On the way to Ithaka[1]: Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Publication of Karl E. Weick's *The Social Psychology of Organizing*

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ABSTRACT   Karl E. Weick's *The Social Psychology of Organizing* has been one of the most influential books in organization studies, providing the theoretical underpinnings of several research programs. Importantly, the book is widely credited with initiating the *process turn* in the field, leading to the 'gerundizing' of management and organization studies: the persistent effort to understand organizational phenomena as ongoing accomplishments. The emphasis of the book on organizing (rather than on organizations) and its links with sensemaking have made it the most influential treatise on organizational epistemology. In this introduction, we review Weick's magnum opus, underline and assess its key themes, and suggest ways in which several of them may be taken forward.

Keywords: ambiguity, complexity, enactment, organizing, process, sensemaking

INTRODUCTION

'To be complicated is to take pleasure in the process rather than pleasure in the outcome. That holds true for the process of theorizing as well as for the process of managing. To take pleasure in the process is to understand what an Ithaka means'

Karl E. Weick, *The Social Psychology of Organizing*, 1979, p. 263

The Social Psychology of Organizing (hereafter referred for brevity as SPO), first published in 1969 (Weick, 1969) and revised in 1979 (Weick, 1979; references in this paper will be made to the 1979 edition) is Karl. E. Weick's magnum opus. It has been one of the most influential books ever published in organization and management studies, and has provided the foundation both for Weick's rest of ground-breaking research on sensemaking (especially his other major book *Sensemaking in Organizations*, Weick, 1995; see also Weick, 2001, 2009) and for what has been called 'new thinking' (Tsoukas, 1994, 2005) in organizational research, which stresses bounded-cum-embodied rationality, reflective action, process and relationality, ambiguity and paradox, complexity and emergence, becoming, performativity and practice, materiality and embodiment, language and social construction (Czarniawska, 1997, 2008; Hernes, 2014; Lawrence and Phillips, 2019; March, 2008; Morgan, 1986; Nicolini, 2013; Starbuck, 2006). Although extensive citations of SPO are an indicator of its influence (Anderson, 2006), its impact extends well beyond that. Weick did not simply write a book that has been widely referenced (and, one hopes, read) but, importantly, a book that has inspired a new way of talking about organizations (SPO, p. 26, 234) and has stayed with us ever since.

SPO is an unusual book, especially if compared with other classic books in the field, such as Simon's (1945/1976) *Administrative Behavior* (Simon, 1945/1976), March and Simon's (1958) *Organizations*, Lawrence and Lorsch's (1967/1986) *Organization and the Environment*, Thompson's (1967) *Organizations in Action*, Pfeffer and Salancik's (1978/2003) *The External Control of Organizations*, or Pfeffer's (1982) *Organizations and Organization Theory*. SPO lacks the austere organization of these treatises, does not follow a quasi-deductive structure of reasoning, develops the argument in a sometimes non-linear (recursive) fashion, is often conversational in tone and essayistic in style, makes use of everyday examples, cartoons and puzzles, and often playfully invites the reader to engage in thought experiments and exercises. Occasionally, it looks like a textbook written for students (as was the editor's stated intention of the series in which SPO was published, see Kiesler, 1979, iii) but, at other times, it elevates abstraction to a level more familiar to advanced scholars.

The intellectual inspiration of SPO comes not only from Weick's home discipline (social psychology) but also from systems science, cybernetics, evolutionary theory, pragmatist and phenomenological philosophy, interactional sociology, ethnomethodology, and a selective engagement with organization theory (Czarniawska, 2006; Weick, 2004). Indeed, one of the most admirable features of SPO is the diversity of its conceptual sources and the polyphonic manner they are brought together. Weick does not merely cite or quote but engages in dialogue with the authors he draws upon (Weick, 2004). SPO is exemplary for its method of disciplined eclecticism.

