

# Understanding Sense-Making

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## INTRODUCTION

The relevance of decision-making theory in improving understanding has been called into question especially when attempting to understand organisational environments faced with organisational change (Craig-Lees, 2001; Mintzberg, Waters, Pettigrew, & Butler, 1990; Reed, 1991). For example, Mintzberg et al. (1990) commented that, in understanding organisational change, the relevance of decision-making theory takes on the appearance of the continued playing of the orchestra on the Titanic as it sank. In fact, Weick (1993) commented that there have been a number of responses to this problem of the over-reliance on decision-making theory in organisational studies, for example, there has been a shift toward examining naturalistic decision-making with more attention to situational assessment and sense-making (Weick, 1993). Weick (1993, p. 635) commented that

*one way to shift the focus from decision making to meaning is to look more closely at sense-making in organisations. The basic idea of sense-making is that reality is an ongoing accomplishment that emerges from efforts to create order and make retrospective sense of what occurs.*

Consider these scenarios as examples as you start to read this entry: if someone was to say to you “I do not want you to make a decision right away, I just want you to think about *it* and come back to me when you have time,” you would immediately begin a sense-making process regarding the action you have taken at some point in the past around *it*. Furthermore, in an interview, if an interviewer asks an interviewee about a project that they were involved in for the past 6 months (for example), the interviewer is triggering sense-making where the interviewee looks back over the project and attributes meaning to what happened.

## BACKGROUND

Sense-Making theory is rooted in symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Prasad, 1993), ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967; Burrell & Morgan, 1979), and sociology of knowledge (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Wuthnow, Hunter, Bergesen, & Kijrzwil, 1984). These sociological perspectives are illustrated in Table 1.

From these sociological perspectives the origins of the sense-making construct lie in constructivism. Therefore, the basic premise of the constructivist view of sense-making theory is that people act on the basis of the meaning that they attribute to situations, where action emerges from social interaction and is developed and modified through an interpretive process (Lyytinen, 1987).

## MAIN FOCUS

Weick (1993) observed that most organisational analysis begins and ends with decision-making, but also noted that there is growing dissatisfaction with this orthodoxy. This observation was also been made by Lyytinen (1987, p. 29) in relation to the usefulness of contingency frameworks and their relevance in solving IS problems, stating that “contingency studies in other areas, such as organisation design and decision theory, has been inconclusive. There is no evidence that they would be more satisfactory in the IS area.” In fact, Reed (1991) commenting on the work of March (1989) highlighted how far the concept of decision-making has been stretched and questioned if decision-making should in fact continue to set the agenda for organisational studies. Furthermore, Reed (1991, p. 559), commenting on the work of Brunsson (1989), believed that many unanswered questions concerning the continued explanatory power and relevance of

Table 1. Sociological perspective of sense-making theory

Sociological Perspective	Background	Characteristic
<b>Symbolic Interactionism</b>	Perhaps the most important and enduring sociological perspective from North America. While the symbolic interaction perspective is sometimes associated with Mead, it was Herbert Blumer who developed Mead's ideas into a more systematic sociological approach and coined the term symbolic interactionism in 1937. Overall, interactionism allows material causes to produce mental effects and mental causes to produce material effects	Refers to the peculiar and distinctive character of interaction as it takes place between human beings. The peculiarity consists in the fact that human beings interpret or "define" each other's actions instead of merely reacting to each other's actions
<b>Ethnomethodology</b>	A fairly recent sociological perspective was founded by the American sociologist Harold Garfinkel in the early 1960s. Ethnomethodology focuses on the ways in which people already understand the world and how they use that understanding. In so far as this is a key behaviour in human society, ethnomethodology holds out the promise of a comprehensive and coherent alternative to mainstream sociology	Simply means the study of the ways in which people make sense of their social world and display their understandings of it
<b>Sociology of Knowledge</b>	The term first came into widespread use in the 1920s, with Scheler and Mannheim writing extensively on the topic. However, the sociology of knowledge tended to remain on the periphery of mainstream sociological thought, due to the dominance of functionalism through the middle years of the 20 <sup>th</sup> Century. It was largely reinvented and applied much more closely to everyday life in the 1960s, particularly by Berger and Luckmann (1967)	The study of the social origins of ideas and of the effects prevailing ideas have on societies

conventional doctrine (e.g., decision-making theory) have been raised.

Sense-Making is not decision-making, for example, Weick (1995) explained that sense-making was about such things as placement of items into frameworks, comprehending, constructing meaning, and interacting in pursuit of mutual understanding and patterning. In fact Weick (1995) commented that sense-making is not synonymous with interpretation or decision-making, as it encompasses more than how cues (information) are interpreted, and as a result is concerned with how the cues are internalised in the first instance and how individuals decide to focus on specific cues. For example, Seligman (2006) argued that several approaches to adoption focus on the adoption decision and its antecedents and consequences, whereas sense-making focuses on the adopter, their mental frameworks, and the antecedents and products of those frameworks. Therefore, Seligman (2006) argues that the sense-making perspective provides a "look under the hood" of the adopter's mental engine. "It is meant to compliment, not replace those other perspectives on adoption, just as an understanding of how an automobile engine works is complimentary to an understanding of how to drive" (Seligman, 2006 p. 110).

## Properties of Sense-Making

Weick (1995) provided seven properties of sense-making which characterised the essence of the sense-making process. These properties are presented in Table 2 and the sense-making process is then discussed in the remaining sections.

## Components of the Sense-Making Process

There are many differing perspectives on the definition and true meaning of the sense-making process, however, a range of descriptions have been used to describe the concept; for example, "placing of stimuli into a mental framework used to direct interpretations," "recurring process of forming anticipations and assumptions and the subsequent interpretation of experiences that deviate from these anticipations and assumptions," and the "reciprocal interaction of information seeking, meaning ascription, and action." Therefore, these descriptions of the sense-making process are used as a metaphor for "understanding" and "meaning making," and describe a broad and all-encompassing, subjective, mental activity whereby individuals make sense

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