

Analyzing Organizational Change: A Sensemaking Perspective

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***Abstract:** Exploring and explaining organizational change have emerged to be among the most recurring and challenging themes in organizational research. Over the years, attempts have been made to study change using various perspectives. A visible trend in recent change literature is its focus on social constructionism as a broad lens to explain change. This paper attempts to discuss the possibilities of using ‘sensemaking’, a perspective based in the social constructionism tradition, as an alternative approach to study change. Based on a comprehensive review of existing literature on sensemaking and organizational change, this paper tries to identify gaps for future research in the area.*

Keywords: Organizational Change, Sensemaking

Exploring and explaining organizational change have emerged to be among the most recurring and challenging themes in organizational research over the past few decades (Pettigrew et al., 2001; Van de Ven & Poole, 1995). Scholars in their pursuit of such exploration and explanation have borrowed from various disciplines as well as ontological and epistemological traditions contributing to a “theoretical pluralism” in the area (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995, 2005). For example, to organize such pluralism, Van de Ven & Poole (1995) have categorized change theories borrowed from various disciplines like psychology, sociology, education, economics etc. into four broad categories: Life-cycle theory, Teleological theory, Dialectical theory and Evolutionary theory based on their content and intellectual heritage. They are of the view that each of these broad theories provides a partial understanding of the complex phenomenon of

organizational change and that integration facilitates a stronger explanation (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995). Similarly, in a later effort of addressing diversities in ontological and epistemological orientations about whether change consists of things or processes, the same authors have developed another typology of variance and process approaches that can aid change research (Van de Ven & Poole, 2005). Such a diversity of theorization in the area confirms that there have been efforts from many different perspectives to crack the code for successful organizational change.

Despite the development of the many theories and approaches to inform management of change, reported failure rate of recent change programs surpasses 70 per cent (Karp & Helgo, 2009). This raises questions in one's mind about gaps between change research and the practice of change management as well as the adequacy of current change theories to holistically explain the complex phenomenon of change. Reflecting on these questions only confirms the challenging nature of analyzing organizational change. Planned change often emerges in a fashion that is unplanned for, thus displaying its complex and non-linear nature. There are a growing number of debates concerning the core assumptions about the very nature of change itself: whether change is a thing or a process (Van de Ven & Poole, 2005), whether it is episodic or continuous (Weick & Quinn, 1999) etc. Pettigrew et. al (2001) opine that change literature remains underdeveloped regarding six inter-related analytical issues: (1) Examination of multiple contexts and levels of analysis of organizational change, (2) Focus on issues of time, history, process and action, (3) The link between organizational change and organizational performance outcomes, (4) Cross-cultural comparisons in organizational change, (5) The study of receptivity, customization, sequencing, pace and episodic versus continuous change, and (6) The partnership between

scholars and practitioners in studying organizational change. Perhaps, resolving these issues will make change research more robust and applicable in actual practice.

There are advantages and disadvantages related to choosing between approaches to follow in change research because different approaches aim at different kinds of explanations of a particular phenomenon. For example, choosing a content study of change would mean focusing on explaining antecedents and consequences of organizational change while ignoring the sequence of the way change unfolds, which is a focus of process studies (Barnett & Carroll, 1995). A holistic understanding of change is however dependent on an integration of approaches based on the context in which change happens (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995, 2005). Pettigrew (1985) has earlier criticized change literature to be acontextual, ahistorical and aprocessual but introspection on the issues such as those enumerated by Pettigrew et. al (2001) has led to a gradual progress for the current literature on change. Alternative perspectives have evolved over time to build on older perspectives in explaining change. A quick review of the recent literature published on organizational change shows one such perspective of “social constructionism” (Berger & Luckmann, 1967) emerging to define developments in the area. Briefly, social constructionism is an alternative approach to reality which says that reality is a product of social processes and interactions people are engaged in (Burr, 2003). Standing as a contrast to the popular positivist lens of inquiry, the main tenet of this approach is that our action depends on the subjective, social reality we construct. While positivism focuses on explanation that demonstrates causality, social constructionism aims at increasing the general understanding of a situation which is particularly important for theory generation (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2012). This has contributed to the emergence of a comparatively new strand of change research that lays importance on the context, history and process of change. Organization

Development which has been the major approach to organizational change has also come to base itself on the principles of social constructionism (Burns & Cooke, 2012). Within the field of organizational change, there is a growing emphasis on sensemaking, narrative analyses, discourse analyses, strategy-as-practice and methods such as appreciative inquiry etc. that are broadly based in the social constructionism tradition.

