

## Making Sense out of Bad Faith: *Sartre, Weick and Existential Sensemaking in Organizational Analysis*

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### ABSTRACT

Through a nuanced braiding of Weick's (1995) sensemaking epistemology and Sartre's (1957) phenomenological ontology, we propose an approach to organizational analysis which we label existential sensemaking. We first explore the potential to fuse Weick's sensemaking and Sartre's ontology and then examine the case of a Peruvian mountaineering expedition to explore the potential of the existential sensemaking heuristic in understanding the importance of individual decision making in the process of identity work. We conclude that this perspective has profound implications for understanding ethical behaviour in organizing processes as well as within identity construction.

*"Some would argue that there was no decision to be made; that cutting the rope and the powerful symbol of trust and friendship it represents should never have entered my mind. Others say that it was simply a matter of survival, something I was forced to do...I knew I had done all that could reasonably be expected of me to save Joe, and now both our lives were being threatened, I had reached a point where I had to look after myself. Although I knew my action might result in his death, I took the decision intuitively in a split second. It simply felt like the right thing to do, like so many critical decisions I had taken during the climb. Without hesitation, I removed the knife from the rucksack and cut the rope."* Attributed to Simon Yates in the epilogue of *Touching the Void* (Simpson, 1988: 203)

organizational analysis which we label existential sensemaking. Through a focus upon a well documented mountaineering expedition which took place on the West Face of Siula Grande in the Peruvian Andes, we explore the potential for existential sensemaking as a heuristic for understanding the importance of individual decision making in the process of identity work, this having profound implications for ethical behaviour in organizing processes.

Recent debates within organizational analysis have highlighted the notion of identity and identity work (Thomas, Mills & Helms Mills, 2004) while simultaneously reducing, if not eliminating, the notion of the individual (Nord & Fox, 1996). Arguably, this is in part due to the growing influence of postmodernist theorizing and reactions against enlightenment notions of the essentialist individual (Foucault, 1965); in part a reaction against sociohistorical privileging

This paper proposes a braiding of Weick's (1995) epistemologically-based notion of sensemaking and the phenomenological ontology of Sartre (1957)<sup>12</sup>, to develop an approach to

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created. In this respect, the separation between epistemology and ontology may be less that distinct, largely because the enacted environment is best understood as processural. This observation in some ways forms the very basis of our initial interest in this present project, and so while we acknowledge "ontological slipperiness" (as does Weick), we also suggest that a focus upon the epistemological aspect of the process of sensemaking is not to the detriment of the enacted environment premise. Likewise, existentialism (and particularly Sartre's phenomenological ontology) is interested in the *how* rather than solely the *what* (Flynn, 2006: 1) of our lives, thus mediating epistemological and ontological categories.

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<sup>12</sup> We note that Weick and Sartre are both concerned with what we might call "enacted environments". This type of environment involves a requirement to respond to that which is

of individualism (Sampson, 1988); and, in part, a simultaneous privileging of social context across social science research (Nord & Fox, 1996). Nonetheless, outside of essentializing psychologistic accounts, there is some recognition of the importance of the individual self in the process of identity work as she engages in “internal mental work” (Acker, 1992), techniques of the self (Brewis, 2004, Foucault, 1988), and dialogical self confrontation (Hermans, 2002, Lecoure & Mills, 2005, 2008)<sup>13</sup>. While gendered constructions of identity exemplify the deep-rooted and profound relationship between internal mental work and contextual relationships (Acker, 1992), accidents, disasters, and other life threatening situations provide the most dramatic examples (Weick, 1993). Through examination of one such account – the story of events surrounding the life and death decisions of two mountain climbers – we trace the outline of an approach to identity work that combines sensemaking and existentialism.

It has been argued that Weick’s work on organizational sensemaking is “at the forefront” of attempts to reconceptualize the role of the individual in identity construction (Nord & Fox, 1996: 156), which is clearly at the heart of sensemaking (Helms Mills, 2003). It is also of interest, for our purposes, because of its focus on the life and death failures of sensemaking events (Weick, 1990): examination of the failure of the ordinary sensemaking process is intriguing, for there is a corresponding lack of inquiry into the types of situations whereby the ordinary flow of sensemaking is substantially disrupted, only to be reestablished through dramatic recontextualization. It is this type of situation, illustrating the capability of an individual to redefine their reality, which is examined in this paper. Nonetheless, within Weick’s framework the individual sense maker is overshadowed by social and ongoing sensemaking contexts and the focus

on sensemaking “failures” suggest, if anything, mechanical responses to events that draw on an ingrained collective self rather than those of an individual sense maker. Thus, while Weick’s descriptions of sensemaking forms an epistemology which is coherent it is also subject to the type of criticism leveled by Burrell and Morgan (1979) (and explicitly acknowledged by Weick, 1995) as “ontological oscillation”. We suggest that this “ontological oscillation” is less of a problematic when normal patterns of interaction break down, and a robust ontology is employed as part of the analysis of these relatively extraordinary situations. That brings us to the existentialism of Jean Paul Sartre.

