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# Making Sense of Sensemaking in *Organization Studies*

Organization Studies

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## Abstract

'Sensemaking' is an extraordinarily influential perspective with a substantial following among management and organization scholars interested in how people appropriate and enact their 'realities'. *Organization Studies* has been and remains one of the principal outlets for work that seeks either to draw on or to extend our understanding of sensemaking practices in and around organizations. The contribution of this paper is fourfold. First, we review briefly what we understand by sensemaking and some key debates which fracture the field. Second, we attend critically to eight papers published previously in *Organization Studies* which we discuss in terms of five broad themes: (i) how sense is made through discourse; (ii) the politics from which social forms of sensemaking emerge and the power that is inherent in it; (iii) the intertwined and recursive nature of micro-macro sensemaking processes; (iv) the strong ties which bind sensemaking and identities; and (v) the role of sensemaking processes in decision making and change. Third, while not designed to be a review of extant literature, we discuss these themes with reference to other related work, notably that published in this journal. Finally, we raise for consideration a number of potentially generative topics for further empirical and theory-building research.

## Keywords

organization studies, process, sensemaking, sensemaking perspective, theory building

## Introduction

'Sensemaking' is an enormously influential perspective<sup>1</sup> (or concept, approach, lens or theory) in organization studies, associated strongly with research that is interpretive, social constructionist,

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processual and phenomenological. It continues to attract huge interest from scholars with various interests in distinct, though often overlapping topics at multiple levels of analysis who seek to comprehend and to theorize how people appropriate and enact their ‘realities’ (Holt & Cornelissen, 2014; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2014). Overwhelmingly, this work focuses on analysing ‘the practical activities of real people engaged in concrete situations of social action’ (Boden, 1994, p. 10), making it integral to the ‘practice turn’ (Whittington, 2006) in studies of organizing. It also draws on and contributes to the turn to language, sensemaking being accomplished in part through linguistic and communicative processes (Weick, 1995). While *Organization Studies* has been one of the main outlets for research on sensemaking there has, as yet, been no attempt to draw together or to assess systematically the contribution of articles published in this journal. This provides the rationale for our *Perspectives* piece.

Our principal objectives are fourfold. First, we review briefly what we understand by sensemaking and some key debates which fracture the field. Second, we draw critical attention to eight papers published previously in *Organization Studies* which both employ and contribute to ongoing debates on sensemaking in, between and around organizations: Abolafia (2010), Bolander and Sandberg (2013), Brown (2004), Karreman and Alvesson (2001), Malsch, Tremblay and Gendron (2012), Vlaar, Van den Bosch and Volberda (2006), Weber and Glynn (2006) and Zilber (2007). Apart from the two most recently published papers, these works chosen for this special issue have all attracted scholarly attention, as indicated by citations in *Thomson Reuters Web of Knowledge*; this decision criterion for inclusion is consonant with Weick’s (1995, p. 6) dictum that ‘Sense may be in the eye of the beholder, but beholders vote and the majority rules’. This said, dozens of papers on or related to sensemaking have appeared in *Organization Studies*, many in recent years, and our selection is doubtless (and unashamedly) to some extent idiosyncratic. Second, while this introduction is much too brief to review adequately the extensive literature on sensemaking, it does attempt to locate and to contextualize the contributions made by these eight papers with reference to other work, especially that published in this journal. Our analysis focuses specifically on five core themes: discourse, power/politics, micro/macro concerns, identities and decision making/change. Finally, brief consideration is given to a number of potentially fruitful avenues for further empirical and theory-building research.

