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Administration & Society 2008 40: 223 originally published online 21 February 2008
DOI: 10.1177/0095399707313446

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Administration & Society
Volume 40 Number 3
May 2008 223-252
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Extending the Present Understanding of Organizational Sensemaking

Three Stages and Three Contexts

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Despite a growing literature on the topic, our understanding of organizational sensemaking remains somewhat fragmented, and discussions have not yet fully integrated related ideas into a conceptual framework that includes the contextual terrain in which these activities occur. This article offers such a model. We begin with a story from a Korean fire inspector, delineating the process of his sensemaking into three stages: noticing, interpretation, and action. We demonstrate how sensemaking can be understood in three separate contexts—the ecological, institutional, and social relational. We show how each context provides a setting for a unique account of the three stages of sensemaking. We derive four theoretical propositions and conclude with implications and discuss prospects for this promising research area.

Keywords: *sensemaking; phenomenology; grounded analysis; Korean fire officials*

Nearly 30 years ago one of the founders of the field of operations management, Russell Ackoff (1979), observed that:

> (M)anagers are not confronted with problems that are independent of each other, but with dynamic situations that consist of complex systems of changing problems that interact with each other. I call such situations messes. . . . Managers do not solve problems: they manage messes. (pp. 99-100)

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Pondy and Mitroff (1979), writing at the same time, were more outspokenly critical of mainstream approaches to organizational analysis that were available at the time, which they characterized as "mindless conceptions" emphasizing order and control, and which had for the most part failed to understand the true nature of reality that individuals in organizations confront. Among other faulty conceptions in much of the management literature were these assumptions: that "meaning" is fixed for the social situations in which we find ourselves; that the problems requiring managers and other public servants to act or make decisions are generally clearly ordered; and that such situations have been catalogued and anticipated so that it is possible to prepare public servants and other managers for the range of such encounters. Practitioners then and now know that these assumptions are unrealistic, in part because in actuality they actively generate their own realities.

Fortunately, from about that time forward a small group of other scholars have recognized that "the routine, taken-for-granted aspects of organizational life are far less concrete and real than they appear" (Morgan, 1980, p. 617). As a result, these scholars (e.g., Porac, Thomas & Baden-Fuller, 1989; Ranson, Hinings & Greenwood, 1980; Thomas, Clark & Gioia, 1993; Weick, 1995, 2001) have actively explored the conscious meaning construction side of organizational life, and the body of their efforts has come to be called "organizational sensemaking." The study of organizational sensemaking is important because it provides us with insightful findings about the ways in which individuals in organizations actively generate their own organizational realities. Despite the conceptual contributions of these scholars, however, our understanding of the sensemaking phenomenon in organizations remains somewhat fragmented to the present day, and current academic dialogue has not yet coherently integrated related ideas into a conceptual framework that includes the contextual terrain.

Organizational sensemaking is sensemaking by individuals in organizations. Individuals in organizations are not spectators sitting alongside the encountered situations. Rather, they are actors involved in practical ways in these situations. Accordingly, sensemaking in organizations is not a process of formulating detached theories. It is a process in which individual actors recognize and solve their problems with situations that they encounter, and in doing so scatter these situations with the seeds of other problems. Oddly enough, however, current work in the field has not paid sufficient attention to the pragmatic quality (Weick, 2001) of organizational sensemaking. Consequently, the sensemaking process itself is left relatively abstract.

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Individuals in organizations live in a flow of empirical working situations that they have to handle. With organizational actors, dealings with situations outside themselves are already to a high degree preorganized by the "stocks of knowledge" (Schutz, 1967) that they carry in their minds (Waal, 2002). In this sense, organizational members also live to a large extent in their own reference schemata (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973), which makes it possible for them to engage these empirical working situations cognitively, and in doing so map out projected lines of action (Blumer, 1969). In organizations, on the other hand, individuals are not isolated entities. They are living subjects in interactions with others. If "the everyday life world" (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973) that organizational participants inhabit can be understood in its totality as a contextual terrain with three components—an empirical, cognitive, and social world—then we need to examine how the act of sensemaking, or conscious meaning construction, occurs in this three component contextual terrain. Yet few have tackled this issue in a systematic way.

This article extends understanding of organizational sensemaking by appropriating related ideas from the social-behavioristic and the phenomenological points of view and elucidating their connections to the sensemaking process. We begin with a sensemaking story of a Korean fire inspector. We delineate the process of organizational sensemaking in three stages: noticing, interpretation and action. Next, we demonstrate how organizational sensemaking can be understood in its three contexts: the ecological, the institutional, and the social relational. We show how each context provides a setting for a unique account of the three stages of sensemaking. We draw on the sensemaking story to illustrate the points under discussion. From this discussion, we derive four theoretical propositions, conclude with practical implications, and discuss prospects for this promising research area.

Given the basic nature of sensemaking—that it is improvisational and specific to local circumstances—it is impossible for us to prescribe a comprehensive toolkit for managers to use in their sensemaking activities. Based on our integrated theoretical model of the sensemaking process, however, we do provide recommendations for an approach to training and orienting managers that allows them to approach their work in ways that realistically anticipate their own meaning making activities and those of other organizational participants around them. We argue in our conclusion that in the short run, our principal contribution is not primarily for practitioners but for scholars' efforts to portray accurately the experiences of practitioners.

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A Sensemaking Episode: A Building of Two (and Yet Five) Stories[1]

Mr. Kim is a Korean fire inspector with 2 years experience in the field. Approximately 1 year ago he conducted a fire safety inspection of an apartment building of five stories that contained 10 households. The building was built on sloped ground. The first and fourth floors had separate main entrances through which the residents could enter and exit onto sidewalks at different levels on the sloped ground adjacent to the building. That is, one entrance on the downhill side of the building opened on the first floor, and a second entrance on the uphill side opened on the fourth floor.

As a result of inspection Mr. Kim discovered that dwelling units on the third floor and above were not equipped with an escape device called *Wangang-Gi*.[2] As far as he knew from the Korean Fire Safety Code, every home on the third floor and above in apartment buildings of 3 to 10 stories ought to be furnished with a *Wangang-Gi*. If not, the inspector must enforce administrative measures to give building representatives instructions to set up *Wangang-Gis*.[3] If *Wangang-Gis* are not installed after such instructions have been issued, the inspector must report the failure to prosecutors. To Mr. Kim the inspected building was an object[4] to which the administrative instructions applied because it was a building of 5 stories not equipped with *Wangang-Gis*. When he inspected the building the building representative was absent, and Mr. Kim could not inform him of the fire safety violation.

