour of the system or the notion of an external designer suspect.⁵⁴⁴ However, while no agent is “in control” of the system’s evolution, it is nevertheless evolving in a controlled manner with the source of this control in the pattern of conflicting constraints.

Thus, at the edge of chaos, a CAS configures itself into closely connected clusters that make it difficult for perturbations to cascade through it. This happens through canalisation (restrictions), which means that many agents follow the same rules so that there are many chances of the same responses and patterns of response being reproduced.

Since the natural result of the sensemaking process is a specific intersubjectivity, to be expressed in changed ways of thinking, talking and acting, of interest is to investigate how sensemaking appears on organisational level.

4. **Organisational Sensemaking and Organising**

Sensemaking, it has been argued, is the activity that copes with reality as an ongoing accomplishment that emerges from effort to create order, and to make retrospect sense of what occurs. In a nutshell, sensemaking theory is rooted in an understanding of human cognitive functions as the embodiment of complexity and is it therefore reasonable to refer to organisations as complex bodies of cognition.

The need for sensemaking is assumed to increase when, for example, existing meaning structures are questioned or change, when people’s thresholds of dissatisfaction are acceded, in moments of uncertainty, ambiguity, crisis situations, when ongoing projects are interrupted or when there is a lack of fit between what people expect and what they experience. In a word, on occasions when novel moments in organisations capture sustained attention and people persist in trying to make sense of what they

⁵⁴⁴ Cilliers 1998; Lucas 2003; Stacey et al. 2000

notice. In these moments people vest objects, utterances and actions with subjective meaning that helps make their world intelligible. Actions toward “things”, in other words, depend on the meaning they represent to them and not the things themselves.⁵⁴⁵

Although Weick⁵⁴⁶ discusses organisational sensemaking on both the individual and organisational level, he takes great pains to show that it is a collective endeavour. He uses the insights of Wiley⁵⁴⁷ to actually distinguish between four levels of sensemaking. First, the level of the individual “I” (self, agent, subject), who has thoughts, beliefs, feelings, experiences, intentions, etc. Here, meaning is within the self. Secondly, the “I-You” level, referred to as the *intersubjective* level. It is the level of interaction between agents in conversations who interprets events and situations to create shared meaning. It is important to note that at this level the meaning is not within but between and among selves. Third, the “we” level of social structure that emerges from social interaction, is characterised by a shift from the intersubjective to *generic subjectivity*. Here, there are no selves and structure implies a generic self, an interchangeable part – as filler of roles and follower of rules – but no concrete, individual selves. The fourth level is that of culture, symbolic reality and ideology – of pure meanings, divorced from individuals – referred to as the *extrasubjective* level of sensemaking.

It is important to discuss Weick’s⁵⁴⁸ understanding of *organising* in the context of organisational sensemaking, as it correlates with the insights of self-organisation at the edge of chaos discussed earlier. Organising is a self-organising process characterised by movement (from vertical to horizontal; from less open to more openness to the environment; from tight to looser couplings or structures among components; from structure to natural process and from less ambiguity to more ambiguity), information and communication, substitution and replacement, identity and interactive relationship.⁵⁴⁹ He introduces organising as something that comes into play in the

⁵⁴⁵ Bolman & Deal 1991

⁵⁴⁶ Weick 1995

⁵⁴⁷ 1994; on page 43 of this study the focus was on the individual, that is, subjective level.

⁵⁴⁸ Weick’s (2001: 58ff.; 181ff.; 284-286) discussion of improvised theatre and improvisations jazz musicians serves as excellent illustrations to deepen understanding of self-organising processes.

⁵⁴⁹ Weick 1995: 70-72, 175

movement between the intersubjective and generic subjectivity. That means, organising is an activity between relative independence and relative interdependence that serves several purposes. Because people can be replaced or substituted for in organisations, organising (as process and quality of interaction) makes it possible for understanding to be picked up by people who did not participate in the previous, original intersubjective construction. It further serves to keep action and understanding from getting stuck in either of the two social forms. Put differently, organising serves as both a link and bridge between the two forms since intersubjective understanding must translate into the generic in order for coordinated action to take place.

Earlier it has been noted that one of the insights from complexity theory is that change at the edge of chaos is the product of tension, which may also be defined as a failure to understand, confusion as a result of ambiguity and information overload, uncertainty and interruptions. Another aspect of tension is the felt *sense of urgency*, defined as the rate at which adaptive events take place – metaphorically expressed as an organisation's metabolic or energy conversion rate. While Weick's organising can be interpreted as the system's activity that seeks to reduce the tensions, it may also be argued that the organising is the communication.⁵⁵⁰ In other words, only by virtue of continuous communication are exchanges and interpretations of intersubjectivity and the shared understandings of generic subjectivity, developed and maintained. If the communication activity stops, organisation disappears.

As has been pointed out, the sensemaking framework is part of what is described, typified and categorised as the constructionist school of thought. The important insight derived from this school of thought is that reality (ontology) is constructed by interconnected patterns of communication. If this insight is read together with the discussion above, then it is reasonable to conclude that reality is defined not so much by individual acts, but by complex and organised patterns of ongoing actions.

What the above analysis highlights, is that the conjuncture of these procedures, interpretations and behaviours describes what organising does and what organisation is. The important point is that no-one person rules, that order and control are made possible by the mutual influence of interlocked behaviours and pattern of relationships.

⁵⁵⁰ Weick 1995: 75

It has already been pointed out that complexity theory describes the world as it is. In this regard, it is widely recognised that the business environment of most companies today changes with incredible speed. Organisations and members feel themselves pushed around by global market forces they can neither predict nor fully comprehend. Corporate mergers, acquisitions, joint ventures and restructuring impose radical cultural and structural changes on the organisations involved.⁵⁵¹ Turbulence has therefore become characteristic of organisational complexity. Weick⁵⁵² defines *turbulence* as “a combination of instability (frequency of change) and randomness (frequency and direction of change)”, and take *complexity* to mean “a greater number (numerosity) of diverse elements (diversity) interact in a greater variety of ways (interdependence)”.⁵⁵³ This picture is enhanced when technological complexity and information overload is added to Weick’s definitions of turbulence and complexity.⁵⁵⁴

It is thus noticeable that Weick’s sensemaking framework fits in well with the description of the world as provided by complexity theory. While the first provides insight into and operates on the ontological level, the latter operates on the cosmological level. If people are to adopt the view of complexity theory, and the lessons from chaos and quantum theory that the world is largely unknowable and unpredictable, then Weick⁵⁵⁵ makes sense when he says that sensemaking is all that people have. The shift of a mindset of stability to one of complexity, turbulence and uncertainty, therefore, places a greater premium on sensemaking.