Sartre’s ontology is also useful to us for the purpose of examining these organizational junctures at which ordinary sensemaking has failed, but in a way that ontologically grounds the notion of sensemaking through a focus on the individual actor. The times when ordinary sensemaking falters, presents the individual a situation that has similarities with the existential anxiety that Sartre describes in *Being and Nothingness* (1957). This anxiety is characterized through the requirement to make choices while at the same time realizing that a desire to choose authentically (i.e. in good faith) is problematic when our underlying nature does not allow us the option of using external forms of validation for our choice. The union of a sensemaking epistemology with Sartre’s phenomenological ontology allows us an opportunity to examine how individuals manage both the underlying ethical implications of free will and the simultaneous fracture of the processes by which they interpret their world.

There is a growing resurgence of interest in how existentialism may be usefully employed in the examination of contemporary management/organizational thought. With areas of interest such as leadership (Lawler, 2005; Ashman, 2007; Lawler, 2007) and recent work using a feminist existentialist perspective to examine career choices of women chartered accountants (Wallace, 2007), the role, indeed focus, upon “the non-essentialized individual” is being felt in organizational studies (Lecoure & Mills, 2005; 2008). Our interest in how Sartre’s

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<sup>13</sup> There is however a growing interest in the relationships between notions of self and identity and collectivities (e.g. see Stryker, Owens & White, 2000 for an examination of self and identity in the social movement context).

ontology may be linked to Weick's epistemology, seems timely in providing a framework for moving these discussions forward through attempting to build a philosophic base for a broader existentialist methodology for organizational studies.

The very nature of writing as "ordering work" (Law 1994: 31) makes descriptions of how non-essentialized individuals navigate their world difficult; if individuals are continually becoming that which they choose to be, how do we describe the processes by which they negotiate their reality? To address this conundrum, we undertake to do two things: first, we will use an example to illustrate the perspective we are building; secondly, we will do our utmost to keep a focus upon the internal processes of organizing and identity construction, rather than solely focusing upon organization as an outcome.

To emphasize the individual in the process of identity work we focus not on the collapse of sensemaking (and the loss of individual identity) but on a situation where individuals have successfully overcome the failure of ordinary sensemaking through what we term existential sensemaking. Existential sensemaking differs from the more ordinary and ongoing flow of sensemaking in that the juncture faced when an immanent threat to more common sensemaking is felt places an individual's existential choices at the very heart of the identity construction process. That is to say, the extracted cues available for ongoing sensemaking seem truncated, to the point of offering the illusion of a sort of inevitability, but with dire outcomes. This is not to suggest that existential sensemaking is not necessarily present or perhaps latent during the more ordinary presentation of sensemaking processes<sup>14</sup>. It seems to be

the awareness of our capacity for existential sensemaking which is absent during more conventional, ordinary and ongoing sensemaking. For this reason, it is useful to examine sensemaking during extremes. It is the comparatively extreme situations whereby the ongoing flow of sensemaking is replaced with existential anxiety, which uncovering now offers us opportunity to examine the role of existential sensemaking. To illustrate how existential sensemaking may be used in organizational analysis, we focus on a well documented mountaineering expedition on the West Face of Siula Grande in the Peruvian Andes. Our notion of an opportunity for such comparatively extraordinary sensemaking, being a time when the day-to-day sensemaking process is on the brink of failure and the individual is faced with their existential choices, is well illustrated using Joe Simpson's and Simon Yates' harrowing ordeal chronicled in *Touching the Void* (Simpson, 1988). Notably, this example of the failure of the climbing team and the subsequent dramatic survival story of Joe Simpson offers a positive example to augment a literature whose main focus seems to be failure in extraordinary situations.

We conclude our discussions with implications for the self in organizational analysis and suggestions as to how the perspective of existential sensemaking might be employed for further studies of the individual navigating their organized world. Our suggestion is that the examination of successful cases of poignant existential sensemaking situations would complement the growing literature that already explores the breakdown of the more ordinary, ongoing sensemaking processes.

### **MAKING SENSE OF THE WORLD**

When Simon Yates cut the climbing rope that connected himself to his partner Joe Simpson, he severed more than just the lifeline that connected two climbers together. The gossamer rope connection between mountain climbers in a remote alpine environment represents far more than a simple safety precaution; it is the organizational processes of

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<sup>14</sup> The conceptualization of sensemaking episodes is also consistent with our notion of existential sensemaking. Essentially, sensemaking episodes are seen as being comprised of sense-losing, followed by a cosmological episode, with a subsequent sense-remaking. Doug Orton is a proponent of such an episodic approach, in particular for the context of high-risk environments.

the climbers made incarnate. There is a shared language, symbolism, and set of goals - even culture - that is evidenced in the connection of the nylon climbing rope. Those who are part of the climbing community subculture may seem casual about how they tie themselves into the rope but make no mistake about it, the creation of the "rope team" is not undertaken lightly, nor is the dissolution of such done easily.

