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Karl Weick and the Aesthetics of Contingency

This essay was commissioned as part of a special issue of the journal Organization Studies, *in honor of the work of management scholar Karl Weick. Ever since I first read him in the 1970s, Weick has had enormous influence on both my work and my worldview. Weick sang the praises of equivocality long before it was acceptable to do so, and this paper both celebrates his unique vision and conducts a thorough assessment of the ways in which contingency is an exemplary framework for certain kinds of organizational communication.*

This paper contains my latest thinking about the relationship between organizational communication and sensemaking. Although I take Weick to task some for his unwillingness to take on issues of power and politics, the broader message lies in his implicit theory of identity. Specifically, I wish to extend Weick's work to develop a more robust aesthetics of contingency with the potential to improve human relations across a broad range of institutions. As Weick is a central figure in organizational studies, this essay has the potential to impact a large group of scholars and their conceptions of communication.

The emergence of Western culture has been characterized as a "flight from ambiguity" (Levine, 1985). Expansion of global capitalism is fueled by a reliance on technology and a belief in the possibility of unfettered progress. Taylorism is but one example of Newton's "single vision''—we moderns need little encouragement to dream of discovering the "one best way" to work, love, and live. A massive self-help industry from Dr. Ruth to Dr. Phil offers candidate solutions to life's most vexing problems. Mega-churches dot the American landscape preaching an increasingly fundamentalist message. Many Westerners long for a simpler time where life-paths were clear. What we experience instead is a world of contradiction and confusion, wherein rampant subjectivity and diversity make plural that which was once self-evident and certain, leaving us with a multiplicity of truths, reasons, and realities. Each of the paradigms central to Western civilization is undergoing major transformations today, at the start of the 21st century (Ventura, 1993).

It is against this dynamic backdrop that I take stock of the scholarly contributions of a leading American intellectual, Professor Karl E. Weick. When Weick began writing in the 1960s, most organizational observers were confused and disoriented by the radical changes described above and for the most part persisted with traditional models and concepts. Others acknowledged the new reality of unrelenting change, but did little more than comment upon it. Weick's body of work is unique in that he both identified the fragmented, turbulent, at times counter-rational quality of organizational life and struggled to make sense of it. His legacy is a rich set of concepts and tools for appreciating the turbulent quality of contemporary organizing.

More specifically, I reflect on Weick's work with the aim of illuminating his impact on my chosen sub-field of *Organizational Communication.* Far from being a parochial decision, however, I will show that the sensibility that captured the imagination of the Communication discipline impacted the whole of Organizational Studies. The wide reach of his scholarship is largely the result of his approach to organizations being less a technique than a new way of thinking about communicating and organizing.

This essay is motivated by the following question: In accepting Weick's invitation to think his way, to what exactly have we agreed? In the next section, I describe the historical and intellectual context within which Weick's ideas first emerged, chronicling his attempts to evoke a new kind of order in the wake of the collapse of a facile modernism. Against this historical backdrop, I undertake a closer analysis of Weick's scholarly contributions, focusing specifically on his enduring effect on the field of Organizational Communication.

Organizing After Modernism: A Certain Equivocality

Scholarly reactions to this erosion of certainty in contemporary life have been mixed. The first, more pessimistic view pronounces the death of grand narratives, of God, meaning, authorship and the autonomous self, putting in its place "situation ethics" and deconstruction without end. The second, more optimistic perspective sees the proliferation of meanings as an opportunity for world-building. This latter project has been dubbed the "re-enchantment" of the world (Berman, 1981), and it is also Weick's project, as he aims to celebrate equivocality and a plurality of perspectives while at the same time avoiding moral or intellectual relativism.

A *seeming* contradiction characterizes Weick's work. While his writings are chocked full of potentially destabilizing concepts such as randomness and equivocality, they are presented in the service of elaborated sense-making, increased understanding, or as precursors to improving practices of organizing. Sporting an anarchist's vocabulary, he deploys it both constructively and appreciatively, shedding more light than heat. And as much as Weick's ideas are challenging to the status quo, he remains a card-carrying organizational scientist in pursuit of ever more compelling and reliable explanations.

