

Being Sensable about Sensation: Introduction to the Special Issue

ALBERT J. MILLS*, JEAN HELMS MILLS†

One of the unique facets of the *Standing Conference on Organizational Symbolism* (SCOS) is its conference theme, designed, as it is, to encourage participants to think about organizations and organizing in very different ways. A classic example was the ‘empty space’ theme of the 1997 Warsaw conference, which challenged participants to rethink the boundaries and very concept of organizational life. Other years have focused on violence (Dublin, 2001), speed (Budapest, 2002), and excess (Stockholm, 2005).

In 2004 Halifax, on Canada’s eastern seaboard of Nova Scotia, was the site of the annual SCOS conference, and the initial theme was ‘Sense and Sensibility.’ Apart from the obvious literary allusion, the juxtapositioning of the two words was designed to illicit papers focused on anything from the various ways that people make sense of, and in, organizations, through appreciations and responses ‘to complex emotional or aesthetic influences,’ to the way that people develop sensitivities ‘that make them readily offended or shocked’ (Oxford American Dictionaries, 1.0.1) by aspects of organizational life.

However, as with all sensemaking devices, the Halifax theme generated different understandings among those involved—in this case, the members of the SCOS Board. One of the expressed concerns was that the theme might be narrowly translated as a call for papers focused around Weick’s (1995, 2001) notion of organizational sensemaking, and, as a result, might not generate enough, or a sufficient range of, papers to encourage creative readings. In Weickian terms, growing interest in his work may have provided saturated cues in on-going organizational debates to trigger a narrower reading of any theme that linked sense and organization.

In the ensuing debates among SCOS Board members a new theme—‘Sensation and Organization’—emerged that had the beauty of retaining the previous focus on sensemaking, albeit in a more subdued fashion, while highlighting the apparently narrower yet more ambiguous notion of sensation. On the one hand, sensation can be defined as a noun that describes ‘a physical feeling or perception resulting from something that happens to or comes into contact with the body [or] the capacity to have such feelings or perceptions’ (Oxford American Dictionaries, 1.0.1). Yet on the other hand, it might be seen as ‘a widespread reaction of interest and excitement [or] a person, object, or event that arouses such interest and excitement’ (Oxford American Dictionaries, 1.0.1).

Reflecting the reconstructed theme, the call for papers was focused on ‘*the senses which [organizational] symbols arouse, and the sense we make of them.*’¹ Fleshing out an understanding of the theme, the call went on to argue that in

a world which seems to have an endless appetite for sensation and the sensational, some of us constantly push the *extreme* in sport, entertainment or experience—bored with reality, we may seek our thrills in the *virtual* or

*Email: Albert.mills@SMU.CA

†Email: jean.mills@smu.ca

attempt to extend our physical and sensory capabilities through technological or other prostheses. A good part of the world's information, communication and entertainment industry is geared to titillating our thirst for the latest fad or fashion; the new sensation; the latest exposure; the latest or longest hidden secret; the most romantic myth; the greatest risk; the peek into the forbidden or the unknown, or, like Big Brother, the processes of the mundane, all on a mass scale. The Disney Corporation has long known how to stimulate or simulate feeling or emotion in its audiences; our appetite for dreams and illusion seems to have no bounds. Indeed the world could be viewed as one big spectacle in which we are all performers—and where the deceivers and tricksters are never what they seem. Even the domestic is now the subject of fame: celebrity chefs in unprecedented numbers offer epicurean tools and techniques to constantly re-animate jaded palates. Has our accelerated sense of the extreme, of excess, luxury, pleasure and desire easily gratified rendered our senses *numb* in the face of ordinary experience? Do we have to re-organize our lives in order to get anything out of them?

Or is the challenge to recognize the extremes of crisis, catastrophe and disaster with which we still rub shoulders and the degree of *sensory deprivation* which much of the world still experiences—pain, famine, torture, disease, violence or simply the lack of human company. How do we *make sense* of the *non-sense* of the world, and do we need to? Are our *sensibilities* appropriate for the job they have to do? How do we seek to organize the world *rationally* to deal with our *sense* of it? How do governments, organizations and institutions seek to control and manipulate our sense of the world, and our sense of *identity*? Although we are exposed to surveillance in myriad ways every day, are there any sensational exposures left that have not already been exposed? Is, as Niklas Luhmann implied, secrecy the unspoken condition for social organization?²

The call for papers ended with a plea for contributions that 'seek to explore all aspects of the ideas of *sensation and sense* in connection with organization and organizations.'³ Exemplars of such contributions included 'Sense and sensibility' and 'Spectacle, Kitsch, Melodrama'—a kind of Bakhtin meets Weick fest!