The choice to examine a case which revolves around a rope team of climbers goes beyond just the poignancy of the pursuit of mountaineering. Mountaineering has a long literary history, and seems a compelling metaphor for many human pursuits. Contained within the narrow context, indeed microcosm, of the mountaineering expedition are many examples of key organizing processes (e.g. effective communications, resource and task allocation, risk assessment, etc.). In a pursuit which tends to attract iconoclastic individuals we find cases which provide us an excellent milieu in which both individual identity and organizational aspects may be usefully examined, given the nature of the extremely close teamwork involved in expeditions.

The particular case recounted in *Touching the Void* (Simpson, 1988) initially concerns the story of the pursuit of alpine climbing's most highly valued prize: the first ascent of a route. To climb a mountain via a never before completed route is both highly regarded and potentially risky. Located in Peru, Siula Grande (the teams' objective) is both remote and subject to brutal weather conditions. To mitigate the risk (and to maintain a certain purity in how the climb is undertaken), Joe and Simon elected to climb in what is commonly referred to as "alpine style". In essence, they will be without communication and support from below, acting as a self contained team, working together, and connected by the climbing rope as they move through the hostile terrain. This provides a certain opportunity for analysis as the unfolding of the story of the two men and their climb involves the

dissolution of the climbing team as a consequence of the cutting of the rope which connects the men.

The study of the role of the individual during times of organizational crisis and failure is gradually becoming more common. In the broad field concerning organizational crisis, there is a developing application of sensemaking to the analysis of organizations. Karl Weick has undertaken work regarding a number of crisis situations and sensemaking (Weick, 2001) as have others regarding situations as diverse as the Westray mining tragedy (Mills & O'Connell, 2003), the Challenger space shuttle disaster (Starbuck & Milliken, 1988), and even the management of organizational change at Nova Scotia Power (Helms Mills, 2003). These descriptions and analyses have a singular humanity about them that challenges more mechanistic and positivistic notions of social reality. If we are to gain understanding of the individual in these crisis situations, adopting this sensemaking perspective, which does not exclusively privilege the organization, is useful. Similarly, the failure of sensemaking in its ordinary and daily manifestation calls into question not only how individuals make sense of their world, but also what the very nature of their world might be. The crisis context that we seek to understand might be better viewed as a co-creation between actors and their worlds, for without these individuals there is no organization, or more pointedly no organizing. Plainly put, when a climber is alone and holding the frayed end of a climbing rope, there is no longer any entity known as the rope team. What of the individual climbers who were once organized?

The robustness of day-to-day sensemaking is, to some extent, embodied in its normalcy. It may take exceptional circumstances to allow for a breakdown of this ongoing process, and organizational crises and failures offer such exceptional circumstances<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> We note that while exceptional circumstances provide clearly defined contexts in which this ongoing flow of sensemaking is interrupted, this is certainly not to suggest that the crises context is *required* for the presentation of existential sensemaking. Any

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The crisis-type juncture is well recognized and utilized in the study of sensemaking, e.g. the Mann Gulch disaster (Weick, 2001), Hurricane Juan (Helms Mills & Weatherbee, 2006), and the Tenerife Air disaster (Weick, 2001). Notably, less well studied are the success stories of those individuals who suffer a breakdown of this ordinary day to day sensemaking, only to subsequently succeed in reconstructing their world and overcoming the failure of their organization. We suggest that with the failure of the ordinary and ongoing sensemaking process individuals are presented with an opportunity for existential sensemaking.

Sensemaking as an ordinary and ongoing process is described as being both retrospective and grounded in identity construction (Weick, 1995). The dissolution of the climbing organization of Joe Simpson and Simon Yates, poignantly signified with the cutting of their climbing rope, was a crisis that greatly upset these aspects of the sensemaking process. Through the rope, each climber was responsible for the other, and in turn reliant upon the other for their own safety. If members of a rope team are responsible for each other, but one is forced to cut the rope, the resulting identity construction is potentially confused. Simon Yates writes of such confusion when he recalls the moments after sending his partner on a fall that promises Simpson's death as the only possible outcome:

"I argued that I was satisfied with myself. I was actually pleased that I had been strong enough to cut the rope. There had been nothing else left to me, and so I had gone ahead with it. I had done it and done it well. Shit! That takes some doing! A lot of people would have died before getting it together to do that! I was alive because

I had held everything together right up to the last moment. It had been executed calmly. I had even carefully stopped to check that the rope wasn't going to tangle and pull me down. So that's why I feel so damned confused! I should feel guilty. I don't. I did it right. But, what of Joe..." (Simpson, 1988: 105).

Sensemaking is a social process, including when it is conducted alone (Weick, 1995), for even an internal monologue presupposes an audience of some sort. The failure of an organization means that the audience has shifted to some extent, perhaps becoming an audience of the self in the case of Simon Yates ongoing musings. Surely this would be both confusing and traumatic when the audience of the organization has gone, and with it, his very understanding of his role as a member of the rope team. If Yates is on the mountain to climb as a member of a rope team, and now that organization has ceased to exist because of his very actions, then what is he? In the end, Yates finally relies upon a fundamental tenet of sensemaking, that being plausibility over accuracy. Plausibility extends beyond immediately observable phenomena; it is an attempt to fit together the evidence available, thereby completing a puzzle despite having only some of the puzzle pieces at hand. Yates invokes plausibility over accuracy, constructing his reality around his suppositions regarding what others might have done in his situation. With his identity as a team member shattered through his own actions he chooses to become, instead, a survivor.