To summarise this chapter, the focus was on organisational change, and the aim was to provide an answer to the question of how an organisation becomes what it becomes. Self-organisation was described and discussed as the cause of change and that organising at the edge of chaos serves as a bridge between two social forms, namely, the intersubjective and generic. The context in which the discussion took place was organisational complexity as an occasion for sensemaking. It is to organisation and organising that we turn to in the next and final chapter of this study.

⁵⁵¹ Capra 2003; Castells 2000

⁵⁵² 1995: 88

⁵⁵³ 1995: 87

⁵⁵⁴ Weick 1995: 87

⁵⁵⁵ 2001: 264

CHAPTER 8

SENSING AND ORGANISING

Weick's "talking about organisations", organisation as non-physical entity, ontology and the nature of time, organisation in the mind, organisation and organising as relationality, the nature of time, beyond realism and idealism, organisation, organising and social construction as becoming ontology

In the previous four chapters Weick's thought has been interpreted from the point of view of four meta-perspectives and the theories they inform. Put differently, although the previous four chapters have shown that Weick's sensemaking framework is underpinned by various meta-paradigms, with process thinking at the core of them all, the picture of *organisation* derived from the analysis and interpretation may still be vague or obscured. It is therefore the aim in this chapter to focus attention primarily on this important aspect of Weick's thought, as it is inextricably part of *sensemaking* in organisations. It is thus reasonable to say that a failure to understand the one will result in failure to understand the other.

For example, how is Weick's thought to be interpreted if he, on the one hand, describes organisations as literally 'adaptive social forms'⁵⁵⁶ whose structure unfold vertically (which represent the mechanical and generic) or horizontally (that is, organically and intersubjectively),⁵⁵⁷ organisations as evolutionary systems,⁵⁵⁸ interpreting and sensemaking systems,⁵⁵⁹ and as entities that adapt to and co-evolve with its environment,⁵⁶⁰ and Weick, on the other hand, arguing that there is no such thing as "the" environment or "the" organisation,⁵⁶¹ that the word 'organisation' is a myth ("If you look for an organization you won't find it"),⁵⁶² that organisations simply do not exist,⁵⁶³ and that, paradoxically, organisations only exist in the mind?⁵⁶⁴

⁵⁵⁶ 1995: 70,72

⁵⁵⁷ 1995: 170, 175-176

⁵⁵⁸ 1979: 238-240, 252ff.; 2001: 211

⁵⁵⁹ 1995: 170-172; 2001: 22

⁵⁶⁰ 1995: 75

⁵⁶¹ 2001: 184

⁵⁶² 1979: 88

⁵⁶³ 1995: 69, 74

In order to make sense of this apparent paradox, it is necessary to (1) be very attentive to certain subtleties in Weick's⁵⁶⁵ "*ways of talking about*" organisations. Firstly to the distinction between an internal and external view of organisations, that is, between a participatory and observational position that, secondly, corresponds to a distinction between the vocabulary of verbs and nouns, and (2) to take special notice of the phrase "ways of talking about", since he⁵⁶⁶ states explicitly that his "theorizing" is deliberately and intentionally focused that way. It is the contention here that Weick's "way" represents the internal, the way of verbs, of movement and participation. In other words, it is a way that is consistent with the concepts of enactment, closed systems imagery and organising. This view contrasts sharply with that of observers (or as Weick refers to them, "organizational watchers"),⁵⁶⁷ the perspective of nouns, where reference to *the* organisation is an abstraction.

What Weick in essence reasons is a way of understanding organisation in terms of relating and becoming, as something that is never final, never complete, that has the same nature as the world, which means that organisations are in no way different to or separate from the world. There is thus no dualism of inside/outside in his thinking. It will be shown that Weick thereby gives social construction of reality an ontological twist. It will therefore be necessary and useful to frame Weick's theorising in process terminology (both organic and psychological) since it relates to the central thesis of this study. Process theorist's conception of time forms an important aspect of the interpretation offered below.

1. **Weick's "Talking About" Organisations**

To begin with the apparent paradox in Weick's thought, it is remarkable that Weick's "talking about" organisations never explicitly refers to what they *are*, despite discussing organisational sensemaking in the context of other's understanding and conceptualisations.⁵⁶⁸ However, 'through the lines', so to speak, the attentive reader is able to discern Weick's own position, especially when he advances arguments for

⁵⁶⁴ 2001: 199

⁵⁶⁵ 1995: 69, 75

⁵⁶⁶ 1979: 234

⁵⁶⁷ 1979: 31; 2001: 185, 204

⁵⁶⁸ See especially 1995: 69-76

correction of a particular understanding and or pointing out limits in a particular formulation or argument. In fact, all his “talking about” may lead to the mistaken idea that Weick is discussing “findings” or giving credence to substance. How is this state of affairs to be understood?

This chapter proposes three answers to the question. Firstly, as he⁵⁶⁹ explicitly reveals, there is no such thing as a theory of organisations that is characteristic of the sensemaking paradigm. Hence, only “ways of talking about” organisations that allow sensemaking to be a central activity in the construction of both the organisation and the environments it confronts. The first problem that has to be dealt with, then, is the fact that ‘organisation’ is an ambiguous term; it can be used as either a noun or verb. Secondly, in Weick’s scheme of thought, the *the* organisation point toward an abstract, a linguistic artefact, a socially constructed phenomena and is organisation as a noun used merely for pragmatic reasons. As he⁵⁷⁰ puts it, for instance, if it is “useful” and it allows organisational members “to take reasonable action, fine”. Lastly, much of Weick’s “talking about” is metaphorical. Thus, while metaphor is used as a figure of speech or as a way to think about a phenomenon in order to illuminate aspects in novel ways that cannot be otherwise understood, it is important to keep in mind that it does not reduce the phenomena referred to, to their essences. In other words, metaphor is not a literal application. It is, furthermore, important to keep in mind that, while metaphor is a way of seeing, it is also a way of not seeing; while it reveals, at the same time it also conceals.⁵⁷¹ Thus, Weick’s “talking about” is consistent with his “theorizing”⁵⁷² which means that it is more open-ended and ongoing, something meant to be never final or complete, in contrast to the use of the vocabulary of organisational watchers that is characteristic of nouns, the static, the final and substance.