Much of Weick's appeal is traceable to his keen ability to speculate about the future. He reveals in his work the "charm of the scout," a moniker once applied to Gregory Bateson for his unique ability to challenge the status quo with ideas that were decades ahead of their time (Toulmin, 1983). He appears comfortable in the role of a guide and his talent is in the wandering. His body of work represents a long intellectual bridge between a linear, hierarchical, and avowedly rational world to one that is circular, participative, and unabashedly improvisational.

All told, Karl Weick has made great strides in the struggle to re-enchant the world of organizations, returning to them the mystery that resides at their core (Goodall, 1991). He has done so without ever falling prey to easy answers or fundamentalisms. Rather than seeking to purify human action through the development of a more perfect belief system (cf. Burke, 1969), Weick rejoices in the choppy humanness of action, and in the ways in which belief and action are consistently out of alignment (e.g., when a fire-fighter struggles to choose between dropping his tools and ignoring the advice of his squad leader). In this way, his thinking foreshadows Giddens's (1986) preoccupation with unintended consequences and the limits of practical consciousness; i.e., in practice, we do so many things that we don't fully understand, at least when we are doing them.

For Weick, organizing is improvisation without end, set in a world where our actions have serious consequences but lack solid foundations.

Whether consumed with hospital handoffs, secondary education, or air traffic control, Weick sustains his focus on belief-in-action and on the ongoing interplay between thought and behavior. In this sense, he responds to the hopelessness that can accompany paradigms lost by redoubling his faith in human ingenuity and the endless possibilities of human organizing.

Put another way, Weick's work reveals a wellspring that exists just beyond the concepts at hand, a worldview that transcends human organizing and reflects a strong view of the human spirit. In addition to the many intellectual contributions Weick has made in his career, his legacy will include the advancement of a particular aesthetic, one that construes the world as contingent and multifaceted and conceives of effective communication as heedful interrelating across a diversity of perspectives.

Communicating and Organizing: Tracing Weick's Influence

I begin with an obligatory caveat: Since an exhaustive view of Weick's writing is beyond the scope of this essay, my more modest aim is to identify three historical moments in Weick's work, each characterized by a particularly influential set of ideas. For ease of discussion, these three moments can be associated with his three most popular books, *The Social Psychology of Organizing* (1969/1979), *Sensemaking in Organizations* (1995), and *Managing the Unexpected* (2001, with K. Sutcliffe). Weick's influence on organizational communication centers on sensemaking, the process by which people enact equivocal environments and interact in ways that seek to reduce that equivocality. His first book (1969/1979) lays the groundwork for a theory of sensemaking by introducing the notion of equivocality and affirming the importance of collective action. His second book (1995) presents the theory itself and adds more detail to sensemaking properties and the cognitive processes they reflect. Finally, his most recent volume (2001) applies the sensemaking vocabulary to a specific genre of organizing, and in so doing valorizes the importance of "heedful interrelating" as a model of effective organizational communication.

Equivocality and Interaction

The first edition of *The Social Psychology of Organizing* (1969) was a short book whose influence grew exponentially over time. I was first introduced to it while in graduate school in the 1970s, when a member of my doctoral committee (Vince Farace) declared it to have "more good ideas per page

than anything he had ever read." The impact of this book stems from presenting equivocality reduction as a driving force in social life, identifying social interaction as the substance of organizing, and linking systems thinking to meaning-based models of organizing. Each of these elements is described below.

