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**Ambiguous Artifacts: Exploring Sensemaking Towards
Organizational Identification**

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Abstract

Ambiguous Artifacts: Exploring Sensemaking Towards Organizational Identification

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Scholars have long sought to understand how professionals construct their identity relative to the organizations in which they work. Organizations put in place loose and flexible structures to be responsive to emerging opportunities and challenges and to encourage and manage organizational and industry changes. New organizations may be especially likely to adopt unorthodox or intentionally ambiguous structures to set themselves apart and address problems that motivate their founding and diversify their structures. Research in turn needs to understand how organizational members accommodate uncertain and shifting organizational structures by negotiating the personal, professional, and organizational aspects of their identity through communicative sensemaking. I contribute to the study of organizational identity and sensemaking processes through a qualitative case study that explores how individuals construct their identity in the absence of conventional sensegiving artifacts. Discursively vague job titles, indefinite and inapplicable job descriptions, and unclear and ambiguous

organizational structures prompt continuous sensemaking. Analysis of interview data and field notes uncovered alternate schemas and resulting work practices individuals engage in as they negotiate their organizational identity to cope with uncertainty and ambiguity.

Key words: organizational identity; sensemaking; sensegiving artifacts

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Introduction

In founding a new organization, the processes of defining who the organization is and will be, what it means to be a member of the organization, and how the organization will define and solve problems are paramount. New organizations face a greater burden to support the sensemaking needs of its members, because employees need frameworks that help them to understand and implement decisions in their work (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). Sensemaking occurs in newly formed organizations as individuals marshal their own communicative skills, previous experiences, and the resources provided to them by the organization to define the organization's problems and opportunities, to decide who the organization will be and who they will be in it, and to position the organization and their work in it as legitimate. Founding also prompts organizational members to incorporate their multiple ongoing identity narratives into their work. In a new organization, individuals of various backgrounds bring with them their normative ideals of how work is and should be, which can vary greatly across disciplines, cultures, and demographics. They must coalesce and coordinate these ideals as they work together in the interest of the organization. Sensemaking guides decision-making. The decisions workers make day-to-day reflect how they come to understand organizational problems and what counts as an effective solution.

Identity, how organizational members see themselves and present themselves to others, is central in sensemaking. Identification processes, the processes through which identity forms and changes over time, influence individuals' work practices as they

continuously negotiate what it means to be part of an organization as a person, organizational member, and professional. Ashforth, Harrison, and Corley (2008) suggested the potential for “parsimonious models of multiple identification” in lieu of independent evaluation of individuals’ various levels for identity and identification. This “loose gestalt” of identities informs and is informed by organizations as workers situate the multiple identities they bring with them in relationship to the evolving identity they understand the organization to have.

Literature Review

Sensemaking and Identity

Sensemaking is a foundational concept in the organizational communication literature (Weick, 1979). Sensemaking is an inherently social process that is situationally-bound and tied to identity. Weick (1995) argued that humans are meaning-seekers and identification with organizations and roles can lessen the uncertainty workers face as they navigate organizational change and development. Morgan et al. (1983) described sensemaking as

...concerned with understanding the genesis of meaningful action, how individuals make sense of their situations, and thus come to define and share realities which may become objectified in fairly routinized ways. In short, [sensemaking is used] to understand how the objective, taken for granted aspects of everyday life are constituted and made real through the medium of symbolic processes. (p. 22).

The routinization of these symbolic processes can inform and constrain actors' actions as they become embedded in their understanding of reality. Weick (1996) described the notion of "dropping one's tools" as an allegory to represent the process of adaption and the difficulty of unlearning of engrained, organized behaviors. He draws it out of an example of firefighters perishing because they failed to drop the heavy tools they had been trained to protect while running from danger. In this example, underscoring how identity and sensemaking are interwoven, that firefighters hold onto their tools is integral

not just to their training, but to who they are as professionals. Routinization may be understood as accepted, established, and in some cases formalized ways of making sense, and it is a natural, necessary function of organized behavior and the smooth execution of organizational processes. Just as organizations routinize produces and ways of acting, they make routine ways of being—forms of identity that are more or less acceptable.

Weick (1996) expanded on the importance of and potential for integrating research on sensemaking and identity:

In a very real sense, the basic questions, “who am I,” “who are they,” and “who are ‘we’” dominate attempts at sensemaking... And once a tentative answer is formulated, sensemaking has just started, because answers need to be reaccomplished, retuned, and sometimes even rebuilt. What the answers never have is a sense of finality. (p. 77)

Weick further argued that sensemaking is grounded in identity, and posited that people deal with a situation depending on the identity they choose to adopt while addressing it. These decisions are influenced by their perceptions, and their perceptions depend on who they become or what they represent when facing the situation, determined by the subjective situational-self, not the objective reality of what is happening. Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld (2005) posited that “sensemaking unfolds as a sequence in which people concerned with *identity in the social context of other actors* engage ongoing circumstances from which they extract cues and make plausible sense retrospectively” (emphasis added p. 409). Sensemaking, how organizations define and enact the problems

and solutions they face, is an inherently social process that is also situationally- and identity-bound.

Organizational Identity

Sensemaking involves individuals' sense of identity, which reflects and also shapes the construction of organizational identity. Organizational identity can refer to the individuals' sense of what it means to be an organizational member and also the representation of the organization itself. Ashforth and colleagues (2008) stress the importance of organizational identity as an explanation for the actions individuals take in entering, working within, and leaving organizations. They itemize the attributes of identity – values, goals, beliefs, stereotypes, knowledge, skills, and abilities – and posit that narratives are invoked as a means to articulate one's identity. Individuals negotiate multiple aspects of their identity including who they are as individuals, as members of their communities and social groups, as holders of specific occupations and professions, and as organizational members. In organizing, these multiple facets of identity are organizationally situated and loosely coupled (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Cheney, Christensen, and Dailey (2014) defined an organization's identity as that which is used to *represent* the organization. Organizational identity serves as an important resource and target for identification processes for employees and consumers (Larson & Gill, 2017).