Simon Yates might well have simply sat down and allowed himself to die, in fact he had a strong sense of this possibility himself (Simpson, 1988), yet his experiences are consistent with him personally overcoming a substantial organizational crisis; an example of what we have labeled existential sensemaking. The process of sensemaking was able to be continued, despite the collapse of the organization, and a dramatic juncture in organizing processes. This in itself is substantive and perhaps even unusual. If sensemaking is an ongoing process (and we

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presupposition of such a requirement would likely call into question the very phenomenological ontology which Sartre wrote of. It is the interplay of the facticity an individual finds themselves facing, with their innate ability to make something of what they are given, which fundamentally contributes to Sartre's conception of an agent both free and constrained at the same time.

have a literature that examines the failure of ordinary and ongoing sensemaking: see Weick, 2001), then we must ask what allows for these occasions of existential sensemaking in such situations? The descriptions of the sensemaking epistemological process, (that is, how we acquire information about our world) seem unable to explicate completely the nature of these type of success stories. To aid in understanding the ramifications of such Herculean efforts, we turn to Jean Paul Sartre, existentialism, and the experiences of Joe Simpson after his partner cut the rope and he plunged to what would seem to be a certain death.

### **THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ONTOLOGY OF SARTRE**

If Weick's descriptions of sensemaking are the epistemological process by which we acquire knowledge, then to allow for the freedom that Simon Yates shows in terminating both his organization and his own identity as a member of the rope team, we require further detail to understand how his act of existential sensemaking came to be. In this case, the process is only part of the story. There is something fundamental in the nature of individuals and their world that offers the prospect of existential sensemaking, and yet still makes the outcome of organization failures of the type described far from certain. If sensemaking was able to proceed automatically and without difficulty, then tales of the sort endured by Yates and Simpson would be unworthy of a second thought. Similarly, if we believe the outcomes of events such as their struggles on the West Face of Siula Grande in the Peruvian Andes are based upon luck or some such notions of fate, then why bother studying any organizational crises at all? To make sense of how individuals engage in existential sensemaking, we need to examine the nature of their underlying reality. Sartre's *Being and Nothingness, An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* (Sartre, 1956) offers a compatible description of the nature

of reality with the opportunity for freedom of choice. Through examining this ontology and its intersection with Weickian sensemaking, we have a unique opportunity to explain Joe Simpson's incredible personal journey from rope team member to abandoned survivor and finally to forgiveness. Through using this perspective, we in some manner interject the role of the individual and choice into the realm of organizational collapse. We are able to partially explicate how the individual survives the loss of their organizational identity only to recontextualize who and what they are.

### **Being in Itself, Being for Itself, and the Being for Others**

In Sartre's phenomenological ontology there is the distinction of two main types of things: those that are constituted as being *in itself* and those that exist as being *for itself* (Levy, 2002). These categorizations are critical, for they not only describe how our reality is constituted, but they also lay groundwork for describing the underlying nature of our condition of freedom.

Things which are described as *being in itself* are those things which exist only in positivity; they do not contain negations nor are they lacking in any way. They cannot be improved upon and they are not self aware. This category of things is familiar to us- the chair we sit upon, the rain which falls from the sky and the keyboard upon which we type are all examples of things which are *being in itself*. The knife that Simon Yates used to cut the rope which connected the two climbers was a *being in itself* thing.

The other category of being is the *being for itself*. The unique ability to question ourselves derives from the intrinsic quality that we alone bring to the world, that of negation. The *for itself* is the means by which a certain lacking quality is introduced to reality. Negation is also an intrinsic part of the ontological split that we humans experience. This split, the understanding of ourselves as both an object and our ability to self-regard ourselves (and thus our being as more than just an object), is at the heart of the potential for

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inauthentic behavior. This ability, which allows us to treat ourselves as a simple *being in itself* object, while simultaneously being able to transcend that supposed simple nature (via our nature as being more than the simple existence of a rock, for instance) involves a potential denial of our intrinsic nature of *being for itself*.

Sensemaking is only possible through our nature as a *being for itself*, yet we are continually faced with a notion of cold, calculating objectivity that, should we surrender to it, treats events as mere facts with little emotion. After Yates cut the climbing rope, Simpson plunged down a substantial crevasse and came to a stop on a small ledge below the surface. As the former rope team member faced the nature of his predicament, he struggled with the giddy realization of both his survival and the beginning of his battle with self-objectification:

“I sat, hunched against the ice wall, laughing convulsively, and shivering. It was the cold. Part of me recognized this; a calm rational voice in my head told me it was the cold and the shock. The rest of me went quietly mad while this calm voice told me what was happening and left me feeling as if I were split in two - one half laughing, and the other looking on with unemotional objectivity. After a time I realized it had all stopped, and I was whole again.” (Simpson, 1988: 111-112)

Lastly, there is a third category of being in Sartre’s ontology; *being for others*. He describes a situation whereby to fall under the gaze of another *being for itself* is to become objectified by that other. Subsequently, we attempt to avoid the loss of our transcendence through the gaze of the other by preemptively objectifying them. This ongoing objectifying (and thus diminishing the possibilities of the other) and counter-offensive objectification in turn are said to

characterize the very nature of human relations.