Prior to Weick, organizational analysts regarded equivocality as inherently problematic and to be either ignored or expunged from organizational life. Weick turned this idea on its head, arguing instead that equivocality is *the* engine that motivates people to organize. In Weick's model, individuals enact environments that vary in their degree of equivocality, which in turn leads everything that "happens" in and around organizations to be subject to multiple (and often competing) interpretations. People communicate in an effort to reduce the number of possible interpretations, and in so doing make coordinated action possible. Notably, these insights pre-date Goffman's (1974) work on the "framing" of social situations. Some representative quotes from the first edition (Weick, 1969):

> [Actors] create and constitute the environment to which they react; the environment is put there by the actors within the organization and by no one else. (p. 28)

> Organizing is concerned with removing equivocality from information and structuring processes so that this removal is possible. (p. 29)

An important consequence of this argument was the centering of communication in the processes of organizing. Weick's work showed communication practitioners a genuine alternative to the transmissional model of human interaction (cf. Putnam, 1983). But however conceptually appealing, it was hard to imagine how to study a phenomenon that was at once shapeless and fleeting. Where was one to look for the "double-interacts" that were purported to characterize organizational communication? Surely not in the research literature at that time. In the 1960s, organizational communication research was dominated by paper and pencil studies of manager and employee attitudes regarding communication. No one looked directly at social interactions.

In the field of communication, the first empirical test of Weick's approach came in the late 1970s (Bantz & Smith, 1977). Bantz and Smith conducted a laboratory experiment to assess the relationship between equivocality and cycles of communication. Non-significant findings caused the researchers to reflect critically on Weick's initial conceptualization. In particular, they noted a conflict between two very different definitions of

process (linear and non-linear) evident in Weick's theory. Bantz and Smith rejected the linear version of equivocality reduction represented in Weick's specified model and argued instead for a gestalt explanation for the way organizing resembles sociocultural evolution.

A few years later, Kreps (1980) studied the relationship between the equivocality of motions made in a university Faculty Senate and the cycles of interaction that ensued, and concluded that more equivocal messages *did* in fact lead to greater numbers of cycles. Adding support to this conclusion was an experimental study conducted by Putnam and Sorenson (1982). Using students as subjects, they created zero-history simulated organizations and exposed them to messages that varied in ambiguity. Participants used more assembly rules and involved more people in processing ambiguous messages than they did with those that were relatively clear. A unique finding of this study was that how participants responded to ambiguity varied by their job level in the simulated organization. Lower level "employees" responded to ambiguity by generating multiple interpretations, while "managers" moved more directly to action as means of reducing equivocality. The authors observe that conflict may ensue in organizations when different employee groups use differing strategies for sensemaking.

All three of these studies demonstrated the considerable challenges associated with operationalizing Weick's model. Despite some positive empirical results, Bantz and Smith's first insight seems on the right track. Weick's formulation works best as a theory of dynamic systems, one that is difficult to test through simplified linear representations or the relatively primitive methodological approaches popular at the time (i.e., cross-sectional data collection, general linear model of analysis).

Recently, organizational communication scholars have picked up Weick's model yet again, this time with the aim of modifying it to reflect changes both in academic sensibilities and contemporary organizations. Weick's initial formulation was developed in the 1960s to describe organizations and environments, both of which were stable in ways that now seem quaint (for example, airline corporations and the banking industry were examples of stable industries that occupied placid environments at that time). Seen in this light, the notion of requisite variety seems chimerical—how can organizations today develop internal processes that match the complexity of external forces? Taylor and Van Every (1999) conclude that there is a profound ambiguity that characterizes Weick's early thinking, traceable to his work at the intersection of two very different vocabularies and sensibilities: systems and cultures.

And there is the rub. In combining the two great tropes of the 20th century—system and culture—Weick entertains strange bedfellows.