Although appreciating abstraction (SPO, p. 26), more than anything else Weick values creativity and imagination. That is why he does not refrain from partly characterizing his work as speculative ('we will not be timid about speculation', he writes, SPO, p. 26); avowedly embraces hyperbole; and utilizes incongruity, anthropomorphic language, even reification at times, provided they offer him the rhetorical 'tricks that help counteract sluggish imaginations' (SPO, p. 26). Weick (2006, p. 1723) seems to appreciate the Romantics' point that 'a talent for speaking differently, rather than for arguing well, is the chief instrument of cultural change' (Rorty, 1989, p. 7). And SPO certainly does speak differently. It is, fundamentally, a *poetic* piece of work (Van Maanen, 1995): it uses language

to make new words, to suggest new concepts, to offer new images – all in the hope that we will start thinking and acting differently, in order to appreciate ever more subtle nuances of a complex world. Weick sees his work more as 'aphoristic' rather than deductively structured knowledge. 'Aphorisms', he notes, may lack the permanence and objectivity of classic scientific knowledge, but 'they are not necessarily inferior' (SPO, p. 40): they help inquiry by drawing attention and enabling more insightful questions, without pretending to offer objective knowledge. Hardly anything important in practical human affairs (Aristotle's '*ta prakta*') can be captured in scientific laws (Berlin, 1996; MacIntyre, 1985).

At several points in SPO, Weick describes his 'organizing model' or 'formulation' (SPO, pp. 234–35, as he often calls it) as an effort to evoke new images and metaphors in the mind of the reader. He seems to have taken on board Wittgenstein's remark that, very often, entrenched 'pictures' of the world hold us 'captive' (Wittgenstein, 1953, §115). Imagery that is more diverse enables the inquirer to comprehend more of the phenomenon of interest (SPO, p. 63; Cornelissen, 2006). The intention to *evoke* is articulated explicitly in SPO: '[the book] has been written to evoke lines of theorizing from the reader, to serve as grist for the reader's free associational mill, and to release lines of argument that previously may not have been given much attention' (SPO, p. 234). Since one of the main themes of SPO is that 'believing is seeing' (SPO, p. 135), Weick' effort was to offer ever more subtle candidates for belief, since 'as ways of talking and believing proliferate, new features of organizations are noticed' (SPO, p. 234). In other words, Weick prompts us to see organizations afresh by inventing new ways of talking about them.

Weick's Model of Organizing

Placing 'organizing' in the title of SPO makes an emphatic contrast with other similar texts, such as, for example, Katz and Kahn's (1966) *The Social Psychology of Organizations*, published only three years earlier (Czarniawska, 2006). Hardly ever used before 1969, 'organizing' has become a staple term in the field ever since. Whereas organization theorists before Weick used to ask: 'what do formal organizations consist of?' or 'what causes organizations to have the features they do?', after Weick we are more inclined to ask: 'How does organization emerge? How is order generated in a particular context? How is collective sense created out of equivocal flows of action? How can contradictory organizational pursuits (e.g., stability and change, adaptation and adaptability) be simultaneously sustained?'. The key to address these questions is to change the language of inquiry: to talk not so much about organizations but about organizing.

What does the emphasis on organizing signify? It is not that Weick denies the existence of organizations (that would be absurd) or wants to purge language from static nouns (that would be too Orwellian) but, rather, he wants to press upon us the point that what we conventionally take to be an 'organization' should not be seen as an entity or a substance but a 'pattern' (SPO, p. 34; see also Wiener, 1968, Ch. V). As a pattern, 'organization' is interactively produced and sustained, and endures despite personnel turnover. Notes Weick: 'It is the persistence of the pattern through contributions made by interchangeable people that distinguishes organizations from other collectivities, such as mobs, families, or patient-therapist dyads where changes in "personnel" produce fundamental changes in the process and the outcome' (SPO, p. 34). By focusing attention

on *organizing*, we are sensitized to take notice of what we ordinarily overlook, namely the streams of activities that sustain the pattern we ostensively call 'organization'.

Does this change of language matter? It does, for three reasons. Firstly, it considerably widens our conceptual lens. By focusing on organizing, we can talk not only about organizations such as NASA, General Motors, Google or Apple but, more fundamentally, about 'microcosms of organizing', that is, practical contexts in which individuals collectively accomplish complex tasks by making order out of disorder (Patriotta, 2016; Tsoukas, 2005, Chapter 9–12). Possible microcosms of organizing include firefighting (Weick, 2001, Chapter 4), newsmaking (Patriotta and Gruber, 2015), developing clinical practices for patient safety (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2003), or rehearsing for orchestral performances (Maitlis and Ozcelik, 2004). To this list, we would probably add today: fighting pandemics globally, protesting racial injustice, campaigning for climate change, and so on (George et al., 2016). Indeed, one of the most creative features of SPO is its call to the reader to make connections among wildly disparate situations that nonetheless share a common feature – the accomplishment of organizing. In Weick's words: 'In every case there is a shared sense of appropriate procedures and appropriate interpretations, an assemblage of behaviors distributed among two or more people, and a puzzle to work on' (SPO, p. 4; see also, p. 45).