Organizational artifacts are essential to organizational identity representations. Take, for example, the efforts of consumer goods corporations to build brand awareness, affinity, and loyalty. Organizations appeal to audiences through advertisements displaying relatable or desirable identity markers such as wealth and beauty. In

organizations where knowledge and partnerships are valued, sensegiving artifacts that communicate the expertise and human capital of the organization are salient. A focus on identification as a process, to which I now move, creates space to study the recursive relationship between sensemaking and identity work.

Organizational Identification and Identity Work

Connected to and yet distinct from organizational identity is organizational identification. Ashforth and Mael (1989) defined identification as (a) a perception of oneness with a group of persons, (b) stemming from the evaluation of ingroups and outgroups as distinctive, prestigious, and salient, and (c) leading to activities which support and reinforce the activities, antecedents, and institutions that embody the identity. Drawing on Social Identity Theory (SIT), they posited that individuals hold a personal identity, as well as multiple social identities, which are “composed of the meanings that persons attach to the multiple roles they typically play in highly differentiated contemporary societies” (Stryker & Burke, 2000, p. 284).

Organizational identification can be defined in terms of perceptions of belonging and self-definition (Mael & Ashforth, 1992), as well as by changes in decision-making and desires to promote the interests of the organization (Tompkins & Cheney, 1985). Organizational identification is an ongoing, iterative process that workers engage in as they contribute to and are informed by the organization’s identity and their identity in relationship to it. The organization’s identity does not exist in a vacuum; it is instead an amalgamate of worker’s organizational identities, which they form based on their shared

understanding of central and enduring characteristics of the organization (D'Enbeau & Buzzanell, 2013), as well as organizational members strategic efforts to shape the organization's image for others. Identity work comes into play as people negotiate their organizational identity as they shape and are shaped by the world around them (Taylor & Van Avery, 2000). Identity work is defined as "people being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness" (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p. 1165).

Identity work is prompted by social interactions that motivate people to question who they are, subsequently reproducing or transforming their sense of self (Alvesson et al., 2008). Ashforth et al. (2008) argued that "identification matters because it is the process by which people come to define themselves, communicate that definition to others, and use that definition to navigate their lives, work-wise or other" (p. 334). Organizations have become keen to the importance of providing workers with resources to inform their social constructions of the world around them, and have accordingly devoted effort to improving socialization practices. Organizational identification is directly influenced by common assimilation and socialization practices such as employee orientation, initiation ceremonies, and training sessions (Larson & Gill, 2017), and the more rigorous the programs, the greater the shared values between employee and organization (Chatman, 1991). Sensegiving artifacts, the objects organizational members create to influence sensemaking processes, are key in such programs. These artifacts, such as job descriptions, titles, organizational charts, missions, and value statements

influence identity negotiations that endure after the orientations, induction ceremonies, and opening sessions conclude.

Artifacts as a Sensegiving Resource for Identity Construction

This study seeks to forward scholarship on sensemaking and identity work. Existing scholarship has explored the intersection between artifacts and organizational identification to forward knowledge on the impact of corporate branding, employee dress, and logos (Howard, 2008), and this existing scholarship makes clear the need to investigate how workers negotiate their identity when they are presented with ambiguous sensegiving artifacts. Weick (1996) argued that people “learn about their identities by projecting them into the environment and observing the consequences” (p. 23). Louis (1980) suggested sensemaking occurs as people cope with violated expectations and interruptions, both of which are common in newly founded organizations as members evolve their previously situated practices to accommodate new roles, responsibilities, and cultural expectations. Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991, p. 446) suggested that a “captivating vision” is key in these contexts because “it provides a symbolic foundation for stakeholders to develop an alternative interpretive scheme” and that “the symbolic constructions used to create meaning for others (i.e., to give sense) are instrumental to the effectiveness of the critical stage of proposing and initiating an overall change effort” (p. 148). To understand how workers make sense of themselves and the organization they belong to, we should examine the information they seek, the artifacts they are given, and the meaning they make of them.

Vough (2012) defined sensegiving as consisting “of discourses provided by the organization to guide and shape individuals’ understandings and actions in organizationally beneficial ways” (p. 779). Weick (1995) noted that humans seek meaning by nature, and identification with their organizational roles and collectives helps them to reduce uncertainty during organizational entry or change. A lack of sensegiving may hinder organizational members’ navigation of navigate complex, knowledge-intensive, interdisciplinary roles. Scott and colleagues (1998) showed the interconnectedness of multiple identities upon multiple targets (organization, occupation, team, etc.) within the organizational context, explaining that differences in salience result from their situated activities. Lammers and colleagues (2013) found that the multifaceted nature of identity buffered professionals from concerning burnout. That is, identity can be a resource in doing difficult work.

Organizational leaders can be sense-givers (Thayer, 1998) who guide members attention to certain aspects of their identity and forms of sensemaking by providing material resources and discursive vocabularies for what, how, and with whom their work should be completed. Weick (1996) argued that these vocabularies are influential in defining the assumptions that inform decisions and influence sensemaking. Ring and Rands (1989) defined sensemaking as “a process in which individuals develop cognitive maps of their environment,” a process which the organization is expected to assist in, as organizations exist to make sense of human collectives (p. 342). For example, organizations typically provide such a “cognitive map” by creating an organizational chart. If that map is ambiguous, it may not be useful.

Weick (1996) suggested that organizational sensemaking depends on the “adequacy of the scripts, routines, and recipes already in place” (p. 5). He posited that when organizations provide a greater variety of language, symbols, and images to members they are more adaptive in their sensemaking. These routines and recipes for work are materialized by the job descriptions organizations construct to establish workers’ roles, expectations, and responsibilities. These texts are particularly important for HR functions such as recruiting and hiring, as well as managerial functions such as performance reviews.

Gärtner and Huber (2018) defined inscriptions as “material textual translations of any setting, such as written texts, tables and charts, numbers, and lists which are to be acted upon” (p. 268). Organizational charts, job descriptions, and job titles are material inscriptions in their terms. They support individuals’ identity work, that is, how actors “create a coherent sense of self in response to the multiple (and perhaps conflicting) scripts, roles, and subject positions encountered in both work and non-work activity” (Kuhn, 2006, p. 1341). They are discursive resources provided by leadership as sensegiving artifacts that inform identity negotiation by establishing reporting relationships and giving a sense of organizational structure to external and internal stakeholders.