Mr. Kim returned to his office, and as he was drawing up the papers for issuing administrative instructions directed to the building representative his fellow fire inspector, Mr. Lee, asked what he was doing. Mr. Kim explained his inspection of the building. Mr. Lee interposed an unexpected objection to Mr. Kim's inspection, raising the divergent opinion that the building might not be five stories high. He pointed out that the building could be a structure with two stories above and three beneath ground level if the sidewalk adjacent to the fourth floor were considered to be ground level. Not until hearing Mr. Lee's suggestion did Mr. Kim realize that he had not thoroughly examined the building register when he inspected it. As a matter of fact, Mr. Kim did not even think about the need to look into the building register because, given his initial impression, the building simply appeared to be five stories high.

Just as Mr. Lee suggested, the building was registered as a structure with two stories above and three beneath ground level. This meant that the building was not an object to which the administrative instructions applied as Mr. Kim initially presumed. Despite the official record of the building

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register, however, the building appeared to be five stories high in every respect to Mr. Kim. He had misgivings that the absence of *Wangang-Gis* might endanger the lives of the residents in the event of fire. From this perspective, the building was an object for administrative instructions. He asked Mr. Lee whether the building could be equivalent to an object requiring administrative instructions, but neither he nor Mr. Lee knew how to handle the case.

Together with Mr. Lee, Mr. Kim referred this matter to their supervisor, Mr. Yang, who had wider experience in the field. Mr. Yang opined that the building was not an object requiring administrative instructions. If Mr. Kim forced the building's representative to install *Wangang-Gis*, he pointed out, it would be perceived as a kind of governmental heavy-handedness. Mr. Yang sympathized with Mr. Kim's view, however, that *Wangang-Gis* needed to be installed in the building for the safety of residents. As an alternative to administrative instructions, Mr. Yang recommended that Mr. Kim take an administrative action named *Haengjeong-Jido* (administrative guidance) to induce the representative to install *Wanggang-Gis* voluntarily.[5]

Mr. Yang's suggestion seemed reasonable to Mr. Kim. Mr. Kim had been familiar with *Haengjeong-Jido,* but he was not far-sighted enough to think about the possibility that it could be applicable to this case. He thought that *Haengjeong-Jido* was an effective administrative measure to avoid the reproach of heavy-handedness and at the same time to make it likely that the building representative would install *Wangang-Gis*.

Mr. Kim sent written advice, paid a visit to the representative, and urged him to set up *Wangang-Gis*. The representative hesitated to comply at first but finally promised to do so under Mr. Kim's powers of persuasion.

Some weeks later, Mr. Kim got a phone call from the representative informing him that *Wangang-Gi*s had been purchased but the residents did not know how to use them. He wanted Mr. Kim to provide directions for them and to demonstrate their use to residents. Kim was at a loss. He was not sure whether such training and demonstration belonged properly within the domain of his duties and responsibilities as a fire inspector. Again, Mr. Kim inquired with Mr. Yang about this matter. The request of the representative was a surprise to Mr. Yang also, and he could not readily answer Mr. Kim's question. After contemplating the situation, Mr. Yang concluded that it was possible to construe the implications of *Haengjeong-Jido* more actively for this situation. According to Mr. Yang, *Haengjeong-Jido* in this case was not necessarily limited to sending a letter of advice, paying a visit to the representative, and persuading him to purchase *Wangang-Gis*. Mr. Yang believed that, if necessary, teaching and demonstrating could be a part of

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Haengjeong-Jido. There was reason in what Mr. Yang proposed. Accepting Mr. Yang's view, Mr. Kim taught the residents how to use *Wangang-Gis* and provided a demonstration in cooperation with the rescue team of his fire department.

It was not long before a fire of unknown origin actually occurred in an apartment on the fourth floor (the ground floor from the point of the building register). The dwelling unit was consumed. However, a housewife, cut off from escape by the fire, managed to save herself by descending on a *Wangang-Gi* installed on her balcony. She was one of the residents who had learned from Mr. Kim how to use *Wangang-Gis*.

When Mr. Kim conducts a fire safety inspection of a building nowadays, he always checks the building register carefully. When he finds something wrong with an inspected building, he knows about approaches in his work other than instructing (ordering) the person(s) concerned to correct the problem. When people ask about how to use fire safety equipment such as a hydrant, a fire hose, or even a *Wangang-Gi*, he is very comfortable providing directions for their use.

Three Stages of Sensemaking

The sensemaking process is neither simple nor well understood (Daft & Weick, 1984). There are many sensemaking related images in the literature, including noticing, scanning, attention, interpretation, encoding, thinking, doing, action, and response (e.g., Fiske, 1992; Hinz, Tindale & Vollarth, 1997; Thomas et al., 1993). We organize these concepts into three stages that constitute the overall sensemaking process.

Noticing

To make sense of some things, people must notice the things that create the sensation (Weick, 1995). What persons do not notice are not, ipso facto, available for their (further) sensemaking (Starbuck & Milliken, 1988). In a word, to make sense of some things requires the individual to take notice of those things in particular.

According to Weick (1969, 1995) and Meltzer (1994), noticing is an attentional process by which individuals point out some portions of their experiences in encountered situations as cues for subsequent interpretations. On the other hand, Louis and Sutton (1991) suggest that noticing is a switching process in which actors move from "automatic thinking" to "active

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thinking" by recognizing some novelties or discrepancies that interrupt or violate their ongoing interpretations.

Based on these two notions of noticing, we can say that noticing is a process in which individual actors single out some problematic stimuli as cues for further conscious processing out of their streams of experience in the situations that they face. This analysis of noticing in the field of organizational sensemaking connotes a point of view with regard to the nature of the process: Noticing is a process in which individuals in organizations indicate to themselves some things in the outward situations, and in doing so mentally project their problematic plans of action (Hewitt, 1976; Meltzer1994; Reynold, 1987) for those things.

"To indicate something to oneself is to make that something into an object" (Reynold, 1987, p. 68). An "object" is the nature or reality of a thing: the property or character conferred on the thing by an individual (Blumer, 1969; Reynold, 1987; Strauss 1959). It represents a plan of action, a series of projected responses and the anticipated consequences of them (Meltzer, 1994). Hence, to indicate something to oneself is to point out the property or character of the thing to the mind. This means that a subject for whom it is an object locates his or her plan of action on the thing. Following this logic, noticing is a process in which actors make indication to themselves of some problematic stimuli in the encountered situation. The stimuli imply the responses and the possible results of the responses (Strauss, 1959). Accordingly, what make stimuli (things) as stimuli (objects) possible are "the responses and the imaginary results of the responses" called out by the stimuli, which are characterized as plans of action (Gelven, 1970; Strauss, 1959). In this context, problematic stimuli are stimulations whose contents, namely, the specific responses and the ultimate experiences that follow from them, are not easily imposed by individuals. After all, to indicate problematic stimuli to oneself is to refer to the problematic realities of the stimuli to the mind in the very process of indication. In this respect, noticing is a process in which individual actors identify the blocked impositions of their plans of action on the contacted things (stimuli).