EXPERIENCES OF SELF AND NARRATIVES OF IDENTITY

Over 130 contributors submitted around one hundred papers to the Halifax conference that forms the basis of this special issue. By far the biggest concern across the various contributions was identity work and, within that framework, gender and gendering took centre stage. Although relatively small in number the physical senses and the sensation of experience featured in a number of papers, and included research on smell, touch, vision, spatial/geometric influences, and virtual reality. Finally, not unexpectedly, there were a large number of papers that dealt with sensemaking, including research on the processes of sensemaking and the influences on the organization and flow of sensemaking by way of narrative and discourse.

Among the major influences or inspirations for the various papers we find a fair sprinkling of postmodernists—Foucault, Baudrillard, Deleuze, Derrida; feminists—Weedon, Kristeva, Braidotti, Butler; and critical theorists—Giddens, Alvesson and Willmott; as well as classic social constructionists—Goffman, Berger and Luckmann, Gergen, Burke; psychoanalysts—Jung, Fromm, Hermans; and the sensemaking research of Weick, and Gioia and Mehra.

Sensemaking and Organizational Analysis

In grappling with the problem of sense, sensemaking and organizational analysis several conference papers focused on issues of gender and gender construction. Michèle Bowring (2004), for example, explored 'the effects of both fractured and integrated performances of gender,' viewing *sense* as primarily about identity construction and *sensibility* as identity performance. In a study of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered persons at work, Bowring argues that there are negative identity outcomes for those where sense and sensibility are in conflict (i.e. where they hide their sexual orientation at work). In a similar vein, Creed (2004), drawing on Gioia and Mehra (1996), uses sensemaking to examine how gay and lesbian ministers (across Protestant denominations) 'employ sensemaking to determine

when, how, and with whom to disclose their sexual identities.’ He demonstrates that the gay and lesbian ministers in his study use sensemaking strategies that balance ‘a vision for the future, rooted in a knowledge of past institutions and frameworks, with a tempered, pragmatic understanding of what is possible in the present.’ Thus, by revisiting selected cues in biblical narratives these ministers attempted to reframe the contexts in which sense was being made of their identities. Creed refers to this as ‘prospective sensemaking,’ which he contrasts to Weick’s (1995) ‘exclusively retrospective’ account. In a third paper, dealing with gender and sensemaking Dye and Mills (2004), drawing on the work of Weick, focus on the role of sensemaking in the process of constructing gendered identities, arguing that gender discrimination should be addressed by identifying how an on-going sense of organizational reality is developed, maintained and changed.

In other sensemaking contributions, Darmer ‘explores the sensation of sense-action, [looking] at the ‘thrills’ of being able to sense the actions of others and even the interplay between others and oneself.’ Fusing the work of Weick and Levi-Strauss (1966), Darmer (2004) ‘constructs a synthesis ... to understand sense-action and the thrills of it’, while Tams (2004) ‘examines the dynamics by which people make sense of self-efficacy in real work settings.’ Describing ‘the construction of self-efficacy as a sensemaking process by which individuals seek to establish coherence between their performance, personal goals and values, and the demands from their task environment,’ Tams argues that Weick’s (1995) sensemaking perspective contributes to our understanding of self-efficacy formation by shifting attention away from people as respondents; providing insights into the ways that people integrate congruent and incongruent cues; and suggesting that self-efficacy judgments are retrospective reflections ‘of previous experiences and self conceptions.’ Tams research suggests ‘that self-efficacy depends not so much on exposure to particular sources of information but on the processes by which individuals make sense of their abilities to master chosen courses of action in given settings.’ Two other papers that utilize Weickian sensemaking to analyse organizational crises and disasters provide the opening and closing papers of this edited collection. Both papers bridge the divide between sensemaking and sensation.

Four years prior to the Halifax conference an event in Walkerton (Ontario), in May 2000, caused a national sensation when seven people died and a further 2300 fell ill as the result of a water contamination scandal. Apart from extensive media attention and the production of a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation made-for-television film, the crisis became the subject of a public enquiry that found two managers guilty of corrupt practices and the Ontario Government of excessive cost-cutting of provincial services. Three years after the Walkerton disaster, and shortly after the decision was made to host the 2004 SCOS conference in Halifax around the theme of Sensation and Organization, a category-two hurricane—Hurricane Juan—hit the city on 28 September 2003. Although the number of deaths was limited to two the ‘city of trees,’ as Halifax is affectionately known, was devastated. Thousands of the city’s trees were destroyed and, in the process, brought down power lines and for days cut off numerous streets. Many people were without power for several days as a carnival atmosphere turned into a wake.