## On Sensemaking

There is no single agreed definition of ‘sensemaking’. There is, though, an emergent consensus that sensemaking refers generally to those processes by which people seek plausibly to understand ambiguous, equivocal or confusing issues or events (Colville, Brown, & Pye, 2012; Maitlis, 2005; Weick, 1995). Although sometimes mistakenly used as synonyms, there is an important distinction between equivocality and ambiguity in terms of sensemaking:

Lessening ambiguity implies that through action you can learn to discount what *might* have been going on and reach an answer to the question as to what *is* going on (i.e. ‘what is the story?’). Reducing equivocality suggests that action does not clarify by allowing you to eliminate lack of clarity but that action clarifies by shaping what it is that you are attending to and in the doing, shapes what *is* going on. (Colville et al, 2012, p. 7; emphasis in the original)

This distinction between equivocality and ambiguity is analogous to that made by Weick between sensemaking and interpretation. Whereas interpretation implies that there is already something in the world waiting to be discovered (and will be found once ambiguity is cleared), sensemaking is less about discovery than invention, i.e. sensemaking refers to processes by which ‘people generate

what they interpret' (Weick 1995, p. 13).<sup>2</sup> The phrase 'equivocality reduction' is valuable because it readily acknowledges that *both* discovery *and* invention are aspects of sensemaking.

The experience of equivocality leads individuals to extract and interpret environmental cues and to use these in order to 'make sense' of occurrences and to enact their environment. Sensemaking thus involves not merely interpretation and meaning production but the active authoring of the situations in which reflexive actors are embedded and are attempting to comprehend. People engage in partially overlapping processes in which they construct 'realities' and then retrospectively make sense of them in a continuing dialogue of discovery and invention in which identities and social worlds are concomitantly referenced and fabricated. Much current research on how sensemaking occurs is focused on these three sets of interweaving processes: the perception of cues (noticing), making interpretations and engaging in action (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Since the late 1960s a large, still burgeoning and increasingly diverse and fragmented literature characterized by tensions, ambiguities and disagreements has developed which explores multiple aspects of how sense is made in organizations; despite these fractures, in the main the work of Karl Weick acts as a centripetal force that binds (if it does not cohere fully) much of this research.

Although sensemaking in organization studies is associated primarily with the pioneering work of Weick (1969, 1993), other key contributors to this literature include a range of scholars who have studied actors' quotidian practices of meaning-making (e.g. Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Douglas, 1986; Garfinkel, 1967; Polanyi, 1967). Indeed, the roots of this literature spread broadly into fields as diverse as symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, cognitive psychology and phenomenology, among others. In general, however, scholars have been less interested in its genealogy than 'sensemaking' as an aspect of organizing that is implicated in and enables, for example, processes of change (Balogun & Johnson, 2004, 2005), identity formation and maintenance (Humphreys & Brown, 2002), responses to crises (Colville, Pye, & Carter, 2013), the formation of organizational and professional cultures (Bloor & Dawson, 1994), strategy (Pye, 1995), learning (Catino & Patriotta, 2013), and creativity and innovation (Drazin, Glynn, & Kazanjian, 1999), or in sum, the doing of managing (Mangham & Pye, 1991). Even the notional ubiquity of sensemaking processes or the perspective's putative utility in deepening explanations for organizational phenomena do not, though, account adequately for the apparently beguiling hold that it has on many within organization and management studies.

It is, perhaps, as Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld (2005, p. 410) note, because 'sensemaking and organization constitute one another' that sensemaking has become so central and so enmeshed in our conceptions, theories and studies of organizing. Indeed, in his writing about the relationship between organizing and sensemaking, Weick argues that it is more useful to dispense with the 'and' and discuss organizing 'as' sensemaking, organizing 'through' sensemaking, or organizing 'for' sensemaking (Weick, 2001, p. 95). Organization emerges from an ongoing process in which people organize to make sense of equivocal inputs and enact that sense back into the world to make it more orderly (Weick et al., 2005, p. 410). In other words, organizing is achieved to the extent that sensemaking is accomplished (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2014). From this process standpoint, organization emerges from organizing and sensemaking (Hernes & Maitlis, 2010; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2014; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002); and this in part explains the significance of the sensemaking perspective to the journal, *Organization Studies*.