In the above sensemaking story, what Mr. Kim noticed was a characteristic of the inspected building, which can be expressed as "an apartment building of two (and yet five) stories not equipped with *Wangang-Gis*." Strictly speaking, however, what Mr. Kim indicated to himself in the noticing process was not the building situation itself; rather, what he indicated to himself was his blocked plan of action toward the situation—whether or not the building is an object for administrative instructions.

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Mr. Kim's story shows us that noticing is a process in which actors transform the encountered situation into their problematic situation by attentively capturing some puzzling or troubling elements that obstruct their ongoing dealings with the situations. Through this noticing process, Mr. Kim initiated his sensemaking of the building situation.

Interpretation

Interpretation is a process in which individual actors actively grasp "the modes of being" (Moran, 2000, p. 232) of cues that they notice. Gelven explains this notion of interpretation as follows:

> If one claims that a furnace *as* a furnace must give off heat, one is *interpreting* a furnace, or more exactly, one's relation to a furnace, which is all that the term *furnace* really signifies. This means, then, that interpretation is making explicit the *as*. If we consider the furnace example, it should be clear that when one does make explicit the as-structure of something, one is pointing out the purpose or usability of that thing. (1970, p. 93)

As seen in Gelven's statement, interpretation is a "self-directed thinking process" (Moran, 2000) to clarify the as-structure of a referred thing, namely, the manner in which the referent exists. Such a clarification of the as-structure of something can be said to be a process in which an interpreter understands his or her relation to the thing. In this sense, Mr. Kim's interpretation of the inspected building as "an object for *Haengjeong-Jido*" was a process of making explicit the as-structure of the building. In the process, Mr. Kim presented his relation to the building to himself in a meaningful form.

To interpret the noticed cue is a kind of combining process in which the cue is connected to a frame of reference, through which a state of affairs (meaning) of the cue is constructed (Bruner, 1995; Gray, Bougon, & Donnellon, 1985; Louis & Sutton, 1991; Starbuck & Milliken, 1988; Weick 1995; Zerubavel, 1998). As discussed earlier, the noticed cue is an experiential entity of which the meaning (its mode of being) still remains problematic. A frame of reference, which is sometimes called "a generalized point of view" (Cantril, 1941, p. 20) or "framework" (Weick, 1995), is a belief about "what is" (Starbuck & Milliken, 1988, p. 51). Such a belief involves an idealized entity, not a concrete individual entity. The noticed cue itself is nonsensical because its predicate is not yet given. Only when the noticed cue is put into a frame of reference (what is), does its meaning, more specifically, its manner of being (what the noticed cue is) emerge.

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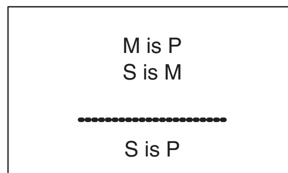
Figure 1
Mr. Kim's Interpretation of the Inspected Building[6]



Note: M: A building not violating the fire safety law, but threatening the safety of residents. P: An object for *Haengjeong-Jido*. S: The inspected building of two (and yet five) stories not equipped with *Wangang-Gis*.

The combination of the noticed cue plus a frame of reference basically includes a process of typification (Berger & Luckman, 1967; Schutz, 1967) in which a concrete (individual) entity is categorized into an idealized (generalized) one. To clarify the discussion, it is helpful to consider Mr. Kim's interpretation of the inspected building as illustrated in Figure 1.

As shown in the above syllogism, Mr. Kim's interpretation of the building (S is P) was the result of his combination of the noticed building situation (S) with an administrative measure (M is P) suggested by his supervisor, Mr. Yang. This combination was effected through the process in which he typified the noticed building situation (S) into a member of the category "a building not violating the fire safety law, but threatening the safety of residents (M)," which was implied in the frame of reference (M is P) proposed by Mr. Yang. Through this process, Mr. Kim imposed what was true of the category (namely, an object for *Hangjeong-Jido*) on the building situation, leading to his interpretation, "the building of two (and yet five) stories not equipped with *Wangang-Gis* is an object for *Haengjeong-Jido*."

Taken together, interpretation is an understanding process by which the as-structure (Gelven, 1970) of the noticed cue is constituted on the basis of an available interpretative scheme (Schutz, 1967). Through this process, the individual reaffirms, revises or elaborates his or her blocked plan of action. The newly established plan of action as a result of interpretation provides a ground for subsequent action to be carried out.

Action

Three aspects of action are critical to understanding its nature in the field of organizational sensemaking. First, action is behavior directed toward the

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realization of a determinate future goal (Schutz, 1967, p. xxiv). "For someone to act, an act must be projected" (Schutz & Luckmann, 1989, p. 14). "To act" in this sense is "the action in progress" (Schutz, 1967, p. xxiv), which is initiated by an acting self. "An act" is a projected future (plan of action), which is pictured as determinate, that is, as over and done with even while it is still anticipated (Schutz, 1967). Based on this approach from Schutz and Luckmann, we can say that action is the step-by-step performance (execution) of the projected action mapped out in the future perfect tense (Schutz & Luckmann, 1989). In other words, action can be said to be the purposeful or rational behavior which is oriented (motivated) by an envisioned future—a future that is anticipated now but has not yet happened (Schutz, 1967).

Second, action is a controlled operation that translates thought into deed, through which an agent necessarily engages the world that surrounds him or her (Schutz & Luckmann, 1989). In this respect, action is the willed or decided expression (externalization) of the action imagined *modo futuri exacti*, by which the actor reaches into his or her outside world (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Catron & Harmon, 1981; Schutz & Luckmann, 1989).

Third, action is doing that often triggers subsequent thinking (noticing and interpretation; Weick, 1979, 2001). Action involves both a process and a product. Action is a process through which the individual makes real, or turns into reality, the idealized project (plan of action) that is represented in his or her mind (Weick, 2001). In the process of attempting to realize an idealized action, the actor usually produces a stream of events that was not there before he or she took action (Weick, 1979). The product of action, namely, the "external residuum" of realized project is hard to ignore or leave out of account because its existence is not questioned and it has potential significance (Weick, 1979, 1995). By virtue of this nature, the outcome of action often provides a pretext that leads to new ways of noticing and interpretation (March, 1996; Weick, 2001).

As shown in the story, Mr. Kim carried out a continuous flow of action—sending a letter, paying a visit to the building representative, and persuading him to establish *Wangang-Gis*. The discussions above tell us that the flow of action was Mr. Kim's effort to complete his plan of action, *Haengjeong-Jido* that he mapped out in his mind.[7] By way of "efferent" (Weick, 2001) manifestation of the *Haengjeong-Jido* modeled in the mind, Mr. Kim became inextricably wound into the building situation, and in doing so his modeled *Haengjeong-Jido* became socially observable to others. In the process of realizing his project, *Haengjeong-Jido*, Mr. Kim created an environment in which he was asked to teach and demonstrate how to use the *Wangang-Gi* to

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the residents. The situation was unexpected to him, and it triggered his seriously thinking through the implications of *Haenjeong-Jido*.