This paper tries to discuss an alternative approach for analyzing organizational change called “sensemaking”. It discusses the concept of sensemaking and the advantages of using it for analyzing change. It also reviews research done on sensemaking and organizational change to identify gaps that can aid future research in the area.

The Concept of Sensemaking and its Dynamics during Organizational Change

Individuals facing new experiences, try to make meaning of the new, the different and the unknown in these experiences on the basis of their prior knowledge. This process of noticing the new or the different in the environment and interpreting the same with reference to the old or the known is called sensemaking. When faced with interruptions in one’s ongoing activities (Weick, 1995) the “current state of the world is perceived to be different from the expected state of the world” and people try to construct meaning by “looking for reasons that will enable them to resume their interrupted activity and stay in action” (Weick et al, 2005). The concept of sensemaking has been articulated in different ways since the time it has come to be used as a psychological construct (see Louis, 1980; Starbuck & Milliken, 1988; Ring & Rands, 1989). However, Weick (1979, 1995) was the first to conceptualize it using a social organizational approach, i.e. his articulation of sensemaking focuses on the social construction of reality. He has

also largely been attributed with having introduced sensemaking to organizational theory (Smerek, 2009). Sensemaking can be understood as a process of construction of possible explanations about cues emerging from disruptions in ongoing activities, by referring to older experiences (Weick, 1995). It is a process that is ‘grounded in identity construction, retrospective, enactive of sensible environments, social, ongoing, focused on and by extracted cues and driven by plausibility rather than accuracy’ (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking is considered to be a meta-theory that has several theoretical roots as its foundation as enumerated by Weick (1995). Weick et. al (2005) look at sensemaking as a process of organizing or ‘a process of bringing order to intrinsic flux of human action and channeling it towards certain ends’ (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). The properties of sensemaking (Weick, 1995; Weick et al, 2005) distinguish it from other explanatory processes such as interpretation, perception, decision making etc. Beginning with noticing and bracketing, it organizes flux by extracting cues from everyday flow for closer attention, labels and categorizes experiences retrospectively, makes presumptions about the cues through communication and social interaction and focuses on action, i.e. decides on ‘what to do?’ based on the sense made of the cues (Weick et al, 2005). In brief, it constitutes a cyclical and dialogic interaction between action and thought which makes it the ‘primary site for meaning formation that informs and constrains identity and action’ (Helms Mill, 2003).

Organizational change as an event constitutes several interruptions which force people facing it to alter their patterns of thought and action so that the said change becomes meaningful in terms of previous understanding and experience (Bartunek, 1984; Louis, 1980). Owing to the disruptions it results in, change constitutes a powerful occasion for sensemaking (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). Individuals hold cognitive interpretive schemes or mental models which work as frames of reference during instances where individuals, groups and organizations engage

in constructing meaning of the world around them. During times of change, individual and shared meanings held by organizational members become exposed to ‘reconstruction’ (Ericson, 2001) or ‘reorientation’ (Balogun, 2007). This leads to micro-level transformations in the cognitive interpretive schemes of the people and organizations relating to their routine ways of doing things or ‘the well-rehearsed patterns of actions’ (Sonenshein & Maitlis, 2010). Owing to these processes, change no more remains a simple, linear process of implementing macro-plans. Instead, it emerges in a way that is often different from how it was envisioned. Looking at the phenomenon the other way round establishes these micro-level transformations as starting points for implementation of planned organization change (Weick & Quinn, 1999). Therefore, sensemaking is not just the matter of change; it is also a perspective that can be used to analyze and manage change. Its focus on the earliest, more tentative stages of behavior (Weick, 1995) where the foundations for how one behaves later are laid make it an important perspective to understand change.