The sensemaking literature, however, is far from homogeneous, and explicit recognition of some of the key disjunctures and disagreements in it is potentially generative because so doing may allow the identification for further analysis of unresolved tensions. First, there is no consensus on whether sensemaking is best regarded primarily as sets of individual-cognitive (e.g. schemata, mental maps), collective-social (interactions between people) or specifically discursive (linguistic/communicative) processes (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1995). Second, while some

scholars regard sensemaking as occurring on a daily or even moment-to-moment basis, and relevant to every mundane interaction and event (Patriotta & Brown, 2011), for others it is triggered by much rarer cues that occur most notably in times of crisis or puzzlement (Weick et al., 2005). Third, although most researchers, in deference to Weick (1995), have highlighted the retrospective nature of sensemaking, yet there is a strand of theorizing and empirical research that insists sensemaking may be future-oriented and can occur prospectively (Corley & Gioia, 2011; Gioia, 2006; Ybema, 2010). Fourth, much scholarship has tended to assume or to imply that individuals bound together in work teams and goal-oriented organizations share similar or consonant understandings (Brown & Duguid, 1998, p. 96); other research emphasizes that this is not necessarily or indeed perhaps even usually the case, and that as much sensemaking among members of social groups is discrepant as it is shared (Brown, Stacey, & Nandhakumar, 2008).

Increasingly, there is evidence that scholars are seeking to vitalize discourses centred on sensemaking by looking for new sources of inspiration and novel directions for theorizing (Holt & Cornelissen, 2014). The papers we have chosen for this SI emphasize in particular how sense is made through discourse, the politics from which social forms of sensemaking emerges and the power that is inherent in it, the intertwined and recursive nature of micro-macro sensemaking processes, the strong ties which bind sensemaking and identities, and the role of sensemaking processes in decision making and change.

### *Sensemaking through discourse*

Research published in *Organization Studies* mostly emphasizes not the cognitive aspects of sense-making, but the linguistic. This is in line with Weick's rhetorical question 'How can I know what I think until I see what I say?' (Weick, 1995, p. 18), and Taylor and Van Every's (2000, p. 40) observation that 'sensemaking involves turning circumstances into a situation that is comprehended explicitly in words'. Bolander and Sandberg (2013) offer an ethnomethodologically inspired analysis of how new employee selection decisions are made through the study of what was *said* by participants in actual selection decision meetings. They emphasize that sensemaking is associated with the production of a 'practical reality' (p.288) in which "action" and "context" are mutually elaborative and mutually determinative elements in a simultaneous equation that the actors are continually solving and re-solving to determine the nature of the events in which they are placed' (Heritage, 1987, p. 242). Karreman and Alvesson (2001) focus on the discourse by which people author versions of their 'realities' and identities in their performance of work tasks. For Zilber (2007, p. 1036) institutions and their sensemaking are a 'textual affair' (Munir & Phillips, 2005, p. 1669) in which 'discourses constitute institutions' (p. 1036) and institutional entrepreneurship is accomplished and constituted discursively. This work both resonates with and has spurred further studies which emphasize the importance of discourse more generally in acts of interpretation and meaning production (Cornelissen, Oswick, Christensen, & Phillips, 2008; Fenton & Langley, 2011).

One stream of research that figures prominently in *Organization Studies* focuses specifically on sensemaking narratives/stories.<sup>3</sup> Stories are active constructions of embedded participants' local 'realities' and 'a potent tool for meaning-making' (Zilber, 2007, p. 1038). Processes of narration in which stories are co-authored by multiple actors to account for pasts that may be contested or nostalgized (Brown & Humphreys, 2002), the present that is most often ambiguous and confusing, and futures that are variously desired and feared are, perhaps, a natural focus for analysis. Drawing on a public inquiry report into the *Piper Alpha* disaster, Brown (2004) shows how a seemingly verisimilitudinous version of events was constructed and then deconstructs the storyline to highlight vulnerabilities and points of contest in the official narrative. Abolafia's (2010, p. 350) analysis of 14 years of Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) transcripts allows him to focus specifically

on ‘the narrative process, rather than the product’ (p. 350) to show how through interaction and negotiation a policy group ‘thinks’. Sensemaking stories, it seems, fascinate scholars in part because they permit actors to manoeuvre between contradictions, to ignore and to gloss ambiguities, to both mask and disclose emotional responses and intellectual positions, to simultaneously make and to unravel sense in organizational settings (Boudes & Laroche, 2009; Brown, Ainsworth, & Grant, 2012; Golant & Sillince, 2007; Pye, 1993).<sup>4</sup>