In short, action is the current "work" (Schutz & Luckmann, 1989) that is motivated by a future project and at the same time makes it real. "In the process of acting out a projected future (plan of action), the actor usually "puts a personal imprint on what is out there" (Weick, 2001, p. 177), whether the resultant imprint is intended or not. And the set of traces deposited by action—such as documentation of actions taken—often become candidates for subsequent sensemaking (Weick, 1979, 2001). In this sense, the supporters of the sensemaking perspective (e.g., March, 1996; Porac et al., 1989; Starbuck, 1983; Thomas et al., 1993; Weick, 1979, 2001) consider action as an important mechanism to generate the raw materials (data; Weick, 2001) available for the next episode of meaning construction (sensemaking).

Sensemaking in Three Contexts

As shown in the above discussions, sensemaking is a series of conscious processes. First, the individual as sensemaker brackets (notices) some puzzling and troubling portion of the flow of experience in the encountered situation as a metaphoric text or document for closer attention (Denzin, 2001; Schutz, 1967). Second, the individual forms (interprets) a plausible idea of the portion that is set apart so that he or she restores (reestablishes) the interrupted practical engagement with the situation that he or she faces (Moran, 2000; Weick, 1995). Third, the sensemaker implants the idea through behavioral manifestation (action), and in doing so creates things in the situation, which often provoke further bracketing (noticing) and formation (interpretation; Catron & Harmon, 1981; Weick, 1979).

In organizations this sensemaking process by individuals occurs within three contexts, namely, an ecological context (e.g., Manning, 1982; Smircich & Stubbart, 1985; Weick, 1995, 2001), an institutional context (e.g., DiMaggio, 1990; Porac et al., 1989; Scott, 1995) and a social relational context (e.g., Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Granovetter, 1985; Porac et al., 1989). Related to these three contexts, the organizational sensemaking phenomenon is characterized by the following triadic processes: an enacting process (Smircich & Stubbart, 1985; Weick, 1979, 1988, 1995, 2001), a structuring process (Giddens, 1979; Ranson et al., 1980; Schutz & Luckmann, 1989), and a social process (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Blumer, 1969; Miller, 1982).

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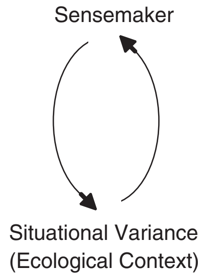
Figure 2
Enacting Process in Ecological Context



Sensemaking as Enacting Process in Ecological Context

In association with its ecological context, sensemaking in organizations is an enacting process (Figure 2) through which organized members actively create or legislate part of the world in which they work (Abolafia & Kilduff, 1988; Smircich & Stubbart, 1985; Weick, 1979, 1988, 1995, 2001).

Based on the three stages described above, the enacting process in which organizational actors produce some of the very environments (surroundings) which they face (Merton, 1948) is understood as occurring through two transformational steps.

The first is a step through which organized participants make the external surroundings (situations) in front of them into internal surroundings (situations) in their minds. The thinking stages (noticing and interpretation) of sensemaking correspond to this transformational step. As mentioned earlier, noticing is a self-reflective activity of making that which is interpreted by tearing off some problematic portion of the field of experience in the surrounding situation (Weick, 1979, 1988, 1995). Moreover, interpretation is a conscious activity of making a symbolic reality (meaning; Smircich & Stubbart, 1985) of the noticed portion by connecting an available interpretative scheme to it (the noticed portion). Through these thinking processes, Mr. Kim in the episode redrew the conceptual picture (Weick, 1995) of the building situation before him. That is, the inspected building is not an object for administrative instructions, but an object for *Haengjeong-Jido*.

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The second transformational step is one through which organized people put the internal surroundings (situations) made in their heads into external surroundings (situations), and in doing so make new external surroundings (situations; Smircich & Stubbart, 1985). The action stage of sensemaking corresponds to this transformational step. As indicated above, action is a centrifugal activity of making real an idea of the surrounding situation by extending the idea outward (Merton, 1948; Thomas, 1928; Weick, 1979, 2001). Through this action process, Mr. Kim brought his internal idea of the building situation, that is, "the building is an object for *Haengjeong-Jido,*" into existence in tangible form, set it in motion, and, as a result, transformed the display of the building situation into a new one—the building equipped with *Wangang-Gis*.

Accordingly, Mr. Kim's story illustrates that the external situations that organized people encounter in the course of sensemaking are not objectively fixed settings. Rather, they are settings that are "tampered and manipulated" (Moran, 2000) by organizational actors in the course of sensemaking. In this respect, sensemaking as enactment can be featured by a kind of controlling process in which individuals ascribe some meanings to their encountered situation, let the ascribed meanings become integral parts of the situation, and in doing so, shape the contours of the situation (Manning, 1982; Merton, 1948). However, such situations are not perfectly determined (controlled) by the individual actors involved in the process of sensemaking.

In the case of Mr. Kim's sensemaking, he induced the representative to install *Wangang-Gis*, which in turn induced him to teach and demonstrate how to use them. In acting out, and in doing so realizing his project, *Haengjeong-Jido*, Mr. Kim produced another environment toward which he subsequently needed to respond. This story shows us that sensemaking as enactment is not a unilateral controlling (determining) process in which individuals "command and (the) environments (situations) obey" (Follett, 1924, p. 118). Rather, as suggested in the following statement, sensemaking as enactment can be said to be an interdependent authoring process (Giddens, 1979) in which individual actors continuously invite new situations (settings) that often require further sensemaking.

> We are neither slave nor master of our environments. . . . My farmer neighbors know this: we prune and graft and fertilize certain tress, and as our behavior becomes increasingly that of behavior towards apple-bearing trees, these become increasingly apple-bearing trees. The tree releases energy in me and I in it; it makes me think and plan and work, and I make it bear edible fruit. It is a process of freeing on both sides. And this is a creating process. (Follett, 1924, p. 118-119)

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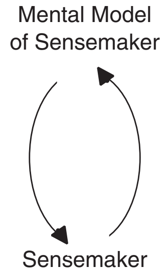
Figure 3
Structuring Process in Institutional Context[9]



In sum, sensemaking in organizations is a process in which organizational members consciously do something (notice, interpret, and act) with what happens to them, and in doing so constantly build (create) some of the subsequent events, which generally provide them with new opportunities and constraints (Weick, 1979, 1988). Through the process, individual actors in organizations energetically enact the ecological context (Smircich & Stubbart, 1985) of thinking (noticing and interpretation) and action.