### Good Faith, Bad Faith

Based upon these categories of being, Sartrean ethics offer us a special quandary. The nature of good faith (or perhaps what we might label authentic) behavior is to act in accordance with our underlying being (in this case, *being for itself*). We possess ultimate freedom, unconstrained by anything, through our power of creation and of negation. To act in bad faith (and thus in a fundamentally inauthentic manner) would be to deny our freedom, to act towards ourselves as though we were simple objects of a *being in itself* variety. Thus, to act in good faith requires that we cannot treat ourselves as victims of circumstance, nor entities at the whim of fate or predestination. We are required to take full responsibility for our choices, with no acceptable alternative that might prevent us from acting in bad faith. Now we are able to identify the source of our existentialist anxiety, our confrontation with our nauseating freedom which stems from a resulting lack of external criteria with which to judge our choices (Lavine, 1984). This is at the crux of our search for meaning and Simon Yates, wrought with angst, wrestles with this when coming to terms with what to tell others about the cutting of the climbing rope:

“All I could think about was the disbelief and criticism I was inevitably going to be confronted with. I couldn’t face it. I shouldn’t have to face it! Anger and guilt clashed in my arguments as to what I should do. I knew above everything that I had been right to do what I had done. Deep inside I would always know that I had nothing to be ashamed of. If I concealed the truth it wouldn’t be so bad...I can’t tell the truth...I told Richard exactly what had happened” (Simpson, 1988: 125-127)

### The Temporal Nature of our Being

So, we find ourselves with a description of the nature of being, but thus far to the exclusion of the passage of time. Any attempt to meld aspects of Weickian sensemaking with

Sartrean existentialism requires us to address the temporal issues of both the underlying nature of our world and the retrospective aspect of sensemaking. In considering time, Sartre describes the past as effectively being in itself, by virtue of the unchanging and unreflective nature of the past. This is consistent with the fractured nature of human existence in so far as we are comprised of our past yet we are more than our past at the same time. The future is also quite an interesting situation for a *being for itself* creature such as ourselves. Sartre contends that when contemplating the future, we effectively project ourselves into the future state and in doing so we bring possibility into the world. This possibility is, for all intensive purposes, an *in itself* thing which we have created, but has not yet happened. We might label the gap between the future possibilities which we create and those past *being in itself* things as the present, which is therefore essentially a gap or negation. It is this gap, the temporal state of the present, which forms a fascinating juncture with aspects of the epistemology of sensemaking as described by Weick. It is also in this temporal gap of the present that we are able to examine the nature of an individual coping with the failure of their organization and one particularly evident opportunity to surface existential sensemaking presents itself.

## **PARALYZING REALITY MEETS DYNAMIC EPISTEMOLOGY**

### **The Journey is the Destination**

The ordinary day-to-day acts of sensemaking are a full expression of our freedom to (re)create meaning based upon what we feel is plausible, not based upon some positivistic notion of objective accuracy. Thus, any unresolved interruption in this process would be to potentially act in the bad faith manner that Sartre reviles. That is, to not sensemake would be to treat oneself as a *being in itself*, as a thing that possesses neither free will nor choice.

We engage in this ongoing sensemaking process within the realm of our

social context (Weick, 1995) and utilize extracted cues that are useful based upon the “projects” that we have chosen to become involved in. The ongoing accomplishments of sensemaking are creative acts of individual freedom. The ceasing of this creative process implies a static epistemological process; that is, we would sense reality rather sensemake it.

The very moments when ordinary sensemaking is on the verge of failing (for example, in those situations of drama so adequately described by Weick) seem to have much in common with the paralyzing nature of existential anxiety/nausea. Our “projects”, the future things we have constructed (that is, caused to come into being), and past events become misaligned. Ordinary sensemaking may fail, in part because we no longer can reconstruct events into plausibility. The existing facts as we perceive them cannot be massaged into a coherent whole. We are thrown face to face with our freedom. This failure of the ordinary, daily sensemaking process has exposed the potential underlying ambivalence of our decision making and we risk a loss of meaning.