Organizational charts, job titles, and job descriptions are facets of professional work that have become institutionalized as expectations exist for their content and design. Simmering (2006) argued that the expectations for organizational charts include “the organization’s structure, its hierarchy, the degree to which it is centralized or

decentralized, and its chain of command” (p. 622). These charts represent structure and attach names to titles. Likewise, research on job titles has explored their importance for effective organizing, as they can reinforce trust (Bechky, 2006), help teams differentiate skillsets (Hollenbeck, Beersma, & Schouten, 2012), and aid newcomer socialization. They can communicate “a person’s specific knowledge, competencies, status, and values, which can serve as a source of pride and identity for jobholders” (Grant, Berg, & Cable, 2014, p. 1202). Baron and Bielby (1986) suggested that organizations give workers job titles as a means “to anchor workers’ identities” (p. 563), and Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) argued for the importance of job titles as “prominent identity badges” (p. 417).

If these maps, scripts, and titles are ambiguous, vague, or unstructured, they may make it difficult for workers to form expectations or make sense as well as violating their existing expectations for how organizing ought to work. That is, they may offer limited value in individuals’ negotiation of the inherent uncertainty and equivocality of organizational life. Weick (1996) emphasized that information does not necessarily help individuals manage equivocality. Instead, they need “values, priorities, and clarity about preferences to help them be clear about which projects matter” (p. 28). Sutcliff (1994) argued that “having an accurate environmental map may be less important than having some map that brings order to the world and prompts action” (p. 1374). Regardless of whether the map is comprehensive, exhaustive, or definitive, it may help workers make sense of the organizational environment, their work, and who they are in the organization.

Strategies workers employ for making sense of and negotiating identity, all while coping with uncertainty in the context of ambiguous sensegiving artifacts, are a valuable

focus for study. Their strategies may shed light on “a host of important management issues, including specific practices employed by organizational members as they attempt to focus and balance their attachments, managerial efforts to shape employee thinking and behavior, and employees’ responses to such efforts” (Larson & Pepper, 2003, p. 529). To advance understandings of how workers make sense of and build identity in the context of multiple sources of conflicting information about their work and ambiguous sensegiving artifacts, the present study asks: how do workers negotiate their organizational identity in the context of absent or ambiguous sensegiving artifacts (RQ1a), and what effect, if any, do absent or ambiguous sensegiving artifacts have on their identity work (RQ1b)?

Study Background

Healthcare practice, research, and teaching is progressively shifting towards interdisciplinary collaboration to accommodate the increasing complexity of patient conditions and patient management (Wilk et al., 2016). The focus on whole-patient and patient-centered healthcare brings with it opportunities and demands to bridge barriers between professional disciplines ranging from those focused on ecologic, behavioral, and social factors (Mabry et al., 2008). At the same time, these changes represent profound changes in the organization of healthcare. Along with innovations in healthcare research, education, and service come requirements for a reconstruction of interprofessional communication and what it means to be a competent professional in collaboration with other professionals within and across professions (Institute of Medicine, 2001).

This study focuses on a healthcare organization, hereafter referred to as the Health Intervention and Research Organization (HIRO), committed to building interdisciplinary bridges to fulfill its mission of combatting healthcare inequities and transforming healthcare. This recently founded healthcare organization grew quickly, increasing its workforce tenfold in less than five years. As a fast-growing, innovative, and multidisciplinary organization, HIRO struggled with communication, and HIRO's senior leadership asked our research team to conduct a communication assessment and offer recommendations. We focused our initial efforts specifically on a single department within HIRO. Taking an engaged scholarship approach, our team sought to work with members of this department to help them identify and navigate their communication

challenges. For purposes of anonymity in reporting, we are referring to all data collected in this department as belonging to HIRO.

This organization provides a rich setting for exploring the emergence of identity markers in the absence of explicitly defined roles. This organization decided against orthodox sensegiving in an effort to give members the autonomy to construct their own professional stories and to push back against existing practices in healthcare. HIRO sought to promote egalitarianism, arguing against traditional hierarchies and divisions of labor in healthcare. As such, HIRO eschewed traditional organizational charts, role descriptions, unit monikers, and job titles. At the same time, HIRO's fast growth meant job descriptions that existed on hire were quickly out of date, because the HIRO's initiatives developed as new individuals came on board.

Methods

The initial research goal was to understand their communication strengths and struggles and their communication strategies for navigating them, exploring the “how” and “why” of this contemporary space, and we thus took a qualitative case study approach (Yin, 1994). Researchers adopted a semi-ethnographic process to data collection (Tracy, 2003), which consisted of shadowing and field interviewing. We also held findings-reflecting meetings and a workshop to engage findings at first with senior leadership and then all of HIRO. Participants included HIRO leadership, administrative assistants (hereafter admins), technical professionals (hereafter staff), and scientists.

Researchers conducted 26 semi-structured, audio-recorded interviews (see Appendix for the interview schedule) and completed 40 hours of on-site observations, producing approximately 400 pages of typed, single-spaced interview transcripts and 50 pages of typed, single-space field notes and memos. For example, I undertook a 4-day work shadowing session, during which I observed one of the senior administrators of the department who worked in the office space shared by departmental leadership, near the main common area. The research team also observed regular, weekly meetings of the entire department, and attended key HIRO events. Our questions and observations focused on communication and work strengths and problems, participants’ communication and problems-solving strategies, and their accounts of the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of their strategies.

The research team conducted a preliminary thematic analysis of the data aimed at surfacing communication and work strengths, complicating factors, and areas for development. The research team coded the data for participants' common experiences. The goal of the analysis was to give voice to the participants' experiences, opinions, and concerns and facilitate discussion and shared meaning making about them. These findings were presented at a series of three meetings, first with three senior leaders, next with the approximately-one-dozen-member senior leadership team, and then the entire department. These meetings invited participants to amplify, challenge, and modify findings, and the third department-wide workshop focused invited all present to identify ideas for actions they could take as individuals and actions needed from leadership to strengthen their departments communication. The project thus reflects a commitment to the co-missioning, co-design, and co-enactment of engaged scholarship (Dempsey and Barge, 2014).

