On Weick: An Appreciation

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Keywords: Weick, sensemaking, organizing, enactment, understanding, ambiguity

When I first read Weick in 1977, I had no idea what to make of him. The style of writing and thinking was unusual, even weird to me. It struck me initially as cryptic and arcane, and also as rooted in ideas that seemed obscure and esoteric. Furthermore, he demonstrated these ideas — supposedly about life in organizations — with examples that did not appear to focus very much at all on organizations. What to make of this mysterious persona and his puzzling ideas? He seemed to use the same tools — ideas and words — that I and others in my newly adopted field used to play the scholarship game, but he used them in ways that other writers didn’t, to fashion a different way of understanding the game itself. I was reminded of the great golfer Bobby Jones’s comment on Jack Nicklaus: ‘Mr. Nicklaus plays a game with which I am not familiar.’ Well, as a budding young scholar, Mr Weick seemed to be playing a game with which I was not familiar, and playing it very well. Over time, Jones’s marvelously phrased compliment has only become more apt. Although many of us play the game, none of us plays it quite the way Weick plays it.

When I was first introduced to Weick the writer, I had just come from the business world (Ford Motor Company), where I had become accustomed to straightforward thinking, straightforward speaking, and straightforward action in a notably complex and dynamic world. The world I had inhabited at Ford was extraordinarily intriguing to me, not just on a ‘Get-it-done-now! Think-about-it-later!’ level, but also on some deeper or higher conceptual plane. I was so fascinated with my whole organizational experience that I decided I wanted to learn about organizations in a more studied fashion. The big issue I kept stumbling over was trying to figure out how it was actually possible to organize 240,000 people into some sort of global enterprise that acted like it was coherent and (surprisingly) seemed to work reasonably well. Because of my frequent marveling — and frequent exasperation — at the workings of Ford, it was clear to me that the way people organized and the way they understood organizing was the golden key to grasping the whole whirling lot. I really thought it would be interesting to explore the issues involved with ‘understanding how people understand in organizations — and how they organize to create workable organizations’ (an essential question that remains with me to this day).

You can imagine, then, my new-found scholarly pleasure — rather early on in my doctoral program — in finding an author who purported to address my
major interests. So I jumped right in — at the very deep end, as it turns out — reading ‘Enactment processes in organizations’ (1977) as my first exposure to Weick. Oh my god; I wasn’t even sure this was English. The language, as well as the ideas, at first seemed to me confusing, contrived, and even convoluted. Yet, they also seemed rich with possibility and obviously were rendered by someone who wrote as if he knew what he was talking about. Even though many of the assertions were couched in conditionals, and left enough latitude for other ways of seeing, they nonetheless had a certain confidence and intellectual gravitas to them. So I decided to go along for a tentative ride. And, although I cannot in good faith credit or blame Weick for where I have ended up, I can at least implicate him in offering my peek at a different and compelling view of organizing and organizations.

On Changing the Conversation

Weick has made far more than his fair share of contributions to understanding organizing, organization, and organizations (all arguably different concepts in his lexicon). He has put forth distinctive thinking in related-but-diverse domains like sensemaking, organizing, loose coupling, high-reliability organizations, cause maps, improvisation, etc. Looking at the scope of these subjects, it is clear that trying to offer commentary on all of them would inevitably produce a very shallow reading. My intent is instead to offer a kind of gestalt appreciation, with brief forays into just a few demonstrative areas.

Of all the accomplishments we might attribute to Weick, undoubtedly one of his greatest is that he has, in the modern vernacular, ‘changed the conversation’ of our field. Changing the conversation has become something of an idealistic standard that we like to use to connote high aspirations in counseling PhD students, junior faculty, and even many senior people hoping to leave some legacy. We often say that one’s professional goal ought not to be just getting published, but making a difference. That high aspiration has become the hoped-for final step in a progressive litany that reads: ‘You don’t just want to be published, you want to be read. You don’t just want to be read, you want to be remembered (and, therefore, cited). You don’t just want to be cited, you want to change the conversation.’