### *Sensemaking, politics and power*

The papers in this *Perspectives* issue reveal helpfully the extent to which social processes of sense-making are caught up in political machinations, and that sensemaking is both an effect, and productive, of what are continuously negotiated relations of power. Issues relating to power appear, sometimes in unexpected places, in many of the papers. Weber and Glynn (2006, p. 1641) comment on the ‘social policing of action through institutionalized expectations’ that structure processes of sensemaking. Power is inherent in the processes of formalization which Vlaar, Van den Bosch and Volberda (2006, p. 1629) identify as significant means by which micro-processes of sensemaking are enacted, guided and controlled: as these authors assert, ‘the creation of new understandings is not free of power issues and self-interested behaviour’. Relatedly, Karreman and Alvesson (2001, p. 78) remark on ‘the power of the premise’, understood as the ‘appropriate sequence of events in a particular context’ (Mangham, 1986, p. 44), which frames individual and group sensemaking (Pye, 2005). In Malsch, Tremblay and Gendron’s work, ‘an interest in power, either for exerting or for checking it’ (Douglas & Wildavsky, 1982, pp. 174–5) is intrinsic to each of Douglas’s cultural types that they use to analyse compensation committee members’ sensemaking.

Power is integral to Zilber’s (2007) interpretation of institutional entrepreneurship which analyses how meaning was managed by groups at a conference to protect their vested interests and improve their group’s position by promoting field change: how groups make sense is recognized to be a highly politicised process: ‘...In reconstructing reality through discourse, actors in the field take part in the redistribution of power itself’ (Zilber, 2007, p.1037). Abolafia’s (2010, p. 350) analysis of narrative construction processes reveals how policymakers’ sensemaking is guided by legitimacy concerns, ‘the institutionalized logic of action that members consider “desirable, proper, and appropriate”’ (Suchman 1995, p. 574). Two key aspects of the argument made by Brown (2004) are (i) that authoritative sensemaking is not a neutral act but hegemonic (an act of power) that mobilizes and reproduces the active consent of those subject to it (Clegg, 1989, p. 160); and (ii) that official sensemaking documents serve often to legitimate state institutions. This research resonates with a rich stream of theorizing and empirical studies that have sought to link processes of sensemaking with legitimacy (Golant & Sillince, 2007), institutional power (Topal, 2009) and power/knowledge (Ainsworth & Hardy, 2012).

### *Sensemaking (from micro to macro)*

The seeming reluctance of theorists, including Weick, to engage with broader epistemic contexts, and hence to account adequately for the role of culture, or indeed institutional/organizational structures and discourses, in micro-level processes of sensemaking has attracted some attention (O’Leary & Chia, 2007). At least four of the papers in this *Perspectives* issue are relevant to these debates. Quoting Weick’s observation that the ‘juxtaposition of sensemaking and institutionalization has been rare’ (Weick et al., 2005, p. 417; Taylor & Van Every, 2000, p. 275), Weber and Glynn (2006) seek to integrate institutional contexts into sensemaking theory. While it has been observed

frequently that institutions shape ‘sensemaking at more macro levels’ (Weick, 1995, p. 70), nevertheless they have most often been regarded merely as forms of internalized cognitive constraint. Weber and Glynn’s (2006) contribution is to identify three ‘mechanisms’ – priming (providing social cues), editing (through social feedback processes) and triggering (posing puzzles through contradiction and ambivalence) – by which ‘institutions are woven into sensemaking’ (p. 1657). In similar vein Vlaar, Van den Bosch and Volberda (2006) specify four ‘mechanisms’ by which formalization (the processes and outcomes associated with the negotiation of contracts, rules and procedures) enables sensemaking – focusing attention, forcing articulation and reflection, instigating and maintaining interaction, and reducing errors, biases and inconsistencies – in interorganizational relationships.