Advantages of a Sensemaking Analysis of Organizational Change

“Change can be like an old slot machine, where a penny placed in the top can take many different paths so that you can’t know in advance what you will get out at the bottom” (Balogun, 2006, p.30). In their analysis of strategic organizational change, Balogun & Johnson (2005) question the traditional objective or rationalistic view that strategic action automatically flows from policy. Change, being a complex process, needs concepts capable of encompassing such complexity to enable its understanding in totality (Ericson, 2001). Balogun (2006) argues that, understanding change involves understanding the intended and unintended messages that have been received, the manner in which messages are interpreted and the reasons for that, as well as

the way these meanings affect behavior. A sensemaking analysis of change enables just that. Macro-level explanations of change need to be complemented with micro-level explanations to build a holistic picture of change. The social constructivist, interpretist approach to managing change in general and the sensemaking approach in particular aim to bring about organizational change by changing the meaning systems active within the organizations. In other words, a sensemaking analysis of change “provides opportunities to incorporate meaning and mind into organizational theory” (Weick et. al, 2005, p. 419). It helps confront the two major questions related to change program failure by explicating the role of agency and thus the ‘how’ of change in an organization and by reducing the ‘research-practice gap’ in the area.

- **Role of agency and the ‘how’ of change**

Organizations are not actors who can respond but people are and thus aggregate organizational level responses largely depend on individual level responses (Stensaker & Falkenberg, 2008). This also stands true for organizational change scenarios. The rational planned change approach has come to be widely criticized for not being able to meet the challenges of radical change taking place in organizations over the years (Caldwell, 2005). Change cannot be holistically conceptualized as a top- down initiative as visualized by the rationalists. The role of people other than change agents and leaders as agencies of change is now coming to be recognized as important. There seems to be an overall transition from rationalist epistemologies of agency to the fragmented discourses of social constructionism (Caldwell, 2005; Gergin, 2001).

Sensemaking as the substance of change, allows people to discover as well as create the new reality following from organizational change (Greenberg, 1995; Gioia, 1986). Analyzing

change from the sensemaking perspective improves our understanding of the organizing process (Mills, 2009) at work during such a time. Organizing is the process of bringing people and their energies together and harnessing them into an operative system for collective action (Weick, 1995; Weick et. al, 2005). Organizations now come to be seen as processes rather than structures and thus the dynamism encompassing change because of the way people make sense of the experience can be tapped with the help of such an analysis (Mills, 2009). For example, a sensemaking analysis of change helps one explore the events that shape the identities of people in the organization which in turn influence what cues they extract and how they interpret it (Thurlow & Helms Mill, 2009). Sensemaking thus constitutes an important perspective that helps in adding a micro, processual dimension to the macro, content explanation of change which in turn explains change more holistically.

- **Mitigating the research-practice gap in organizational change**

Academic research on organizational change can be gauged in terms of relevant implications it has for the actual practice of change management in organizations. The high failure rate of change programs makes one conceive of a wide research-practice gap in the field. Previous change research based on rationalistic approaches came up with prescriptive to-dos for change managers. However, the social constructionist approach to change research provides interesting insights into the actual change process that can better inform management of change. A sensemaking analysis provides a micro-mechanism that produces macro-change over time (Weick et al, 2005, p. 419). Sense made of a change initiative is the first step towards change action and therefore, influencing sense during the different stages of a change program can influence the behavior following from it. Concepts related to sensemaking like sensegiving (Gioia & Thomas, 1996) and sensehiding (Vaara & Monin, 2010) explain this process of

influencing. Sensegiving is the process of giving sense or creating meaning for organizational members of the change program. Sensehiding on the other hand refers to the process of consciously avoiding certain discourses while managing change in a particular context. A form of sensemaking called prospective sensemaking that works in the future tense by visualizing and making sense of an event that has not occurred can also be used as a technique for change buy-in.

A major strand of research that aims at reducing the said research- practice divide speaks of the importance of language or communication as a vehicle of change (Mills, 2009; Thurlow & Helms Mill, 2009; Sonenshein, 2010). These studies largely base themselves on the sensemaking understanding of how change communication is interpreted and made meaning of in the organization. This further emphasizes the relevance of such a perspective in change research.

Review of Literature on Sensemaking and Organizational Change

Given the importance of sensemaking as an approach for analyzing organizational change, it has emerged to be a promising area of research in organization studies. An earlier review of research done in the area reported trends relating to the focus of sensemaking studies in terms of change actor and type of change (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). A piece of academic research is generally evaluated through its contribution in one of these ways: the new concepts it develops, novel ways of application in diverse contexts or through the methodological innovations it entails. This review tries to build on Maitlis & Sonenshein's (2010) change-actor / change- type categorization and organizes literature into four categories: type of change, type of industry, category of change actor and type of research. In our focus of organizational change,

the type of change, the industry it is based in and the change actor involved are the major themes that provide the context for developing new concepts or applying old ones. Further, a look at the type of research methods employed for conducting studies provides scope for identifying methodological innovations in the area or gaps to build on.