We are inclined to talk about trade-offs between playing safe by doing a minor, incremental study vs. taking the high-risk/high-reward path of doing something truly different. And if you are really, really good, you at least have the opportunity for changing the conversation. At the grand level, Weick is one of precious few organization scholars who have changed the way we think about, talk about, and even act in organizations. His reach also extends beyond academic boundaries and is affecting practice, thanks in no small part to Peters and Waterman’s tip of the hat to Weick for inspiration for the landmark In Search of Excellence (1982) and Collins’ similar gesture for the blockbuster Good to Great (2001). Even a popular business periodical, Fast Company magazine, has labeled him rather coyly as the ‘smartest business thinker you’ve never heard of’ (http://www.fastcompany.com/magazine/58/chalktalk.html).
A quick example: In his more far-reaching moments, Weick counsels us not even to think about ‘organizations’ per se. Organizations, you see, are nouns. And nouns tend to obfuscate or elide because the term connotes some sort of stable entity under study. And there is almost nothing (well, at least, almost nothing interesting) about organizations as nouns because organizations are never actually stable. No, the focus should instead be on verbs, with their inherent dynamism. And not just any verbs, mind you. Rather we should give prominence to gerunds — verbs that are so facile and versatile that they harbor within themselves some of the characteristics of nouns. Webster’s dictionary even calls them ‘verbal nouns’. Think not in terms of organization, but organizing; not in terms of management but managing. Now, when you think in terms of verbs and gerunds, it changes the way you talk about and understand phenomena. And that’s precisely the point. The conversation changes when you emphasize verbs and gerunds. And that’s one of the main reasons why, when you take a ‘Weickian’ view, you cannot help but see things differently. Organizations become much more richly dynamic enterprises, always in flux and continuously subject to the consequences of their own actions. As interested observers, we are prompted to focus on ‘processes of becoming’ rather than ‘states of being’. Organizing and organization come alive in the ways they construct themselves and in the ways those of us who study them construct them.

Yet, it’s not just at some mysterious, deep-structure level that Weick works on the professional dialog. He also fiddles with the words themselves and, in the process, changes the way we understand the subject of our mutual concern. He seems to have some sort of aversion to using the words everyone else uses. So, he pointedly chooses different words that seem always to be up-scale synonyms for everyday words. Consider, for instance, the common concept of ambiguity. We’ve long been accustomed to talking about ambiguity, right? Yes, of course. But, then consider the peculiar word, equivocality, as a close substitute. Now wait. Weren’t we always taught to use simple, familiar words if they could convey more or less the same meaning? Of course we were. But you don’t do that if your intention is to be provocative — in the literal and best sense of this overused word — to provoke thought.

So, look what happens when you substitute a different word than the one you and I would use, and then begin to play with it intellectually. Let’s see ... ‘ambiguity’. Something vague; something also with multiple possible meanings. Yeah, I know what ambiguity is, and that’s precisely why the revelatory potential of the ambiguity term is limited. Now, try ‘equivocality’ instead. Hmm. Different. Maybe it has other connotations, too. But equivocality is essentially the same idea as ambiguity, isn’t it? Couldn’t be, or he’d have used ambiguity if he meant ambiguity. Must mean something at least somewhat different, right? Well, maybe. But, even if it doesn’t, you are prodded to think through the nature of ambiguity (sorry, equivocality). Then you realize that this notion is wider and deeper and more encompassing, and maybe even different than you had presumed. This idea of equivocality (or ambiguity) is big — maybe one of the most important in understanding human sensemaking and organizing. Well. I’d better muse on this notion a bit more. Over time, he even performs a linguistic sleight of hand and morphs equivocality into some alternative way of understanding
technology as ‘equivoque’ (Weick 1990b). What? Must be something mysteriously
different than equivocality or ambiguity, but, no, not necessarily. The main thing
that is mysterious is your own conception of ambiguity and its effects. Merely
considering one unusual keyword in depth, then, lends more range to our ways
of understanding organizing, organization, and organizations. The process of
organizing and the product of that organizing both become more complex, so
you need to be careful in considering and reconsidering their places in your
worldview(s).