Sensemaking is concerned with plausibility, not some objective sense of accuracy. Nevertheless, ordinary ongoing sensemaking has the appearance of causality. In the failure of ordinary sensemaking, we are now aware of our potential for bad faith inauthenticity and are confronted with the juncture of our self objectification and simultaneous transcendental nature. We become aware of our sensemaking and in doing so we confront the strange nature of how we construct plausibility. The very nature of placing plausibility above accuracy allows us our freedom in good faith; we (re)construct reality retrospectively as we wish and in accordance with our personal projects. The appearance of a positivistic causality is illusory and yet the removal of this illusion during the failure of ordinary sensemaking is nevertheless troubling to us. The Yates/Simpson drama in the Peruvian Andes provides rich evidence of the type of gap that is formed when the illusion of causality becomes fragmented and we

simultaneously recognize that our exertions of choice are responsible for “causality’s” demise. Following the choice to sever the rope lifeline to Simpson, Yates continued alone to escape from the mountainside and he describes this gap between supposed causality and his coming to terms with the choice he made:

“I turned away from the drop and glared sightlessly at the peak directly in front of me. The cruelty of it all sickened me. It felt as if there were something deliberate about it, something preordained by a bored and evil force. The whole day’s effort, and the chaos in the stormy night, had been for nothing. What fools we were to have thought we had been clever enough to get away with it! All that time struggling just to cut the rope. I laughed. The short bitter noise rang loud in the quiet. It was funny all right, but the joke was on me. Some joke!” (Simpson, 1988: 118).

Our creation of the future (i.e. as yet unattained *being in itself* things) places us in a predicament that is exposed when sensemaking fails in the present. In so far as sensemaking is retrospective, we are only concerned with its perspective on the past. Sartre however maintains that we bring possibility into the world through our projection to the future. Through seeking to combine Sartre’s ontology with an epistemology of sensemaking *we are suggesting that ordinary sensemaking fails when there is an inability to construct plausibility retrospectively from the viewpoint of a given future projection per Sartre’s ontology*. Put another way, we ordinarily suppose a seamless causality that links our past and the future which we have caused to come into being. This retrospective plausibility that we sensemake is quite robust, and is the normal and ongoing compensatory mechanism for the relatively mundane misalignments between our constructed past and created futures. When our created futures are seen to be incommensurable with our past, no matter

how skillfully we sensemake, we are faced with the juncture which we describe as a failure of ordinary sensemaking. In this respect, we are discerning a process that is akin to a failure of what is described by Weick (1995) as a self fulfilling prophecy, which is a belief driven process. In so far as self fulfilling prophecies flourish in organizational settings (Weick, 1995), an organizational crisis (or failure, as in the example of the climbing team) causes the collapse of the presupposed causal chain of events. Our created future and the meanings we attribute to the past are incompatible during these times of ordinary sensemaking failures. The temporal gap of the present becomes visceral to us. We are fully aware of our existential existence.

### **Paralyzed and the Fear of Bad Faith**

With the failure of ordinary sensemaking, we have an interruption to our ongoing, good faith efforts to espouse our freedom. We still have the projects that we have chosen to work upon, but our constructed future is not able to be made coherent with the past in light of these current projects. The fear of bad faith and the sense of the failure of “causality” as we have constructed it can virtually paralyze us. We have suffered a loss of meaning, much as the firefighters in the Mann Gulch tragedy did (Weick, 2001) when they ceased to be firefighters, but failed (for the most part) to create a new meaning for themselves as survivors instead.

The low probability of an event that contributes to this loss of meaning often renders us unprepared for the shock. We are familiar with the constant stream of sensemaking, and in its interruption, we have the potential to allow ourselves to permit a fall into the bad faith trap of self objectification. Sadly, to do so is often not only an existential ethical failure, but also a situation that potentially results in personal catastrophe as well.

When an individual seizes the opportunity for existential sensemaking (particularly that resulting from a crisis formed in the collapse of ordinary, ongoing sensemaking), the results can appear astounding. Referring to

the case of our climbers, Joe Simpson survived his fall to a crevasse, succeeded in lowering himself further to the chasm floor, and then began crawling (dragging his shattered leg) along a fragile snow bridge towards the surface. His transition from climber and rope team member to survivor was still in process (and somewhat threatened) when he spotted a beam of sunlight and succeeded in making the transition to a new "project":

"In seconds my whole outlook had changed. The weary frightened hours of night were forgotten, and the abseil which had filled me with such claustrophobic dread had been swept away. The twelve despairing hours I had spent in the unnatural hush of this awesome place seemed suddenly to have been nothing like the nightmare that I had imagined. I could do something positive. I could crawl and climb, and keep on doing so until I had escaped from this grave. Before, there had been nothing for me to do except lie on the (snow) bridge trying not to feel scared and lonely, and that helplessness had been my worst enemy. Now I had a plan." (Simpson, 1988: 133)

Simpson restored the flow of his sensemaking in the face of what appeared to be overwhelming adversity and despite the failure of the organization that he was part of.

In light of a perceived inability to use the good faith mechanism of ordinary sensemaking, Simpson seemed to have initially lost his freedom to reconstruct events towards plausibility. Yet while a particular incarnation of his existential freedom was no longer useful to him (that of being part of a climbing team), he did have the opportunity to examine the context in which his existential freedom was situated. *The failure of the ordinary sensemaking process is only within the context of our existing projects!* The retrospective sensemaking mechanism we ordinarily use is only rendered static through our current, self-created future. We

create our plausible past through sensemaking and we create our future through the nature of our phenomenological existence. As demonstrated by Joe Simpson, we still retain the freedom to reconstitute or recontextualize our projects ourselves. Herein lays our opportunity to move forward and in good faith. We can change, however temporarily, our projects (i.e. our futures) and in doing so we may restore the flow of ongoing sensemaking. We may create whatever future we require to reestablish plausibility and thus sensemaking.

