Sensemaking and Identity Development:

Different Fields, Similar Processes, but How?

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Abstract

The following article examines sensemaking and the minority/majority identity development models as processual theories. While these theories are offered in different concentrations of Speech Communication (i.e., Organizational Communication and Intercultural Communication respectively), they are actually interrelated concepts that share similarities. Sensemaking is a process where individuals attempt to understand unknown elements because of unfamiliar/uncertain situations. Identity development is very similar to sensemaking because we have to make sense of who we are in everyday life through unfamiliarity. Sensemaking and identity development are two similar theories that impact our identity/identities within organizations. In order to articulate this connection further, I explain sensemaking and the minority/majority identity development models. I also synthesize sensemaking and minority/majority identity development noting other relevant theories.

Keywords

Intercultural communication, identity development, organizational communication, sensemaking

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Having a sense of belonging within an organization (e.g., with co-workers, within a particular department, with the supervisor, etc.) is an important necessity in organizational life because it raises self-esteem and provides support for members. Maslow (1971) argues that having a sense of belonging is a basic need. However, integrating into a particular organization or knowing your identity within a respective organization is a process. It takes time and energy to assimilate into a new organization because it requires making sense of unfamiliar experiences. Knowing your identity within an organization is also a process because it requires maneuvering through different situations that are unknown.

For this article, I examine the processes of sensemaking and minority/majority identity development together and establish how they are actually interrelated constructs. While both processes have been individually examined in organizational and intercultural communication literature respectively, they have common processual elements that have yet to be integrated. Sensemaking is a continuous life-long process in which an individual attempts to understand the unknown elements (e.g., the actors, norms pertinent to cultural values, etc.) of a given communicative situation that s/he will be in for some time (Starbuck & Milliken 1988; Weick 1995). Minority/majority identity development takes place along a series of stages that track an individual's sense of either belonging to a nondominant group or the majority group and their subsequent relationships with members of other groups (Hardiman 1994; Martin & Nakayama 2000).

Based on the research reviewed, the following research question is proposed: **RQ:** What makes sensemaking and identity development similar processes and interrelated concepts? To answer this research question, I put forth three elements common to each theory, suggesting that integrating the theories offers organizational scholars a productive way to articulate the intercultural aspects of sensemaking. First, both theories are process oriented. That is, a person does not come to a realization of what is going on and the relationship of their identity to it in a given situation all of a sudden. Rather, a person goes through some stages to determine what is going on. Second, both theories describe an individual's ongoing adaptation to unfamiliar surroundings. For example, when a person is assimilating into an organization or progressing beyond the first stage of unexamined identity, s/he is dealing with

stages of the unknown. Last, both theories acknowledge the importance of a certain "encounter" (i.e., critical incident, critical situation, paradigm shift, etc.) that occurs and prompts a person to reflect upon what is going on in either process.

I first examine this issue by explaining sensemaking and minority/majority identity development. Second, I synthesize sensemaking and minority/majority identity development, while noting other theories that are very similar.

Definition of Sensemaking

Weick (1969) refers to sensemaking as making sense of uncertainties in environments through interaction. He applies this theory to demonstrate how members of organizations make choices (or are forced to make choices) when uncertainty arises. Weick (1995) argues that sensemaking examines the critical issues of organizational behavior and also the meanings that are constructed with/within organizations. We have to make sense with/within organizations because organizations are complex entities that have unpredictable environments, as one behavior is different from another behavior. Mandler (1984) argues that sensemaking occurs because there is an interruption in a continuous flow. This interruption is a feeling of unfamiliarity. But, the sensemaking process should not be limited to only organizations. Rather, it is a way to move through everyday life. That is, sensemaking is the ability to discern, over time, key factors (e.g., beliefs, cultures, norms, relationships, values, etc.) within everyday life. It is a cognitive process that starts from birth all within the context of one's own schemata and person prototypes that one has gained through her/his experiences. Sensemaking is a way of life that one has to endure time and time again because making sense of unfamiliar phenomena is a reoccurring process. The definition of sensemaking needs to be expanded from work/organizations to other facets of one's life, as we are always making sense during our everyday experiences. Because unfamiliarity forces an individual to make sense, it is a continuous process that one faces at home, work, during creative/leisure time, etc. While sensemaking is a process that one goes through continuously in life, it is also a process that helps in terms of identity development. The minority identity development and majority identity development models explicate how sense of identity changes in various points of life.

Definitions of Minority/Majority Identity Development

Within large cultures, there tends to be smaller cultures of people who have similarities. This feeling is universal within larger contexts because individuals belonging to the same culture feel more comfortable with one another, even through they may be a small representative of a larger culture. Moreover, one individual's epistemological sense of knowing or coming to terms with her/his identity will be different than the next person.