And speaking of being careful ... using ‘careful’ is so ‘1980s’, so much of a
cliché that it makes you careless and sloppy in your thinking. So, what happens
if we dispense with simply conceiving of the notion of acting carefully? Which
is exactly what Weick and Roberts (1993) did with a gloss (another Weickian
term — you should look it up to learn its actual meaning) on the notion of a col-
lective mind. One of the keys to making such an anthropomorphic notion as
‘mind’ intellectually defensible at the collective level is to think not about
thoughts, and not even about well-thought-out, routine interactions with others,
but rather about a process of ‘heedful interrelating’. Is that different? Well,
maybe yes, maybe no. But, let’s go deeper and use the provocation provided by
the term to see where it takes us. And it takes us on a marvelous intellectual
journey, a journey where, with some expert guidance through some treacherous
passages, we arrive at a workable way of conceiving the possibility of a collec-
tive mind. Now, the intellectual ride requires an unusual but nonetheless credi-
ble definition of important core concepts like ‘mind’ (with a tip of the hat to
Gilbert Ryle, 1949), but even that exercise is instructive. In the same piece we
see a similar substitution of the term ‘mindfulness’ for the more pedestrian
notion of ‘paying attention’. But when the discussion revolves relentlessly
around mindfulness, the whole notion gets transmogrified into a sense that is, at
once, enigmatic, insightful, and revelatory.

On Weick on Organizing

It is both instructive and insightful to consider that two classic volumes in our
field have almost the same titles: Katz and Kahn’s *Social Psychology of
Organizations* (1st edition 1966, 2nd edition 1978) and Weick’s *Social
editions came out on the heels of Katz and Kahn’s treatises, some people won-
dered why someone would write a book that was presumably already written.
But then you read the books and you wonder instead if they are even talking
about the same subject. The first treats organizations essentially as objective
systems; the second treats them essentially as subjective accomplishments. That
difference makes all the difference, especially if one is operating out of a coherent
way of conceiving organization as collective product of organizing processes,
as Weick does.

Weick’s take on organizing and organization is just first-rate scholarship, so
carefully rendered, engaging, and revealing that Van Maanen (1995) has
deemed him to be the most notable exponent of ‘style as theory’. His scholarly
approach constitutes a kind of stealth phenomenological view. The second edition of The Social Psychology of Organizing, in particular, amounts to an extraordinarily well-articulated, extended essay (centered on organizing but ranging widely and deeply into human interactional social psychology) that yields extraordinary insight. Considerations that were merely skeletal musings in the first edition are fleshed out here. His enactment–selection–retention model comes in for detailed development and demonstration. It is a marvelous assemblage of keen observations, insightful thought experiments, and illustrations from actual or vicarious experience (plus cartoons, poems and anything else that will enliven and clarify a point) that concatenate into a compelling case for a phenomenological view — one that frequently arrives at an oh-my-goodness, look-where-he-ended-up sort of surprise.

All of Weick’s writing tends to be chocked full of ideas and observations, large and small, but he has been pursuing a number of running themes over the years visiting, revisiting, and revising them as he goes. Here are just a few that stand out to me.

**People Think by Acting**

The encapsulation of this major theme is found in what Weick frequently terms the ‘recipe’ for sensemaking: *How can I know what I think until I see what I say?* What a wonderful turn of phrase. Now, Weick is not the first to articulate the essential idea here. Schutz’s (1967) treatise argued that people can only know what they are doing (actually, have been doing) after they have done it. Bateson (1972: xvi, cited by Weick 1979) noted that ‘An explorer can never know what he is exploring until it has been explored’. Wiener (cited by Bennis 2003) made a similar observation when he said, ‘I never know what I say until I hear the response’ (which is an interesting variant on the same idea). Weick himself (1995) attributes something close to the phrase to a 1920s schoolgirl who blurted out the profound statement in response to an exhortation from her teacher to think carefully before speaking. Long before any of this, Søren Kierkegård, the Danish philosopher, observed that life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards. So, this non-obvious idea has been around for a while. Yet, no one else except Weick has taken this idea and performed a conceptual tour de force with it in a way that uncovers the means of human cognition and understanding. He demonstrates the non-obvious by showing that understanding does not so much guide action, as the lay view would have it, so much as action guides understanding (meeting Davis’s (1971) prime criterion for declaring ‘That’s interesting!’, because it is so very counter-intuitive). The consequences of developing this line of thought are not trivial. It even leads to further non-obvious, but demonstrably defensible conclusions that goals are often formed *after* action (as a kind of retrospective explanation for what people think they must have been doing). Oh, come on! That can’t be right, can it? Any common-sense consideration would tell you that can’t be true, can it? Well, yes, in fact, it can, but the larger point is that you are prodded into thinking about how organizing processes actually work. No small feat.