Secondly, while talk of 'organizations' as if they were substances encourages us to think of an underlying reality waiting to be discovered and, ideally, measured, talk about organizing invites us to think about how the patterns we notice are generated through our own coping with streams of experience (SPO, pp. 11–12). For Weick, ontologically, the primordial stuff out of which organizations are made (or, differently, organizing operates on) are flows of experience (Mesle, 2008). Any pattern is a creation that imposes some order on streams of experience.

Thirdly, the shift to organizing illustrates a preference for thinking with verbs and gerunds rather than nouns. Verbs signify action, gerunds suggest process (Bakken and Hernes, 2006). Weick's admonition 'think "ing"' (SPO, p. 42) has strongly resonated with many organizational scholars and has helped to 'gerundize' the field (perhaps excessively at times), by inviting us to understand organizational phenomena as processes of ongoing accomplishments, namely to fuse action with possibilities (Gioia, 2006; Langley et al., 2013; Tsoukas and Chia, 2002; Langley and Tsoukas, 2017). Examples abound: from strategy we shift to strategizing, from leadership to leading, from knowledge to knowing, from innovation to innovating, from relation to relating, from theory to theorizing, and so on. The underlying idea is: take any relevant concept, turn it to a gerund, and there you have an indication of a process, implicating agency and 'work' – an accomplishment. It is as if Weick had turned the kaleidoscope to enable researchers and practitioners alike to see new patterns: to see, critically, their own agency in creating the patterns they notice (Shotter and Tsoukas, 2011).

Be that as it may, what does 'organizing' consist of? Writes Weick in his now classic formulation: '*organizing* is defined *as a consensually validated grammar for reducing equivocality by means of sensible interlocked behaviors*. To organize is to assemble ongoing interdependent actions into sensible sequences that generate sensible outcomes' (SPO, p. 3; italics in the original). Notice the following features in this dense definition. The occasion for organizing is equivocality: any input that has multiple meanings. When equivocality is reduced,

an activity has become organized (Weick et al., 2005). How does it happen? Through people interlocking their behaviours by means of 'double interacts', (i.e., action by A is responded to by B, which is counter-responded by A) (SPO, p. 89). Double interacts are assembled by consensually validated rules ('grammar') – procedures, instructions, or guides – individuals use to create larger processes aimed at reducing input equivocality. When this is achieved, sensible outcomes are generated, which take the form of 'cause maps' (or 'loops' or 'circuits') (SPO, pp. 72–86) – patterns of circularly interconnected variables that impose meaning on streams of experience. In short, organizing is accomplished by processes composed of loosely coupled sets of double interacts which have been assembled by rules.

The processes that accomplish organizing (or, to use a phrase Weick is fond of: the organizing processes that are assembled) resemble the process of natural selection. Drawing on Campbell's sociocultural evolution model (Campbell, 1974), Weick outlines four elements of organizing: ecological change, enactment (his rendition of the evolutionary term 'variation'), selection, and retention (see also Weick et al., 2005). *Ecological change* is what happens in the world – events, change, anomalies, differences that occur in a stream of experience – anything that catches people's attention, creating an 'enactable environment' (SPO, p. 130). *Enactment* is what people do with – the way they respond to – the raw material ecological change provides: bracketing portions of experience for closer inspection and further action. Enactment generates equivocality ('strange displays', SPO, p. 130) that requires interpretation. *Selection* involves making sense of strange displays to reduce their equivocality: applying 'schemes of interpretation' (SPO, p. 131), derived from past experiences, on equivocal raw materials, for creating cause maps that provide a reasonable interpretation on what has occurred. Finally, *retention* is the process of storing the outcome of successful sensemaking in the form of an 'enacted environment' (SPO, p. 131) or retained cause map, which will be drawn upon in the next round of enactment. Retention represents the wisdom of the past or a set of retained beliefs for how the world works.