For Simpson, however, this journey was not over and in order for his feat of extraordinary sensemaking to continue we still must address the fact that sensemaking is a social enterprise, and Simpson was alone.

### **An Audience of One**

In *Sensemaking and Organizations* (1995: 40), Weick identifies that "Sensemaking is never solitary because what a person does internally is contingent on others" and suggests that even monologues are audience driven. In the case of Joe Simpson, the monologue was an internal one that lasted for days as he emerged into the open from the crevasse and staggered/crawled towards the site of the base camp:

"It was as if there were two minds within me arguing the toss. The *voice* was clean and sharp and commanding. It was always right, and I listened to it when it spoke and acted on its decisions. The other mind rambled out a disconnected series of images, and memories and hopes, which I attended to in a daydream state as I set about obeying the orders of the *voice*. I had to get to the glacier. I would crawl on the glacier, but I didn't think that far ahead. If my perspectives had sharpened, so too had they narrowed, until I thought only in terms of achieving predetermined aims and no further. Reaching the glacier was my aim. The *voice* told me exactly how to go about it, and I obeyed while my other mind jumped abstractly from one idea to another." (Simpson, 1988: 141)

Even in light of the failure of the rope team organization, a social context remained that would allow Joe Simpson to engage in sensemaking (albeit of an extraordinary variety). In Simpson's case, the social context was that of his own internal monologue.

### IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

What initially seemed a strange union between Weickian sensemaking and Sartrean ontology has offered us some unique insights into the struggles of the individual in times of organizational crisis/collapse. In each their own way, the epistemology of sensemaking and the phenomenological ontology of Sartre's existentialism have offered strengths to augment weaker points in the other. This approach therefore answers, in part, the recent call for a renewed examination of the role of individual agency in sensemaking utilizing the anti-victimization stance that existentialism may offer us (Mullen, Vladi & Mills, 2006).

Sensemaking is a creative process. The pressure in organizations towards generic roles to be filled with generic people engaged in generic sensemaking threatens to render sensemaking a *being in itself* thing. A misattribution of causality, rather than an understanding of how retrospective plausibility is constructed, erodes our acceptance of our existential freedom. The addition of Sartre's well constructed ontology is both an implied critique of the potential objectification of sensemaking (and those engaged in it), as well as a profound complement. Through the process of sensemaking our free will to (re)construct reality is exposed. The epistemology of sensemaking offers explication as to how we may navigate in this Sartrean existentialism, authentically and in good faith. An understanding of how we are able to choose plausibility over accuracy goes some way towards reducing our existential anxiety. Thus, this addition of sensemaking renders

us an existentialism that is more humane while simultaneously cautioning against objectification of our freedom.

There are a number of implications that arise from the deployment of an existential sensemaking perspective for the study of individuals within organizations. The reframing of organizational crises as opportunities for individuals to use existential sensemaking (as in our example of the two climbers in Peru) puts an emphasis upon the positive outcomes possible when people understand their existential nature and choices. Research conducted from this viewpoint further privileges the individual and their choices in a way that offers another facet to the literature. This counterpoint to the more common analysis of the failure of sensemaking balances our conceptions regarding individual choice in the midst of organizations in crisis. Furthermore, through examining junctures where individuals use the cues generated through their existential awareness to engage in the choice to continue their sensemaking, we begin to see the contours of an existential ethics as applied to identity construction. Ethical choice and the intersection of non-essentialized individuals navigating an organized situation, offers a potential heuristic to explore how ethics are enacted in the organizing process, this without being constrained by a concretized conception of ethics and personal choice.

Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld (2005) state that "Sensemaking is about the interplay of action and interpretation rather than the influence of evaluation on choice. When action is the central focus, interpretation, not choice, is the core phenomenon" (Weick et al, 2005: 409). Existential sensemaking seems especially likely to occur when action is central and yet interpretation is substantially at risk, with existential choice being the "fall back" position. We find in such existential sensemaking analytical opportunities to examine this interplay of interpretation and choice.

In reviewing the limited literature regarding existentialism and organization, we found an interesting discussion regarding

existentialism and the management of dilemmas in administrative behavior (Aram, 1976). Through a discussion of the concentration camp experiences and subsequent writings of Viktor Frankl, the author offers the following:

“Yet Frankl states that most prisoners believed the opportunities and challenges of life were in the past rather than the present. A majority of them looked upon the camps lacking consequence and as meaningless. It is implied that many prisoners longed for the experiences and external values that are present in the day-to-day context of organizational life.” (Aram, 1976:131)

Frankl believed that in an individual's search for meaning, the resources required could largely rest with the individual. We suggest that this concept of existential sensemaking, being one of anti-self victimization, offers a rich potential to further illuminate the successful transcending of overwhelming adversity, precisely when the more commonplace ordering of interpretation over choice fails.