The first paper in this collection draws of Weick’s (1995, 2001) notion of sensemaking to analyse the Walkerton contaminated water crisis while exploring the voracity of Weick’s framework as a heuristic for studying organizational disasters and crises. Unlike many of Weick’s own studies (1993a, 1993b, 1996) of organizational crises and disasters, which are characterized by breaks in social and on-going sensemaking, the Walkerton disaster provides a series of events that were characterized as rooted in the consistently inept and corrupt behaviour of two primary individuals. The authors—Jane Mullen, Natalie Vladi and Albert J. Mills—reveal the value of Weick’s framework for analyzing complex situations that move beyond simplistic blaming of individuals (Vaughan, 1996) but they conclude that the

sensemaking perspective downplays not only power in the shaping of sensemaking and sensemaking processes but also individual responsibility. They conclude with a plea that future crisis research should involve a fusion of Weick's notion of sensemaking with Foucault's work on discourse (to deal with power and the structuring of sensemaking) and Sartre's work on existentialism (to address individual responsibility).

The final paper in the collection also deals with sensemaking and sensation in the aftermath of Hurricane Juan. The carnival atmosphere that pervaded the city not only immediately following the hurricane but also in the lead-up to it led Jean Helms Mills to ponder how to make sense of the situation. Meanwhile, Lieutenant Colonel Terrance Weatherbee of the Army Reserves, one of the first on the scene as a member of the emergency services was pondering the organizational disconnects that were making crisis assistance problematic. In his other capacity as a PhD candidate, Weatherbee was undertaking research with Helms Mills on organizational legitimacy that fused together sensemaking and ethnostatistics (Helms Mills *et al.*, 2004). In their ensuing discussions they turned their attention to the hurricane, setting out not only to apply Weick's (1995, 2001) sensemaking framework but also to extend it to study of 'reaction to disaster and the causes of organizational disasters' and to contribute to the much needed operationalization of Weick's (1995, 2001) sensemaking properties (Helms Mills, 2003; Weick *et al.*, 2005). In the process of their research Helms Mills and Weatherbee found that while Weick's framework was useful for drawing attention to the socio-psychological processes involved in organizational crises it needed further refinement (and operationalization) to deal with the more micro aspects of how people make sense of situations. They suggest that of Weick's seven properties identity construction and plausibility may be more central to the process of sensemaking, and they go on to call for further research into hitherto neglected issues of inter- and intra-organizational sensemaking.

Experiencing Organization

In the midst of discussions around identity and sensemaking a number of contributions focused on the contribution of the senses (and experience) to our understanding and (re)construction of organizational life. Here one or two papers dealt with the impact of spatial arrangements on our sense of organization—with Bissonnette (2004) examining the impact of workspace on worker identities, and Mac-Allister (2004) exploring the privileging of 'space as a way of thinking and acting' and the consequences for our sense of organization. Virtual space was a major theme among several papers, including Carvalho's (2004) examination of 'the dynamics of virtualization in the routine management of organizations—the intranet spaces—and the absence as an intense feeling experienced by individuals when they intensify their contacts with the network'; Davilla-Gomez's (2004) study of the impact of sensemaking on information technology solutions; Dymek's (2004) analysis of socio-economic representations within and through computer games; Kivinen's (2004) analysis of the home pages of organizations and what this tells us about the role of the internet in the 'performance' of organizational boundaries; Lawley's (2004) examination of 'what it means to be 'sensing' the activities of organisation, virtual or otherwise'; and Skold's (2004) 'looks into the dynamic between the private/public negotiative aspects of the dating process and the economy emerging around this phenomenon.'

Other papers dealt more or less directly with the senses and included work on observation—with Hamilton (2004) looking at corporate and organizational brochures as 'attempts to generate sensation' and Belova's (2004) study of images in the University of Essex prospectuses and 'viewers' comments on what they mean'. Stenström (2004), on the other hand, looks at 'how the human touch is perceived in different contexts', including a dance company, a bank and a hospital and attempts to 'build on theories about the human body and

organization theory', and Candlin (2004) explores the motivating factors that cause patrons of art museums to touch exhibits, despite explicit warnings to the contrary and what the 'implications of this are for the rationalist museum'. Baxter and Ritchie (2004), in a study of a bakery, describe and analyse the impact of smell on the research process and how this shapes understandings of organizations. In a related contribution, and constituting the second paper in this edited collection, Martin Corbett explores 'the sense of smell and the social meanings we attribute to the generation and perception of odour.'

Contending that organization studies tend to privilege the 'epistemological regime of the eye,' Corbett goes on to envision a renewed approach to the field through an exploration of the contribution of the other senses, in particular smell. Drawing on the work of Mary Douglas, Michel Foucault and others, Corbett makes a plea for 'organization studies to take smell seriously.' In a far-reaching review of the role of smell in social life—both in fact and in its metaphorical use—Corbett argues that it has an important influence on sense of self in a (Western) society that is 'obsessed with the deodorisation of the body.' Corbett then goes on to review the 'deodorisation of Western culture' and its impact on discrimination (through olfactory markers), location (control of social space) and regulation (of such things as air flow). In a what is likely to be seen as a major contribution to the field, Corbett concludes by linking the study of smell to a range of key issues, from postmodernist critiques of Cartesian dualism, through debates around identity work and emotion labour, to research on associative memory.