Certainly, the cognition-action process is recursive, but there is no denying that both lay people and the cognitive cognoscenti tend to give prominence to the role of understanding in producing action. It ain’t necessarily so. We can get
caught up in the ‘which came first’ game of arguing the precedence of cognition and action. Weick clearly, consistently, and even forcefully comes down on the side of action having precedence over cognition. Some of that stance is, of course, for scholarly effect, to dramatize the usual assumption that cognition precedes action. As Colville (1994) observes, however, we should not be treating such weighty concerns as either-or questions, but rather as both-and issues. Undoubtedly the two processes are inextricably and recursively intertwined. Yet that recognition produces its own oddball conceptualizations that are themselves quite revelatory. We end up talking about people ‘thinking actingly’ (or is that ‘acting thinkingly’?). Well, no matter. Toying with either phrase makes precisely the point that Weick would have us consider.

**Believing is Seeing**

This observation also seems counterintuitive, mainly because we have a folk aphorism, ‘seeing is believing’, that is such a part of our idiomatic language that hearing it backwards always prompts a full-stop reflection. The phrase works in the same way that an unusual, cautionary aphorism works to help me remember to drive on the left when I am in Britain (‘If you’re left, you’re right; and if you’re right, you’re wrong’). Makes you think every time you come to an intersection because you need to carefully consider the non-obvious phrasing to make sense of it. The same for ‘believing is seeing’. The nugget in the little phrase is, of course, the recognition that prior conceptions drive interpretation. There could not be a stronger, more concise, more memorable statement that schemas influence all interpretation (all interpretation … even though sensemaking is usually cast as a ‘controlled’, conscious process that requires active thought, and schema-use is usually cast as an ‘automatic’, unconscious process that happens without awareness, prior conceptions held in the form of schemas in memory affect both processes). Again, others might have made similar observations to ‘believing is seeing’ (Walter Lippmann once observed that we do not first see, and then define; we define first, and then see), but no one has taken the idea and used it to pry open such an important window into human foibles and fallibilities.

The process described by this line of thought can have huge consequences, too. We are reminded that major actions can be taken by corporate, organizational, and government decision makers when they wittingly or unwittingly fit facts to policies or belief structures—that is, when facts are consciously or unconsciously selected and dwelt upon because they are consistent with an implicit theory or belief system. Space shuttles get launched in error and wars get started without adequate supporting evidence when people rely uncritically on their preconceptions. The lives of astronauts, as well as soldiers and civilians, are placed in harm’s way because prior beliefs so strongly sway interpretations of data patterns. Such ‘prior hypothesis bias’ is nicely captured by well-turned phrases like ‘believing is seeing’ and well-chosen witticisms like ‘My mind is made up; do not confuse me with the facts!’

**Enactment**

Weick offers this succinct statement about the notion probably most associated with him: ‘The term enactment is used to preserve the central point that when
people act, they bring events and structures into existence and set them in motion’ (1988: 306). The concept of enactment lays the responsibility for the environments we face at our own feet. Enactment constitutes an ‘inside job’, casting ourselves as creators of the contexts with which we must then deal. Enactment might seem to many readers as some sort of rarely occurring, esoteric process, confined to those infrequent occasions when people actually conspire against themselves to create the environment that stymies them. Not so. Reading Weick makes it apparent that the human, and often the personal, hand is in the construction of many events that look for all the world as if they are produced by higher forces.

Now, the creation of some of these environments can be fairly long-linked and indirect, but it is eminently clear that human agency is at the root of the complex and ambiguous environments we need to make sense of and act upon (or should I say, act upon and make sense of?). The root notion is that things turn on our actions. It was Lou Pondy (cited in Weick 1979) who famously noted that if we were trying to describe thinking processes as predominantly implicated in this process, the term would have been ‘enthinkment’, not enactment. Think about that. I cannot imagine a better way of pointing to the key feature of enactment than this stark contrast in invented terms. To conclude that enactment explains only a small part of the world we face is to miss the essential point: Individually or collectively, we create what we confront.