Whereas systems thinking holds out hope for the precise mapping and managing of complexity, cultural approaches are less focused on outcomes and more on understanding and appreciating the meanings people ascribe to collective behavior, and how these meanings help constitute communities and societies. Some clear overlaps exist, namely, contemporary cultural and systems approaches to organizational communication share an interest in developing holistic understandings of the dynamics of organizing. However, important differences distinguish the two arenas, both in the aims of people doing this work and the aesthetics that underlie it. Weick incorporates elements of both vocabularies, but remains unreconciled to either. This duality is visible in contrasting the 1969 definition of organizing with his 1979 definition in the 2nd edition:

> Organizing consists of the resolving of equivocality in an enacted environment by means of interlocked behaviors embedded in conditionally related processes. (Weick, 1969, p. 91)

> Organizations keep people busy, occasionally entertain them, give them a variety of experiences, keep them off the streets, provide pre-texts for story telling, and allow socializing. They haven't anything else to give. (Weick, 1979, p. 264)

In this latter quote—which concludes the 2nd edition of *The Social Psychology of Organizing*—Weick foreshadows the next turn in his career, one that would focus much less on the structure of interaction and more on the sense people make of these exchanges.

Fueling the "Interpretive Turn"

In Weick's universe, enactment is the starting point for organizing. Drawing on research that documents the selectivity of human perception, Weick makes an unconscious human activity both conscious and discussable. He insists that the first step in understanding how social reality is constructed and reproduced is grasping the nature of *attention*, of identifying which elements in one's surroundings are most worthy of focus.

Weick's discussion of enactment in his first book was eventually developed into a comprehensive theory of sensemaking (Weick, 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005). The roots of this thinking can be traced to Wittgenstein (1972), Heidegger (1962), and Langer (1968), each of whom underscore the centrality of language in human existence. Decades later,

Gergen (1985) famously summarized the constitutive view of communica-
tion with the statement "knowledge is something we do together." Weick's
theory of sensemaking is in many ways a logical extension of this world-
view. It stems from his treatment of language less as a tool for sharing infor-
mation and more as a resource for creating reality.

The first half of *Sensemaking in Organizations* (1995) preserves Weick's
earlier emphasis on cycles of interaction aimed at reducing equivocality.
Furthermore, he insists that the reader acknowledge that sensemaking is
mainly about *enactment*:

> Sensemaking is about authoring as well as interpretation, creation as well as
> discovery. (p. 8)

> Problems do not present themselves to the practitioners as givens. They must
> be constructed from the material of problematic situations which are puzzling,
> troubling, and uncertain. (p. 9)

> Sensemaking is about the ways people generate what they interpret. (p. 13)

The interpretive turn in the social sciences (Rabinow & Sullivan, 1979)
surfaced in organizational communication in the early 1980s, first
appearing in a series of conference papers presented in Alta, Utah that
were eventually published as a book (Putnam & Pacanowsky, 1983).
Weick was aware of these conversations, knew about the growing inter-
est within organizational communication, and even attended some of
these meetings (cf. Weick, 1983). Consequently, research on sensemaking
in organizations both proceeds and follows the publication of his 1995
book, which was a summation of Weick's research program at the time.
Weick's theories and concepts have been applied to a wide range of orga-
nizational phenomena (e.g., negotiation, public relations) with the intent
of revealing how communication is constitutive of organizational culture.
A special issue of *Communication Studies* that appeared around this time
(1989) provides a number of examples of this trend. Weick's theory and
concepts permeated much of the published writing in organizational
communication in the 80s and 90s.

More recent communication research that uses Weick's theory of sense-
making includes studies of university search processes (Eisenberg, Murphy, &
Andrews, 1998); nomadic work (Bean & Eisenberg, 2006); sexual harassment
(Dougherty & Smythe, 2004); and environmental destruction from flooding
(Sellnow, Seeger, & Ulmer, 2002). Within organizational studies, promising
applications of sensemaking appear in studies on institutionalization

(Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001), organizational change (Mills, 2003) and emotion at work (Magala, 1997). In each case, researchers select key concepts from the sensemaking model and use them to generate new insights about how organizations enact problematic situations and how communication addresses them.