For the purpose of the review, 48 well cited journal papers were chosen and each paper was analyzed in terms of the context of study, change actor it focused on and research methodology it followed. Table 1¹ below presents an overview of the categorization.

TABLE 1: RESEARCH ON SENSEMAKING AND ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

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I.	TYPE OF CHANGE
	1. STRATEGIC CHANGE (27) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. RESTRUCTURING (12) B. M & As (5) C. MISCELLANEOUS (6)
	2. OTHER CHANGES (10)
II.	TYPE OF CHANGE ACTOR
	1. TOP MANAGEMENT (5)
	2. MIDDLE MANAGEMENT (12)
	3. OTHER EMPLOYEES (7)
	4. MULTIPLE ACTORS (11)
III.	TYPE OF RESEARCH
	1. EMPIRICAL (35)
	2. THEORETICAL (11)
	3. BOTH (2)
IV.	TYPE OF INDUSTRY
	1. SERVICES (24) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. HEALTH (5) B. EDUCATION (9) C. UTILITIES (6) D. TELECOM (1) E. INSURANCE (3) F. CONSULTANCY (1)
	2. MANUFACTURING (8)

¹Note: The numbers against the categories indicate the count of papers in that particular category. These numbers are based on the information available within the research paper about the category. In case of unavailability of information, the paper has not been categorized.

Sensemaking and Type of Change

Type of change is a useful way to classify research on sensemaking and organizational change based on examining the nature of change situation under study. As has been concluded by Maitlis & Sonenshein (2010), this review also finds strategic change to be the central focus of research studies in the area (e.g. Gioia et al, 1994; Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Luscher & Lewis, 2008; Balogun & Johnson, 2005; Balogun, 2007; Rouleau, 2005). More than 70% of the papers reviewed focus on strategic change. Within the category of strategic change, the largest focus has been on restructuring and mergers and acquisitions. Less than 30% of the papers focus on studying sensemaking during other kinds of change situations.

Strategic change has been defined by Gioia et al (1994) as change that “involves either a redefinition of organizational mission and purpose or a substantial shift in overall priorities and goals to reflect new emphases or direction.” According to them it involves a “*re-institutionalization* of cognitions, actions and practices.” Such changes basically result from adapting to the changing environmental needs of organizations and are dramatic, second order in nature. Their success depends on the organization’s ability to change in terms of directions, vision and values as well as the ability of the stakeholders to ‘understand and accept a new conceptualization of the organization’ (Smircich, 1983 cited in Gioia et al, 1994). The different types of strategic change that have been studied in the sensemaking context include restructuring (for e.g. Balogun, 2007; Balogun & Johnson, 2005; Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Gioia et al 1994; Luscher & Lewis, 2008); mergers and acquisitions (for e.g. Chreim & Tafaghod, 2011, Vaara, 2003, 2000; Brown & Humphreys, 2003) and others types of strategic change that embrace multiple aspects like total quality implementation, cost reduction and delayering (Apker, 2003),

strategic organization development initiative (Bartunek et al, 1999), institutional transformation (Kezar & Eckel, 2002) etc.

Sensemaking studies of strategic change have focused on explaining the sequence of the change process, factors influencing change and the outcomes of change. For example, in exploring the sequence of change, Gioia et al (1994) have talked of four phases of change lifecycle that a task force for change goes through: *Interpretation* (trying to understand its identity and role), *definition* (making sense of its role as a facilitator of change), *legitimation* (trying to understand how to exert influence) and *institutionalization* (constructing influential statements of change). Balogun (2007) alternatively explicates the process of change in terms of a shift through *shared sensemaking* (before change), *fractured sensemaking* (during change) and *differentiated sensemaking* (post change). Similarly, in examining the factors of change sensemaking, Gioia & Thomas (1996) show the importance of the sensemaking context, identity and image as influencing the interpretation of environmental issues. Balogun & Johnson (2005) in their study show the influence of change sensemaking on various intended and unintended outcomes of strategic change. Apart from the process, factors and outcomes of change, research on strategic change like mergers and acquisitions focus on the contradictions that arise in the process. For example, Chreim & Tafaghod (2012) use the concept of new comer sensemaking to elicit interpretations of change by acquired managers. Acquired managers' sensemaking occurs in a context where their past frames interact with the acquirer frames. As a result contradictions arise between the acquirer and the acquired owing to their differences in terms of structural and temporal loci: what the acquired manager sees as radical change, the acquirer sees as evolutionary change; what the acquired manager sees as loss of autonomy is viewed as control

by the acquirer and so on. In a similar vein, Vaara (2000) uncovers the cultural differences arising during mergers from a sensemaking perspective.