During the data collection process, participants' uncertainty about their roles in the organization emerged as a central and recurring theme and a thread for inquiry, which later became the focus of this analysis. For this thesis, analysis of the data took an inductive approach in which I allowed themes to emerge out of the data rather than imposing categories of analysis on the data prior to collection and analysis (Patton, 1980). I used a constant comparative method of analysis as the data collection endured, “[iteratively testing] tentative explanations against the experience of ongoing interaction with group members” (Lindoff & Taylor, 2002, p. 11). The interplay of artifacts and identity emerged as participants shared struggles with their role ambiguity. Rounds of

selective coding followed this open coding and emphasized a theoretical sensitivity towards identity work surrounding and in response to artifacts. These themes contributed to the recognition of identity sensemaking within the space, as participants repeatedly responded to questions surrounding the role of communication in their day-to-day work by drawing on multiple levels of their identity.

Glaser (1992) defines theoretical sensitivity as “the researcher’s knowledge, understanding, and skill, which foster his generation of categories and properties and increase his ability to relate them into hypotheses, and to further integrate the hypotheses, according to emergent theoretical codes” (p. 27). With such sensitivity in mind, I coded for (1) acknowledgements of present or absent, and adequate or inadequate artifacts, and (2) expressions of identity; including core beliefs or assumptions, values, attitudes, preferences, decisional premises, habits, and rules as reflecting what it meant to be a professional working at this organization.

I outlined the foci of my selective coding in Table 1. I used a total of 34 codes belonging to 5 overarching code groups. The number of quotes attached to each code ranged from 3 (Gender and Income) to 66 (Communication Orientation), and the number of coded quotes attached to each interview ranged from 6 to 60.

Table 1 Coding Guide

Axial Code	Selective Code
RQ1a: How do workers negotiate their organizational identity in the context of absent or ambiguous sensegiving artifacts	
Drawing on identity as an individual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Communication Orientation - Gender - Relationships - Personal Values
Drawing on identity as a professional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Work/Life Balance - Approach to Email - Work Outcome Goals - Career Goal Alignment - Performance - Income - Gatekeeper - Validity/Importance of Role - Professional Background/Experience
Drawing on identity as an organizational member	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mission/Vision - Work Group
RQ1b: What effect, if any, do absent or ambiguous sensegiving artifacts have on their identity work?	
Acknowledging the absence of / futility of artifacts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Org Chart/Structural Representation - Onboarding - Dependable Job Descriptions/Titles - Resources
Moments of organizational uncertainty / complicating factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Expectations - Reporting/Reviewing - Unpredictability - Overload - Growth - Colleagues' Roles - Permeating Hierarchy - Hypocrisy/Contradictions - Poor Top-Down Communication
Moments of organizational deidentification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Exclusion - Image - Invalidation - Cultural Issues - Perceived Fit - Isolated Emotions

Findings

Analysis of employees' accounts of their day-to-day work revealed the importance of sensegiving artifacts for their work practice and identification processes. The findings shed light on the sensegiving power these taken-for-granted artifacts can have on adaptation, collaboration, and identity. Before moving into the findings, I provide foundational evidence that shows participants' struggle with absent or sensegiving artifacts. I then describe the primary identity attributes individuals drew on as they made sense of their work amidst that ambiguity.

Importance of Artifacts

Artifacts emerged as a salient source of tensions and difficulties for workers early-on in the data collection. Participants mentioned the organizational chart, job titles, and job descriptions as uncertain, changing, or too vague to be helpful as they described their struggles to coordinate work. For example, Adele, a senior researcher, expressed a desire for more explicit role definition:

I'm just hopeful you guys can help us think through some kind of platform (...)
There has to be a quarterback. There's gotta be somebody calling the play (...)
because you're always trying to get to the highest level. To the exec who makes
the decision. Many of us come in the door and we're at these lower levels trying
to get to that exec, presidential level right? And there's many different needs for
different people to be there, but we need to know *who's* there.

The organizational map emphasized the egalitarian commitments of HIRO. It included few titles, placed senior leadership at the bottom, and represented each major domain of work at HIRO without making clear how they relate to each other or who reports to whom. Even so, Adele described her sense that work and responsibility are nonetheless distributed to specific, vertical, hierarchical levels, and she is asking in this quote for more clarity about who the higher-ups are. Adele mentioned wanting an explicit definition of positions. Audrey, the leader of Unit B, calls for such sensegiving artifacts:

[I] kind of feel like I'm reinventing the wheel. Not knowing what [individuals] have already gotten, what I can work off of, what are all my different resources? Like an org chart of who is in every department and what [they] get, and just kind of that managerial overlay... so I think in that sense [communication] hasn't been ideal because I'm still trying to figure out... there are just so many resources here, and I don't have like an organizational framework to figure out where to tap into them.

Audrey needs information that clarifies what her resources are, where to go for them, and how problems have been solved in the past. Audrey also mentioned that she had a limited understanding of her department and the people within it, which she ascribed in part to never going through a formal or informal onboarding or orientation.

Other participants explained that the organizational chart that did exist did not feature certain groups, separated groups they understood to be one entity into more than one area, and only included the names of ten senior leaders. Rosa, a senior researcher, explained:

I saw on something that I was a chief of something, and I was like, oh! I like chief way better than director. I don't know why. Is there a difference? Is chief above or below? I don't know. I like chief for some reason. It's been director on all my cards and everything. It was just... I don't know if that was intentional or... probably not. I don't even know what the difference is. But on the org chart [Lydia and I] are lateral, right? But Joe also reports to me, I did his evaluation. And yet he's also a director of a division.

Rosa used the organizational chart to inform her understanding of her job title and her responsibilities; however, she was unsure if her interpretation was accurate. Giving an example of how this played out in her work, she described completing a review of another individual, who she initially thought ranked above her. In this example, the ambiguity of titles and the organizational chart made it difficult for her to understand her authority in the organization.