More recently, Weick and his colleagues (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005) highlight the implications of the sensemaking concept for organizational communication. Relying heavily on the Taylor and Van Every (1999) book, Weick maintains that communication is central to sensemaking, and supports this claim with a quote from their text:

> We see communication as an ongoing process of making sense of the circumstances in which people collectively find themselves and of the events that affect them. The sensemaking, to the extent that it involves communication, takes place in interactive talk and draws on the resources of language. . . . As this occurs, a situation is talked into existence and the basis is laid for action to deal with it. (Taylor & Van Every, 2000, p. 58)

Even though the core notions in the theory of sensemaking fit with Weick's earlier model of equivocality (now called the "enactment model"), Weick provides some important updates. In the 1995 volume, Weick sharpens the distinction between decision making and sensemaking by revealing that the former prompts us to blame bad actors who make bad choices while the latter focuses instead on good people struggling to make sense of a complex situation. This systemic sensibility with regard to error and accountability foreshadows his later work on high reliability organizations. In addition, he places more emphasis on the pivotal role of plausibility over accuracy by highlighting the improvisational quality of organizational behavior.

A second area of emphasis that emerges in the theory of sensemaking is the connection between sensemaking and individual/organizational identity. Struggles over meaning invariably have implications for identity, that is, particular explanations and courses of action evoke certain images of the organization while eroding others. It is no accident that Weick lists *identity* as the first property of sensemaking. He references Dutton and Dukerich's (1991) study of the New York Port Authority as an example of how positive and negative perceptions of organizational identity affect members' interpretations of "who they were, what they felt, what they faced, and what they were doing" (Weick, 1995, p. 21). Furthermore, he contends that sensemaking is "triggered by a failure to confirm one's self" and that "people learn about their identities by projecting them into an environment and observing the consequences" (p. 23). In this way, the development of

identity and its link to communication surface in one's attachment to explanatory narratives of self in organizing (Eisenberg, 2001).

True to his politically neutral stance, Weick has written copiously on the subject of enactment but makes scant reference to questions of hegemony or agenda control (Gramsci & Buttgieg, 1991). One notable exception is his discussion of premise controls (Perrow, 1986), which he characterizes as vocabularies of organizing that may constrain thought and action. The enactment idea, however, provides explanatory power for understanding the motivations behind human behavior, and it can account for why certain voices are or are not heard within and outside the organization (see Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005, for an update). The demise of Enron, for example, could be traced to one CEO's ability to enact a world within which illegal and unethical practices "made sense," and where alternate definitions of reality were at best not tolerated and at worst actively punished.

Other historical echoes reverberate but never quite penetrate Weick's conceptual universe. For example, parallels exist between Weick's work and the Soviet school of literary criticism and philosophy, as represented by Vygotksy (1980) and Bakhtin (1983). One senses Vygotsky's "social theory of mind" and his contention that meaning is "always rented, never owned" in Weick's discussion of retrospective sensemaking. Weick's favorite description of how cognition works in practice is the recipe "How can I know what I think until I see what I say?" But Bakhtin might have asked: "Does this question go far enough?" Inasmuch as what we say makes sense only *in relationship to others* (there is, after all, no private language [Wittgenstein, 1972] or monologic imagination), the saying, seeing, and thinking in this sentence are *already social* and, to use Bakhtin's term, fundamentally and forever dialogic. The last section of this essay shows how this dialogic sensibility is now appearing in Weick's recent work on high reliability organizations.

Finally, one potentially fruitful line of argument that first appears in the sensemaking book casts interruptions as emotional triggers for sensemaking. Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld (2005) concur with Magala (2003) that research to date only scratches the surface of what might become a full-blown theory of organizational *sentiments* in sensemaking. The contention that disruptions to expectations or routines could trigger strong emotions and the need for sensemaking is both compelling and provocative.