Minority identity development is how an individual constructs identity when s/he is not part of the majority (Ponterotto & Pedersen 1993). There are four stages of minority identity development and each one represents a way of assimilating (c.f., Jablin 1982, 2001) into a particular group that also helps to constitute one's identity.

Stage one is unexamined identity. Martin and Nakayama (2000) explain that unexamined identity is the "lack of exploration of ethnicity" (130). It should be noted that while ethnicity is the primary focus of this essay, it can be interchangeable with other minority groups (e.g., class, gender, sexuality, etc.). To discuss each one would be a time consuming discussion that is outside the scope for this essay. Stage two is conformity. In this stage, there is a strong negative value associated with one's identity. This may/may not lead to negative attitudes about herself/himself and their respective ethnic group at large. But, one incident that may lead to negative attitudes is the harsh labeling of individual ethnic groups as in the United States (e.g., "Oreos"-African Americans, "Bananas"-Asian Americans, "Apples"-Native Americans, etc.). While labeling and self-labeling changes over time, something that is consistent is that groups are labeled in terms of another group (Martin, Krizek, Nakayama, & Bradford 1999).

Stage three is resistance and separatism. This stage is more personal as it occurs when somebody questions a person's identity. Stage four is integration. "A person who has reached this stage has a strong sense of his or her own group identity (based on gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and so on)" (Martin & Nakayama 2000:131). From my perspective, this stage can occur at any point in one's life and

is not always guaranteed to happen. It all depends on the personal history of the individual and what has led her/him to this stage.

While minority identity development is one source of in group/out group and also a way to (in)form/shape identity, there is also majority identity development. Hardiman (1994) first develops this model and terms it as the White Identity Model (WID). Martin and Nakayama (2000) update the WID model by renaming it the majority identity model and further defining the stages. More importantly, Martin and Nakayama illustrate that if there is a minority then from a binarial stance, there must be a majority. In turn, this conceptualizes the processes of each model holistically as one is defined in terms of the other. Stage one is unexamined identity. This is the same stage as in the minority identity development model, but where White people recognize differences from themselves to minorities (e.g., African American, Asian Indian, Latino, etc.). Stage two is acceptance. This stage is more complex and is the cognitive examination of the unconscious/conscious acceptance of being White. Specifically, it is the acknowledgement and expression of being White.

In addition, this stage relates more to the worldview that is learned/inherent in each person. Worldview is how one looks at reality through her/his eyes (Littlejohn 1996; Patton 1990). According to Martin & Nakayama (2000), individuals during the acceptance stage take either one of two positions in regards to issues of race. "They either avoid contact with minority members or adopt a patronizing stance toward them. Both positions are possible at the same time" (Martin & Nakayama 2000:132). In other words, if an individual avoids contact with minority members, then they are avoiding interpersonal communication with the "other." This could be that the individual wants to avoid contact because it can result in conflict or in possibly learning that the "other" is not that different from herself/himself. It can also mean self-disclosure by either individual, and this can be an uncomfortable situation. If the individual is patronizing, then there is a definite feeling of superiority as the person in the majority is belittling the minority (Hobbes 1651/1996). There is a psychoanalytic component to this as feeling superior to another (i.e., majority over minority) creates a feeling of being better than the "other." This helps the majority individual with self-esteem (Maslow 1971) and ego, while demoralizing the person who is in the minority. If an individual chooses to avoid contact and patronize, then the person is making sense of the situation as two-fold. This is quite powerful and hurtful because there is a minimal level of acceptance for the "other," and also a feeling of "I am better than you are." Hardiman (1994) believes that this stage is either accepted passively (subconscious) or actively (conscious).

Stage three is resistance. "It is a move from blaming minority members for their condition to one that names and blames their own dominant group as a source of racial or ethnic problems" (Martin & Nakayama 2000:133). This stage is accomplished either passively (with some change) or actively (ownership of being racist towards one or more groups). Stage four is redefinition. In this stage Whites begin to refocus on defining what it means to be White in nonracist terms. For instance, Hardiman (1994) argues that Whites move into defining their own race as being more positive and downplay the negativity. This is when Whites express how they are proud to be White, and become more accepting of their racial makeup.

Stage five is integration. It is where individuals acknowledge that they are White and also able to see the differences among minorities in a positive manner. This step is critical as the individual recognizes that s/he is different, but also is more accepting of minority groups.

While these previous stages are crucial in identifying the development that one may/may not go through minority/majority identity development, it is important to critique several flaws. Minority identity development primarily centers on race and ethnicity. But, this is not equitable to other minority populations that are not part of the large majority. For example, class, gender, nationality, sexuality, etc. are also minority categories that should be part of the central axis that constitute minority identity development. Additionally, individuals in majority identity development may not make it past acceptance, stage two. This feeling could potentially result because individuals have not experienced moving beyond a level of comfort for themselves. Each person's individual experience is different from the next person and it is not ethical to generalize in either identity development model. Furthermore, life and identity cannot always be categorized by stages because we are constantly evolving. Each stage should be viewed as continuous processes that merge into each other while holding on to past stages. Additionally, some individuals may feel as if they are in more than one stage at the same time.