Malsch, Tremblay and Gendron (2012) analyse how members of compensation committees determine acceptable reward boundaries operating under either an individualistic scheme – emphasizing principles of freedom to negotiate and a market-orientation, or a hierarchic scheme – which emphasizes objectivity, measurability and expertise. In making their case, they draw on Douglas’s (1992) cultural theory which suggests that there are four types of interactive and non-deterministic cultural biases – individualism, hierarchy, egalitarianism and fatalism – associated with different sets of framing assumptions that affect individual and group sense-making, not least by shaping their moral sensibilities. As they say, stakeholders ‘involved in the construction and sense-making around executive compensation policies...are inevitably culturally biased and...each bias, as a point of view, needs to be acknowledged’ (Malsch et al., 2012, p. 397). The idea that micro processes of sensemaking draw on macro scripts features also in Abolafia’s (2010) analysis of policy making: ‘every organization has a repertoire of plots that it draws from in making sense of its environment’ (p. 357). Abolafia shows how policy makers’ sensemaking is influenced by an operational model that serves as ‘a dominant perceptual filter that shapes and biases sensemaking’ (p. 363), in this instance the logic of action ‘appropriateness’. These papers are important because they hint that individual-level sensemaking is not just embedded in but may have consequences for organizations and even, perhaps, societies.

### *Sensemaking and identities*

Weick (1995, p. 20) famously recognized that not only are sensemakers concerned both to make sense of their selves and their external worlds, but that their sensemaking in both cases is interdependent and dynamic:

Whenever I define self, I define ‘it’, but to define it is also to define self. Once I know who I am then I know what is out there. But the direction of causality flows just as often from the situation to a definition of self as it does the other way.

Such is the fundamental importance of identity in Weick’s theorizing that it is unsurprising to find so many *Organization Studies* papers touch on identity issues, even if tangentially or implicitly. Weber and Glynn (2006) suggest that constellations of identities (in the form of typified actors) are one aspect of institutions that are drawn on in sensemaking processes and ‘may in fact “steer” action in a direct, taken-for-granted way’ (p. 1644). In Malsch et al.’s (2012) findings it is clear that the sensemaking of many members of compensation committees was influenced by a particular cultural identity, with one bias coming ‘close to being a permanent trait of the individual, almost like a personality’ (Olli, 1999, p. 59). Abolafia’s (2010) study shows how people’s sense-making was ‘tightly bound to their operating model’, and how this functioned to provide certainty, and to reduce feelings of isolation and personal responsibility, sustaining their ‘identity-construction rite’ (p. 85).

Most obviously, identities construction processes are at the heart of Karreman and Alvesson's (2001) paper which explores the simultaneous construction of plausible organizational realities and work identities in a routine meeting conducted in a Swedish evening newspaper. Meetings, they argue, 'operate as sense-making devices' (p. 80), but while other authors have examined their role in the sensemaking of problems, crises and decisional choices, Karreman and Alvesson maintain that what may also be at stake is the exploration and elaboration of identity issues. Through an in-depth ethnographic study of a seemingly unremarkable meeting, individuals who appear to be discussing their work are shown in fact to be also constructing or making sense (through discourse) of their (dynamic and flexible) multiple social, group, professional and organizational identities: '*...organizing can be seen as constructing and maintaining identities to facilitate collective action*' (Karreman & Alvesson, 2001, p. 80; italics in original). This research has helped to spawn a wealth of recent research that connects processes of sensemaking with identity at the individual (Brown & Toyoki, 2013), group (Patriotta & Spedale, 2009), community (Howard-Grenville, Metzger, & Meyer, 2013) and organizational (Hirst & Humphreys, 2013) levels.

### *Sensemaking, decision making and change*

In terms of 'application' areas, sensemaking theorists have often been especially interested in individual and collective decision making and processes of group and organizational change. Bolander and Sandberg (2013) analyse how selection decision making occurs through processes of 'practical deliberation' centred on two discursive constructs (versions of the candidates and selection decisions) which are themselves the result of committee sensemaking. Selectors, they argue, work using a retrospective-prospective orientation to discursively fit together versions and decisions – while simultaneously constructing them – during decision meetings which are characterized either by initial agreement or disagreement.

