

**An exploration into sensemaking and sensegiving:  
A stakeholder model approach**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper defines the relationship between sensemaking, schemata, and scripts. It shows how the “4I” model of organizational learning supports the notion of sensemaking and the sensemaking process. Barley and Tolbert’s (1997) model of Sequential Institutionalization is used to discuss how sensemaking, schemata, and scripts become institutionalized and how those scripts may change overtime. Finally, a Stakeholder Model of Sensegiving is introduced to delineate the importance of stakeholders in the process of sensemaking and giving in the process of the social construction of the organization.

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Humans are bounded in our mental abilities (Simon, 1957). The stimuli present in any situation are too great and complex for any one of us to be able to process the entirety of information. Our minds are bombarded with millions of items that so overwhelm our capacity for processing we experience chaos and meaninglessness (Moskowitz, 2005); James (1991, p. 76) described it as “a motley which we have to unify by our wits.” As a result we handle the confusion by limiting the intake of information. We are unable to dissect each element so we must selectively attend to the available information. As Allport elucidated, “Outer reality is in itself chaotic – full of too many potential meanings. We have to simplify in order to live; we need stability in our perceptions. At the same time we have an insatiable hunger for explanations” (Allport, 1954, 169-170). The result of this cognitive capacity overload is that we must find ways of increasing the efficiency of the processing abilities we possess. This paper addresses tools used in simplifying cognitive processing beginning with schemata and scripts. The role of sensemaking is explored and a model is proposed of the relationship between the sensemaking, schemata, and scripts. Attention is then turned to the “4I” model of organizational learning (Crossan, Lane, and White, 1999) and the Barley and Tolbert (1997) Sequential Model of Institutionalization to provide insight into the process of social construction of institutionalized scripts. The influence of stakeholders on the organizational construction is missing from these models. This paper provides a discussion of stakeholders and the sensegiving process to propose a Stakeholder Model of Sensegiving.

## **SCHEMATA**

Social cognition suggests that the first step in dealing with the maze of information bombarding us is to structure our knowledge with categories. Similar objects or people are grouped together based on some feature that defines the class of things constituting that category. A child learns to distinguish between a cat and a dog, or between a tree and a flower. At the onset these categories are very simplistic distinctions from which many other more complex distinctions may draw overtime. These mental representations of the external world form the building blocks of future knowledge and guides to social interaction (Moskowitz, 2005).

Kant proposed the idea of schema in an attempt to make sure that categories have “sense and significance” (Pritchard, 1909). Kant suggested twelve pure categories, or *a priori* concepts, which are related to phenomenal appearances through schemata. The schemata provide the categories with a connection to perceived, experienced objects and therefore significance (Schopenhauer, 1819). An unschematized category may be a thought but it is not truly understood. It would neither make sense nor have significance at that moment in time.

A schema can be thought of as “a proposed organizational structure for the knowledge that comprises one’s categories” (Moskowitz, 2005, p. 155). Gioia and Manz (1985) defined a schema as “a knowledge structure that people use to organize and make sense of social and organizational information or situations” (p. 529). The schema stores information in abstract form instead of storing compilations of specific examples of past encounters and behavior. If we have a schema for professors it calls to mind a set of abstracted behaviors and attributes rather than recalling a list of professors we have encountered. We may not even remember the specific professors but their contribution to the schema affects our view of professors nonetheless. Schemata also contain information about the relationships that are known to exist between the features; therefore schemata provide two important functions. Schemata provide an “understanding of the connections between the features and *the rules that govern the features*”

(Moskowitz, 2005, p. 155, italics from the original) and they guide the manner in which new information is processed and what information is selectively retrieved from memory. Schemata largely determine what we see and what we think we have seen and, based on schema-consistent processing, lead us to see and remember information in a manner consistent with the underlying schema (Moskowitz, 2005).