Also, redefinition is a strong move from defining Whiteness to owning Whiteness (Supriya 1999). It is important that individuals who own whiteness accomplish it in a positive manner. Specifically, owning whiteness has to be accomplished in an unenforceable manner. Owning whiteness recognizes that there are extremes in identity development (which may not happen for every individual and is not always the case). This truly depends on which stage(s) the individual falls and accepts in terms of minority and majority identity development. It does not always have to be two extremes. Furthermore, the integration stage is very problematic. This stage is not achievable for all individuals, as individual experiences will differ from person to person. Compared to other cultures across the world, has the United States of America (USA) really achieved a level of integration to other facets of identity? I do not think so. Some members of the USA have moved to integration in both minority and majority identity development, but as a country it has not. This is a positive step in the right direction, but is somewhat utopic in ideology. While Martin Luther King, Jr. calls for a particular integrated society in his "I Have a Dream" speech (Carson & Shepard 2001), it has not been achieved in a manner that lives up to integration from Martin and Nakayama (2000). Discussing the definitions of minority/majority identity development is only one way to examine identity. In fact, there are several other theories that are very similar to sensemaking and identity development. The following section synthesizes sensemaking and minority/majority identity development with similar theories and also demonstrates how the two processes are actually interrelated concepts.

Synthesis of Sensemaking and Minority/Majority Identity Development While Noting Similar Theories

While sensemaking and minority/majority identity development are theories in two different concentrations of Speech Communication, (i.e., Organizational and Intercultural Communication respectively), they are undergirded by commonalities. Because these theories have only been individually offered in previous literature within their respective concentrations, no scholar has recognized that they have much in common. First, both theories are processual. Second, both theories describe an individual's processual adaptation to unfamiliar environments. Last, both theories, acknowledge the importance of a certain encounter that prompts a person to reflect upon what is going on in either process.

First, sensemaking and minority/majority identity development are process oriented. That is, individuals do not all of a sudden come to a realization of what is going on and the relationship of their identity to it in a given situation. Specifically, individuals go through certain proccesual stages (depending on which model is being used) to determine what is going on and where they stand in terms of their identity. More specifically, there are stages involved in both theories that individuals maneuver through. For example, when a new member is entering an organization (e.g., a new work environment) for the first time, s/he needs to make sense of the unfamiliar surroundings and also her/his own identity. Jablin's (1982) organizational assimilation theory outlines these steps in our discipline. The organizational assimilation process includes "conscious and unconscious, behavioral, affective and cognitive processes" that affect an individual who joins, assimilates, and exits the organization (Jablin 1994:31). They are the following stages: anticipatory socialization, encounter, metamorphosis, and disengagement/exit. The anticipatory socialization stage is most relevant to this essay. In this stage the new member has to make sense of what is going on in the new environment with different cultural norms and codes (e.g., dress, hierarchical relationships, productivity, what can be said/what cannot be said, etc.). Making sense of the environment impacts the member's identity because it depends on how s/he acts in different situations. In order to move to the encounter stage, an individual must be more comfortable than when first entering the organization. Even though a new member may know existing members, may have extensive knowledge about the organization, etc., the new member does not know/understand exactly everything that is going on until s/he is immersed in the culture.

In the minority/majority identity development theories, an individual goes through several stages to see where they are in terms of recognizing their own identity. These stages are a crucial part of the process for two reasons. First, each stage marks where individuals are in terms of acknowledging their own identity. This way an individual can choose to know where s/he is in terms of the identity process, or for scholastic purposes, be identified/labeled. Second, each stage is part of the unifying process. While one may/may not go through the entire process of each model (unexamined identity to integration), the models are processual in nature. That is, everybody starts off with unexamined identity as adolescents (Adamson & Lyxell 1996; Phinney 1993). Even though an individual may stop at stage two, three, or

four and never progress to integration, the individual has moved on from stage one of unexamined identity. So, the individual is progressing, just at her/his own individual rate. While these theories are processual, they also have other common elements.

Second, both theories describe an individual's ongoing adaptation to surroundings that are not yet familiar. For example, when individuals are assimilating into an organization or progressing beyond the first stage of unexamined identity in either minority/majority identity development theories, they are dealing with stages of the unknown. Weick (1995) refers to the unknown as "ambiguity" and "uncertainty" in organizations. More specifically, there is either confusion (ambiguity) or ignorance of the current situation (uncertainty). This feeling occurs when individuals have to make sense of the current situation and asses the environment before making the next step. But, sometimes people learn by taking the next step and then retrospectively examine the situation afterwards. Weick (1979) explains "How can I know what I think until I see what I say?" (5). This is retrospective sensemaking (Weick 1979). Retrospective sensemaking should not be limited to organizations. Rather, it is a theory that happens in everyday life as well. Retrospective sensemaking is a component of the minority/majority identity development processes. Some individuals may only progress or even regress after taking one step forward or one step back. For example, an individual may be in the integration stage of the minority identity development model, but then a critical incident occurs that causes her/him to think about the situation. Rather than accepting the incident, this person may regress back to resistance and separate herself/himself from her/his group and question her/his cultural identity.