This study is important in part because it reveals decision making in situated contexts to be practical, deliberate and, crucially, a consequence of dynamic, social, reflexive, sensemaking processes. Other papers in this *Perspectives* also touch on issues of decision making. Weber and Glynn (2006) suggest that the sensemaking that accompanies decisions made in and by organizations are primed, edited and even perhaps triggered by institution-level processes. Malsch et al. (2012) show that the decision making of compensation committee members is influenced by macro-level cultural types. The complicated intertwining of sensemaking and decision-making processes has been explored in multiple contexts and situations, including the *Piper Alpha* disaster (Brown, 2004), a deadly heat wave in France (Boude & Laroche, 2009), the *Columbia* space shuttle disaster (Dunbar & Garud, 2009), the killing of Jean Charles de Menezes (Colville et al., 2013), and in assessments of managers' identification of project risks (Winch & Maytorena, 2009).

The role of sensemaking in both maintaining and (potentially) disrupting ongoing processes of organizing is tackled directly by Zilber (2007) in her analysis of how institutional entrepreneurship is accomplished through the narration of sensemaking stories. She describes how two groups of actors at a high-tech conference in Israel authored both a shared, cohesive, optimistic story and counter-stories which blamed others for the crisis and positioned themselves as the 'key' actor in the field. These discursive constructions 'allowed for efforts at both reproducing and disrupting the institutional order, and enabled the various groups to cooperate and compete at the same time' (p. 1036). In this instance, venture capitalists told stories that downplayed the importance of entrepreneurs and accentuated their own while service providers highlighted the faults of the venture capitalists and implied the need for them as objective, knowledgeable intermediaries. One major contribution she makes is to show that stories can be 'both a medium of, and a resource for,

institutional entrepreneurship' (p. 1036). In contrast, Abolafia's (2010) paper emphasizes how change is slowed in conservative ritualized processes of committee sensemaking and decision making in the Federal Reserve, where models and logics in use 'limit the range of stories they can tell' (p. 364). These are themes that have been taken up and explored further by other scholars, who have, for example, discussed the role of sensemaking texts in processes of institutional continuity and change (Denis, Langley, & Cazale, 1996) and global restructuring (Erkama & Vaara, 2010; Pye, 2005).

## Towards Future Conversations

A decade ago, Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld (2005, p. 417) wrote that there was only a 'modest amount of empirical work on sensemaking'. Even in 2005 this was true only if relatively tight boundaries were drawn regarding what counted as 'sensemaking' as opposed to other notionally distinct processes of meaning-making and reality construction. This said, it is arguably the case that sensemaking research has been largely conservative, and that there remain many relatively uncharted topics and areas of interest. Discourses centred on sensemaking have begun to broaden to consider issues of mood/emotion (Holt & Cornelissen, 2014; Maitlis, Vogus, & Lawrence, 2013), metaphor (Cornelissen et. al., 2008; Patriotta & Brown, 2011), moral awareness (Parmar, 2014) and its embodied nature (Cunliffe & Coupland, 2012; Harquail & King, 2010), but theorization of these issues remains under-developed. Some scholars (Helms Mills, Thurlow, & Mills, 2010) continue to maintain that inadequate attention is given by sensemaking researchers to issues of politics and power (though for exceptions see Brown, 2000, 2005). Despite the efforts of Weber and Glynn (2006) and Vlaar, Van den Bosch and Volberda (2006), Maitlis and Christianson (2014) have argued for more studies that explore the role of macro-level discourses – social, cultural, economic and political – in the constitution of sensemaking processes both within and across organizations.

Given recognition of the importance of issues of spatiality and temporality in processes of organizing, there is scope also for more fine-grained analyses of how the distributed sensemaking of individuals and groups in organizations is, or more pragmatically is *best*, marshalled and organized to make decision-making processes more highly reliable. Whether described as 'thinking... in future perfect tense' (Weick, 1969, p. 66), 'postalgia' (Ybema, 2010) or more prosaically as 'prospective sensemaking' (Corley & Gioia, 2011), it is clear that there is huge scope for contributing further to our understanding of how we make sense about the future. This is particularly important during times of change where guides to the future based on what has happened in the past may be at best misguided and, at worst, pathological (Colville et al., 2013). For this reason, researchers increasingly are calling for an unpacking of 'prospective sensemaking' that conceptually goes beyond a derivative of retrospective sensemaking (Mackay, 2009; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2014). Whether this can be achieved within an expanded aperture of the sensemaking lens or not will be at the forefront of research agendas which foreground the practices of strategy and processes of change (Brown & Thompson, 2013; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002).