On rare occasions Weick might concede that he is capable of overstating the role of enactment. When he does, however, he turns the admission to positive effect. As he noted when writing on enactment processes during crises: ‘Even if the relative importance of enactment is exaggerated, and borders on hyperbole, the important outcome of such exaggeration could be the discovery of unexpected control over crises’ (Weick 1988: 316). This observation is important for at least two reasons: (1) it sensitizes us to the prevalence of enactment and (2) it is conceptually and relentlessly firm in locating the creation of precipitating events, environments, and problems in ourselves as authors. We are the authors of our contexts and our fates. Or as Walt Kelly’s cartoon character, Pogo, put it in such a pithy fashion ‘We have met the enemy and he is us.’ A sensitivity to enactment makes us aware that we are witting or unwitting authors of our situations, thus forcing upon us a collective internal locus of control whether we are sharp enough to own up to it or not.

I find the metaphor of people as authors quite compelling and never more so than when standing before Abraham Lincoln’s chilling but stirringly insightful question chiseled in stone in Washington, DC:

‘At what point shall we expect the approach of danger?... Shall we expect some transatlantic giant to step the ocean and crush us at a blow? Never. All the armies of Europe, Asia, and Africa combined could not, by force, take a drink from the Ohio or make a track on the Blue Ridge. At what point then is the approach of danger to be expected? I answer, if it ever reach us, it must spring up among us. It cannot come from abroad. If destruction be our lot, we ourselves must be its author and its finisher.’

Now, Weick might not be quite as eloquent as Lincoln, but he constantly urges us to be more sensitive to our own role as agents in producing the contexts and situations with which we need to deal. Enactment might be better construed as the default mode of environmental construction or production, an observation
of a magnitude similar to one in which he suggests that we might usefully invert our usual conception of change not as period of stability punctuated by turbulence, but rather as periods of turbulence (‘permanent white water’, as Peter Vaill terms it) interrupted by occasional moments of relative stability (Weick and Quinn 1999).

So, why is the elaborate development of the enactment idea such a big deal? Because it has affected the way we think about action and its consequences, as well as the way we think about the purveyors of those actions. The core idea has reframed the way we think about and treat the environment, too. It is no longer an environment ‘out there’; it doesn’t have clear-cut boundaries; it doesn’t lend itself to the objective assessments that we so fervently hope for and act as if we are dealing with. For many of us in the field now, the environment is a social invention that we treat as real. More tellingly, it is an environment we create via often circuitous chains of activities and occurrences (maybe best captured by the wonderful cartoon of a man pushing on one end of a chain of dominoes, the last of which will inevitably fall on him). It is a world where the old joke ‘He made his bedlam, let him lie in it’ takes on a closer association with our actions than we ever imagined.

As Smircich and Stubbart (1985) note, viewed through an enactment lens, organizations and environments can usefully be seen as convenient labels for patterns of activity (p. 726). So what? Well, consider that even the apparently obvious, taken-for-granted idea that organizations should adapt to their environments becomes problematic. If there is any adapting to be done, it is adapting to the consequences of one’s own prior actions that created that environment. Treating enactment seriously also implies that if we are going to talk to practicing managers, we should talk to them in terms of understanding how their actions and non-actions are the sources of the actual realities they face. So, we ought to be reminding them what they ought to be doing (Colville et al. 1999). In this view, managers become creators and proactors, not adaptors and reactors. They also become, quite literally, managers of meaning (Smircich and Morgan 1982), whose role is to make sense and give sense (Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991) in interpreting the consequences of their (and others’) actions.