Sensemaking as Structuring Process in Institutional Context

In conjunction with its institutional context, organizational sensemaking is a structuring process (Figure 3) through which individual participants consciously reorganize lenses to view the world in which they work, and in doing so deliberately reestablish ways of concerning themselves with the world (Gelven, 1970; Giddens, 1979; Heidegger, 1970; Kaelin, 1987; Moran, 2000; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991).[8]

On the basis of the three stages of sensemaking discussed above, organizational participants initiate the structuring process by experiencing some breaks in their "taken-for-granted interpretative schemes" (Bartunek, 1984; Kaelin, 1987; Ranson et al., 1980; Schutz, 1967; Weick, 1995). Through experiencing some disturbances in their pre-existent mental constructs (Brower, 1999), individual actors in organizations come to recognize that "reliance on habits of mind (*may be*) inappropriate" (Louis & Sutton, 1991, p. 56), by which they disclose their formerly familiar but inconspicuous structures of the mind (Fiske, 1992) as themes for speculation (Kalein,

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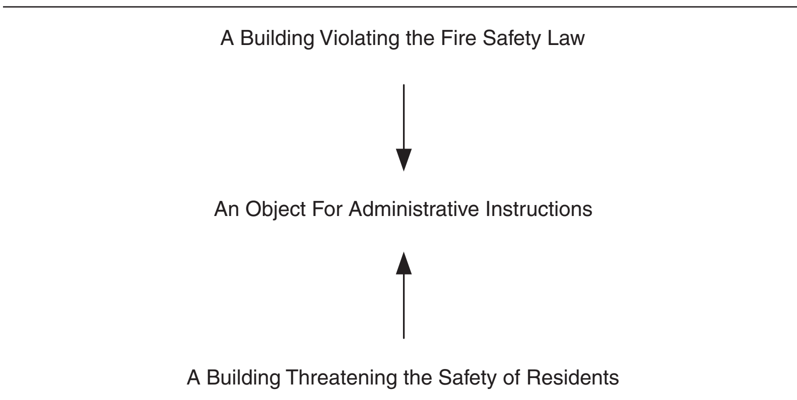
Figure 4
Mr. Kim's Disclosed Interpretative Scheme



1988). The process of noticing relates to these activities of experiencing, recognizing and disclosing.

In the case of Mr. Kim's sensemaking, he already had at least two taken-for-granted fire inspection practices. One of them could be characterized as: "A building violating the fire inspection law is an object for administrative instructions." This practice made it possible for Mr. Kim to initially understand the building as an object for administrative instructions. Also, the practice had its explicatory horizon (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973), that is, "A building not violating the fire inspection law is not an object for administrative instructions." When Mr. Kim found out the official description of the inspected building from the building register (a building of two stories), this explicatory horizon provided him with an interpretation that the inspected building was not an object for administrative instructions. However, Mr. Kim had another fire inspection practice already in mind, so to speak: A building threatening the safety of residents is an object for administrative instructions. As shown in the story, the building not equipped with *Wangang-Gis* was actually five stories high to Mr. Kim, which had the potential to threaten the safety of the residents in the case of fire. Related to the assumed characteristic of the building (the building of five stories), Mr. Kim's other practice provided him with the opposite interpretation: that the building was an object for administrative instructions. In the course of noticing this puzzling characteristic of the building Mr. Kim experienced, and recognized, a certain break in the taken-for-granted flow of these two fire inspection practices. In doing so, he disclosed them to himself as a theme for speculation, which can be depicted as Figure 4.

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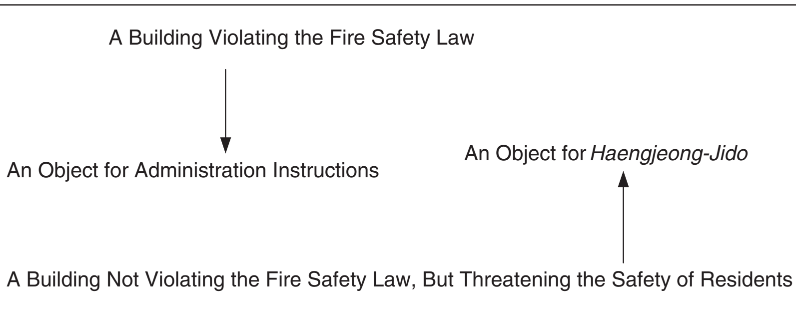
Figure 5
Mr. Kim's Revised Interpretative Scheme



To disclose the structure of the mind is to reveal it as a phenomenon by "breaking down the inconspicuous familiarity into a conspicuous visibility" (Kalein, 1988, p. 84). Through this disclosure process, organizational actors come to critically look at (Sokolowski, 2000) their previously familiar but now strange rules or assumptions (Hirsch, 1997; Kalein, 1988; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991) whereby they have prethematically related themselves to immediate situations and, in doing so, thematically construct ways to engage themselves in the outward situations (Bourdieu, 1984; Kalein, 1988). The activity of interpretation pertains to such a thematic construction of meaning making structure (Fiske, 1992).

In the process of interpretation of the inspected building, Mr. Kim accomplished the thematic construction of his inspection practices by internalizing an administrative measure, *Haengjeong-Jido,* recommend by his supervisor. Through such an internalization, Mr. Kim modified his already admitted (Gelven, 1970) concept, "a building threatening the safety of residents" into a more narrow one, "a building not violating the fire safety law but threatening the safety of residents." In the process, Mr. Kim reestablished new fire inspection practices illustrated in Figure 5, while retaining the validity of his first fire inspection practice. As seen in his story, newly structured fire inspection practices have subsequently structured his fire inspections.

Once ways to approach and proceed in situations are thematically built (Ranson et al., 1980), organizational members usually put them into action (Daft & Weick, 1984), by which they actualize (realize) their idealized dealings with the situations in tangible forms (Weick, 1995, 2001). When the results are successful, the schemes of involvement deliberately constituted in the course of interpretation are restored as useful guides to direct subsequent

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involvement with the situations (Weick, 1979), while gradually receding into deep-seated assumptive frames (Ranson et al., 1980). When the results are not successful, they are repeatedly elaborated at the level of consciousness. In this respect, the action stage of sensemaking functions as a platform for channelizing further structuring process into either automatic or active mode (Louis & Sutton, 1991).

In our story Mr. Kim's effort to realize his project, *Haenjeong-Jido*, brought about an unexpected consequence, the request of the building representative for teaching and demonstrating how to use the *Wangang-Gi*. In the course of handling this situation, Mr. Kim elaborated his understanding of *Haengjeong-Jido* with the help of Mr. Yang, leading to his accepting the request of the representative. The result was successful, which encouraged Mr. Kim to make active use of the elaborated *Haenjeong-Jido* in conducting subsequent fire inspections.