One critique of retrospective sensemaking is that while regressing may be true for some individuals, it is not true for all individuals. People have their own experiences (Bantz & Smith 1977). This post modernistic view (Alvesson & Deetz 1996; Kim 2002) is important to emphasize because one person may experience the same phenomenon differently from another person. Experiences are not always generalizable nor should they be generalizable. It is not fair to assume that retrospective sensemaking occurs for all individuals in the same manner.

Another critique of sensemaking that Weick fails to mention is that some people always act first and interpret the step later. Eisenberg and Goodall, Jr. (2001) argue that some people only act in accordance with predetermined plans. This is important to note because some individuals choose not to alter their plans regardless of what ambiguity or uncertainty lies ahead. Instead, these individuals choose to follow existing plans before an incident occurs, and execute them in any case. A prime example is military operations. In certain cases, when plans are made, there is no choice but to follow through with them in spite of the situation and how it affects other areas related to the plan (e.g., cultural implications, geography, lives, relationships, etc.). The common element among these theories is that a certain situation occurs that affects the individual.

Third, sensemaking and the minority/majority identity development constructs acknowledge the importance of a certain encounter (i.e., critical incident, paradigm shift, situation, etc.). The encounter prompts the person to reflect upon what is going on. These encounters occur during sensemaking situations in everyday life. They occur when individuals encounter a place where there is ambiguity and uncertainty. It causes individuals to reflect upon the situation to determine what the next step is during uncertainty. These encounters also occur during minority/majority identity development. This commonality between the theories is a core component. A situation can occur in stages after unexamined identity. This particular situation causes individuals to either move back one or more stages or progress to the next stage. This is also a key element of why these theories are processual. Moreover, the different stages of each theory are part of the ongoing process of self examination in terms of identity.

Encounters also occur during organizational assimilation and can occur at anytime. The goal of organizational assimilation for a new member is to integrate into the organization. Encounters tremendously impact this goal. That is, encounters aid members in making progress towards metamorphosis, or dissolving the relationship between themselves and the organization.

Encounters also occur during organizational socialization. Organizational socialization is learning specific strategies to know how to manage and accept the behavior that is expected within an organization and its specific roles. Specifically, it is learning knowledge, skills, and strategy in order to maintain in the organization (c.f., Van Maanen & Schein 1979; Wanous 1980). In this process,

individuals learn how to become members of the organization. A situation occurs that can also affect this process as well. Some individuals learn what strategies are accepted/not accepted after trying them out. For example, during organizational socialization, individuals may use jokes as a strategy to learn which genre of jokes are not acceptable (e.g., jokes about co-workers, jokes about race, jokes about weight, sexual jokes, etc.). Using jokes is one way to test what which genre of joke is not okay within the organization and also a strategy that can aid a new member socialize more effectively. I understand that there is general knowledge about what is acceptable in organizations overall, however, sometimes people forget, do not realize, or just don't know what is acceptable. This comes back to retrospective sensemaking because individuals have to think about which jokes are acceptable and which ones are not after they have been tested. Once individuals test which jokes are not acceptable, they will know what to use. But, individuals would not know unless specifically told during the socialization process which jokes are acceptable and which ones are not. By testing which jokes are not acceptable, an individual maneuvers through a situation. When an individual is testing jokes, s/he does not know what is acceptable unless told beforehand. When the jokes are tested, there is a period of ambiguity and uncertainty. During this period, the individual has to think if any of the jokes are offensive, and realize retrospectively which ones are acceptable or not. Thus, an encounter can occur in organizational socialization as it does in other noted theories.

Conclusions

As demonstrated throughout this essay, sensemaking and minority/majority identity development are two theoretical processes that are very similar. While these theories have been previously offered in different concentrations in our discipline, we should integrate them to show that what happens in one area of life may affect another area of life. One core component of either theory is a feeling of ambiguity and/or unfamiliarity which requires individuals to maneuver through the respective process. Integrating the two theories demonstrates that sensemaking happens in everyday life. Sensemaking is a process. Discovering your identity is a part of that process. Also through integration, organizational scholars that research sensemaking should be able to decipher that there are intercultural aspects involved with it. Articulating these issues and examining them critically can aid organizations in training their employees by making them aware that there is more than simple organizational life.

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