It should also already be evident that the *verb* form of *organisation* is uppermost in the mind of Weick when he talks or thinks about organisations. If that is the case, on a more fundamental level, the question is, what *is* organisation then? As an ontological question it is perhaps *the* question, the question about the very nature of the

⁵⁶⁹ 1995: 69

⁵⁷⁰ 2001: 184

⁵⁷¹ Morgan 1997

⁵⁷² 1979: 26

phenomena we are talking about. To reformulate the question: Is the organisation an entity, and if so, how is its ontological nature to be interpreted and described?

2. **Organisation as Non-Physical Entity**

The point of departure is a footnote at the end of a discussion in the context of enactment processes in organisations, where Weick⁵⁷³ states that, “The theory on which this work is based views organizations *as flows of experience*”. If this formulation is taken as Weick’s most single, concise and succinct description of the ontology of organisation, then the rest is mere discussion and argument in order to illuminate what would otherwise be misunderstood. Moreover, if this is the correct interpretation, several things become clear that otherwise obscured in his “talking about”.

Attention has already been drawn to Weick’s argument that since there is no theory of the organisation that is representative of the sensemaking paradigm, all that remains is talking or thinking about organisations (in the context of various other conceptualisations of organisations). On page 75 of *Sensemaking in Organisations*⁵⁷⁴ he refers to Schall’s description of organisations as “entities developed and maintained only through continuous communication activity”. Weick then argues that the communication activity *is* the organisation. The first important point to take note of is that Weick formulates his argument that way purely because Schall’s⁵⁷⁵ description may lead the reader to conclude that the organisation is something separate from the communication activity, and hence, an independent objective physical entity that requires development and maintenance apart from communication.

Secondly, what becomes problematic and perhaps confusing, is the following statement by Weick in the same context: “When we view organisations as entities that move continuously between intersubjective and generic subjectivity...”. How can organisations as entities move between two levels of processes? In other words, what is the relationship between organisation and entity in this context? If organisations are people, must we conclude that organisations as people move between two levels of

⁵⁷³ 2001: 204 (emphasis added)

⁵⁷⁴ 1975

⁵⁷⁵ 1983

people or entities that move between entities? The “organisations” refer to here as entities can clearly not be physical, objective entities. The key to understand this is to be found to page 72 where Weick states that Wiley⁵⁷⁶ does not invoke “organisation” as a specific level, and Weick arguing that “organising lies atop that movement between the intersubjective and the generic subjective”.

To elucidate the argument that organisations are not physical entities, on page 64 Weick refers to Porac et al.’s⁵⁷⁷ study of garment making in Scotland, to show how sensemaking manifests in “actual” organisations. How is “actual organisations” as entities, in this context to be understood? It must be stated again, Weick argues consistently the same thing; if the “actual” here correspond to Whitehead’s “actual entity”, which means, as we have seen in chapter 3 of this study, *occasion* or *event*, then it means that organisations are non-physical entities, constituted by processes of relating. In other words, while organisations may have physical manifestations, its ontology is to be understood as *social psychological processes* – what is a social process is psychological in nature, and what is a psychological process is social in nature. The vocabulary is therefore of processes and relating and is thus representative of an internal view of organisations.

This argument will become clearer in the following sections. For now it is important to show how Weick’s understanding of organisations as a single flow of experience relates to time as pure duration, and following that, how organisations exist only in the mind.

3. **Ontology and The Nature of Time**

(1) *Ontology – one nature and one flow of experience.* A very interestingly and noticeable aspect of Weick’s⁵⁷⁸ thought is the interchangeable use of ‘everyday life’ with ‘organisational life’ and ‘organisation’ with ‘world’. In other words, no sharp dividing lines are drawn between them. This is interpreted to mean (a) that Weick actually consider organisational life as no different from everyday life in the world, and (b) that an inquiry into the nature of organisation and the world leads to an

⁵⁷⁶ 1988

⁵⁷⁷ 1989: 76-82

⁵⁷⁸ e.g. 1979: 65-68, 117-118; 1995: 30-31, 40-45, 63, 132; 2001: 8-9, 20, 84, 87

understanding of one and the same nature. Different *ways* of talking *about* organisations, in other words, only represent different conceptual orientations toward the organisation/world. It follows that there is no single way of describing the world/organisation or building the world through building a system. None of the “ways” tell *the* way the world is, but each of them tells *a* way the world is. As has been pointed out earlier, Weick states that his ways of talking about organizations is “*intentionally focussed this way*” since he is concerned about metaphors and images rather than with scientific “*findings*”.⁵⁷⁹

Part of the difficulty in grasping reality as one flow of experience is because people have become accustomed to thinking in terms of ‘things’ and thus reification.⁵⁸⁰ Instead of viewing “an” organisation as a thing, Weick⁵⁸¹ argues that ‘organisation’ is just a suitable word that abstracts temporal features of a situation in motion. To put this differently, organisations are nothing but “superimposed structures”,⁵⁸² inventions⁵⁸³ of people and that this imagery implies that there is no underlying “reality” waiting to be discovered. “Events inside organizations resemble events outside organisations; sensitivities of the worker inside are continuous with sensitivities of the worker outside. Since people have as much desire to integrate the various portions of their lives as to compartmentalise them, what happens inside affects what happens outside, and vice versa”.⁵⁸⁴

Thus there is only one nature, one flow of experience, no fixed boundaries. The important point to bear in mind here, is that what semantics emphasise is that the symbol is *not* the thing.⁵⁸⁵

(2) *The nature of time.* Two concepts from the sensemaking perspective of Weick that captures attention in a discussion of the nature of time, are ‘retrospect’ and ‘ongoing’. It is the irony of life that one can make sense of occurrences, experience,

⁵⁷⁹ 1979: 234.(emphasis added)

⁵⁸⁰ “Reification” means to treat an abstract concept “as if” it refers to a thing – Weick 1979: 34.

⁵⁸¹ cf. 1979: 43ff.