According to Taylor and Crocker (1981), a schema should be thought of as:

a pyramidal structure, hierarchically organized with more abstract or general information at the top and categories of more specific information nested within the general categories. The lowest level in the hierarchy consists of specific examples or instances of the schema (e.g., specific people or events). The schema is connected to other [schemata] through a rich web of associations. (p.92)

A specific person or event may be tied to several schemata which share some relevant link (e.g., father and professor if one's father was a professor).

Schemata seem to subsume what Schultz (1967) called "provinces of meaning" which enable actors to compose and understand their world as meaningful and to articulate elements of that province as "purposive values and interests that lie behind the strategic implementing or warranting of structural frameworks" (Ranson, Hinings, and Greenwood, 1980, p. 5). Schemata also align with Durkheim's (1982) notion of "social fact." "A social fact is any way of thinking, whether fixed or not, capable of exerting over the individual and external constraint; or: which is general over the whole of a given society whilst having an existence of its own, independent of its individual manifestation" (Durkheim, 1982, p. 59).

There are several types of schemata such as self-schemata (Markus, 1977), role and relational schemata (Baldwin, 1992; Fiske and Taylor, 1984), and causal schemata (Kelley, 1973). Event schemata (Taylor and Crocker, 1981) represent a particularly interesting type of schemata for this discussion. Event schemata dictate specific behaviors for specific situations (Moskowitz, 2005). The event schema is also known as a script (Schank and Abelson, 1977) or a frame (Minsky, 1975). A script contains the existing cognitive structures that specify how to behave when confronted with specific events or situations. It is thought of as a series of "if-then" statements (Moskowitz, 2005). In addition to guiding the behavior of the actor in specific situations, the script also serves as a guide to understanding and interpreting the behavior of others (Gioia and Manz, 1985). This gives the script a reinforcing tendency that reproduces the script through the process of its enactment. As one actor has entered a script and demonstrated the prescribed behavior another actor observing the first is also learning the script. This leads us to the question of where scripts originate.

## **SCRIPTS**

It is thought by some that scripts are unconsciously developed (Abelson, 1981; Gioia and Manz, 1985; Langer, 1978). In this view scripts are executed automatically, without purposefulness or deliberation. The script emerges from the gathering and interpreting of experience. For example, young baseball players may watch a professional baseball player's batting stance and routine and mimic what they see the professional doing. The youngsters may

inadvertently learn proper mechanics of hitting when they were really only trying to look like their favorite professional player.

On the other hand, scripts may be consciously developed in a purposeful manner (Gioia and Manz, 1985; Klein and Ritti, 1980; Snyder, 1974, 1977). For example, actors interested in promotion and advancement within the organization may carefully monitor the behaviors of their counterparts to determine which behaviors are rewarded and which are not. Through this process, the actors are developing the script they believe most appropriate for enhancing the promotional opportunities.

The origination or learning of scripts can be explained using Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (1986, 2002). Bandura emphasized the importance of observational learning: "Virtually all behavioral, cognitive, and affective learning from direct experience can be achieved vicariously by observing people's actions and the consequences for them" (Bandura, 1999, p. 170). Bandura's theory suggests that not only can scripts be developed through personal, hands on experience (Gioia and Manz, 1985); scripts can also effectively originate through the examination of others' actions. This observation could be directly observing a co-worker engaging in a behavior that results in a desired response or it could be through the use of video training or other media. Bandura's model suggests four conditions necessary for the learning process to occur: the actor must pay attention to the model (attention); the actor must be able to remember what has been observed (retention); the actor must be able to replicate the observed behavior (reproduction); and, the actor must want to demonstrate the observed behaviors (motivation) (Bandura, 1986, 1999). Scripts are developed because of attention and retention of the behavior of others. Through reproduction, then, the learned patterns of behaviors become the script. The motivation to use the script and reproduce the behaviors is influenced by "the functional importance or usefulness of the learned behaviors to the job, the frequency of repetition or rehearsal of the behavior, and the degree of self- and external reinforcement experienced" (Gioia and Manz, 1985, p. 530).