In their study of sexual harassment in an academic setting, Dougherty and Smythe (2004) describe the offending incident as unexpected and emotionally jarring, serving as a trigger for retrospective sensemaking. They use Weick's seven properties of sensemaking to explain the harassment incident and its aftermath. In a related vein, Sellnow, Seeger, and Ulmer (2002) build upon

Weick's characterization of the Mann Gulch fire as a nomic rupture, a collapse of sensemaking "when people suddenly and deeply feel that the universe was no longer a rational, orderly system" (Weick, 1993, p. 634). They use this example to illuminate the sensemaking that followed the 1997 Red River Valley floods in Manitoba, Canada, thus, linking this ineffective institutional response to an emotional bias for seeing novel and threatening occurrences in a routine way. They conclude by advocating that organizational actors recognize these challenging emotions and embrace equivocality as both more ethical and more effective than a false certainty (Sellnow, Seeger, & Ulmer, 2002).

But even this treatment of emotion is still somewhat mentalistic and bloodless. It misses a complete consideration of emotions from the neck down, one that incorporates the whole body and in particular the senses other than the thinking. Scholars could argue, for example, that the theory of sensemaking fits with the work on organizing as joint performances (e.g., Murphy, 1998). Specifically, it is exciting to imagine the hybrid understandings that might occur from the marriage of Weick's ideas and the performance ethnography of Conquergood (1991) or the autoethnography of Goodall (1989), both of whom have taken great pains to document the sounds, touch, smells and feel of organizational life.

Dialogue and Heedful Interrelating

In effect, Weick's three most influential books serve less as separate scores and more as movements within a larger symphony. While written for a practically-minded audience of intellectually curious executives, *Managing the Unexpected* continues with many of the major motifs that appeared in Weick's earlier work. In describing how high reliability organizations (such as nuclear power plants and hospital emergency departments) work, Weick and Sutcliffe (2001) feature the concept of mindfulness, defined as

the combination of ongoing scrutiny of existing expectations, continuous refinement and differentiation of expectations based on newer experiences, willingness and capability to invent new expectations that make sense of unprecedented events, a more nuanced appreciation of context and ways to deal with it, and identification of new dimensions of context that improve foresight and current functioning. . . . Mindfulness exploits the fact that two key points of leverage in managing the unexpected are expectations and categories. People who persistently rework their categories and refine them, differentiate them, update them, and replace them notice more and catch unexpected events earlier in their development. That is the essence of mindfulness. (p. 42, p. 46)

This concept is in essence a new way of talking about enactment. What carries through from Weick's earlier work is the idea that communication creates social reality through the "reworking of categories." For the organizational communication researcher, there is much at stake in persuading practitioners to appreciate this premise. If on the one hand language and communication are simply tools for sharing information, organizational communication offers little more than the development of effective communication skills. On the other, if language and communication function as the ways in which people call reality into being through their choice of categories, then organizational communication has great significance for work on organizational strategy, alignment, and change.

A second theme present in the 1969 book that has gained currency in 2001 is the need to acknowledge and learn to cope with complexity. Describing how to do this is the central contribution of *Managing the Unexpected*. Three ideas with direct implications for communication receive close attention in this book: (1) a preoccupation with failure; (2) loosening of hierarchical control; and (3) encouraging heedful interrelating. I discuss each in turn.

In arguing for the value of a preoccupation with failure, Weick and Sutcliffe (2001) underscore the dramatic difference between high reliability organizations and their less risky counterparts. In most organizations, success breeds routine, which leads to confidence and complacency. It takes great effort to challenge the human tendency to seek out confirming information and ignore failures. In practice, it requires a radical change in what typically passes for organizational communication, even among leaders. Sustained conversations about failure are difficult because they are mined with threats to identity. In Western cultures at least, talk of systems failures is still closely shadowed by hushed talk of incompetence and blame.

But Weick and Sutcliffe (2001) maintain that high reliability organizations do not conceive of failure in terms of blame. They recognize the tendency to scapegoat and suggest how institutions can make it normative to speak openly about failures and near misses as a way of developing a deeper understanding of and coping with complexity. One obvious example of this idea is medical error, in which open communication about missteps is essential to avoid them in the future (Eisenberg et al., 2005; Leape, 2004). But by far the most comprehensive example of the challenges associated with remaining vigilant to potential failures is Tompkins's (2005) career-long study of NASA's space shuttle program, in which he suggests that the loss of a culture of open communication (and the mechanisms to support it) was a significant contributor to multiple disasters and the steady decline of the space program.