There are also plentiful opportunities for extending our comprehension of sensemaking in mundane rather than crisis-led sensemaking, and for the study of sensemaking in novel – for example, virtual – contexts. In pursuing these and other lines of research scholars will need to continue to refine their methods to capture more of the nuance and complexity of sensemaking processes, perhaps through the use not just of ethnography and textual analysis but also video materials, the real-time analysis of situations and events, and auto-ethnography.

Finally, and deliberately provocatively, we note that in this *Perspectives* issue we have emphasized the strengths and significance of sensemaking research. There have in fact been

relatively few attempts to subject this literature to more critical appraisal, though this might prove generative. What are the ‘blind spots’ in sensemaking scholarship? What does this corpus shield, obscure, marginalize and ignore? What are its most important drawbacks, inconsistencies and peculiarities? Is it always necessarily the case that sensemaking is utilitarian? Are there occasions or events where sense cannot plausibly or practically be made and, if so, what do these tell us about the limits of sensemaking perspectives to account adequately for human experience? Sandberg and Tsoukas (2014) note some specific criticisms of the sensemaking perspective such as that it under-explains notions such as ‘process’ and ‘sense’. Others may complain that it focuses attention on a narrow domain of human activity at the expense of so much else that happens in and around organizations. Such points serve to remind us that all perspectives are partial, and that ‘every way of seeing is a way of not seeing’ (Burke, 1965, p. 49).

## Conclusions

Processes of sensemaking are at the core of a vibrant and continuing stream of research in *Organization Studies* that grapples to explain how people in organizations when confronted by discrepant events seek processually to negotiate and sustain meanings which permit coordinated, (putatively) rational action (Ainsworth & Hardy, 2012; Barry & Meisiek, 2010; Dane, 2013). The interaction of experience, meaning ascription and action in processes designed to reduce equivocality and to attribute plausible sense in ways which make the world seem stable and enduring is fundamental to human sociality. Sensemaking studies are, as we have shown, particularly useful for understanding ‘the micro processes that underlie macro processes’ (Zilber, 2007, p. 1049); indeed, many of the papers in this *Perspectives* piece focus on the small-scale, local, sometimes individualized processes by which people make sense in ways which, ultimately, are found to have profound consequences. Such issues are not merely of scholarly interest but are of ever more pressing practical significance. In increasingly turbulent times there is in contemporary organizations a requirement for the sophisticated combination of requisite sensemaking complexity and simplicity of action (‘simplicity’) (Colville et al., 2012). As usual, Weick (2012, p. 151) puts it best while he also points to the future in saying: ‘A central issue in sensemaking will be the ways in which people redeploy concepts in order to ward off blind perceptions, and redirect perceptions to ward off empty conceptions’; and that applies to people *qua* organizational inhabitants and *qua* organizational researchers.

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## Notes

1. We refer to sensemaking as a perspective. Some have elevated it to the status of a theory (e.g., Foldy, Goldman, & Ospina, 2008), but this would seem to be too much of a claim for what Weick describes as ‘a developing set of ideas with explanatory possibilities, rather than... a body of knowledge’ (1995, p. xi).
2. While Weick insists on this distinction between interpretation and sensemaking, Sandberg and Tsoukas (2014) argue that a large majority of studies fail to do so and that all too often processes of sensemaking become synonymous with processes of interpretation.
3. We use the terms ‘story’ and ‘narrative’ interchangeably.
4. There is also a substantial stream of research that focuses on how sense is made by organizational participants through other forms of discourse such as rhetoric, metaphors and analogies (Cornelissen et al., 2008; Cornelissen, Holt, & Zundel, 2011; Holt & Macpherson, 2010; Patriotta & Brown, 2011).

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