Weick describes his organizing model as a 'preliminary effort to develop an organizational epistemology' (SPO, p. 235). His primary concern is, as he notes, 'with the nature, origins, and limits of organizational knowledge' (SPO, p. 235) – how organizations understand themselves and the world outside them. His model of organizing introduces at least four conceptual novelties.

Firstly, the environment is not external (or an input) to organization, as was conventionally thought (and as is still analytically shown in several Organizational Behavior and Strategic Management textbooks) but an output of organizing. The enactment process (i.e., how ecological change is responded to) makes several environments possible for the organization, but which one is chosen is determined by selection. In short, environments are created by their organizations (Smircich and Stubbart, 1985).

Secondly, organizations do not necessarily function as open systems. Anticipating future research on autopoiesis and self-reference (Cooren and Seidl, 2020; Hernes and Bakken, 2003; Maturana and Varela, 1980), Weick notes that organizations can easily seal themselves off from ecological change, since their only direct point of contact with it is in enactment. To the extent the organization makes use of knowledge retained through selection and enactment, it encloses itself in a world of its own making. Its map (i.e., its enacted environment) risks becoming the territory (SPO, p. 250). That is why

Weick points out that 'there is a certain amount of autism in […] organizations' (SPO, p. 239), which manifests itself in the use of conjectures and self-fulfilling prophecies as primary modes of constructing, and making sense of, reality (Patriotta, 2003a; Weick and Sutcliffe, 2015).

Thirdly, sensemaking is retrospective and circular (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015). People make sense of what has already occurred and their sensemaking further shapes their beliefs. Enactment produces the equivocal occurrence (the strange display) that is made sensible during selection, and what is retained as sensible – a reasonable interpretation – further conditions retention. In short, action is followed by understanding, followed by action, and so on.

Fourthly, the process of organizing works in a reasonably stable manner insofar as individuals are ambivalent towards their past experience (stored in retention), that is by both trusting and distrusting it. As Weick famously put it, quoting Campbell (1965, p. 305), 'ambivalence is the optimal compromise' (SPO, p. 219). Ambivalence is important since it preserves both adaptation and adaptability. When people act ambivalently, they become more 'complicated' (SPO, p. 261), that is their complexity has more chances of matching the complexity of the world; requisite variety is preserved.

Philosophical Underpinnings of the Organizing Model

Although not explicitly aligning himself with a philosophical perspective in SPO, Weick is undoubtedly inspired by two philosophical traditions: pragmatism and phenomenology. The influence of pragmatists, especially James, Mead and Dewey, is apparent in Weick's conception of the meaning of truth and how it reflects on how organizations enact their realities. His very method of theorizing speaks to pragmatist concerns. Streams of experience have no intrinsic nature waiting to be represented faithfully in language (Rorty, 1989). Weick, rather, views language pragmatically – a tool for coping with the world (SPO, Chapter 2). It is not only science, broadly understood, that is an authoritative source of useful knowledge but any domain of human discourse that helps us cope with an unfathomable world will do. Weick consciously blurs the boundaries between science and art; takes recourse to poetry and literature (Czarniawska, 2006; Van Maanen, 1995); loves puzzles and games, stresses the importance of belief (alluding, perhaps, to religious belief); thrives in speculation and does not necessarily dismiss even superstition (SPO, p. 262), if it can be functional. In other words, any cognitive aid, any intelligent 'guess' (Weick, 2006) that can help us orient in, and successfully engage with, 'an unknowable world' (Weick, 2006), is welcome.

Truth has no metaphysical purchase for Weick. It rather is 'the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief, and good, too, for definite, assignable reasons' (James, 1995, p. 30). The pragmatic method is to search not for 'the truth' but for what works, what is reasonable, whatever enables us to find satisfactory relations among different parts of our experience. It is pointless, notes Weick, to seek truth or falsity in accounts of organizing. 'In an equivocal world things are *reasonable* or *unreasonable*. If you take a stream of experience and impose a construction on it, then it's nonsense to say that the construction is wrong or right. The best you can say is simply that there are other ways to interpret that stream and that they raise more interesting possibilities' (SPO, p. 247; italics in the original).