⁵⁸² 1979: 11; 201: 204

⁵⁸³ 1979: 12

⁵⁸⁴ 1979: 31

⁵⁸⁵ Weick 1979: 249

events and interruptions – the flow of experience – only in retrospect (hindsight), and that life can and must be lived in the present / forward-mode of existence. However, what people chose to label, punctuate and select to focus attention on, is only a moment *in*⁵⁸⁶ one continuous stream of experience.⁵⁸⁷ This argument can be elucidated with a description of process theorist’s conception of time as pure duration, as a single “indivisible continuity”.⁵⁸⁸ We will do so with the help of Bergson⁵⁸⁹ and Bernstein.⁵⁹⁰

Bergson’s argument is that science had paid almost no attention to this conception of time, and that through history, time and space have been treated as “things” of a kind in “juxtaposition” – and lays the blame on science and the everyday conventions of language, as responsible for the confusion between “clock-time” (mathematics and the need to measure) and time as pure duration (real time – its “essence is to flow, not one of parts”).⁵⁹¹ In terms of the mathematical conception of time, time is conceived as a straight line, from one point to the next, *ad infinitum*. However, the line that is measured is immobile; the line is made or invented. It extracts and retains from the material world that which can be repeated and calculated, and consequently that which is not in a state of flow. If something happens between two points, reason intercalates new positions – “it refuses to consider transition”.⁵⁹²

Bernstein⁵⁹³ argues that the invention of the zero allowed mathematics to develop into a science of the abstract that revolutionised the old numbering system, in that it established new rules for adding, subtracting, multiplying and dividing – that is, new rules for computing. Bernstein⁵⁹⁴ quotes Whitehead who said that, “The point about the zero is that *we do not need to use it in the operations of daily life*. No one goes on to buy zero fish. It is in a way the most civilised of all the cardinals, and its use is only forced on us by the needs of cultivated modes of thought”. In other words,

⁵⁸⁶ Weick 1995: 33

⁵⁸⁷ Weick 1995: 25. Weick uses William James’ image of “stream of experience” (note the singular).

⁵⁸⁸ Bergson 1974: 16

⁵⁸⁹ 1974

⁵⁹⁰ 1998

⁵⁹¹ 1974: 12

⁵⁹² Bergson 1974: 15

⁵⁹³ 1998

⁵⁹⁴ 1998: 33 (emphasis added)

conventional time means artificial time, abstracted from real time, born out of the need to control and to predict events in the unknown future, on the one hand. However, on the other hand, by inventing time as something to be measured, people have come to consider things as fixed, static and unchangeable. In everyday language nouns are employed to point to that fixity.

But as Bergson⁵⁹⁵ pointed out, the moments of time and the positions of the mobile are only snapshots that our understanding has taken of the continuity of movement and duration. The “snapshots”⁵⁹⁶ are only practical substitutes for time and movement which conforms to the exigencies of language until such time as language lends itself to the exigencies of computation; but people have only an artificial means of recomposing: time and movement are something else. What the measuring of time is counting on, in other words, is only a certain number of extremities of intervals, or moments, in short, virtual halts in time. In contrast, pure duration, in the words of Schutz,⁵⁹⁷ is a “coming-to-be and passing away that has no contours, no boundaries, and no differentiation”. It is in this sense that sensemaking and organising (as cut from the same cloth) never starts. “The reason it never starts is that pure duration never stops”.⁵⁹⁸ It therefore follows that it is ongoing.

It has now become necessary to translate the discussion thus far into Weick’s organisational terms in order to show what he means when he asserts that organisations exist only in minds.

4. **Organisation in the Mind**

If organisational life means that people are always “in the middle of things”, “thrown into situations”, as Weick⁵⁹⁹ in Heideggerian terminology argues, then organisation is nothing but a “snapshot”, a project⁶⁰⁰ to impose order on seemingly disorderly events, interruptions or ongoing flows – since “order, clarity, and rationality is an important

⁵⁹⁵ 1974: 16

⁵⁹⁶ cf. Weick 1979: 42-43ff.

⁵⁹⁷ 1967, in Weick 1995: 25

⁵⁹⁸ 1995: 43

⁵⁹⁹ 1995: 43-44

⁶⁰⁰ 1995: 45, 105

goal of sensemaking”.⁶⁰¹ Both the *idea* of order and the *idea* of disorder reside in the mind, and is it those ideas that people have in their heads that are imposed on and turned into reality, that is referred to as “the” environment. But as Weick points out, to reason that that environment is something fixed, separate from people’s minds, is to become guilty of the “fallacy of misplaced concreteness”.⁶⁰² In other words, when the “*the*” is used, it is something people impose on experience in order to make experience more meaningful.

What is thus clear is that organisation is nothing but organising processes - cognitively constructed in the individual and socially between people, hence the ‘social psychology of organising’. The problem arose when “organizational watchers” draw boundaries between what they consider to be fixed entities and describe with nouns and a supposedly external, separate environment, when in reality it is organising that is happening all the while. In the words of Weick,⁶⁰³ “Actors immersed in experiential streams organize and punctuate those streams [cognitively] by positing organizations and environments... Thus people invent organizations and their environments and these inventions reside in *ideas* that participants have superimposed on any stream of experience”.

In other words, what observers taken to be “the” organisation, is actually only a “snapshot”, a “virtual halt”, a moment in time, which understanding (mind) has taken of the continuity of movement and pure duration. As such it is an abstraction that has come to be associated with brick and mortar,⁶⁰⁴ or the institution. However, if organisation could be grasped in terms of verbs, it should ceaselessly take on new forms, as original and unforeseeable as people’s states of consciousness.

Failure to see organisations in those terms must, in other words, be related to the perpetual attempt to impose regularities upon the world (and hence “the” organisation) and interpret it in terms of laws, rules and procedures forever invented by people who wish to control it. It is therefore no surprise when people conclude that is the way things work, and will always work. But, how does organisation comes into existence?

⁶⁰¹ 1995: 29

⁶⁰² 2001: 184

⁶⁰³ 2001: 184, 196

⁶⁰⁴ Weick 1979: 88

Again the answer provided by Weick is, in and through the mind. For example, in the form of cause or experience maps⁶⁰⁵ and justifications,⁶⁰⁶ that “watchers” then impose on reality and call “the” organisation. Through cause maps people construct connections of cause and effect and act *as if* it corresponds to reality. However, as Weick⁶⁰⁷ reasons, “cause-and-effect” is arbitrary designations of people’s experience. David Bohm⁶⁰⁸ puts forward the same argument and points out that the map in people’s minds is only a guide that corresponds to certain features of the territory, but is never reality itself; it may also be distorted. In a similar way, people expect the world to be put together the way their justifications say it is put together. Once that happens, they selectively perceive what they see “as if” it were put together the way their justifications say. In other words, what becomes reality, is the things in people’s minds. It is this process that both creates new organisation and reaffirms organisation already in place, that is, in the mind, which is then imposed on the stream of experience “as if” it is separate from the person imposing it.