The other types of change that have been the focus of sensemaking research include social change (Sharma & Good, 2013), educational change (Schmidt & Datnow, 2005; Marz & Kelchtermans, 2013), work empowerment- related change (Bartunek et al, 2006) etc. Such research also throws light on the different factors influencing change sensemaking like personal beliefs about the content of change and structural reality (Marz & Kelchtermans, 2013), emotions (Schmidt & Datnow, 2005), participation in change program (Bartunek et al, 2006) etc. Outcomes of change that are found to be influenced by sensemaking in this category include level of change implementation (Marz & Kelchtermans, 2013), perceived gains from a change program (Bartunek et al, 2006) etc.

Sensemaking and Change Actor

Sensemaking starts with a sensemaker (Weick, 1995). Classifying literature based on the type of change actor turns our focus from what the change is to who is involved in the change process? Change actors have a major influence on the organizational adaptation to change (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). Change triggers reframing as actors seek to make sense of disparities between their expectations and new experiences (Balogun & Johnson, 2005). These actors can be recipients of change, deployers of change or both recipients and deployers in a particular change context. Recipient interpretations of change and the ways in which they are mediated by the context, ways of thinking and interactions with others are likely to be key (Balogun & Johnson, 2005; Brown & Humphreys, 2003). Based on the change actors, studies can be classified in terms of their focus on top management, middle management, other

employees or multiple actors. The dominant focus of literature in this line has been on the middle management (e.g. Sharma & Good, 2013; Balogun, 2007; Balogun & Johnson, 2005, 2004; Luscher & Lewis, 2008). Around 34% of the papers that provide information about the change actor they focus on, study the middle management sensemaking. 14% focus on the top management, 20% on the other employees and roughly 31% on multiple stakeholders of change.

The role of middle management in change has come to gain wide recognition in the change literature. They act as the ‘targets as well as the agents’ of change. The middle management has to make sense of the change (sensemaking) initiated by their seniors and provide sense or meaning (sensegiving) to the lower hierarchical levels as people in charge of change (Balogun & Johnson, 2005). If their interpretations are consistent with those intended by change instigators, it culminates in successful implementation of intended change (Balogun & Johnson, 2005). Sensemaking as a process has also been shown to have a bearing on how these middle managers work with different paradoxes during change (Luscher & Lewis, 2008) or balance opposing logics related to change (Sharma & Good, 2013).

While the role of middle management cannot be ignored in change implementation, the top management generally envisions change for the entire organization. Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) study the iterative process of sensemaking and sensegiving processes of top managers in context of the different phases of change initiation namely envisioning, signaling, revisioning and energizing. The result is a negotiated reality in the wake of change. In post merger integration situations, the top managers have a fundamental impact on the process because they not only have to manage the cultural integration of the two parties but also have to deal with cultural differences themselves (Vaara, 2000). Therefore they too have to engage themselves in dual processes of sensemaking and sensegiving like the middle managers do during change.

However, as mentioned earlier, the agency of change is not restricted to the top management or the change agent. Change also largely depends on the lower in hierarchy, frontline employees who actually implement the change. These employees act as the ultimate change recipients whose response has been often cast as resistance (Kuhn & Corman, 2003 & Oreg, 2003 in Bartunek et al. 2006). Change recipients and change agents may not share the same understanding of a change initiative (Bartunek et al. 2006). In order to throw light on how this category of people make sense of change and the impacts of their sensemaking, different types of employees have been studied depending on the industrial context, for e.g. nurses (Bartunek et al. 2006; Apker, 2003), teachers (Schmidt & Datnow, 2005; Marz & Kelchtermans, 2013) and nomadic telecom workers (Bean & Hamilton, 2006).