If so, the question, then, is: what possibilities does a scholar or a manager envisage? The most important possibility Weick's organizing model offers is that of the self-renewing organization, in a world that is only partially and fallibly understood. His process-oriented vocabulary enables us to look for inter-dependence and think in circles (Tsoukas and Cunha, 2017); to privilege revisable action over searching for the truth (reminiscent of Wittgenstein's aphorism 'look, don't think' – Wittgenstein, 1953, p. §66); not to confuse the map with the territory (Bateson, 1979; Weick, 1990); to see sensemaking as the core of organizing (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015); not to think about fixed goals and substances but about evolving relationships and patterns (Mesle, 2008; Vickers, 1983); to embrace ambivalence and paradox as the best response to an equivocal world (Smith et al., 2017); and always strive to make understanding more complex ('complicate yourself', as he advises; SPO, p. 261; Tsoukas, 2017) and action more nuanced. The Wittgensteinian 'picture' underlying SPO is a process-relational one (Hernes, 2014; Mesle, 2008).

Weick is also inspired by the phenomenology of Alfred Schutz and Martin Heidegger (this influence becomes even more prominent in his later work, see Weick, 1995, 2001, 2009). Phenomenology captures the everyday streams of experience in which individuals are immersed and the sensemaking processes by which equivocal happenings are organized into meaningful events (Schutz, 1967). For Weick (SPO, p. 6), 'The activities of organizing are directed toward the establishment of a workable level of certainty. An organization attempts to transform equivocal information into a degree of unequivocality with which it can work and to which it is accustomed.' From this perspective, organizing refers to the movement by which 'noisy' situations characterized by disorder, multiplicity, dissonance, change, unfamiliarity, interruption, and irregularity are progressively turned into order, unity, harmony, stability, familiarity, continuity, routine, and regularity (Patriotta, 2016, 2020; Tsoukas, 2005, 2019).

The phenomenological underpinnings of SPO are particularly conspicuous in Weick's claim that cognition follows action (Starbuck, 2006). This temporal inversion between thinking and acting is consistent with Schutz's observation that we imagine projects as completed in the future perfect (Schutz, 1967). The retrospective character of sensemaking (people make sense of what they do after they have done it) and the inherently forward character of action account for the 'strange loops' (Hofstadter, 2008) Weick points out: 'people make sense of things by seeing a world on which they already imposed what they believe. People discover their own inventions, which is why sensemaking understood as invention, and interpretation understood as discovery, can be complementary ideas' (Weick, 1995, p. 15).

How is such a strange loop possible? People are thrown into tasks (Heidegger, 1962; Weick et al., 2005) and act according to the immanent sense they have acquired though their socialization into the practices of the organization (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2020). To put it differently, organizational members start from a set of initial conditions, which, arbitrary though they are, provide the necessary preconditions for all understanding. When people act, they necessarily do so on the basis of their already formed pre-judgments, pre-interpretations, and habits of action (Dreyfus, 1995; Patriotta, 2016). Action, therefore, is an opportunity to, among other things, find out – discover – what

people think. Such a paradoxical loop accounts for one of Weick's favourite maxims (enunciated originally by Kierkegaard): life is lived forward but understood backwards.

Phenomenology also permeates Weick's ideas about intentionality and rationality. Weick acknowledges Simon's (1945/1976) concept of 'bounded rationality' but takes it further. Rationality for him is not merely limited but *adaptive*. Individuals are always already immersed in action; they do not necessarily have a self-consciously clear understanding of the task at hand. They enact the situation they subsequently face as an external strange display; their understanding emerges *after* enactment. Insofar as this is an ongoing process, rationality becomes adaptive, since individuals strive to be in tune with their surroundings and respond appropriately. As Weick has famously remarked, 'how can I know what think till I see what I say?' (SPO, pp. 133–4). Furthermore, since organizations are filled with feedback loops, intentions do not easily translate to outcomes and certain outcomes are not necessarily the products of particular intentions. 'It is less often the case that an outcome fulfils some prior definition of the situation, and more often the case that an outcome *develops* that prior definition' (Weick, 1995, p. 11).