In summary, individuals seek to make sense out of categories of information through the use of schemata. Scripts develop from the schemata to provide guides for behavior for specific situations as directed by the schemata. We turn our attention next to explain the role of sensemaking in this cognitive process.

## **SENSEMAKING**

Sensemaking involves "an ongoing retrospective development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing" (Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld, 2005, p. 409). Whenever there is a discrepancy between the expected desired state and the perceived existing state actors will engage in sensemaking activities. A popular description of sensemaking is that it is "a way station on the road to a consensually constructed coordinated system of action" (Taylor and Van Every, 2000, p. 275). There is an action orientation to sensemaking in that it is constantly moving toward developing guides for behavior. It answers the question, "What do I do next?" In fact this is why sensemaking is salient to the organization; it turns chaotic, unintelligible situations into comprehensible words that create the catalyst for action (Mills, 2003).

Sensemaking starts with chaos (Weick, 1995; Weick et al, 2005). Sensemaking activities will be prevalent where people are dissatisfied with the existing condition and they experience a “gap” in their expectations relative to their experience (Balogun and Johnson, 2004). These activities can be instigated by discrepancies that represent dramatic loss, ordinary or less troublesome loss (Weick et al., 2005), or by unfamiliar contexts where the appropriate response or meaning is elusive. Sensemaking seeks to provide interpretation and meaning retrospectively for events that have already occurred. Through reflection on past events and situations actors will engage in noticing, bracketing, and labeling to simplify the world and generate common ground that will guide actions (Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005). This is reminiscent of the categorizing suggested by social cognition.

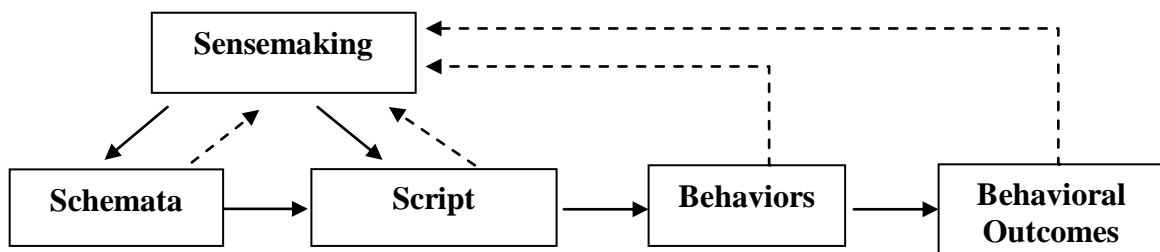
“To make sense is to connect the abstract with the concrete” (Weick et al., 2005, p. 412). Sensemaking is not about an academic exercise that hypothesizes about esoteric issues far removed from practical implications. It is instead an action-directed effort that is driven by plausibility more than accuracy. Sensemaking is a continuing, emerging story that through multiple iterations becomes more comprehensive, more inclusive of observed data, and more durable. Sensemaking is a highly social activity (Balogun and Johnson, 2004) that involves many people in the creation of shared meaning and shared experience that will ultimately guide organizational action. Through multiple conversations interpretation and knowledge unfolds gradually. While individuals use their cognitive abilities to sensemake, the unfolding knowledge is collectively held and will ultimately be collectively shared (Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005). Accuracy is certainly the goal of sensemaking but it is achieved in successive plausible steps inching behavior closer and closer yet never achieving the perfect solution where sensemaking activity ceases.

### A MODEL OF SENSEMAKING, SCHEMATA AND SCRIPTS

Figure 1 depicts a model of the relationship between sensemaking, schemata, and scripts. The goal of sensemaking, schemata, and scripts is to reduce uncertainty and chaos in situations faced by individuals, groups, and organizations. The model suggests that sensemaking is an antecedent to the development of both schemata and scripts. As discussed earlier, individuals engage in categorization of information to enable them to develop schemata that would make sense out of the environment. When individuals engage in noticing, bracketing, and labeling as a part of their sensemaking activities, they are behaving consistently with the idea of categorization. These noticed, bracketed, and labeled groupings of information become the building blocks from which subsequent schemata are developed.