Staging the Sensational

Not surprisingly, a number of the Halifax conference papers were structured around theatrical metaphors and story telling. The latter included deconstructions of fiction and narrative accounts of social reality. In the first group we find the study of Das and Das (2004) of the role of Indian fiction in the perpetuation of male and female stereotypes, Taalas and Hirsjärvi's (2004) revisiting of 'the entanglement of cultural organisation practices with the consumption of science fiction and fantasy literature', and Schwabenland's (2004) analysis of the founding stories of voluntary organizations. In the second group we find Godee's (2004) discussion of the role of narrative interviewing in 'the sensational role in organizing processes' and multiple realities, Reveley and McLean's (2004) study of 'miner's narrative sense of 'self' and 'other' during performance appraisal at an underground coalmine', and Sims' (2004) account of the relationship between learning, cognitive, emotional, and fantasy in the re-enactment of situations that are mediated by narratives and stories.

Contributions around theatrical performance and framing were found in David Boje and Yue Cai's staging of 'McDonaldization Theater' and Jan Betts' (2004) study of organizational conflict through the theatrical lens of Augusto Boal. Following this approach vein, the third paper in this edited collection draws on the dramatism of Kenneth Burke to analyse 'leader-follower identification motives.' Here, Paresha N. Sinha and Brad Jackson 'develop a rhetorically based understanding of the dynamics of the identification process between transformational or charismatic leaders and their followers.' The authors utilize a dramaturgical model 'to reveal the dramatic struggle that underlies the leader-follower identification process' but suggest that 'Goffman's views on morality and manipulation can provide a useful supplement to Burke's theory of identification as it highlights the performative aspects of transformational and charismatic leadership.' Setting out to understand 'interactive processes as opposed to unidirectional aspects of leadership, Sinha and Jackson take us through carefully crafted review of the current leadership literature and highlight within, what they call, the current leadership discourse, the 'emphasis on transformational and charismatic leadership' that is 'likely to view active identity work from both leaders and their followers.' Concurring with Grint (2000), they conclude that 'leader identity can no longer be

considered as given and secure; but has to be viewed as the target, medium and outcome of internal and external control.'

Identity Work

Bridging the gap between virtual sensemaking, narratives and identity work, Piñeiro and Case's (2004) work reported 'on an empirical study of a programming community known collectively as *Slashdot*' and the narrative form of the on-line exchanges. And they conclude, 'storytelling is far from dead' in on-line exchanges but that the medium 'with its preoccupation with *speed* and the perfunctory is likely to encourage a minimalist rather than a baroque form.' Sharing a focus on identity work, Chandler *et al.* (2004) 'explore the impact of New Public Management (NPM) on academic identities in England', while, in a similar vein, Thomas and Davies (2004) examine the policing of identity work against the background of NPM in the police force, arguing that 'understanding how various categories of identities interact, conflict, are backed up, and challenged, in the context of different organizational arrangements, and forms of social interaction, is of fundamental importance in effecting radical change in the police.' Gender is to the fore in Anne Fearfull's (2004) reflection 'on the guilt, shame and sadness of being an academic and a mother' while Sheena Vachhani explores 'the discursive production of sales identities.' In the fourth paper in the edited collection, Vachhani draws of the work of Irigaray to critically examine 'how identity formations change, dissolve and reform.' From an empirically study of a UK sales force, she uses a 'micro discourse approach' to make sense of the narratives of those involved within a localized context. Through a careful and detailed mapping of 'the movement of discourse', Vachhani contends that 'within organisation is contained an unwritten space for difference in identity, contained within the frame of a conceptual opposition that is 'always already' inscribed in ... the political unconscious of dominant cultural discourses and their underlying master narratives.' She concludes that, understanding difference in renewed ways offers us interesting insights into the dissolution and disruptive refiguring of identity dualisms and that it 'is the anatomy of the changes and breakdowns of identity which have warranted little research and it is the silence of these changes which now warrant further exploration.'

BACK TO THE FUTURE

Naturally, a special issue can only present but a few of the numerous contributions to any conference but we have attempted here to reflect some of the range and findings of various papers while providing a context and debates for the papers that do appear. Even then we have, sadly, privileged some contributions over others. Indeed a number of excellent contributions to the field have been left on our personal cutting room floor. For that we sincerely apologize. Fortunately, however, many of those contributions we have mentioned and of those we have failed to mention have found a home in print elsewhere. It is our hope that the papers in this special edition reflect some of the key debates that surfaced during the summer days of July 2004 in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

NOTES

1. SCOS 2004 Call for Papers.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.

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