If rationality has this ex post facto justificatory role (Brunsson, 1982; Cabantous et al., 2010) how is rational action ever possible? It all depends on what 'rational' is taken to mean. If rational is equated with planning ('what happens in an organization was at one point in time expected or planned to happen', SPO, p. 20), then it is doubtful that organizations are rational, although, in conditions of modernity, they have to use the language of 'rationality'. Organizations may manifest adaptively rational behaviour not when they plan, nor even when they acknowledge their limited cognitive capacity, but when they strive to keep making sense of what they already do, in response to ongoing ecological change. Moreover, adaptive rationality can be seen as quasi-teleological not because organizations have clear goals but because double interacts and behavioural cycles are not randomly executed but driven by the meaningful, purposive whole in which organizational members are embedded (e.g., caring for patients, teaching students, connecting people through social media, etc.) (Tsoukas, 2018). In short, when the organizing model works in a reasonably stable manner, we have evidence of adaptive rationality in action.

From Organization Theory to Theorizing About Organizing

Early in SPO (p. 26), Weick underscored his preference for 'theorizing' rather than theory (see also Weick, 1995). The reason, he notes, is that theories quickly age, and what matters is the activity of theorizing – keep making theories. In his view, theorizing should strive for 'generality' and 'abstraction' but, also, for capturing 'relations' and, perhaps most critical of all, suggesting 'evocative images' (SPO, p. 26). Following the pragmatists, theorizing for Weick does not get to the truth of organizations, but, as already mentioned, provides ways of talking about organizations, singling out certain aspects for closer attention (SPO, p. 26). Thus, his natural selection model that forms the spine of his argument is explicitly used as a metaphor (SPO, p. 119; see Cornelissen, 2006). Weick does not tell us what organizing processes are but, rather, what they 'resemble' (SPO, p. 130). Evolution does not necessarily generate adaptation and order, and that is why he describes his version of sociocultural evolution as 'weak' (SPO, p. 120). What matters most in 'weak' evolution is change, not change-towards-order.

Weick describes his model of organizing as 'metatheory'. A metatheory is abstract enough to enable both scholars and practitioners to develop their own theories of specific organizational settings. This is probably related to Weick's predilection for theorizing that combines 'simplicity and generality' (SPO, p. 39), namely theorizing that has 'modest accuracy' (SPO, p. 39), which is increased when simple and general models are situationally applied. Weick's organizing model draws attention to certain concepts (e.g., enactment, selection, retention, assembly rules), and it is up to the analyst to discern *how* these concepts are situationally defined and related (SPO, p. 235). Notice that, contrary to the ordinary use of the term (Tsoukas, 2005, p. 323), a metatheory for Weick is not a theory about theories but a 'heuristic generalization' (Tsoukas, 2019, p. 396; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2011), that is, a generalization drawn from abstracting past experience, which, however, remains open to further specification in particular cases. Weick's metatheory, thus, enables the making of situational theories. Underlying this type of theorizing is the 'aesthetics of contingency' (Eisenberg, 2006) and the pragmatist idea that concepts are heuristic devices to aid our coping with the world. Concepts are partly open-ended, that is, situationally determined through the ways they are enacted in particular contexts. It is this style of theorizing that underlies the recent use of concepts such as 'routines-in-action' (Feldman, 2000), 'technology-in-practice' (Orlikowski, 2000) and 'strategy-as-practice' (Golsorkhi et al., 2015). As Shotter and Tsoukas (2011, p. 332) have noted, Weick's theorizing is 'reflective' insofar as 'it makes agents' agency visible to themselves'. It is impossible to read SPO (as well as his *Sensemaking in Organizations*) and not become aware of new ways of reading of and acting in organizations. Through reflective theorizing, people are reminded of the possibilities that exist in action.

The Future of Organizing

Weick´s work has been decisive in initiating new research programs in organization and management studies over the last 50 years. Process research (Langley et al., 2013; Langley and Tsoukas, 2017), now thriving in the field, owes a lot to SPO; no other treatise had previously expressed such a clear preference for process-oriented language. The relatively recent emphasis on treating organizational phenomena as 'accomplishments' or as involving 'work' (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019) is similarly easily traceable to SPO. Major developments that have focused on sensemaking (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015), organizational cognition (Eden and Spender, 1998; Huff, 1990; Sims et al., 1986), attention (Ocasio, 1997, 2011; Sutcliffe, 1994; Weick and Sutcliffe, 2006), interpretive and/or cognitive approaches to strategy (Eden and Ackermann, 1998; Meindl et al., 1994; Mintzberg et al., 1998; Narayanan et al., 2010), safety and organizational resilience (Catino and Patriotta, 2013; Sutcliffe and Vogus, 2003; Vogus and Sutcliffe, 2007), organizing through communication (Tylor and Van Every, 2000), and organizations as knowledge and learning systems (Cohen and Sproull, 1996; Dierkes et al., 2001; Tsoukas and Mylonopoulos, 2004), would have been unthinkable without Weick's seminal contributions.