FIGURE 1.

A model of the relationship between sensemaking, schemata, and scripts



It is through the process of sensemaking that a knowledge structure emerges that seems to make sense of the relevant information. From that knowledge structure schemata are developed. A feedback loop continuously provides information on the performance of the schemata relative to expectations. If a discrepancy is present, the sensemaking process is activated and seeks to provide better explanations and understanding of the information and experience. Sensemaking in this step is focused on understanding.

Scripts are the product of schemata and sensemaking. Once the schemata are developed, sensemaking continues focusing on the outcome of the prescribed action. Sensemaking can account for scripts that emerge unconsciously or scripts that are developed consciously. Scripts may be observed through the actions of others and adopted without conscious efforts to identify behaviors (e.g., the replication of a professional baseball player's batting style may not allow the youngsters to know the importance of balance, timing, and speed in the swing but they are utilizing the stance that gives them balance, timing, and speed nonetheless). In this case, the sensemaking process may only include an analysis of the efficacy of the behavior not an explanation of the logic of the behavior. If the individuals however were purposefully engaging in a quest for appropriate behavioral responses to situations, then they would be more engaged in the sensemaking process. The development of satisfactory scripts leads to behavioral action. The behaviors specified by the scripts will lead to outcomes. If the behaviors lead to desired outcomes, the script is likely to be used again. If the behavior does not lead to desired outcomes the script is less likely to be used again.

There is again feedback that links the script to sensemaking and links the behavior and its consequence to sensemaking. Feedback indicating existing scripts no longer allow people to cope effectively based on the routines will result in additional sensemaking. Likewise, if the behaviors generated by the scripts are no longer sufficient to explain the situation additional sensemaking activity will be required (Cramer, van der Heijden and Jonker, 2006). Given that sensemaking is an ongoing process always looking for improvements, the feedback loops are necessary to add to the collective experience that is being evaluated.

We have discussed sensemaking as a highly social activity (Balogun and Johnson, 2004) that involves multiple conversations which allows the knowledge to unfold over time. We consider next sensegiving, which is the sharing of the knowledge gained from sensemaking.

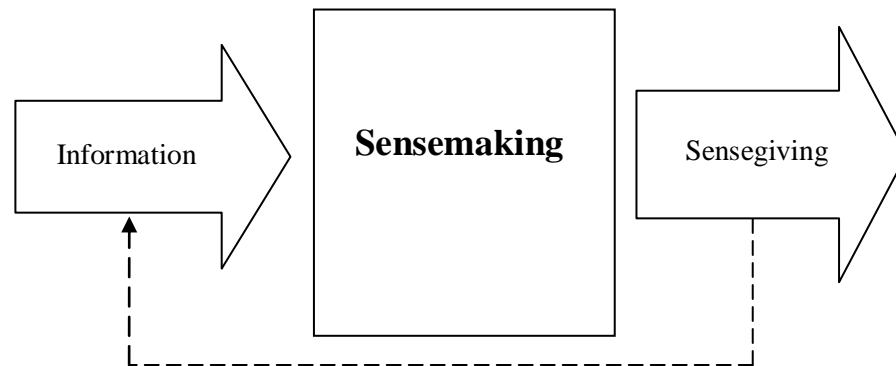
## **SENSEGIVING**

Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) provided the first definition for sensegiving stating it was "concerned with the process of attempting to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others toward a preferred redefinition of organizational reality" (p. 442). Sensegiving can be considered a natural extension of sensemaking. Where sensemaking is concerned with understanding, sensegiving is concerned with influence and sharing of understanding. As one makes sense out of what was previously not understood, it would be expected that one would want to share that newfound insight. In fact, this too could be represented in a simple model of Sensemaking-Sensegiving (see Figure 2).