Job titles were another point of tension as well. The traditional job titles many of participants had held previously had been reimaged at HIRO. During observations, I witnessed how the changes complicated their work and communication. During a departmental meeting, a newly-hired individual stood to introduce themselves and forgot the official name for their position. At HIRO we noted that job titles were often complex, and they were used interchangeably or inconsistently. For example, all of the administrative workers held similar, yet distinct variations of the title assistant, including administrative assistant, executive administrative assistant, and senior administrative

assistant. Also at these meetings, participants seemed to ask lots of questions of new comers in part so they could understand their own role as it related to the new person's.

When researchers asked one individual in this administrative role, Ashley, to identify which title she held and explain it, she responded with uncertainty and acknowledged that their actual titles were rarely used, and assured us we could call her whatever was easiest. During interviews with her direct supervisor, her supervisor simply referred to her as a secretary. Indeed, the construction of the admin role was particularly fragmented in the organization. For example, admin bios were not included on HIRO's website. Bernadette, an admin and Ashley's colleague, explained that "junior members" were not allowed bios though, she explained, she was responsible for composing them for "senior members." HIRO leaders explained that the ambiguity of titles and their use were intended to encourage egalitarianism. It could also be read as threatening the professional empowerment for people like Ashley and Bernadette. Moreover, in the absence of a clear organizational chart and concrete titles, participants found alternative identity targets.

Another sensegiving artifact that took on meaning for participants was their lanyards. Members of this organization had to wear distinctive lanyards at all times. Visitors who were not tied to the greater university wore different lanyards, and visitors from the larger organization of which HIRO is part wore no lanyard at all. These lanyards emerged as a topic during a departmental meeting in which workers discussed their concerns about external perceptions of HIRO. Participants reported feeling self-conscious about how others perceive them based on their lanyards. As one individual stood to speak

on the topic, she took hold of the lanyard around her neck to emphasize the point that she felt it marked her as an outsider as she worked with others outside of HIRO itself.

The design of HIRO's workplace also provided a sort of sensegiving artifact that made lines of authority in the organization more equivocal. The department was housed on a floor in which work space distributed into either closed offices or a bullpen, an open cubicle-system. The distribution of private versus communal work space seemed dependent on job status and seniority. A few of the leaders emphasized that they resisted the symbolic representation walls and a door by treating their offices as space they share with their team. For example, Bianca mentioned that she shares her office space by encouraging her team members use it for meetings when she is not there.

I feel a little bit like the door is not only awkward because you have to slide it to open it, but it's also awkward in the sense that it signals hierarchy and it signals like what I'm doing is different than what you're doing (...) I try to make the space usable by everybody, so like sometimes I'll come out from a meeting and there's like some of my team members are meeting here and I'm like "Oh, I'll just go hang out in a cubicle. Tell me when you're done."

The commitment this organization has made to egalitarianism has prompted leaders such as Bianca to open her space to others. Bianca explained she did not want her team to interpret the physical walls between them as symbols of social or professional difference. Participants also used the phrase "open door" when describing the culture of the organization. Another leader explained he was so determined to communicate

approachability and egalitarianism that, despite their requests for uninterrupted work time, he refused to let the admins close the door to the foyer they share.

RQ1A: HOW DO WORKERS NEGOTIATE THEIR ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY IN THE CONTEXT OF ABSENT OR AMBIGUOUS SENSEGIVING ARTIFACTS?

Role Ambiguity

Participants reported uncertainty surrounding their role and expectations. As the organization continued to grow and change, so did the responsibilities of each individual. Participants explained that it became challenging for some to focus on long-term career goals in the midst of all the short-term needs. They reported feeling insecure in part because of the fluidity of their job expectations. Individuals with new or evolving titles lacked a frame upon which to map their work, and they explained that the organizational chart did not help address this ambiguity about their work and others' work in relationship to their own. A participant shared her frustration with the expectations placed on admins to be accommodating to the ever-evolving, unpredictable needs of the organization:

We get crappy notice and we're supposed to be on the ball, always ready to go, ready to pitch in, ready to jump in at a moment's notice and be good sports about it on a moment's notice. And we're expected to perform at the top level. And you know even when we were hired, well when I was hired, one of the questions that

was asked of me was “can you do things with vague instruction?” Like they were planning to not tell us everything we need to know.

This participant acknowledged the uncertainty the organization faced, and explained that she finds the lack of communication (“notice”) and predictability frustrating. A number of participants described themselves as working in a newly-founded startup.

Many participants had multiple roles at HIRO, which further complicated their sensemaking. At one point during my work shadowing, I sat in on a meeting between a senior leader, Anna, and her administrative assistant, Betty, in which they discussed their plans to give an additional duty to Lydia. During my prior interview with Lydia, she had told me she felt overwhelmed by her dual appointment, and felt frustrated by tasks she has been asked to do that she considered extraneous to her role and not aligned with or contributing to her career goals. Anna explained to Betty that Lydia did not know about this new responsibility and that her offer letter was not accurate.

In sum, participants across all areas and levels of leadership at HIRO described their frustrations with their job descriptions and uncertainty about expectations of their roles. As a result, participants explained that they could not be sure they were doing a good job. Participants also reported concerns that the role fluidity would impede their professional development. Participants explained that their job description did not reflect what they were being asked to do, and that at times, they had to neglect the work they were hired for to take on other roles and responsibilities. Individuals also expressed uncertainty regarding how their work and role related to others’, compounded by the lack of a comprehensive listing of titles, positions in the hierarchy, and job descriptions. To

navigate the ambiguity in their roles, participants made sense of their work and identity by drawing on alternative sources of sensegiving.

Sensemaking Through Alternative Sources of Sensegiving

Relationships

Relationships emerged as useful for participants identity work. Participants reported relying on interpersonal dynamics within relationships with their coworkers to push forward projects and make sense of coworkers' actions. Participants spoke of how important it was for them to like their coworkers, and there generally seemed to be comradery in the department. Multiple admins reported using them for decision-making during volatile moments of scheduling for their supervisors. An admin, Dana, responded to our inquiry of what is going communicatively well for her by sharing her interpersonally-oriented approach towards calendaring:

The communication piece of building the relationship is what works well. Because of that component, I am able to ask for favors if I need a quick meeting, you know, so that helps open doors for me. It also puts me higher on their response line, meaning they will respond to me, probably more than they would respond to someone else that they barely know or don't really talk to. And hopefully, you know, gaining trust that that person has my back and I have theirs. (...) I know for me, if someone asks me, hey can you give me Marco, I need 30

minutes on Tuesday between 10 and 11, I'm like I don't have... why would I do that for you? What have you done for me?