Geertz has written that "man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun" (Geertz, 1973, p. 5). The foregoing discussion shows us that organizational sensemaking is a crucial processing through which humans as organizational actors spin (structure) webs of significance (institutional context) in which they are then suspended (structured).

Sensemaking as Social Process in Social Relational Context

Finally, organizational sensemaking is a social process (Figure 6) in which individual actors creatively construct the meanings of their immediate working situations in the context of interactions with others (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Blumer, 1969; Granovetter, 1985; Kahlbaugh, 1993; Miller, 1982; Schutz, 1963; Strauss, 1978).

As suggested above, sensemaking is not a process in which an acting person habitually (preconsciously) constructs the reality of the situation. Rather, sensemaking is a process in which an acting person discursively (consciously) constructs the reality of the situation. Habitual meaning construction is a series of knowing and acting processes which are frozen by the existent mental constructs. Instead, discursive meaning construction is a chain of knowing and acting processes which are not anesthetized (Brower, 1999) by current mental constructs. As a matter of course, the person doing the sensemaking is the one who actively constructs the meaning of the outward situation, while arresting the "doxic (taken-for-granted) elements" (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991, p. 25) of his or her preestablished scheme of reference.

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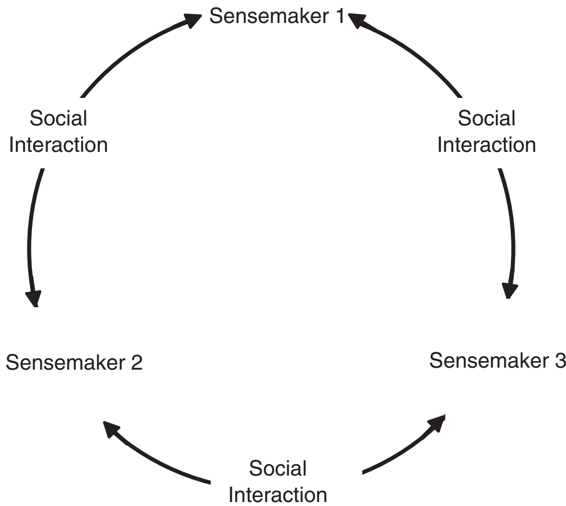
Figure 6
Social Process in Social Relational Context



Although it is not impossible, it is not easy to question the taken-for-granted assumptive frame in the mind (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). Also, it is not easy to maintain a controlled (Bargh, 1984) meaning construction in that it requires a considerable cognitive effort and behavioral commitment (Bargh 1984; Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Weick, 1995, 2001). If this is so, what makes it possible to trigger and sustain such an active meaning construction? What makes it possible for the individual to engage in a mindful (Louis & Sutton, 1991) meaning construction, while taking up a contemplative stance (Sokolowski, 2000) toward his or her already admitted interpretative scheme?

With regard to this issue, Berger and Luckmann (1967) insist the reality of everyday life is constituted in "my here and now." In addition, they say that my here and now is not identical with other's here and now, because my "here" is their "there" and my "now" does not fully overlap with theirs (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, p. 23).

Berger and Luckmann's viewpoint of my and their here and now suggests that so called multiple realities (McHugh, 1968) invariably emerge

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when persons and situations come together. It reminds us that "the same situations can have different meanings for different people" (McHugh, 1968, p. 8).

The organization is a social network in which the member agents are interlinked (Carley, 1997). Such an interlinkage exists essentially in the form of social interaction (Blumer, 1969). Without social interaction, such an interlinkage does not exist, and accordingly there can be no organization as a social network (Blumer, 1969; Carley, 1997; Schall, 1983). Naturally, the organization (a social network) and social interaction can not be understood in isolation (Harris & Cronen, 1979). The organization as social network is not a container (Harris & Cronen, 1979) within which social interaction occurs but rather is the process of social interaction (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Blumer, 1969; Harris & Cronen, 1979; Meltzer, 1994; Schall, 1983).

When we recognize that organizations are, after all, interaction phenomena, individuals in organizations are understood as individuals in interactions. Extending this idea to the field of organizational sensemaking, we can say that sensemaking (by individuals) in organizations is virtually sensemaking (by individuals) in interactions. This implies that the process of sensemaking emerges out of the process of social interaction. Considering that sensemaking is conscious meaning construction, this implication enlightens us that social interaction is a crucial mechanism enabling individual actors to engage in a conscious mode of meaning construction.

When we relate Berger and Luckmann's standpoint of my and their here and now to the above three stages of sensemaking in this context, social interaction as sensemaking generator is comprehended in the following three aspects.

First, borrowing Berger and Luckmann's (1967) terminology, the noticing stage of sensemaking is a process in which *I* (the first person singular, here as in the following illustrations, standing for the ordinary participant in organizational daily work) begin to look at my (taken-for-granted) here and now as a theme for speculation by experiencing some interruption(s) of its ongoing guidance in relating myself to an encountered situation. Such an experience is likely provoked by experiencing others' here and now, which is different from mine. Interactions with others provide me with opportunities to meet and in doing so to experience their here and now, which is not the same as mine. In this respect, social interaction functions as a mechanism to make it possible for me to initiate an active development of my new here and now.

Second, the interpretation stage of sensemaking is a process in which I develop a new here and now through which I am involved in an encountered situation. To develop a new here and now, I must first make my here and

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now thematic (Sokolowski, 2000). To make my here and now thematic, I must look at the here and now that I have normally looked through by distancing myself from the here and now (Packer, 1985; Sokolwski, 2000). When I take distance from my here and now, and in doing so neutralize (Sokolwski, 2000) it as a theme of quasi theoretical study, my here and now is not my here and now any longer. At the moment that I neutralize my here and now, it comes into existence as a possible here and now that I consider in developing my new here and now. At this point of time, interactions with others supply me with chances to contact different kinds of here and now that can be contemplated in building my new here and now. Given my inherently limited thinking ability, therefore, social interaction functions as a mechanism by which I can obtain relevant information (others' here and now in this case) more resourcefully, and accordingly can develop my new here and now more reasonably and easily.

Third, the action stage of sensemaking is a process in which I externalize my newly developed here and now via concrete behavior, and in doing so make it visible to others (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Porac et al., 1989; Weick, 1988). As Blumer points out, social interaction "consists of, and exists in, the fitting of lines of action to each other by the members of the group" (or organization; 1969, pp. 16-17). As long as I participate in interactions with others as an organizational member, I am constantly called on to express my here and now to my associates in an observable form of lines of behavior that form jointed (Blumer, 1969) lines of behavior, and in doing so to sustain the interactions. Once I manifest my subjective here and now, and in doing so make it observable to other interactors, my manifested here and now is often impinged on by their here and now. This typically triggers me to engage in further development of my here and now. Related to the action stage of sensemaking, accordingly, we can say that social interaction functions as a mechanism by which I am induced to objectify (Berger & Luckmann, 1967) my here and now in the product of interpretation that is available both to myself and to others, and in doing so to consciously commit myself to a continuous development of my here and now.

