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## Co-constructing meanings in organizational development

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### Abstract

The paper adopts a social constructionist perspective to explore how organization is emerging through meanings constructed. In this context organization becomes meaningful as a result of the interaction between its members. A significant metaphor dealing how sense is made in organization is *sensemaking*. Starting with a brief literature review on this remarkable metaphor the purpose of paper is to emphasize the potential influence of sensemaking in organizational development, specifically on changing process, decision making, and emotions. Sensemaking pays attention to conversations' context, and introduces fresh ideas for meaning making associated with the experience of interacting with others. A key element in this ongoing process is language used in organization allowing the accomplishment of other new interpretations and possibilities to discover effective practices for organizational development. Finally, the paper suggests some further directions emphasizing the reflection of self relational in constructing meanings as a predictable way for organizational knowledge, learning and change.

Keywords: co-constructing; emergence; ongoing process; sensemaking; social constructionism;

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## 1. Introduction

Social constructionism, a perspective with a philosophical framework focuses on the processes of understanding and addressing social change in the postmodern society, in a wider sense, and on organizations specifically (Gergen, 1994; McNamee & Gergen, 1999; Hosking & McNamee, 2006). Although this approach cannot have a unitary definition, given its epistemological nature, social constructionism enriched a variety of research and professional practices from different fields of knowledge (Gergen & Gergen, 2012). In the field of organizational development this paradigm generates specific implications regarding practical interventions by reviewing well-established concepts to propose innovative practices (Cunliffe, 2001, 2002; Hosking & McNamee, 2006). A remarkable influence in this ongoing process, a field full of ambiguity, challenges, and opportunities, is *sensemaking*. Sensemaking is especially needed when members of an organization are surprised by events, and perceive challenges as fear or treats (Ancona, 2011). Given these assumptions the purpose of this paper is to bring into discussion the potential influence of sensemaking in organization strongly associated with social constructionism perspective. The paper begins with an account on sensemaking concept, why it is helpful, underlying its implications particularly in decision making, changing processes, and emotions. As we shall see sensemaking is useful in uncertain contexts, language, discourse, being important resources for organizational interventions, aiming to expand the possibilities to look at a situation (Gergen, McNamee, & Barrett, 2001). Meaning is constructing through language (Wittgenstein, 1958), which provides the members resources for interacting with each other in socially determinate ways (Thibault, 1997).

People construct realities and make sense of them in continuing dialogue of discovery and invention (Brown, Colville, & Pye, 2015). How members of organization relate in each moment is very important, each thought generating actions that can sustain or not an effective organization (Gergen, Gergen & Barrett, 2004). As Gergen (2009) sustains viewing self as relational one can bring together new potentials in conversations, helpful in development of organization. In this context organizations are seen as "potentially fluid field of meaning making" (Gergen, 2009, p. 321), realities being created within organizations as a result of interactions between individuals and of the significations they assign to these realities (Cojocar, 2005; Cojocar, Bragaru, & Ciuchi, 2012). Realities are created by people who communicate through language, each of them influencing and limiting the responses of others (Cojocar, Bragaru, & Ciuchi, 2012), organization becoming meaningful in relationships (Gergen, 2009).

## 2. On sensemaking

Starting with Weick work (1969, 1993), metaphor that deals with how sense is made is *sensemaking*. There is a rapid interest in organizational research on sensemaking, exploring how sense is made in organization (Hernes & Maitlis, 2010a; Whiteman & Cooper, 2011; Cornelissen, 2012). Researches go deep analyzing also the impact of sensemaking in organization, including innovation and creativity (Drazin, Glynn, & Kazanjian, 1999), decision-making (Sonenshein, 2010; Rerup & Feldman, 2011), organizational knowledge and learning (Christianson, Farkas, Sutcliffe, & Weick, 2009; Catino & Patriotta, 2013). Being an ongoing process of development organizations are seen as "potentially fluid field of meaning making" (Gergen, 2009, p. 321; Gergen, 2015). From a social constructionist perspective, organization is socially constructed, emerging from sensemaking (Hernes & Maitlis, 2010a; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2014). Organization "doesn't precede sensemaking, and sensemaking isn't produce by organization" (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005, p. 410).

Sensemaking, a process of social construction (Berger & Luckman, 1966) deals with how people try to understand events, situations that are novel, ambiguous, confusing in organizational context (Colville, Brown, & Pye, 2012; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Sensemaking is about searching for meaning of uncertainty (Mills, 2003), and it starts with chaos (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005).

The concept sensemaking means simply "making of sense" (Weick, 1995, p. 4). Sensemaking goes beyond interpretation, and people play an important role in constructing each situation they attend to comprehend (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). Sensemaking deals with particular settings. It's about how people create meanings intersubjectively through their embodied dialogical acts (Gergen, McNamee, & Barrett, 2001; Hosking & McNamee, 2006), they construct what they interpret (Sutcliffe, 2013). Sensemaking occurs in ongoing interactions between people, a constant substrate that shapes interpretations, "inventing a new meaning for something that has already occurred during the organizing process, *but does not have a name*" (Magala, 1997, p. 324). Everything is interwoven in particular and generalized with others (Cunliffe, 2008). In this ongoing process people from organization "make sense of equivocal inputs and enact that sense back into the world to make it orderly" (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005, p. 410). "Sensemaking is a way station on the road to a consensually constructed, coordinated system of action" (Taylor & Van Every, 2000, p. 40). This perspective enables to create a map that is "comprehended explicitly in words and that serves as a springboard into action" (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005, p. 409).

From social constructionism perspective the sense of organizations is continually emerging, there is no 'I' without 'you' (Shotter, 1989), because we are always related to others. In the organizational context the members of organization negotiate meanings about their experiences, shaping those experiences in conversations, with the aim to becoming more thoughtful, careful, and reflexive about what they do (Cunliffe, 2008). Engaging in this process leads to understand where the level of organization is, being a potential to discover effective resources in organization development. The sense emerges continually as members of organization interact with others (Cunliffe, 2008), meaning living in conversation, in dialogue and utterances where "everything is in relationship to others: other person, other idea, other conversation" (Cunliffe, 2008, p. 131). According to this intersubjective world, the organization's reality can be reshaped, rethought, in order to transform it (Lustig & Ringland, 2010; Somerville & Farner, 2012; Cojocaru, 2012). Sensemaking is about connecting cues and frames an account, people building together the shaped understandings. Individuals are engaged in "ongoing process through which they attempt to make their situations rationally accountability to themselves and others" (Weick, 1993, p. 16). As Gergen (2009) sustains the production of meaning requires coordinated action. Weick (1995) asserts that action is an integral part of sensemaking; the participants take action, and see what happens next.

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