Dana supported multiple leaders in her role. In lieu of formal, established guidance for scheduling, she relied on interpersonal relationships. She prioritized relationships and her varying levels of identification with other admins to inform decision-making in her work practices. She later described she had to learn over time how to manage these negotiations. She identified as a skilled, seasoned communicator in this space.

Work Group

Participants also managed their role ambiguity at HIRO by identifying with their particular work group. For example, in Unit A participants reported that they do not feel they necessarily belong in HIRO per se, yet understood their work more concretely. Their work was distinctive and technical, and they explained they had a good handle on what they were being called to do in part because of their specific leadership and in part because of the specific nature of their work. At the same time, they stood out as not reporting feeling overwhelmed by communication overload or uncertainty surrounding the expectations and parameters of their work.

Interviews with the workers in Unit A began halfway through data collection, which made the frequency of their reports of low uncertainty levels even more distinct against the remainder of HIRO. Unit A workers reported feeling well-informed and supportive of the distribution of work within their unit. When we asked participants about the communicative successes and challenges of their day-to-day work, Unit A participants

responded with much more functionally-oriented and task-based answers than members of the other units groups. Unit A workers detailed the technical aspects of their specific job functions of fulfilling requests for information, and members were able to explain the expectations and parameters of their roles. In effect, Unit A's work was more focused, well-understood, and less equivocal. The nature of their work as more established and incremental compared to the broader, less quantifiable goals of other divisions (i.e., community improvement) allows these workers to understand the specific, measurable targets for task completion. Notably, Max, who worked Unit A and also held appointments in the other units, expressed feelings of uncertainty similar to the rest of HIRO. Despite being under the same leadership, within the same unit, doing some of the same work, the complexity and ambiguity of Max's role was heightened because of his additional positions.

Sensemaking Practices

Along with identifying with specific relationship or workgroups, participants managed their role ambiguity by engaging in specific work practices related to their identities. In attempting to make sense of their work and sense of self in the organization, individuals described specific strategies they used to cope.

“When in Doubt, Do Everything”

In the midst of so many exciting opportunities and enmeshed goals, participants explained that they had difficulty parsing out what information and initiatives were

directly relevant to them. They also reported that they struggled to prioritize projects and reject opportunities. As a result, they tended to assume responsibility for more tasks and commitments to be sure they did not miss anything. They explained, “when in doubt, do everything.” Rosa shared her frustration with task management along these lines:

And, you know...it’s just like how many people can tell me what to do? And who do I listen to? Like everybody? And then Lydia has got her agenda that... of course I want to advance [her] agenda. I just... does it take precedence? Does it take priority over what I’m doing? It’s all very deadline driven. Like, oh this is now. We need this tomorrow. Like, you’re kidding. Because that’s not usually how we write a proposal is in a day, but okay, I will write you a proposal. I feel like I have a duty to report to all of them. I mean partly because I feel like whatever I do reflects on [George]. We want [George] to look good. We want me to look good. We want my team to look good.

Rosa was not sure how to prioritize her tasks, because she does not know which tasks are more or less relevant to her role. She was also not sure who should clarify and help her prioritize. She was not sure at the time to whom she should report if anyone.

Communication Intensity

To manage the ambiguity they experienced in their sensemaking and in the absence of established procedures for working, HIRO participants reported communicating a lot. They described an intensity of emails, meetings, and calls. Nearly every interview contained mention of resentment surrounding what participants saw as

the overuse of email and unnecessary informational meetings. At the same time, participants explained it could be difficult ahead of a meeting or call to be sure if they needed to attend or not. Participants expressed feeling inundated with the volume of email communication, which they said compromised their ability to thoroughly read, digest, and respond. Participants also expressed frustration with being over-scheduled, as constant meetings left no time to work on projects and push initiatives forward. They also reported not wanting to step back from meetings or email replies for fear of seeming like they were not pulling their weight.

RQ1B: WHAT EFFECT, IF ANY, DO ABSENT OR AMBIGUOUS SENSEGIVING ARTIFACTS HAVE ON THEIR IDENTITY WORK?

The absent or ambiguous sensegiving threatened participants' negotiation of their professional identity and specifically what counted as good work at HIRO. For example, Dana, shared her disappointment in the organization's choice to not include admins in a professional development meeting for women:

I was like well I didn't know about [the meeting], I wanted to go, that would have been something... and especially when they said staff, and I was like staff didn't get an email. So I started... "you get an email?" Nope. "you get an email?" No. Well why not? So we followed this path of communication, it's only given to higher-ups. And I was like, so no staff underneath that? So what are y'all saying? Is there a line here? Cuz y'all talk about this culture, and that's the language y'all are using but there's obviously a line if the message is supposed to involve

everyone and it doesn't. So that felt bad. It felt like... and these exact words were used, "we're just admins." So when she said that I was like "girl I'm better than... I'm not just no admin." And so, but we feel that way. We're just admins.

Here Dana is wrestling with her own construction of her identity, HIRO's expressed commitment to egalitarianism, and this identity implications of this event. Dana thought she was a member of this ingroup of female professionals, but her professional identity was threatened by her exclusion.

Betty had a similar account. During her interview, Betty explained how challenging it was for her to "keep her nose out" of Anna's work, one of the leaders she supported. She explained for example overhearing Anna's strategy meetings and wanting to propose solutions, but Anna did not welcome her suggestions. Betty described herself as having a headstrong attitude, which she attributed to her previous work experience where she led an organization. In her account, she drew on her professional and personal identities to make sense of her communicative choices in the organization. Her sensemaking involved moments in which her attempts to provide unsolicited advice were shut down by Anna, justifying her tendency to do so by acknowledging her preexisting personal and professional identities.

