Evaluation of the Social Psychology of Organizing

By Management Theorist Karl Weick

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Summary of Weick’s Ideas and Contributions to Social Psychology

Perhaps one of the best known frameworks in Social Psychology was developed by organizational theorist Karl Weick for the study of organizing he included in his book *The Social Psychology of Organizing* (abbreviated as *Organizing*). Weick defines organization by processes of organizing and goes on to develop his own model called The Organizing Model. *Organizing* discusses the problems of organization theory. While Weick determines that psychological and biological frameworks are needed to describe the processes of organizing, which include observable behavior as opposed to organizational behavior.

**Weick’s Definition and Processes of Organizing**

Weick defines *organizing* as “organizing consists of resolving equivocality in an enacted environment by means of interlocked behavior embedded in conditionally related processes” (Kassem, 1970, p. 633). Weick believes organizing among humans involve these two choices; what to select and how to act (Kassem). Weick’s three main processes of organizing are enactment, selection, and retention (Kassem). Enactment, that of which, meaning that within an event certain features are identified and acted upon (Wicker, 1980). This innovative stage corresponds to variation (Czarniawska, 2005). Selection involves a decision-making process from the results of the actions (Wicker). Retention is where the chosen selections of actions are stored; therefore, it is a storage process (Wicker). Each process contains two elements: interlocked behaviors with others and assembly rules (Kassem). All three processes are interrelated and form a system; those interrelationships are called the controls of the system (Kassem). The processes are presumed to be of “mutual causation, and determine the fate of the
system: order or chaos” (Kassem, 1970, p.633). Organizing of processes to remove equivocality is done “to establish a workable level of certainty and order” (Kassem, 1970, p. 634).

**Weick’s View of Sense-Making**

The sense-making approach to organizing by Weick is based on his adaptations of evolutionary theory and its effects on social behavior (Wicker). Weick believes that sense-making in organizations can be retrospective; because of its concern that it is attached to past actions (Wicker).

“Sensemaking involves the ongoing retrospective development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing” (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005, p. 409). Sense-making is a part of human behavior that allows people to organize and pinpoint features for change that materialize into action (Weick et. al.).

Weick explored seven properties of organizational sense-making which include: “identity, retrospect, enactment, social contact, ongoing events, cues, and plausibility” (Czarniawska, 2005, p.271). After exploring these properties, Weick concluded what is necessary in sense-making such as the existence of memorable experiences that resonate with people and captures thought as well as feeling; something fun to contrast, which will make a good story (Czarniawska).

As asserted by Weick, “ambivalence, disorder and diversity are better strategies for organizational survival than clarity of purpose, order and uniformity” (Wicker, 1980, p. 716). Weick believes that the preservation of flexibility and ambivalence are achieved in retention which affects selection and enactment (Wicker). Weick’s ideal managers concern themselves invariably more with organizational processes than the outcomes; as their interpretations are that of circular as opposed to linear in nature (Wicker). For example, communication and morale are
recognized for their interdependencies instead of having a casual reliance on each other (Wicker). According to Weick, managers oppose military style leadership and understand that organizational activities require self-regulation (Wicker). Managers as well as laypersons can benefit from Weick’s approach. Laypeople can learn that limitations in their lives may be non-existent. Therefore, instead of inaction they can remove barriers that cause unnecessary constraints. As stated on the matter by Weick, “chaotic action is preferable to disorderly inaction” (Wicker, 1980, p. 718). In simplistic terms, organizing is used to make sense out of the world and within the environment we live through planning, decision-making, and execution through action.

Action-driven sense-making has two forms which are manipulating the world and creating commitment (Czarniawska, 2005). Weick feels that universities are organized anarchies that are driven by routines and standard operating procedures (Czarniawska).

“Sensemaking, in Weick’s view, can be driven by beliefs or by actions. Beliefs shape what people see, and give form to the actions they take” (Czarniawska, 2005, p. 272).