However, to suggest that opportunities for existential sensemaking occur is not to suggest that individuals are necessarily equipped to seize them for what they are. We are skillful in our ongoing application of sensemaking; it seems innate and natural to us to the extent that we likely do not cognitively apprehend it. Further, being embedded in a society that espouses predominantly realist ontological perspectives likely contributes to a misattribution of causality to the continuous stream of sensemaking. The very ubiquitous aspect of ordinary sensemaking renders discussions and thought regarding existential sensemaking unlikely to have occurred prior to a requirement to actively engage in it. Likewise, an additional challenge to the use of existential sensemaking concerns the constellation of power relations, which originate in the social world yet are firmly part of the facticity which presents itself to us.

Powerful actors may seek to shape our experiences and thus we may actually fail to apprehend opportunities for our own freedom to change our projects. This interplay between context shaped by powerful actors and our own freedom espoused within existential sensemaking, while not denying the role of power in shaping of our sensemaking, also offers one way to interrogate Sartre's contention that “...we have no means, no intellectual instrument, no concrete experience which allows us to conceive of this freedom or of this philosophy”(Sartre,1993: 34). We have examples of existential sensemaking in action available to us and they form poignant opportunities to examine the ways in which individuals make changes in their projects when faced with an overwhelming collapse of the ordinary stream of sensemaking. Weick's suggestion that “Reflection is perhaps the best stance for both researchers and practitioners to adopt if the topic of sensemaking is to advance.” (Weick, 1995) is well taken. The additional richness offered through reflection that focuses upon individual choice in extreme circumstances, may aid practitioners (and we are all practitioners of the art of sensemaking) in avoiding the kind of generic sensemaking implicated in such tragedies as the Mann Gulch fire described by Weick (2001). Perhaps awareness and reflection concerning existential sensemaking is one opportunity to provide an “intellectual instrument” of the sort that Sartre sought in his project to understand how a philosophy of freedom might rise to prominence.

It is telling that in many cases where ordinary sensemaking seems to have failed, the post-hoc analysis seems to revolve around the concept of an individual and their failure to properly support an organization. The above described framework of Sartrean/Weickian existential sensemaking challenges us to reframe our understanding of this sort of situation. Initially we are reminded that sensemaking is inherently social in nature; it is the way in which we construct plausibility and escape from the doom of self/other objectification as described by Sartre's being for others. This allows for the good faith authenticity of sensemaking in organizations.

When ordinary sensemaking has failed, and a crisis is at hand, the social context of the individual is no longer plausible in light of her current projects. Those aspects of organizations that pressure us towards generic sensemaking (Weick, 1995) no longer make sense, the environment is now not seen as stable and predictable, just as our organizational sensemaking reassured us in the past, but rather we are pulled from the comforting, constant stream of ordinary sensemaking and shown our individual freedom. Likewise, the inexorable push of organizational sensemaking to find a place of generic interchangeability is made clearly implausible to us in moments of crisis when ongoing sensemaking has failed. As much as we might wish it, no one can be substituted for us in these crisis situations; we find ourselves alone and exactly where we are.

The overwhelming use of examples and cases which represent failures of sensemaking, or indeed sensemaking which results in what might be construed as unwanted outcomes for the individuals and/or their organizations, is not without problems. This type of post-mortem analysis lends itself to conceptions of universal "best practices". In seeking suggestions for what to avoid, we may well miss vital opportunities which offer dramatically different possibilities. We have tried to illustrate how in the absence of meaningful cues which contribute to an individual's ongoing projects, that same individual may (through facing their existential anxiety) make choices to continue action, and thus sensemaking. To those who seem skeptical about the worth of such a positive perspective, we offer the following: perhaps we might imagine that through examination of successful cases of existential sensemaking, the possibility of a conception of processual organizing with an existential ethics at the heart of individual sensemaking becomes feasible.

We have argued that even in an extreme case such as Joe Simpson's, the social context for a revival of the flow of

sensemaking exists within that individual themselves. Eventually Simpson, near death, succeeded in getting close to the base camp and the tents where, by chance, the other members of his party had lingered in sorrow over Joe's certain death. Barely hearing Simpson's feeble cries for help, they found him and carried him to the tent and began to tend to him:

"Then Simon dragged me into the tent and laid me gently back against a mass of warm down sleeping bags. He knelt by my side staring at me, and I could see a confusion of pity, and horror, and alarm fighting in his eyes. I smiled at him, and he grinned back, shaking his head slowly from side to side.

"Thanks, Simon," I said. "You did right."

I saw him turn quickly away, averting his eyes.

"Anyway, thanks."

He nodded silently."(Simpson, 1988: 188-189)

In the end, both men survived their harrowing ordeal of injury, organizational collapse, survival and subsequent forgiveness. In fact, after the ordeal each went on to climb as members of other expeditions and rope teams. They both succeeded in contextualizing the terrible circumstances as part of the risk/reward dyad of the mountaineering pursuit. It would seem that even the most extraordinary existential sensemaking eventually becomes part of the ongoing flow of plausibility, in retrospect.

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