HIRO's mission also substituted for sensegiving artifacts, which made it more difficult to establish what it meant to do good work at HIRO. For example, participants expressed that they did not feel the right to celebrate their work because measurable improvements had not been made in the community. She and others expressed resentment towards what they saw as overly frequent, over the top celebrations of small

accomplishments. They explained they did not feel their efforts had made enough of an impact to warrant recognition. In these accounts, participants self-definition centered on the shared mission to fix healthcare, which was daunting and broad.

Leadership seemed committed to horizontal organizational structures, but many of participants were dissatisfied with the information and respect they were given by their leaders. Dana remarked on how she had to adapt her own standards for the way she is treated and communicated to in order to accommodate her supervisor and the role she must play in the pecking order:

I think it's true across the board. Among the admin group, you know we chat with each other and we've all had an issue where our superior has like crossed a line. Like if we were out in the real world, I wouldn't let you talk to me like that. But we're here at work and I need my job. So you know there's that, that type of communication really affects the way that we work. Whether we feel supported, or whether we are afraid for our job, or whether we feel like we're safe and things are going okay... so what I have observed as well as engaged in communication about, is that they say this culture is supposed to be awesome and it's not. I don't think these people at the top are always getting that. And the messaging they're sending down, that's not what it's saying, and that's not what we're feeling.

In this instance, the desire for egalitarianism notwithstanding, power differences persist. Dana's organizational identity is shaped by those power differences. She makes sense of her communicative choices by drawing on her understanding of her place in the

organization. She draws on her identity as a subordinate to decide how she should respond, reinforcing institutionalized dynamics of superior-subordinate interactions.

Discussion: Implications for Theory and Practice

This study provides important insights regarding sensemaking in the context of equivocal sensegiving artifacts and the implications of their ambiguity on identity and identification. The sensegiving artifacts here include the physical office space, physical markers of membership in the form of lanyards, novel and changing job titles, indeterminate job and role descriptions given at the time of hire, and vague inscriptions of the organization's structure in an unorthodox organizational chart. Sensegiving artifacts shape individuals' understandings of their workplace, but in this case, leadership's desire to encourage progressive changes in the work being done by HIRO meant that they provided ambiguous sensegiving artifacts or that they were absent altogether. The absence of such resources created tensions and uncertainty for participants as they navigated work at HIRO. At the same time, existing forms of sensemaking exerted themselves through the preexisting identities of members and established ways of working in a domain that is highly structured, well-defined, bureaucratized, and institutionalized. Leaders sought to transform that domain and in doing so sought to open the nature of work at HIRO for definition by the workers themselves, but not completely so. Vague resources for the definition of self and work made their sensemaking more difficult. The organizational literature reinforces the constitutive role of work-related artifacts such as tools (Weick, 1996; Gärtner & Huber, 2017) and design of the workspace (Harrison et al., 2011; Barbour et al., 2018) on workplace dynamics. This study sheds light on an instance wherein leaders sought to

eschew orthodox forms of sensegiving and yet provided ambiguous sensegiving, which involved its own difficulties.

In an organization wanting to work without hierarchy, hierarchies nonetheless emerged because individuals needed one to figure out their work. I have explored how artifact ambiguity is related to the coordination of work within a new organization. To get their work done, workers relied on personal and professional-level identity attributes to develop and explain their decision-making. Their decisions varied depending on personal attributes such as gender and communication style, as well as professional attributes such as experience and title.

As participants shared their stories detailing the communicative successes and challenges they face in HIRO, many of them engaged in retrospective sensemaking through storytelling, as they acknowledged and explained instances of violated expectations. Weick et al. (2005) noted that sensemaking efforts are explicit when expectations are violated or individuals are uncertain of how to act, and they occur as people take action to return to routine. The routinization of work thus places people in a sort of feedback loop, the reliability of which is dependent on the nature of the work they perform.

The nature of certain types of professional work as routinized influences the sensemaking practices of the professionals who complete it, and power dynamics permeate unstructured organizations through sensemaking activities as individuals return to existing, institutionalized ways of acting such as norms of professional conduct. Participants' reports of uncertainty surrounding their expectations, work practices, and

outcome values varied between units at HIRO. The most discrete and clear work done at HIRO was being completed by individuals in Unit A, who also reported the lowest level of uncertainty. The predictability and routinization of their work may explain why members of Unit A reported feeling highly identified with their work group, as they had collectively established effective parameters, expectations, and processes for getting work done that came from the work not from HIRO per se.

To capture this dynamic, Figure 1 displays uncertainty levels as the y-axis to represent the overall uncertainty members feel surrounding their work in the organization, with time on the x-axis. The dotted line represents Unit A participants, and the solid line collectively represents all other members of the department who had less well-defined work. The highest point of the curve represents the highest level of uncertainty discrepancy, or the largest deviation between tolerable/preferred levels of uncertainty and the actual levels experienced by workers. All workers experience uncertainty to some degree, and the nature of their work can figure into their management of it.