**Assessment of the Relevance of Weick’s Organizational Theory in Distance Education**

According to Czarniawska, Weick’s organizational theory combined “sophisticated use of systems with insight from the world of music and literature, which steadily acquired a growing circle of followers” (Czarniawska, 2005, p. 268). Weick has had “a central role in shaping the discipline of organization theory in the 1980s and 1990s” (Czarniawska, 2005, p. 274). Though his work may not be called mainstream his influence was not exerted from the discipline of organization theory (Czarniawska). In addition, Weick coined terms and concepts that are used widely throughout organization theory (Czarniawska). The notion of enactment has
been highly used in studies on reliability (high risk) organizations and helped develop the theory of crisis management (Czarniawska). Weick also coined the concept of mindful management in the context of organizing onboard of aircraft carriers in being aware of its own limitations and expectations and the need for ongoing corrections (Czarniawska). Therefore, Weick’s theory on organizing can be used to help organizations such as Distance Education institutions learn how to facilitate changes based on reviews of their processes and performance in such a way that allows growth from pinpointing limitations and getting their goals aligned with their needs. This self-guided approach has advanced our understanding of leadership because it can help organizations develop sense-making within their working environments.

A citation analysis of Weick’s work “shows the magnitude of this influence compared to five other organization studies classics, and reveals that Organizing continues to be highly cited” (Anderson, 2006, p. 1675). Furthermore, that there are a miniscule amount of citations that are critical of Organizing, including those that involve empirical data and due to this it is perceived that Weick’s work will continue to be cited in future research (Anderson).

Czarniawska (2005) stated: Karl Weick’s influence on both form and context of present theorizing in organization studies is profound.

He turned the attention of organization scholars from structures to processes from the relevance of academia to the relevance of the field from mystification to imaginative interpretation. (p. 274).

Accolades

According to Kassem, “this book provides a fresh analytical model for learning about organizations” (Kassem, 1970, p. 633). Four positive points on Weick’s work as stated by Kassem include: First, perceived as an innovative framework for organizational analysis.
Second, the objective to facilitate learning rather than instructing has been largely accomplished. Third, being an intriguing attack on previous management concepts such as in the belief that goals precede action and that planning prior to action is wasteful. Lastly, that “the book is logical in structure and informative in title” (Kassem, 1970, p.234).

According to Czarniawska, Weick’s understanding and use of biological concepts is what made his theory in organization successful (Czarniawska).

Wicker asserts that Weick’s *Organizing* has made an evocative “theory with definite generative qualities” (Wicker, 1980, p. 714). In addition, that the book should be celebrated as it introduces ideas that can extend and revise research in other social sciences (Wicker). He also stated that the book would be appropriate for numerous audiences including college students (Wicker). According to Wicker, *Organizing* denies conventional thinking of managers and asserts that the use of Weicks’ theory applications could increase flexibility in institutions. In addition, Wicker noted that the model illustrates the potential value that comes with analyzing fundamental processes that form social structures.

**Criticisms**

According to Kassem, “the practical value of Weick’s model is rather limited” (1970, p. 635). In addition, Kassem also pointed out that he thought the book lacked guidelines for administrative action and organizational design for managers to adhere and follow (Kassem). Kassem also noted that not only does the book seem to be written exclusively for academics but also the intended audience such as beginner students may be lost in translation having to read through all the psychological terminology (Kassem). After a review of Weick’s work, Wicker
stated that his approach was “developmental and somewhat reductionistic” (Wicker, 1980, p. 715).

**Summary**

After reading through many scholarly, peer-reviewed articles on Karl Weick, it is evident to say that his framework on organization has contributed to the science of Social Psychology. Weick’s assertions on organizing consisting of the three processes of enactment, selection and retention have been viewed with much acclaim and criticism. Though he is opposed to conventional wisdom on organizational management, through his work additional concepts have been developed in the field of organization such as mindful and crisis management. According to Weick, the sense-making approach to organizing is needed to allow organizations the opportunity to learn self-regulation and pinpoint any limitation or barriers within itself; therefore, action can be put forth to bring change. According to several scholars, notably Czarniawska, Karl Weick has helped shape the discipline of organization theory and his influence is still prevalent today as he is cited in numerous scholarly works that indicate his presence is all but inevitable in future research.
References