**On Weick as Advice Giver**

Weick is a gentle provocateur. One of his primary personal concerns — and one of his main ‘problem’ foci in the field — is working out theoretical understanding in ways that can make complex, dynamic organizational systems more reliable (see Weick et al. 1999). In my view, he has contributed some of his best work by considering the problem of high-reliability organizations, studied, curiously enough, via analyzing a number of disasters in which apparently simple procedures have gone haywire and spiraled into incomprehensibility: Bhopal’s toxic gas leak, the Tenerife air disaster, the Mann Gulch fire tragedy (Weick 1988, 1990a, 1993). These are all gripping accounts, skillfully rendered. Playing off the old wisdom that learning often occurs by reflecting on failure, these studies give us some of our deepest insights into the role of sensemaking
in organization — and also just why high reliability in human organization systems is so very difficult to achieve.

These analyses tend to be very complex, identifying whole constellations of maddeningly small factors that amplify into major messes. As a reader, you feel like an incredulous bystander, watching people collectively spin a web of their own making that ensnares them in a burgeoning tragedy. You could end up thinking that you might be part of a species that is damn near hapless, helpless, and hopeless when it comes to dealing with the kind of complexity we so routinely create. You also could end up thinking that these situations are so complex that there is precious little practical advice we might be able to supply to stop this kind of stuff. And yet, although each account comes across as desperately complicated, Weick manages to offer ways of addressing the problems in the systems, without dumbing anything down.

In general, Weick has some advice for us as a way of dealing with complexity, change, high-reliability organizations, etc. and that is to ‘Complicate yourself!’ Well, I certainly can’t disagree with him in the face of the need for requisite variety to deal with increasingly complex systems. And yet, paradoxically for me, I find myself coming more and more often to the conclusion that wisdom is contained in profound simplicities (Gioia 2004). Perhaps we are talking about different concerns here. I am quite confident that complicating yourself is Weick’s scholarly self talking, so that we (scholars and lay people alike) can better appreciate the complexity of the enacted and presented world. Weick’s is a hopeful orientation — that all of us have enough cognitive and behavioral capacity to deal with the social and organizational complexities we either construct or construe.

Seeking the profound simplicity (or simple profundity) is a different sort of endeavor — one in which the phenomenologist in all of us is seeking the essential elements (in the Husserlian sense that there are ‘essences’ that are key to explaining and understanding the human social and organizational experience), that is, the core principles or deep structures and processes of experience that lead to wisdom. Is the world better understood in terms of profound simplicities or daunting complexities? I like Colville’s (1994) report of his students resolving this weighty question by creatively constructing the concept of ‘simplexity’. It connotes the presence of complex understanding and yet a confidence that it can frequently be distilled to a simple (and memorable!) principle.

Some of Weick’s advice is eye-opening and captured in turns of phrase that seem simple, but contain little profundities. Phrases like ‘treat memory as a pest’ carries with it insight into the pitfalls and problems of ‘knowing’ things too well, things that produce preconceptions that blind us, especially to our own enactings — and to the fact that those enactings can begin to take on a life of their own as others respond to them, thus rather quickly making our knowledge obsolete.

Part of Weick’s ability to provoke in his gentle fashion stems from his choice of material on which to comment. He seems to be able to work in ways most of us might not be able to pull off. Analyzing the Canary Islands collision of two Boeing 747s mainly by doing his own gloss on the official reports (Weick 1990a). Analyzing the Mann Gulch fire disaster by playing off of Maclean’s

Weick also repeatedly breaks the old rule that an article ought to have a single, central thesis. Most of us ornament our central thesis with a few sidebar observations in the Discussion section. Reading Weick can be like drinking from the metaphorical fire hose. Everything and anything is grist for the mill. Ideas and good observations come tumbling out as frequently as once a paragraph. Sometimes my response is, ‘Too many ideas in too short a space! Stop!’ (Or, as depicted in a Far Side cartoon, a student frantically waving his hand at the instructor pleading, ‘Teacher, may I be excused? My head is full!’)

On Critiquing Weick

Weick is a pretty careful thinker. I have taken him to task in the past on some issues, but not very many. On one occasion he appeared to equate sensemaking with interpretation (personal communication concerning the pre-publication draft of the 1995 book), but soon realized how that depiction diminished the scope of sensemaking, so he rethought it. The distinction between these two big ideas, sensemaking and interpretation, is significant because it preserves the important notion that sensemaking subsumes interpretation, i.e. interpretation is but a step in the more encompassing process of sensemaking, because sensemaking accounts for action (and more importantly treats action as a constituent part of the process). The result is a stronger statement of the power of a sensemaking perspective. Sometimes I also have questioned his apparent downplaying of other people’s attempts to structure the context and decision premises by which people make sense, which Kumar Chittipeddi and I termed ‘sensegiving’ (Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991). On balance, though, his care in articulating his arguments is obvious, even to a putatively critical reader.