Following the line of inquiry, first suggested in SPO, is now more relevant than ever, in a globally connected, fast changing, complex world. Taking Weick's organizing model

and the process imagery that underlies it further is of vital importance. Several questions remain to be explored. Here are a few suggestions (the list is far from exhaustive).

Firstly, while a social psychological treatise, SPO is strong on cognition, information processing and language-mediated interaction, but somewhat short on emotions, the body, materiality, temporality, the natural environment, and grand societal challenges. Yet, subsequent research has suggested that all of them are important aspects of, or related to, organizational behaviour (Ashkanasy et al, 2017; Catino and Patriotta, 2013; Cooren et al., 2006; Dale and Latham, 2015; Hindmarsh and Pilnick, 2007; Liu and Maitlis, 2014; Maitlis et al., 2013; Orlikowski and Scott, 2015; Schabram and Maitlis, 2017; Stigliani and Ravasi, 2012; Vogus et al., 2014; Whiteman and Cooper, 2011). How could they enrich the organizing model?

Secondly, SPO focuses on human behaviour and face-to-face interactivity (Patriotta and Spedale, 2009) while being reticent on technologically-mediated modes of communication. How is organizing accomplished in conditions of virtual communication? (Leonardi, 2011; Schinoff et al., 2019; Zammuto et al., 2011). How is materiality and its affordances consequential for organizing (Carlile et al., 2013; Leonardi et al., 2013; Leonardi, 2011; Riemer and Johnston, 2017)? Moreover, how are distributed forms of organizing, as manifested in open-source software development, crowdsourcing, algorithmic-mediated forms of work, spontaneously organized social movements, and agents distributed in space and time, accomplished? (Curchod et al., 2019; Ribes et al., 2013; Puranam et al., 2014).

Thirdly, organizations are increasingly thought of as complex systems (Allen et al., 2011; Andrerson, 1999; Tsoukas, 2005; Tsoukas and Dooley, 2011). How can further developments of key themes in SPO (e.g., feedback loops, unintended effects, circular causality, emergence) shed new light on organizational complexity and its management? (Lichtenstein, 2014; Tsoukas and Hatch, 2001). Relatedly, although Weick does not use the term, self-organization – the emergence of organization as an immanent order – is an important implication of his model (Anderson, 1999; Boisot and McKelvey, 2010; Lichtenstein, 2014; Tsoukas, 2015; Weick, 2001, 2009). How should our understanding of self-organization be understood, at different levels of analysis, especially in connection with communication technologies that make coordinated distributed agency possible, and in light of relatively recent developments in complexity thinking? Furthermore, how can collective sensemaking and thinking in organizations become more complex to tackle complex societal issues, be they climate change, global pandemics, poverty, inequalities, etc.? (Colville et al., 2012). How can organizations enhance their requisite capacity to cope with complexity (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2015)?

Fourthly, 'enactment' has been a key concept in SPO, one that has been drawn upon in several strands of organizational research, ranging from entitative (Pfeffer and Salancik, 2003) to process studies of organizations (Hernes and Maitlis, 2010; Maitlis, 2005; Mintzberg et al., 2008; Patriotta, 2003b; Schabram and Maitlis, 2017). How can enactment be further developed, especially in line with insights offered by the 'enactivist' perspective in cognitive science (Stewart et al, 2010; Thompson, 2007; Varela et al., 2017)?

Fifthly, SPO often has a paradoxical feel, or at least makes the reader aware of counter-intuitive suggestions such as 'believing is seeing', 'ambivalence is the optimal compromise', 'how can I know what think till I see what I say?'. How can the paradoxes Weick

discusses in SPO (e.g., credit and discredit past experience; organizations create stability but cannot not change) be further elucidated to better understand the paradoxical nature of organizational life (Smith et al., 2017)?