It is in light of the understanding of time as pure duration and reality as one continuous, ongoing process of flow, that Weick⁶⁰⁹ cautions his readers to be especially careful how they portray process. He focuses our attention on the important point that there is no result *of* the process, but only a moment *in* process. It follows that the only way people can get the impression of something distinct from them, is by “stepping outside the stream of experience and directing attention to it”.⁶¹⁰ It is also in this sense that organisation can be spoken of as *form*. Yet, even in this way “the” organisation is in the abstract, that is, organisation is only a moment in experience. Thus they are always in transition, always in process of becoming. What it means, then, is that there is simply no objectified it. There is only organising of *experience* as the living present. To assume therefore that organisation exists separate from “the” environment is to become guilty of what Whitehead and Weick refer to as the fallacy of misplaced concreteness referred to earlier.

⁶⁰⁵ Weick 1979: 84; 2001: 201

⁶⁰⁶ Weick 2001: x

⁶⁰⁷ 2001: 199-204

⁶⁰⁸ 1985

⁶⁰⁹ 1995: 32-33 (emphasis added)

⁶¹⁰ Weick 1995: 25

To translate Whiteheadian terms into Weickian terminology, “the” organisation is not ontologically distinct from people. It is possible to think of this relation as being analogous to the relation of the human mind to the body. In this sense, the organisation is the body of the social organism, constitutive of people. The implication is clear, the one cannot exist without the other; the social mind cannot exist without the social body in which it indwells.

This view can also be contrasted with that of systems thinking, from which it radically differs. In a mechanism, parts are fitted together to form the whole. In systems thinking, the parts are subservient to the whole, defined and determined by the whole. Here, the whole is prior to the parts, which means, the whole should already exist. It is crucial to bear in mind that in Weick’s thought, the whole (“the” organisation) is an abstraction, an adaptive social form. To labour the point, it is unfortunate that in its contemporary usage, *form* refers to formal, outward form. However, in ancient Greek philosophy, the word *form* meant an *inner forming activity*,⁶¹¹ the cause of the growth of things and the development and differentiation of their various forms. What this “inner forming activity” captures, is Weick’s concept of *organising*. In this sense, organising is organisation and organisation is organising at the same time. In other words, organisation is not something separate from organising.⁶¹² The flow of fluid such as a vortex and the family can be used to further illustrate the point.

Within the vortex, the fluid is a recurrent, stable pattern. It may be abstracted in the mind as a vortex, though there is no vortex. There is nothing but a flowing of water. In other words, “vortex” is only a convenient word to describe that pattern, from the view of a spectator, of course.

While it is possible to point to the individuals in the family, it is not quite correct to talk of the family in this way, because this would simply be numbering the whole (the family) amongst its parts (the members) so that it would be separate from its parts in the same way they are separate from each other. The point is simply that the family is ongoing patterns of relationship between its members, arising between them; the family is the interactions, arising only in those interactions. Each member of the family

⁶¹¹ Bohm 1980: 15

⁶¹² See also Stacey et al. 2000:39

is also never there, never complete, because the identity of each member is also perpetually under construction. From the theory of autopoiesis, it has been seen that this phenomenon is a self-referencing (self-producing) phenomenon, in that the parts are being formed by the whole while they are forming it at the same time. The example illustrates this in that a family is formed by its members as it forms them at the same time. Family and individual identities emerge together. In short, organising are the interactions within which new forms arise; forms are never final, they change constantly.

It is in this context that Weick⁶¹³ refers to Follet's⁶¹⁴ argument that it is more appropriate to talk about '*relatings*', to capture the idea of ongoing interpenetration, interaction and reciprocal influence – meaning that, in the moment and process of meeting between two things, they both become something different.

In chapter 5 it was shown how Weick⁶¹⁵ defends his subjectivist position against Burrell and Morgan and that he argues that people oscillate ontologically because that is what is helping them to understand other people and their worlds. What is it that Weick was actually trying to say? Is it perhaps that, instead of worrying about whether reality might be “mind-dependent” (the idealist position) or independent of the mind (the realist position), attention should shift to the relationship between linguistic statements and the non-linguistic elements that are in the world? Put differently, if people are to avail themselves of the language of *relationality*,⁶¹⁶ at least a few of them would no longer declare themselves subjectivists or objectivists, but rather *relationalists*. In other words, if the spotlight is turned on Weick's way of talking about reality, it becomes evident that his reference to “ontological oscillation as a constant in everyday sensemaking”⁶¹⁷ is merely done so for pragmatic purposes. In other words, besides talking about reality as a subjective-objective-subjective oscillation, Weick actually describes reality within the vocabulary of relating. As he⁶¹⁸

⁶¹³ 1995: 33

⁶¹⁴ 1924

⁶¹⁵ 1995: 55-56

⁶¹⁶ Weick 1995: 30-38, 43-44, 51

⁶¹⁷ 2001: 364

⁶¹⁸ 1995: 32 (emphasis added)

puts it, “If we begin to think about sensemaking as *relating*, several classic issues in organizational studies become recast”.

It is therefore necessary to take a closer look at this vocabulary from a sensemaking perspective. In the following section the focus is on ontology in the vocabulary of relating in order to expound on the preceding discussion and Weick’s understanding of organisations as flows of experience.

5. **Organisation and Organising as Relating**

In chapter 6 of this study it was noted that Weick⁶¹⁹ refers to his ‘organizing formulation’ as a ‘metatheory’, as a “general set of prescriptions for anyone developing his own theory of organizations”. If Weick’s metatheory is taken as an attempt to connect both *theory* and *reality*, then it is reasonable to interpret the relationship between Weick’s cosmology and his theorising to mean that, whereas his cosmology represents his view of the way the world hangs together, his organising and sensemaking theory is primarily representative of his *insight* into how people can deal, comprehend and cope with this world.

But first, Weick’s thought has to be consolidated in light of which the rest of the analysis is to follow.