To accommodate the complexity of change agency, a growing number of research studies now focus on exploring the meaning making processes of more than one stakeholder of change (e.g. Ericson, 2001; Gioia et al. 1994; Brown & Humphreys, 2003) since it is often the inter-recipient sensemaking processes that influence change. Ericson (2001) studies the sensegiving process of the top management and the sensemaking of the middle level management in a strategic change context to demonstrate such inter-recipient sensemaking. Brown & Humphreys (2003) basing their conceptualization of change on the study of narratives describe the way separate groups of the same organization emerge with different change stories or narratives depending on the way they make sense of a merger.

Sensemaking and type of research

In order to identify future directions of research on sensemaking and change, one useful lens is that of the type of research that is being conducted. More than 70% of the research papers

reviewed were empirical in nature. Of the remaining papers, around 7% were a theoretical-empirical paper, where the author tries to propose a theory or model as well as test it empirically.

The socio-constructionist approach has moved our attention from the individual, group and organizational level analysis to interaction (Allard-Poesi, 2005). Therefore, more and more researchers are looking at the interpretive, grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) based on participant observations, narrative analyses etc. to capture the dynamics of interactions. A close look at the empirical papers published on sensemaking and change show similarities in patterns of studies, much in line with what Weick (1995) and Allard-Poesi (2005) observe about research on sensemaking in general. Most empirical studies are qualitative in nature based on:

- the interpretive and grounded theory approaches (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) that rely on building assumptions or theories after looking at the data;
- the insider-outsider approach which uses a participant observer within the research setting as well as an outside researcher for an objective view of things;
- multi-stage processes (Van Mannen, 1979) which generally involve a first order reporting of processes and occurrences as elicited by participants and a second order refining of first order findings by referring to the relevant theoretical concepts and frameworks;
- collection of data through diaries, interviews, focus group discussions etc. and content analyses of such data and
- longitudinal studies to help capture the subtleties of the dynamic, transient nature of sensemaking.

Allard-Poesi (2005) raises a question about the paradox ingrained in studying sensemaking from an interpretive approach, as we are trying to build objective knowledge of a subjective process through these research methods. The paradox arises because researchers in trying to understand sensemaking of organizational members cannot resist their own sensemaking processes. As a result, they describe the sensemaking of the subjects studied in a manner they themselves interpret it. Moreover, they undermine a fundamental characteristic of sensemaking, that of plausibility in the process. There are two alternatives that she suggests: the post modern method of engaging against our sensemaking in trying to uncover other people's sensemaking and the participant route of active engagement during research. Luscher and Lewis (2008) using the second route attempt to demonstrate the usefulness of action research in both facilitating fruitful sensemaking in change situations and theorizing about the same. Such an approach also helps tackle the issue of scholar-practitioner collaboration in change research that Pettigrew (2001) points at. Weber and Manning (2001) from a different stance also criticize ethnographic methods of reflecting the bias of the researcher and not capturing the sensemaking processes in a non- intrusive manner. They further a novel attempt to demonstrate how cognitive cause maps are useful in studying sensemaking during planned organization change. A cause map is a visual representation of the cause-effect relationships of our sensemaking processes. It consists of nodes that represent content and mapping is done by analyzing the relationships between various such nodes. The advantage with this kind of a technique is that it relies on individual-specific questions that emerge while they face change.

These findings of the review about the dominance of qualitative research are in line with Bob Sutton's personal communication to Weick about very little quantitative research on

sensemaking (Weick, 1995). Very few such attempts (e.g. Bartunek et al, 2006; Gioia & Thomas, 1996) are visible in research on sensemaking and organizational change.

Sensemaking and type of industry

The final category of discussion in this paper is based on the type of industry that sensemaking studies have been based in. Since organizational change is context driven, understanding the context in which change happens is important because there is a growing awareness of the need for designers of organizational change to develop context sensitive approaches to implementation if change is to be successful (Balogun & Hope Hailey, 2002). Industry can be the context for change with the way a change emerges varying from industry to industry.

Broadly, sensemaking and change studies can be said to have focused on the services sector. Out of the studies that disclose information of the industry in which they are based, 75% are based in the services sector perhaps because the service industry is growing rapidly all over the world and thus encompassing changes of different kinds. Within the services sector, there is a wide dominance of the education sector (e.g. Marz & Kelchtermans, 2013; Gioia et al, 1994; Gioia & Thomas, 1996), public and private utility (e.g. Balogun & Johnson, 2005; Balogun, 2007; Weber & Manning 2001) and the health sector (Ericson, 2005; Apker, 2003; Thurlow & Mills, 2009). The education and the health sectors offer contexts for such studies because they are facing turbulent second order change after relatively long years in their now changing stable markets (Bartunek, 1984).