Sixthly, how can Weick's model of organizing be used to inform organizational research at different levels of analysis, from groups in organizations to organizations embedded in institutional fields, to networks of organizations? (Abolafia, 2010; Patriotta et al., 2011; Weber and Glynn, 2006). In particular, what is the relationship between individual interpretive frames and the broader conceptual categories and meaning structures provided by society, or, to put it differently, between cognitive maps and habitus? (Dobbin, 2008; Nayak et al., 2020). How are institutions, in the form of rules, dominant understandings and norms, drawn upon and reshaped through organizing processes?

A Guide to the Papers in the Special Issue

The three papers included in the Special Issue draw on key themes introduced in SPO and take them further. They constitute very good examples of what Weick in his concluding essay calls 'handoffs' (Weick, 2020). The authors, inspired by the *problematique* of SPO, focus on the relationship between sensemaking and organizing (Glynn and Watkiss), the emotional process underpinning organizing (Mikkelsen, Gray and Petersen), and the development of intuition to sense (Meziani and Cabantous).

Glynn and Watkiss's (2020) paper in a remarkable historical analysis that traces the development and evolution of Weick's recurring themes of organizing and sensemaking. Sympathetic to Weick's own process and the acknowledgment that theorizing is always grounded in context (to understand the work one needs to know what comes before and what comes after), Glynn and Watkiss set the stage by providing an engaging historical backdrop. Although Weick's work resonated with what came before, his work departed from the past in at least two key ways. The first was with respect to the purpose of organizing. The purpose of organizing is not simply to attain a future goal, but rather to justify past actions. The second was to eschew rational models by emphasizing sensemaking over decision-making. As their analysis of organizing and sensemaking over time reveals, Weick's first edition of SPO (Weick, 1969) emphasized the role of action, whereas the second edition (Weick, 1979) emphasized meaning. His more recent works highlight a more interdependent and integrative relationship between the two, an approach that the authors label as *Sensemaking as Organizing*. In other words, over time, sensemaking has become the core of organizing, providing incredibly fertile ground for future research as the authors propose.

In their article on interorganizational conflict in the Danish healthcare system, Mikkelsen et al. (2020) surface and explore unconscious processes of organizing. As engaging as it is disturbing, this study of two mental health agencies, required to collaborate but instead engaged in persistent and damaging conflict, highlights the power of unconscious, collective emotions in organizing. Drawing on systems psychodynamic theory, the authors reveal how social defences – sets of collective defence mechanisms, unconsciously enacted –served to protect agency members from the anxiety they felt in doing work that deeply challenged their identities as competent, caring professionals. Over time, this generated a self-fuelling dynamic of emotion, sensemaking and (dis)organizing,

in which staff from each agency stereotyped one another to preserve their professional identities, resulting in the ritualized maintenance of destructive conflict between their agencies. Connecting unconscious collective processes to Weick's (1979) enactment-selection-retention model, and building on his notion of an 'organized underground', this intriguing paper reveals the extent to which organizing is shaped not only by our emotions, but by enacted sensemaking that saves us from feeling them.

Meziani and Cabantous (2020) empirically explore and shed light on how people act their intuition into sense. This is a fascinating topic, since the development of proto-sense (intuition) into a more complete sense has been under-studied. Moreover, the authors, promisingly, seek to overcome the mind-body and discourse-materiality dualisms to develop an integrated theoretical account of the development of sensemaking. This is easier said than done, of course, but Meziani and Cabantous deliver on their promise: studying four film crews working on four films, the authors show how initial sense (intuition) that is tacit and complex is transformed to a developed sense that is publicly sharable and simpler. Intuition resides at the intersection of mind and body, and meanings emerge from relations among the loci of sensemaking (bodies, materials, language). Meziani and Cabantous identify two trajectories through which intuition is transformed into sense, depending on the presence of resistances. Sense is gradually constructed through embodied individuals interacting with others and materials, encountering various levels of resistance. The study provides a rich account of embodied sensemaking in action: accomplishing sensemaking requires a relational whole that comprises corporeality, cognition, language and materials. By taking a strong process view of the making of sense, Meziani and Cabantous show how intuition acquires new properties as it is transformed inti sense.

NOTE

[1]'Ithaka' refers to Constantine Cavafy's eponymous poem with which Weick ends his *Social Psychology of Organizing* (Weick, 1979, pp. 263–4).

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