Weick⁶²⁰ states very explicitly that what organising *does*, describes what organisation *is* and that organisation emerges out of relationship and interaction between people. As has been noted above, organisation (noun) is merely the external view of what is actually an internal process, that of organising (ontologically). As such, organising is about motion, process and emergence, something that would not be apparent without verbs. The problem with nouns is that it draws attention to substance as the topic of interest, which Weick dismisses as trivial,⁶²¹ rather than *pattern* and *form* as the crucial issue.⁶²² ‘Pattern’ here refers to the ways in which things happen, develop and is done – the interactions that determine the outcomes. Weick⁶²³ points out that the basic

⁶¹⁹ 1979: 235

⁶²⁰ 1979: 4, 15

⁶²¹ 1979: 79

⁶²² 1979: 34

⁶²³ 1979: 44, 79, 81

property of interdependence is patterns, relationships and processes, which imply impermanence and a concern with flows, flux and momentary appearances. It is therefore the only reality people have to deal with and the only place where they can make a difference, namely, at the “between” - the relationships.

(1) *Beyond realism and idealism.* According to Rorty,⁶²⁴ the distinction between the world “out there” and the world “inside” people’s heads is somewhat ambiguous and can be sometimes be misleading. For what is being called “realism” today is not identical with that which had previously been juxtaposed with idealism. Rather than being about distinctions about the “out there” and the “in here”, the contemporary debate has to do with whether or not the world can be represented. That is, whether representations of the world do, in fact, somehow correspond to it. To avoid confusion, Rorty suggests a speaking in terms of “representation” and “anti-representation”. This way of speaking should avoid implying that the debate has something to do with whether or not there is something called “reality”, and instead, draw attention to the actual source of disagreement, that is, the possibility of representing the world in language.⁶²⁵

For representationalists, true statements are those that correspond to something in the world. Statements can, in other word be falsified or proven through comparison with that which is the world. For anti-representationalists, this is absurd. From this perspective, there is no way of gaining unmediated access to the world and, as a result, it is futile to define ‘truth’ in terms of correspondence with it. For this reason, ‘truth’ is better defined in terms of *coherence* among statements, for at least this is something people are capable of determining. What is suggested here is that it is the difference between correspondence and coherence conceptions of ‘truth’ that differentiates realism (duality and objectivity) and idealism (relativism and subjectivity) respectively. In practice, however, the differences between the two are seldom expressed in these terms. Instead, their differing conceptions of truth are manifested in the particular ways of speaking associated with each and, in particular, the metatheoretical assumptions that each encourages people to make.

⁶²⁴ 1991

⁶²⁵ 1989: 3-22

(2) *Ontology: the nature of reality.* The language of realism encourages an ontological primacy to *things*, whether they are ‘subjects’ or ‘objects’. By this is meant things entering into relationships with other things, whereas the vocabulary of *relating* encourages speaking of things in terms of *emerging* or *coming into being* through relationships. Whereas for a dualist there is no point of talking about ‘relations’ until people have familiarised themselves with the things entering through these relations; conversely, for a relationalist, it is only through relations that these things exist for people. This, then, is the essence of the disconcordance between these two paradigms.

In order to explore this difference further, it is useful to draw a distinction between ‘world’ and ‘reality’. If done so, the “world” would refer to the physical entity of which people are part; to that which, at least in some sense, they are trying to cope with or live within through their seeking knowledge of it. Nevertheless, until such time that they can confidently assert that they know the world in its entirety, it is difficult to fathom how they might actually speak of the world *per se*, that is, how could they know what is meant by the world? So in light of this difficulty, people can use the term “reality” to fill the gap. Thus understood, ‘reality’ would be the world as people know it; it would be what they are actually thinking of when they think they are thinking of something called the “world”. This is not to deny that ‘world’ and ‘reality’ are inextricably linked. Rather, it is to recognise that, despite their overlaps, the two need not be the same.⁶²⁶

In other words, speaking in the vocabulary of dualism, the distinction between world and reality serves little or no purpose. Because it speaks of truths (reality) as though corresponding with the world, world and reality are one and the same. In other words, for objectivists, the world “out there” is a singular reality, inhabited by us all. On the other hand, for subjectivists, like Weick⁶²⁷ for example, the world/reality (and therefore, the organisation) is thought to be “in here” – in the minds of people. As he argues, the sensemaking model is not about object perception;⁶²⁸ “what ties an

⁶²⁶ Bhaskar 1989; Marsden 1993; Rorty 1991

⁶²⁷ 2001: 308

⁶²⁸ 1995: 57

organization together is what ties thoughts together”⁶²⁹ – that is connections and relationship. What is important for the discussion here is to take cognisance of Weick’s argument in the context of a lengthy quote of O’Keefe and Nadel’s⁶³⁰ position, which highlights that a person cannot be a “subject of an environment, one can only be a participant.”⁶³¹ The very distinction between self and non-self breaks down cold. The environment surrounds, enfolds, engulfs and no thing and no one can be isolated and identified as standing outside of and apart from it... The fact that they surround means that one cannot observe an environment; rather the organism explores it”. In the words of Weick:⁶³²

“While the categories external/internal or outside/inside exist logically, they do not exist empirically. The ‘outside’ or ‘external’ world cannot be known. There is no methodological process by which one can confirm the existence of an object independent of the confirmatory process involving oneself. The outside is a void, there is only the inside. A person’s world, the inside or internal view, is all that can be known. The rest can only be the object of speculation. Therefore, when we object to internal/external or inside/outside as arbitrary partitions that tend to confuse issues, what we mean is simply that logical distinctions in this case do not necessarily correspond to empirical distinctions. Actors immersed in experiential streams organize and punctuate those streams by positing organizations and environments... *If* organizational members discover that inside/outside is a useful punctuation, and impose it, and retain it because it allows them to take reasonable actions, fine. We simply don’t want to put words into their mouths or images in their eyes... The misplaced concreteness of talk about *the* organization and *the* environment diverts the attention of organizational theorists from crucial problems...”.