I once thought I was on to another feature of sensemaking that needed conceptual attention, prospective sensemaking — the idea that people surely have the ability to project in advance what they can do to produce a sensible outcome by acting. I reasoned that there had to be a way that people prospectively make sense. But no, that was just my latent lay homunculus speaking. Although I fretted over the idea for some time, I found that it was quite a task to work out a good way of arguing for such a process that could not just as easily (and more clearly) be framed as a product of future perfect thinking — the process whereby we cognitively cast ourselves into the future, look back upon events as if they had already occurred, and interpret their meaning accordingly (Gioia et al. 2002; Schutz 1967; Weick 1979). Although I once took a reasonable swipe at articulating a type of prospective sensemaking (Gioia and Mehra 1996), that notion seemed to cover less of the phenomenal universe than I had envisioned. Nonetheless, the attempt at least taught me how very robust the idea of retrospective sensemaking is. I now see retro sensemaking as the predominant way of
going about our most essential human task — and one of the biggest academic projects of our time — understanding how people make sense of experience.

Now, there are other possible critiques of Weick that have less to do with the content of the arguments and more to do with Weick as Weick. As noted at the start, Weick can be tough sledding for neophytes. As one of my doctoral student colleagues, Craig Crossland, recently said (personal communication), ‘There are a couple of things about Weick’s body of work that make him compulsory reading, but also quite maddening. Although he trains the lens, he often steadfastly refuses to focus it ... he instead offers a kind of Rorschach test. Because of the inherent equivocality of his writing (there is more than a little irony here), it is hard for Weick’s interpreters not to find what they might be looking for.’ Fair enough. Yet, I’ll take the supposed equivocality for the insights-in-waiting.

Another possible critique: One of my reviewers of an earlier draft of this essay asked, provocatively, ‘whether there will be sensemaking after Weick?’ The question really has to do with whether Weick’s ‘style as theory’ (Van Maanen 1995) is so inimitable (Czarniawska 2003) that the ‘theory’ disappears when he departs the scene. My stance on this issue is that style can indeed be theory, but multiple styles are viable. I would not put out a call for other scholars to try to imitate Weick or Van Maanen, or anyone else, but would suggest attending to the elements of style (with apologies to Strunk, 1918) that make for insight, interest, and impact. This is what Van Maanen (1995) did in his deconstruction of Weick’s style. Others clearly can carry on that legacy. It is clear (at least to me) that sense-making work has taken on a life of its own and will continue well into the future. Given Weick’s influence on that domain, it will have his stamp on it. But, like all ideas that take on a life of their own, it will morph, as well.

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In 1979, I attended a Grand Prix race at Watkin’s Glen, New York. Friday’s practice trials for the race on Sunday took place in streaming rain, making for extremely difficult and dangerous driving conditions. During that practice session, an extraordinarily gifted driver, Gilles Villeneuve, lapped the circuit 11½ seconds quicker than the next fastest driver, at a time when a ½ second difference was considered significant. It was a remarkable display. One of the other top drivers, Jacques Lafitte, in assessing Villeneuve’s performance, is reported to have said of him, ‘He’s not like the rest of us.’ When I read Weick, I sometimes have a similar feeling. He’s not quite like the rest of us. His take on the organizing world is refreshingly different and repeatedly revelatory. Each time I re-read articles over the years, I seem to get a new ‘shazzam!’ from them. My rule of thumb has become pretty simple: If Weick wrote it, I’ll read it.

My thanks to Kathy Sutcliffe for feedforward about the intent of this essay and to Linda Putnam for feedback and guidance on an earlier version of it. Special thanks also for comments from Craig Crossland who reflected my own counsel to him to avoid being bland and to Kristin Price for the wise advice to make sure this piece is more about Weick and less about its author.
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