Mr. Kim's sensemaking of the inspected building was accomplished through interactions with other fire inspectors. In the interaction with Mr. Lee, Mr. Kim came to recognize the troubling characteristic of the inspected building. Through interaction with Mr. Yang, he came to know how to manage his encountered problematic situation. The additional interaction with Mr. Yang provided him with an opportunity to develop the implications of his plan of action, *Haengjeong-Jido*. In the end, the safe escape of the

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Table 1
Organizational Sensemaking Activity in Three Stages and Three Contexts

Context	Stage: Noticing	Interpretation	Action
Ecological context	Capturing some problematic portion of the field of experiencing the working situation outside	Making the symbolic reality of the captured portion of the field of experience	Externalizing the symbolic reality made in the mind, and in doing so shaping the contour of the working situation outside
Institutional context	Questioning the preorganized scheme of reference in the mind	Reorganizing the scheme of reference in the mind	Actualizing the reorganized scheme of reference, and in doing so channelizing the subsequent organizing process into either thematic or prethematic mode
Social relational context	Revealing my subjectivity to the mind, which is incompatible with your subjectivity	Establishing my new subjectivity; referring to your subjectivity.	Objectifying my subjectivity, and in doing so making it available to us, involving me and you, as elements of a common world

housewife from the fire was the result of these social interactions of Mr. Kim with his fellow fire inspectors.

Organizational daily life is a dynamic web (Huber & Daft, 1987) of interactions between myself and others. Through such interactions, my relating (here and now) and their relating (here and now) to a commonly encountered situation are incessantly exchanged, by which my new relating (here and now) to the situation is continuously built and rebuilt under the context of imperfectly-shared "our" relating (here and now) to the situation. It is in this sense that social interaction is a crucial mechanism to make it possible for me as an organized actor to engage in a self-conscious mode of meaning construction (sensemaking).

The activity of organizational sensemaking in each stage and each context discussed above is illustrated in Table 1.

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A Conceptual Framework of Organizational Sensemaking

Organizational sensemaking is self-conscious meaning construction by individuals in organizations. From the above discussions of organizational sensemaking, we can derive four theoretical propositions. First, the process of sensemaking is a continual input–output cycle in which the subjective thinking (noticing and interpretation) of situations is objectified via doing (action; Berger & Luckman, 1967; Daft & Weick, 1984; Porac et al., 1989; Thomas et al., 1993). Second, the action aspect of sensemaking is connected to a given situation, and, by virtue of this connection the thinking aspect of sensemaking and the situation are linked together in "a loosely coupled enactment process, in which each is determined partly, but not solely, by the other" (Porac et al., 1989, p. 400). Third, organizational actors learn how they need to make sense of situations before them through their interactions with others and modify or reinforce already established meanings through additional interactions (Berger & Luckman, 1967).

Fourth, the present sensemaking is constrained and empowered by existing institutional practices (mental constructs) in which it is embedded, and, in turn, these institutional practices (mental constructs) are reproduced and transformed in part by the very sensemaking (Barley 1986; Brower & Abolafia, 1996; Giddens, 1979; Scott 1995). Combining these four propositions together, organizational sensemaking can be depicted as in Figure 7.

Conclusion

The work we describe has several implications for sensemaking studies. First, we have clarified what is meant by organizational sensemaking. Sensemaking in organizations is a kind of zigzag process in which actors put out of action (suspend) their experiences in outward situations, map out new experiences, put into action the new experiences, and in doing so interweave themselves within the situations with the new experiences. We give attention in this article to the fact that the experiences which organizational actors suspend from action and again put into action through a conscious mapping procedure are not theoretical but practical encounters with situations outside themselves. Organizational sensemaking is not a process in which individuals abstract themselves from their practical engagements with situations out there, and in doing so idly contemplate (Packer, 1985) these situations as they really are—as though they are disinterested observers.

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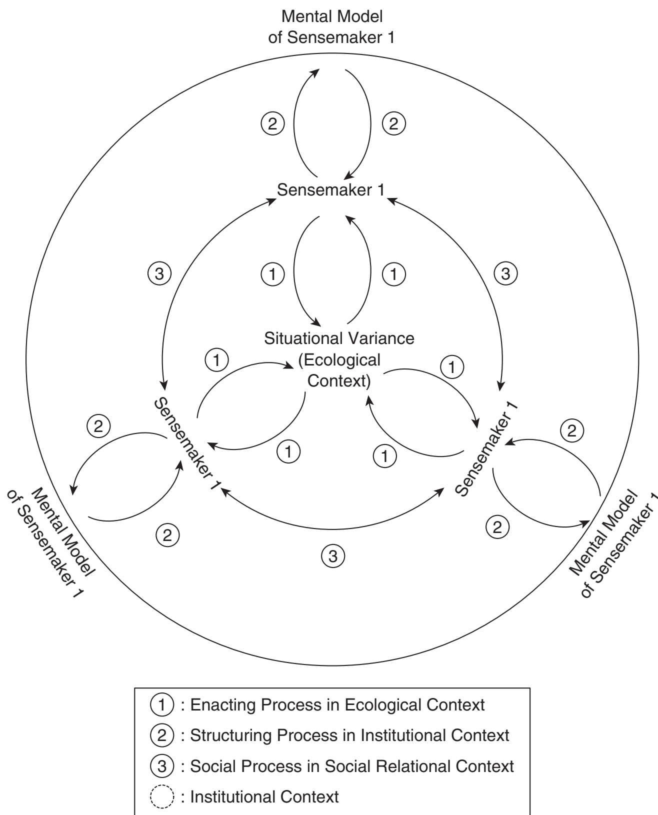
Figure 7
A Conceptual Framework of Organizational Sensemaking



Rather sensemaking in organizations is a process in which actors organize the involvements that they have with these encountered situations at the conscious level, while still remaining in a practical sense within the situation. Focusing on the practical nature of organizational sensemaking, we show how the process is directed by the pragmatic motive (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973).

Second, we have placed the act of sensemaking by organizational actors into its three contexts and explicated how it can be apprehended in these

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contexts. The sensemaking phenomenon in organizations cannot be separated from the contexts in which it emerges and to which its actions are applied. Organizational sensemaking, "looked at in isolation from its contexts, is likely to be ambiguous to the point of opacity and obscurity" (Packer, 1985, p. 1081). As we explain above, sensemaking in organizations is a process in which the participants actively contextualize the working situations (ecological context) that they are forced to handle. With regard to the mental constructs in their minds (institutional context), we characterize organizational sensemaking as a process in which individuals consciously update the conceptual tools that they bring to handle their surroundings. We also show how individuals do their sensemaking in interactions with others (social relational context).