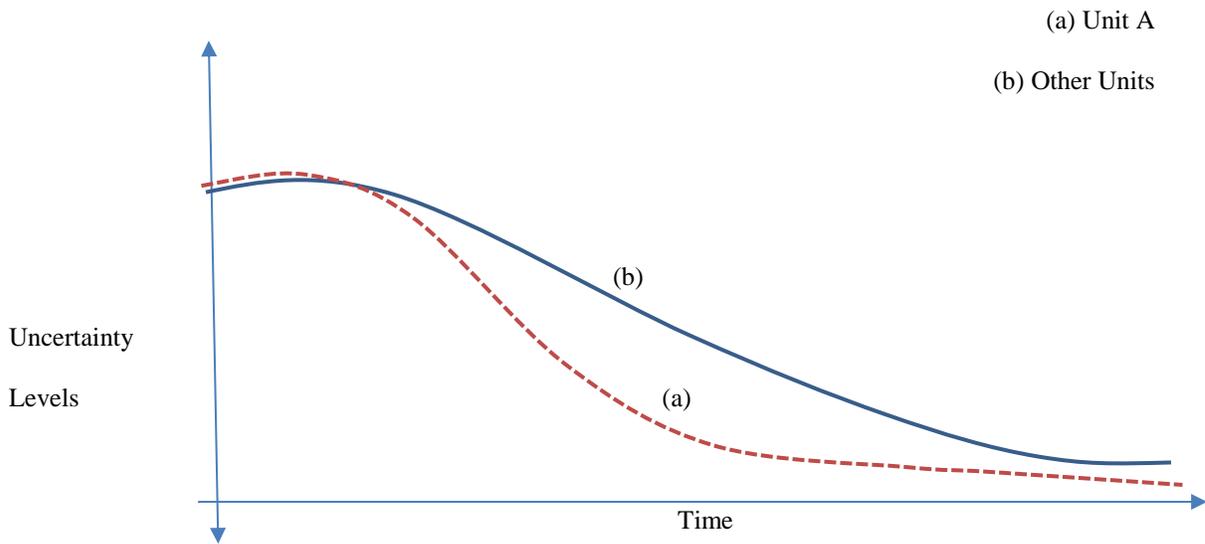


Figure 1: Uncertainty Discrepancy Curve

These findings contribute to research exploring the relationship between subunit differentiation and identification. Members of the unit which worked extensively with information systems all expressed strong feelings of identification with their work group, however they felt that their unit did not fit in the greater department. This finding is consistent with work on the different ways targets of identification processes can contribute to identity negotiation and sensemaking. The Unit A workers did not see the department as a necessary or even appropriate site for their work to take place, and the nature of their discipline required a different style of work.

Despite efforts to break down the traditional status differences in organizations like HIRO, existing differences persisted. Senior leadership aimed for egalitarianism and attempted to foster this by using an intentionally ambiguous organizational chart that placed leadership at the bottom instead of the top. At the same time, participants told stories of being talked down to, denied opportunities to contribute, or kept in the dark

surrounding decisions relevant to their work. In the absence of sensegiving, members organized themselves drawing on existing frames and understandings of work.

Adele's comments about managing the public face of the organization, the organization's identity, provides an example of existing sensemaking filling the void left by ambiguous sensegiving. She shared her belief that HIRO had been unsystematic in its approach to building partnerships, and that this disorganization reflected the different ideas that organizational members brought to the problem. She spoke on the necessity for HIRO to speak with one voice in response to issues ranging from questions regarding the organization's use of community resources, to more general issues of social responsibility. She explained:

I think it may be the newness because the institution of HIRO is new, but the people aren't. They come from different experiences. It's not like they're new. Right? And it may be just trying to figure out who you are. But who you are is who you are to me when you step in in the midst of chaos. And I think that we've missed opportunities where we could do better. And it is something about how we communicate, and what we communicate, and who we communicated to. And I don't have a diagnosis, it's just an observation.

Here Adele's account makes the important point that HIRO may be new, but that organizational members "come from different experiences," and as a result, they bring their own diverse and differing frameworks to HIRO. Their professional identities, their beliefs about what it means to be a good professional, informed their work practices.

Implications for the Practice

The building blocks of collaborative practice are embodied by the diverse set of identities individuals hold on interprofessional teams. Expressions of identity in the midst of ambiguous sensegiving artifacts speaks to their ideals and logics for organizational coordination and professional work. Individuals' communicative choices reflected and were reflected by their identity as (a) an individual, an identity through which they drew upon their communicative styles and personal relationships to get work done, and (b) a professional, which was influenced by factors such as perceptions of professional practices and previous work experience.

Leaders seeking to change existing forms of organizing, existing patterns of sensemaking may be better served by offering sensegiving that explicitly challenges existing patterns and norms rather than or ambiguous, changing, vague sensegiving. At HIRO doing so was complicated as well by a commitment to making change that developed in the organization. That is, leaders were themselves creating the different forms as the organization grew. The challenge for leaders then is to offer open sensegiving that is also specific enough to prevent organizational members from defaulting to doing their work as they always have.

The fluid, permeable organizing sought at HIRO can encourage a flexibility that can enable change, but at the same time complicate and make change more difficult. For example, the ambiguous organizational chart at HIRO reflects efforts to navigate a tension between (a) the confusion and desire for clarity surrounding who reports to whom and who does what (b) the desire to encourage egalitarian and responsive organizing.

This approach encouraged a degree of inefficiency in their work, which the workers had to absorb. An organization's ability to respond to a period of intense change while itself being a change agent may depend on its ability to continuously refine expectations through sensegiving that is mindful of existing, commonly held expectations as well as an awareness of ongoing operations (Gärtner & Huber, 2015; Weick & Sutcliff, 2007).

Conclusion

In applying a practice-based perspective to analyzing sensemaking as a process, this thesis relies heavily on participants own accounts in comparison to observations of their work in progress. Participants remarked during interviews that they struggled to understand some facets of their role, and that the interview itself helped give them clarity. Taking the time to talk through these dilemmas gave them an opportunity to make sense of them. I observed this sensemaking take place during interviews, which proved fruitful in the analysis. Future work that uses interviewing to encourage sensemaking may offer an intervention useful for cultivating the sort of organizing sought at HIRO.

This study takes place within an organization determined to avoid conventional models of highly-structured work. Sensegiving artifacts had been crafted to be ambiguous in an attempt to reconstruct the institutionalized organizational structure of HIRO's work, give workers more control over their work, and create space for collaboration and creativity. Scholarship should explore how ambiguity may be employed to give space for employee voice while limiting the influence of existing models for organizing that may be counterproductive.

Appendix

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

1. In general, describe your day-to-day work.
 - a. Describe an average day.
 - b. Describe an ideal day.
2. Who do you work with regularly to get your work done? Who (or what units) do you depend on most to get your work done?
3. How do you work with data if at all?
 - a. Who provides them? Who do you provide them to?
 - b. What does that work look like?
4. When you think about your day-to-day work, what is working really well?
 - a. Can you think of an example?
 - b. What about your communication is working really well?
 - c. How does apply to your work with data?
5. What are you doing that makes this work well? Why is it working?
6. When you think about your day-to-day work, what problems do you encounter?
 - a. Can you think of an example?
 - b. What communication difficulties do you have?
 - c. How does apply to your work with data?
7. How do you try to manage those issues?

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