Only 25% of the empirical studies are based in the manufacturing sector, for example, Luscher and Lewis's (2008) study in a toy manufacturing organization, Vaara's (2003) study in a

furniture manufacturing organization etc. This means a clear blind spot for there are wide number of changes taking place in this sector like quality improvement, technological change etc. that can be captured from the sensemaking lens.

Vaara (2000) has made a commendable attempt to study mergers across multiple organizations both in the service and the manufacturing sector. Such kind of studies can be useful in making cross industry comparisons in how people make meaning of the same kind of change.

Apart from classifying literature on the basis of the aforementioned categories, a look at the regional distribution of research on sensemaking and organizational change shows dominance in the American and European countries. 54% of the studies that disclose their regions are based in organizations in European countries and 43% in American countries. Very little research has been conducted in the other parts of the world, with almost no research from Asian countries. This leaves a wide gap for such studies to be conducted in other countries in order to see the influence of the cultural and socio-political factors on sensemaking during organizational change.

Discussion and Conclusion

Sensemaking as a concept has great potential to provide a clear and holistic understanding of the very often complex and emergent organizational change from a social constructivist standpoint. As opined by Weick et al. (2005), sensemaking analyses provide micro mechanisms to enable macro changes. In other words, a sensemaking understanding of an organizational change can help catch the roots of how and why change emerges the way it does. This paper has attempted to briefly discuss the concept of sensemaking as well as present a

review of literature specific to sensemaking and organizational change. Based on the review we can draw the following conclusions.

- A close look at the research done on sensemaking in diverse change situations shows different attempts taken to explore the way change emerges as a process, relationships between sensemaking and different outcomes of change like implementation of change, perceived gains of change etc. Also visible, are research findings that talk about factors that influence the sensemaking process like emotions, identity, image, participation in change initiative, information processing structure etc.
- Reviewing the literature on the basis of the focal change actors shows us that change results in multiple meaning constructions spread across different stakeholders in the organization which may in turn result in divergent actions (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). An actual understanding of emergent change outcomes thus depends on revealing the sensemaking processes of the multiple stakeholders of change in a given context.
- A review of the type of research methods reveals minimal amount of quantitative research done in the area. Dominance of qualitative studies based on grounded theory approach suggests that research on sensemaking and change is in a developing stage where the focus is to understand the nature of sensemaking during such situations in depth and its impact.
- One can also see a dominance of the service sector as a chosen set up for empirical studies. More number of studies in the manufacturing sector and service organizations apart from those in the health and education (higher) can help make generalizations about sensemaking during change.

While all these attempts to study organizational change from a sensemaking perspective exist, there are several questions that arise which can also guide future research in the area. These include questions on: Other factors influencing sensemaking during organizational change, Possibility of drawing generalizations about these factors in a given industrial context, Establishing linkage between sensemaking and more tangible organizational outcomes of change (like Thomas et al, 1993) etc. One also finds a large focus on strategic change as the chosen type of change for sensemaking research. The question thus raised is that whether sensemaking is triggered only in dramatic change situations. There is therefore a need to explore the repercussions of the meaning making process in smaller, less dramatic change situations. For increasing the practical relevance of such research, one can also see a need emerging for more work to be done on discovering ways to influence the sense made by these change actors in the desired direction (like Sharma & Good, 2013; Bartunek et al, 1999). There are questions that also arise about the research methods used to capture sensemaking: Which methods can help best capture sensemaking? Can quantitative techniques be used to establish cause-effect relationships between sensemaking and change outcomes? How to best work with limitations pertaining to the study of interactions which is the unit of analysis in sensemaking? Can retrospective and prospective sensemaking be used to discover the way change emerged or will emerge and predict outcomes of change?

Application of the sensemaking lens to study organizational change is an emerging field of research. One can see immense scope in this regard in terms of conceptual development, as well as methodological innovation in research. Research in the area also holds great promises for practitioners in terms of providing micro tools for effectively managing both micro and macro change. Since the field of sensemaking and organizational change is in its emerging stage

of development, any contribution can be a large contribution in this direction. To sum up:

“Almost any kind of work is likely to enhance our understanding of a largely invisible, taken for granted social process that is woven into communication and activity in ways that seem to mimic Darwinian evolution” (Weick et al, 2005), change not being an exception to this.

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