A second theme of this book is the need for loosening hierarchical control. Even though this sensibility appears in Weick's earlier work, it

is not clearly articulated. To cope with complexity, an organization must be mindful; that is, all its members must take responsibility for both remaining vigilant and doing something when they sense a deviation from expectations (Tompkins [2005] refers to this idea as "automatic responsibility" in the old NASA culture). This desirable cultural characteristic is also described as "coordinate leadership" (Westrum, 1997) in which the leadership role shifts "to the person who currently has the answer to the problem at hand" (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001, p. 75). Executives in high reliability firms seek to develop a climate in which expertise is respected and communication is encouraged, irrespective of a member's status. Drawing from generations of research on empowerment, effective organizational communication, and high-involvement organizations, Weick and Sutcliffe (2001) encourage executives to "Work to create a climate where people feel safe to question assumptions and to report problems or failures candidly" (p. 66).

In a recent paper, Browning and Boudes (2005) compare Weick's approach with Snowden's (2000) work at the Cynefin Centre for Organizational Complexity. An important common characteristic of both approaches is an emphasis on self-organization, that is, on creating systems of control that are loose enough to permit significant involvement and improvisation by all employees. They conclude that both Snowden and Weick's models:

> direct us toward developing enough trust that we can empower people to participate in local complex conditions, including the right to respond instantly. If complex change can begin with small, local forces, then having the ears and eyes of observers acting on these forces follows as a strategy. (Browning & Bourdes, 2005, p. 38)

Loosened hierarchical control makes more room for employee improvisation. Notions of improvisation run throughout Weick's (Weick, Gilfillan, & Keith, 1973) work on jazz orchestras, in which he provides a subtle and detailed account of the interplay between structure and improvisation in musical performances. This work has influenced a number of communication scholars to look further at how a musical performance can serve as a metaphor for organizing (e.g., Barrett, 1998; Bastien & Hostager, 1992; Hatch, 1999). My essay on jamming (see Chapter 5, this volume) follows in these footsteps in adopting this metaphor to explain coordinated action (Eisenberg, 1990). This work promises to provide alternative vocabularies for conceiving of new organizing structures, processes and forms.

Finally, *Managing the Unexpected* introduces "heedful interrelating" as a goal for effective communication in complex environments. Weick and

Sutcliffe (2001) wade carefully into these waters, seeming to acknowledge how challenging this mode of interaction can be. They urge practitioners to become mindful of negative information in their environments and to carry the whole of their knowledge and experiences lightly, remaining open to surprise. Reprising one of his earliest insights, Weick concludes by reminding the reader that "ambivalence builds resilience" (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001, p. 167).

Stated even more positively, Weick maintains that the key to successful organizing—particularly in high reliability organizations—is to create a culture of *resilience*. Such a culture is one in which the boundaries between functions and levels are permeable; where employees are unafraid to speak up, even when they are less than certain; and where members develop the systemic awareness that promotes heedful interrelating and catches the precursors of adverse events before they cascade out of control. To succeed in this task, individuals must hold on loosely to their beliefs and remain open to hearing disparate perspectives from others. In this kind of world, people must not only be less certain, but also less certain about the value of certainty (Phillips, 1994).

Weick and Sutcliffe (2001) make a few suggestions concerning the importance of "skill in interpersonal relations" (p. 163), but in this realm, they seem out of their element. Luckily, organizational communication scholars have conducted considerable work on the pragmatics of organizational dialogue, which is a close cousin to the sort of open communication that Weick links to mindfulness and heedful interrelating (cf. Eisenberg & Goodall, 2005). At the close of Weick and Sutcliffe's book (2001), the reader experiences a clear tension between two powerful movements, one focusing on cognition and the other on practice. Weick and Sutcliffe invoke notions of organizational culture to bridge this gap, and while they are successful in part, I would prefer a more dramatic embracing of distributed cognition in action. Needless to say, organizational scholars should examine the pragmatics of heedful interrelating closely, especially for what mindfulness or resilience looks like in practice.