From the subjectivist point of view, then, people can only speak about multiple, socially constructed realities, because there are as many worlds/realities as there are individuals. Furthermore, the world and reality need not to coincide. So, from a sensemaking perspective, ‘reality’, rather than being a model of the world, is understood as a strategy for living in that which is the world. For, as Weick⁶³³ has put

⁶²⁹ 2001: 308; he states that the form it takes is that of a “cognitive map” and that a “map” is “an aggregate of interrelated information” (2001: 310)

⁶³⁰ 1978 (in Weick 2001: 310)

⁶³¹ See also Weick 2001: 196, 200

⁶³² 2001: 184

⁶³³ 2001: 188

it, “reality is a metaphor”. It simply means that to talk about “a reality” is just one way that people try to make sense out of the stream of experience that flows by them. In a similar vein he states that sensemaking is in its broadest sense also a metaphor in that it “focuses attention on the idea that the reality of everyday life must be seen as an ongoing accomplishment...”,⁶³⁴ and because organisations resemble puzzling and changing terrains, the task is to carve out some momentary stability in this continuous flow. In other words, rather than speaking of getting to *know* the world, the vocabulary of sensemaking and relating encourages a speaking of finding better ways to *live* in the world.

Thus, what people hope to accomplish depends on the kind of vocabulary they adopt. Different vocabularies constitute different realities for the individuals that adopt them. From a sensemaking and relating perspective, these realities become shared, negotiated and intersubjective; things like objects and subjects are therefore no longer understood to be real things of the world – from a relating perspective, people gain access to the world through language, as have been demonstrated. So, within relating, the terms ‘object’ or ‘subject’ is understood to denote particular sets of relations among the attributes of that which is the world. In other words, neither the ‘subject’ of Organisational Behaviour nor the ‘object’ of Organisational Theory actually exist. In brief, it is not the subjects and objects that exist in this view, but rather the effects and relations among them.

To conclude this section of the discussion, what we have hoped to achieve, is to show that, if people adopt the vocabulary of dualism then it is possible to speak in terms of things, which would lead to approach an object as a thing-in-itself. In other words, that the essence of each subject or object can be revealed, were it possible to drain away each and every contextual influence. In the language of relating no assertions such as these do arise. In terms of Weickian and Whiteheadian terminology, this would be described as the “fallacy of misplaced concreteness”. Dualism encourages a speaking in terms of subjects acting *upon* objects, whereas the language of relating invites close attention to the interdependent and interpenetration of activities, of ongoing codetermination and the process of meeting.

⁶³⁴ 2001: 11

6. **Organisation, Organising, and Social Construction as Becoming Ontology**

The discussion so far reached a stage where Weick's ontology can be described as essentially a becoming ontology. In this section, the aim is draw attention to another dimension of that ontology, namely that of the social construction of reality as it is an indispensable part of his overall ontological thinking.

From a becoming perspective, reality is understood as in perpetual flux or change, hence, unrepresentable through any static conceptual framework or paradigm of thought.⁶³⁵ In this view the actual world is fundamentally in a process of becoming so that every phenomena of which people are aware exist only as a stabilised moment in an interminable process of becoming. Thus there are no fixed entities, no ultimate terms, or essences. In short, transition and change are the ultimate facts.

Through the becoming perspective Weick emphasises basically four themes that together outline a set of sensemaking theoretical priorities: (1) activity and movement over substance and entities. Instead of thinking in terms of discrete individualities, the emphasis is on the primacy of process, interaction and relatedness. This does not differ from social constructivism in social science, which stress the social construction of reality,⁶³⁶ (2) turbulence and change as the consequence of a world that is never coming into being. On the contrary, change or flux is the essential existence of nature; stability is only an abstraction; (3) in a constantly changing, unpredictable and uncertain world, sensemaking is people's only way of dealing and coping with the world; and (4) in this continuous process of becoming, every moment of activity is already incorporated in the next moment.

In chapter 4 it was pointed out that the social construction of reality forms a rich part of pragmatism and organisational life in general. The understanding of social interaction as a constituent of our understanding of reality as a social constructed (and enacted) phenomenon of consciousness made up one of the leading ideas in the sensemaking perspective as well. This means that, on the one hand, reality is an individual matter of subjective interpretation, forming a person's reality of the world

⁶³⁵ Chia 1996: 46

⁶³⁶ Berger & Luckmann 1967; Gergen 1994

and life in general. On the other hand, this reality is also a social reality. However, whereas a being ontology in social constructivism emphasises individual cognitive structures, Weick is giving social constructivism a becoming ontological twist.

Taking a becoming perspective means that he radicalises understanding of process, by focusing on verbs instead of arresting reality through nouns. Verbs capture the action that lays down the path for sensemaking. As he⁶³⁷ puts it, “People who think with verbs are more likely to accept life as ongoing events into which they are thrown, and less likely to think of it as a *turf to be defended*, levels of *hierarchy to be ascended*, or *structures to be upended*. Sensemaking itself is ongoing and the sense it makes, transient. Verbs force us to face that. Nouns do not. Because verbs are closer to the dynamics of a process, to change a verb is to take the first step to change a process”. In this respect, it can with all right be asked: why do people talk of organisations, when it is *organising* that is going on? Or, for that matter, why talking of knowledge when *knowing* in the concrete context is what matters?

In taking a becoming perspective, instead of regarding the social interaction as the process that constitutes reality of everyday organisational life, Weick is actually taking this process of social interaction (the social psychological processes of sensemaking) as the reality or lifeworld itself. The process is not something that leads to reality, but is, on the contrary, reality as lived in the present. In other words, from a becoming perspective, Weick is arguing that reality is not something that can be passively called forth, but is rather an active (enacted) process of life in which every lived moment is brought into reality.

In social constructionism then, reality has the character of cognitive categories and classifications, which is a stockpile of knowledge or repertoire of actions that can be retrieved into any given situation as people’s possibility, but can also restraint sensemaking and the handling of this situation. Rethinking the concept of reality from a becoming perspective then leads in the direction of a reality that emerges as a flux of understanding in everyday organisational life, a flux of interpretation and ascription of meaning that never comes into a state of being but is always in becoming as people try to deal with their lives in a meaningful way.

⁶³⁷ 1995: 188

Weick's rethinking of reality implies that the sociality, which the organisation concept refers to, will have to be considered an ongoing process of interpretation and creation of meaning as regards this specific sphere of a person's world. In thinking of an organisation as a social construction, from a becoming perspective, means that people turn their attention towards social interaction and the process of creating, recreating and organising meaning in the handling of everyday life, as the proper meaning of organising. Instead of talking of organisations as social constructs, perhaps it would be more apt to talk about organising (verb) as organisational flux – a social praxis of *enactment – interpretation – retention*, a process in which organisation emerges as organisational flux that never comes into being, but is always in the process of becoming. In Weick then, ongoing processes now become the normal condition of reality. Taking a becoming ontological perspective on organising (as organisation in flux) therefore draws attention toward the question of how to understand this ongoing process of change.