Third, we provided a theoretical framework to stimulate empirical research in the field. "Concept-free observation is (simply) impossible" (Garrison, 1988, p. 21). To state this point in Garrison's terms, "concepts without percepts are empty, but percepts without concepts are blind" (pp. 21-25). In this article we offer a conceptual structure with which to perceive the sensemaking phenomenon in organizations. The provisional conceptual knowledge we have developed here provides a foundation for inquiry into the three interrelated questions we posed in this article's introduction. That is, firstly, how do organizational actors, through the process of conscious meaning construction, enact their problematic situations and adjust their meanings to the enacted situations? Secondly, how do organizational actors consciously draw on existing institutional practices in the constructions of meaning and develop these institutional practices through such meaning constructions? Thirdly, how do organizational actors, through social interactions with others, accomplish the meanings of problematic situations?

Although the study of organizational sensemaking is not limited to specific fields of practice, we suggest the activities of emergency practitioners in real disaster or emergency situations as a particularly promising research field to illustrate these ideas. It is no mere coincidence that some of the most graphic illustrations from Karl Weick, whose work has been instrumental in developing the sensemaking perspective, have involved disasters and emergencies. Notable among these works are his study of the most fatal airline accident in history (Tenerife, in the Canary Islands), and the now infamous 1949 Mann Gulch firefighting incident that caused the deaths of 13 smoke jumpers (Weick 1991, 1993). Any given disaster or emergency typically creates unique courses of events that substantially defy the automatic applications of plans and standard operating procedures. Under the emerging circumstances not covered by old scripts, emergency management activities

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inevitably accompany a great deal of improvised meaning constructions of unstructured situations. Because of the very nature of emergency management, study in this field should provide theoretically and practically informative findings about how organizational actors make sense of the situations in which they find themselves.

Interestingly, when we discuss the sensemaking process with experienced emergency managers, they are not surprised by the basic logic underlying the process. On some level they seem already to know that what they are really doing in emergency situations is a sensemaking, or conscious meaning construction process. We have found that thoughtful practitioners already have this awareness and can readily provide examples of these activities. Given this experience, we find it surprising that their activities have not been the subject of greater attention from scholars interested in the sensemaking phenomenon and that these types of experiences have not had greater influence on the broader body of organizational literature, as Pondy and Mitroff (1979) observed.

We argue, moreover, that the practical application of our contribution begins not with changing the behavior of practitioners but with scholars' efforts to portray accurately the experiences of practitioners. In addition to emergency management numerous other fields of practice whose basic technologies depend on symbolic analysts (Reich, 1991) may be suitable as sites for studying emergent meaning construction processes. But what is evident, we contend, is that knowledge transfer for this body of work needs to move first from practitioners' experiences to the scholarly literature rather than vice versa.

When scholarly literature more accurately reflects the ways that practitioners construct reality within their work settings, we can hope that on a second front, management prescriptions based on simplistic tools might give way to new ones that more closely accommodate an active account of sensemaking behavior. As our field's theoretical understanding of managerial action begins to reflect this awareness, we envision changes in management education so that managers become more comfortable engaging in sensemaking under conditions of uncertainty and ambiguity, that is, in managing the "messes" that are typical of managerial work (Ackoff, 1979). Such developments might include:

- Simplistic management tools receding in influence and replaced by training that portrays situational management dilemmas laced with uncertainty and ambiguity and in which trainees are empowered to improvise on the spot;
- Growing appreciation for models such as the Garbage Can process (Cohen, March, & Olsen, 1972), taught not as a model with no practical

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application, but as a state of affairs that managers can anticipate and identify, and within which they can deliberately negotiate constructive post hoc realities;

- Training that occurs in organizations based on reenacting actual dilemmas that the organization has encountered, presented by the actors who actively constructed the everyday meanings in the actual dilemmas; and,
- Teaching skills and awareness that foster managers' confidence in interpreting others' mental models as well as their own, while also promoting confidence among their colleagues and subordinates in their capacities for team learning (Senge, 1990), that is, in leading and constructing situational realities in which others can share acceptance.

None of the prophecy we offer here is meant to devalue the teaching of tools and heuristics in management education. We do maintain, however, that heuristics which assume an ordered and knowable organizational reality must be balanced with other training, brought to mind by the sensemaking approach and the implication that managers actually construct much of their own reality. These latter materials are unlikely to receive their due until the scholarly literature matches what happens in practice. We reiterate, therefore, that the practical import of our contribution lies first and foremost with scholars' efforts to portray accurately what practitioners do rather than changing what practitioners do.

Notes

1. This story has been excerpted from the first author's ongoing research of sensemaking among fire service personnel in Korea.

2. *Wangang-Gi* is a kind of fire rescue rope manufactured by coating heavy aviation cable with cotton to help reduce friction and maintain durability. The price of a *Wangang-Gi* is the equivalent of approximately $80 to $100 in U.S. currency.

3. *Haengjeong-Moungnnoung* is an administrative measure that carries the weight of law to compel corrective action. Failure to comply with such instructions requires officials to report the violation to prosecutors.

4. Building as object is presented at several places in this section to remain consistent with the subsequent discussion of sensemaking, even though this creates a somewhat awkward narrative.

5. *Haengjeong-Jido* is an administrative measure to recommend, advise, or counsel the person(s) concerned to do or not to do something. Unlike *Haengjeong-Moungnnoung* (administrative instructions), *Haengjeong-Jido* does not carry the legal implication of being able to compel adherence under law. In Korea, however, it has often been recognized as having force and effect comparable to administrative instructions.

6. For a more detailed understanding of this reasoning process, see James (1890/1981), from which this syllogism was borrowed.

7. Strictly speaking, we can say that Mr. Kim's *Haengjeong-Jido* was composed of a series of his projected responses such as sending a letter, paying a visit to the representative,

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and persuading him to equip *Wangang-Gis*, and his ultimate goal that followed from them, that is the assurance of the safety of the residents. His actual flow of action was a realization of the responses and the goal in his mind. By *Haenjeong-Jido*, we give a general name to all of them.

8. By *reorganize* and *reestablish*, we mean various forms of structuring processes. They indicate a series of affirmations, as well as alterations of the existent cognitive framework and one's relationship to the world.

9. When we refer to institution, we mean an internalized mental model (interpretative scheme) of the world outside, which mediates between the world and the response of the individual organism. This use of institution is consistent with the cognitive and normative pillars in Scott's (1995) three pillar characterization of institutions. Through social interactions with others discussed below, *my* institution (mental model) is continuously interchanged with *their* institution (mental model), resulting in an imperfectly-shared *our* institution (mental model). By its nature, accordingly, *my* institution (mental model) inherently implies a sharedness derived from sociality with others.

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