Conclusion

Throughout his career, Weick has been a proponent of appreciative inquiry. His critical take on overly rationalized, prospective thinking is softened by his passionate commitment to cultivating flexibility, openness, and a diversity of thought. Weick embodies the spirit of dialogue, in that he holds out

hope for the in-between and for the possibilities that can emerge against a backdrop of certain equivocality. He further recognizes, as does noted child psychologist Adam Phillips, that there "is no cure for multiple plots" (Phillips, 1994, p. 75), nor should there be.

This essay makes connections between the major works of Karl Weick and our unique historical moment. I began by suggesting that Weick's original juxtaposition of system and culture was an apt tonic for post-modern society, inasmuch as it was both framed as scientific but at the same time offered new possibilities for the re-enchantment of the world. In Weick, readers found a contrary voice willing to question some of the more deeply held assumptions about social life.

While Weick's work is radical in an intellectual sense, he has not participated in the groundswell of critical scholarship in organizational studies and has managed to stay resolutely apolitical in his research and writings. Weick might see this stance as a kind of politics, not focused on models of economic power but deeply critical of accepted models of rationality and decision-making. This stance has worked for him as he has made a comfortable home for himself on the inner border of the margins of organizational science.

In this essay, I have reviewed Weick's three most influential books with a goal of identifying how they have influenced my sub-field of organizational communication. What I find is that the core ideas have not changed much over three decades, but have built upon each other. The enactment model that is introduced in his first book re-appears in the second, this time with greater emphasis on the plausibility of explanations and the impact of particular sensemaking outcomes on individual and organizational identities. The third book recasts the enactment and sensemaking models in term of mindfulness and heedful interrelating, with an explicit effort to produce actionable guidelines for interested practitioners.

From the standpoint of organizational communication, Weick's most valuable contributions have been his insistence on the centrality of language and communication in the construction of organizational reality, and his sustained focus on communicative practice as a site for improving our understanding of cognition, culture, and social interaction. In the 1960s, the field of communication was mired in psychological views of interaction, and Weick's approach pointed the way to a different path.

A further Weickian contribution to organizational communication study comes less from his models and more from his metaphors, which consistently evoke an aesthetic of contingency. Like Lifton's idea of the "protean self" (1993), Weick's notions of equivocality and contingency in social life shine a beacon of real hope for humanity at a time when greater numbers of

people seek to allay their fears of uncertainty through the pursuit of various fundamentalisms.

My extreme gratitude for Weick's unique perspective, however, does not stop me from wishing that he would go even further. I encourage Weick and those who make use of his work to take the next steps and consider the pos- sibility of enacting a world without grounding, one lacking in foundations altogether (Eisenberg, 2001). Such a world requires heedful interrelating, to be sure, and compassion toward one's own and others' futile attempts to grasp for new absolutes. In their masterful essay that links Buddhism to cognitive science, Varela et al. (1997) state this case most elegantly:

> our historical situation requires not only that we give up philosophical foundationalism but that we learn to live in a world without founda- tions . . . to lay down a path of thinking and practice that gives up founda- tions without transforming them into a search for new foundations. . . . the solution for the sense of nihilistic alienation in our culture is not to try to find a new ground; it is to find a disciplined and genuine means to pursue groundlessness. (p. 252)

I find in the work of Karl Weick the building blocks for the pursuit of groundlessness, for understanding human organizing as "laying down a path in walking" (Varela et al., 1997, p. 237). To the extent that this worldview takes hold, Professor Weick may turn out to be the most radical scholar of them all.

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