The answer lies in communication. Consistent with the becoming perspective, Weick states that the communication activity *is* organisation.⁶³⁸ Only by virtue of continuous communication are the exchanges and interpretations of intersubjectivity, and the shared understandings of generic subjectivity, developed and maintained. Conversations, dialogues, meetings, arguments are always (ex)change of words, and thereby never the same because the meaning of words are always reconstructed. People never have exactly the same interpretation of a word, since they have already heard it before, and will always relate it to the situations and relations, the context, that they are in. Therefore everything is related and situated, and continuously reconstructed.

To conclude this chapter, the discussion of “organisation as flows of experience” gives us the possibility to thematise change not as something stabilised through organising, but as an immanent part of life as an unfolding flux of constructing and reconstructing meaning. Relating it to Weick's discussion of verbs, it is then appropriate to talk about *organising* and *sensemaking* in relation to this as it is about never-ending processes.

⁶³⁸ 1995: 75

Conclusion and Research Challenge

We conclude that Weick offers a radical challenge to the way life is viewed in general and organisational life in particular. It is assumed that this study has established the following: sensemaking means the activity that cope with reality as an ongoing accomplishment that emerges from effort to create order, and to make retrospect sense of what occurs; the sensemaking framework is rooted in an understanding of human cognitive functions as the embodiment of complexity, and hence, psychological processes as Weick's model for organisational sensemaking (organisations can thus be viewed as bodies of cognition) and that organising and sensemaking are one and the same process. As such, it is not organising "and" sensemaking, but organising *as, for* and *through* sensemaking.

The aim was to show that Weick's thought is the embodiment of an interdisciplinary perspective. Weick's thought and thinking has been analysed and interpreted from the point of view of various meta-perspectives and the aim was to show how these philosophies or conceptualisations underpin his own thought, and in turn influence his theorising and conceptualisation of sensemaking in organisations and organising. In other words, the sensemaking framework is too broad to be explained from a single paradigm. It has also become clear how his cosmology runs consistently through all his thinking, like a golden thread, as well as through the perspectives chosen for this study.

Although there is no such thing as a theory of organisations that is characteristic of the sensemaking paradigm, the rationale behind Weick's *talking* and *thinking about* organisations has been discussed. It has also been noted that an organisation is not a text or tool. What Weick is calling for is a complete new understanding of organisational life and reality such that it more closely resembles the world outside, with all the latter's many disorders and social tensions. The emphasis is therefore on processes that shape subjectivity rather than the process by which individual subjects act upon the world.

Weick can with right be described as a process or becoming ontologist, with a distinct constructivist organic-systemic (holistic) worldview. At the core of the organic-systemic cosmology is *organisation* (verb). The essence of organisation has been

described as *process*, through which organisation is created. Process starts with *actions*, and a process is constituted by a sequence of actions. As process and organisation is to organic-systemic cosmology, so is it to Weick.⁶³⁹ Organising he considers to be his meta-theory about theories, which suggests “that anyone who wants to think about organizations should spend some time identifying specific rules by which organizations assemble themselves”.⁶⁴⁰

The one question this position presents, is whether organisation can still be viewed as the global that emerges from local organising processes or “interlocking behaviours”?⁶⁴¹ In other words, is the vocabulary of micro/macro still a valid way of thinking or talking about organisations? If organisation is known by its organising, just as the organising effort is known by the interacting processes that comprise it, will a micro/macro dichotomy not yield different and conflicting formulations and, hence, continue to put theorists in a constant state of tension?

To continue with Weick, his ontology and epistemology is clearly evolutionary – not static – in that it is action and process driven, constructed in relationship through intersubjective organising. As such, in other words, it is ongoing; it happens out of cognitive necessity in order to make sense, in order to cope and deal with what is happening in the world. The world is a constructed world, as the self who is dealing with it.

Weick leaves no one in the dark about his view of the world and reality. The picture he gives of the real world is that it is not a tidy place. As the complexity sciences describe the world as it is, so does Weick. His theorising (ontology) is primarily an insight, a way of looking at the world, human life and, hence, organisational life. Indeed, if we are to take the complexity sciences seriously, then sensemaking is all we have.

On a more fundamental level, Weick is showing us three things. Firstly, an overall cosmology or worldview is indispensable for people’s well-being. All people use images based on some kind of general notions concerning the nature of reality that cannot be divorced from how they conduct their lives. It has consequences for how

⁶³⁹ 1979: 235ff.

⁶⁴⁰ 1979: 235

⁶⁴¹ 1979: 3

they deal with the world and, as he so consistently argued, sensemaking, after all, is about the world. Secondly, he brought back ‘the world’ into a discussion of organisations. That is, Weick brought back issues of ontology and epistemology into organisational theory, issues largely excluded from or neglected in psychology in general and organisational theory and organisational behaviour in particular.⁶⁴²

It is perhaps appropriate to remind ourselves again of Weick’s discussion of the mindset required by sensemaking, in which the splitting of things has no place. And in this regard, we wish to draw attention to Allnut’s⁶⁴³ discussion of aircraft pilots:

“A pilot may say that he does not allow his work and his domestic life to mix; but this statement can only be partly true. Human beings are *24 hour-a-day people*, possessing only *one brain* with which to control all their activities; and this brain has to cover both work and play. In sum, events which happen in one segment of daily life, may therefore influence what happens in other segments...”⁶⁴⁴

Finally, by drawing on so many and diverse theoretical perspectives, Weick is showing that no point of view is in itself complete, that a social process of thought is the means by which understanding can be enriched.

Sensemaking is work, in other words, and the ideas of Karl E. Weick it represents, is a slice of a creative process. They are presented not as final conclusions, but as an example of one way that new ideas might be raised, inquired into, and allowed to unfold further. We trust that we have succeeded in reaching our aim and purpose with this study, and sincerely thank the reader for having stayed with us.

⁶⁴² Shanon 2002: 1-6

⁶⁴³ in Weick 1995: 103-104

⁶⁴⁴ Emphasis added.

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