The model posits the sensemaking and giving process as an input-output model where the information serves as the input, sensemaking is the transformation process, and the output is

sensegiving. Sensegiving is made in the form of proposed schemata and scripts. As sensemaking occurs, one will naturally engage in sensegiving. People will likely want to share the understanding they have carved from the chaotic flood of information. Perhaps this sharing is made in an effort to influence others toward a “preferred redefinition of organizational reality” but it might also be an attempt to simply to share the insight. Influential redesign is not a prerequisite condition for sensegiving.

FIGURE 2.  
Sensemaking-Sensegiving Model



The sensemaking and sensegiving processes include both individual and collective elements. What is missing from the discussion thus far is an explanation for how these elements work together and how organizational learning can result. In the next section a multi-level model of organizational learning will be discussed.

#### **4I MODEL OF ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING**

Crossan, Lane and White (1999) proposed a model of organizational learning called the “4I” model shown in Table 1 below. Their model suggests four related sub-processes to organizational learning (intuiting, interpreting, integrating, and institutionalizing) that occur over three levels (individual, group, and organizational).

In the 4I model, intuiting is defined as “the preconscious recognition of the pattern and/or possibilities inherent in a personal stream of experience” (Crossan et al., 1999, p. 525). In this process, individuals perceive differences and similarities, patterns and possibilities based on past experiences. This is describing the same process as categorization and sensemaking discussed above. The authors point out here that intuiting is something only individuals do. Organizations are not capable of intuiting, its intuiting is done through its members.

As individuals recognize patterns and possibilities, they begin the process of interpreting. Interpreting is the “explaining, through words and/or actions, of an insight or idea to one’s self and to others” (Crossan et al., 1999, p. 525). In this process, ideas are moved from the preverbal to the verbal as language is introduced to articulate what had been only feelings and unexpressed ideas. While this begins an individual level process, the language development allows for the

TABLE 1.  
Taken from Crossan, Lane & White (1999)

<b>Learning/Renewal in Organizations: Four Processes Through Three Levels</b>		
<i>Level</i>	<i>Process</i>	<i>Inputs/Outcomes</i>
Individual	Intuiting	Experiences Images Metaphors
	Interpreting	Language Cognitive Maps Conversation/dialogue
Group	Integrating	Shared understandings Mutual adjustments Interactive systems
Organization	Institutionalizing	Routines Diagnostic systems Rules and procedures

sharing of ideas through communication with others. Interpreting moves then to a group interpreting process as shared understandings begin to form (Crossan et al., 1999). This is consistent with the sensemaking-sensegiving model above.

Integrating follows the group interpreting process. Integrating is the process of developing shared meanings among individuals and taking coordinated action through mutual adjustment. The shared understandings that began to take shape in the previous step are now further solidified and transition into coordinated action toward the end of the process. This aligns with the development of schemata, which are then translated into scripts. According to Crossan et al (1999) the focus of the group interpretive process is shared understandings (e.g., schemata) and the focus of the integrating process is coherent, collective action (e.g., scripts). Critical to these two steps are communication and joint action just as Weick (1995) stipulated with sensemaking.

The final process is institutionalizing which occurs at the organizational level. This process ensures that the collective action devised in the previous step is followed. It is “the process of embedding learning that has occurred by individuals and groups” (Crossan et al., 1999, p. 525). Therefore, as the schemata are formed into scripts and agreed upon through collective thought, the schemata and scripts become the rules and procedures of the organization. Tolbert and Zucker’s (1983) three-stage model of change aligns closely with the “4I model” and provides greater explanation for the institutionalization process.

### **THREE-STAGE MODEL OF CHANGE**

Tolbert and Zucker’s (1983) three-stage model of change consists of the pre-institutionalization phase, the semi-institutionalization phase, and the institutionalization phase. The pre-institutionalization, or habitualization, phase is where the specific behaviors emerge to deal with a specific problem. This encompasses the intuiting and interpreting process of the “4I

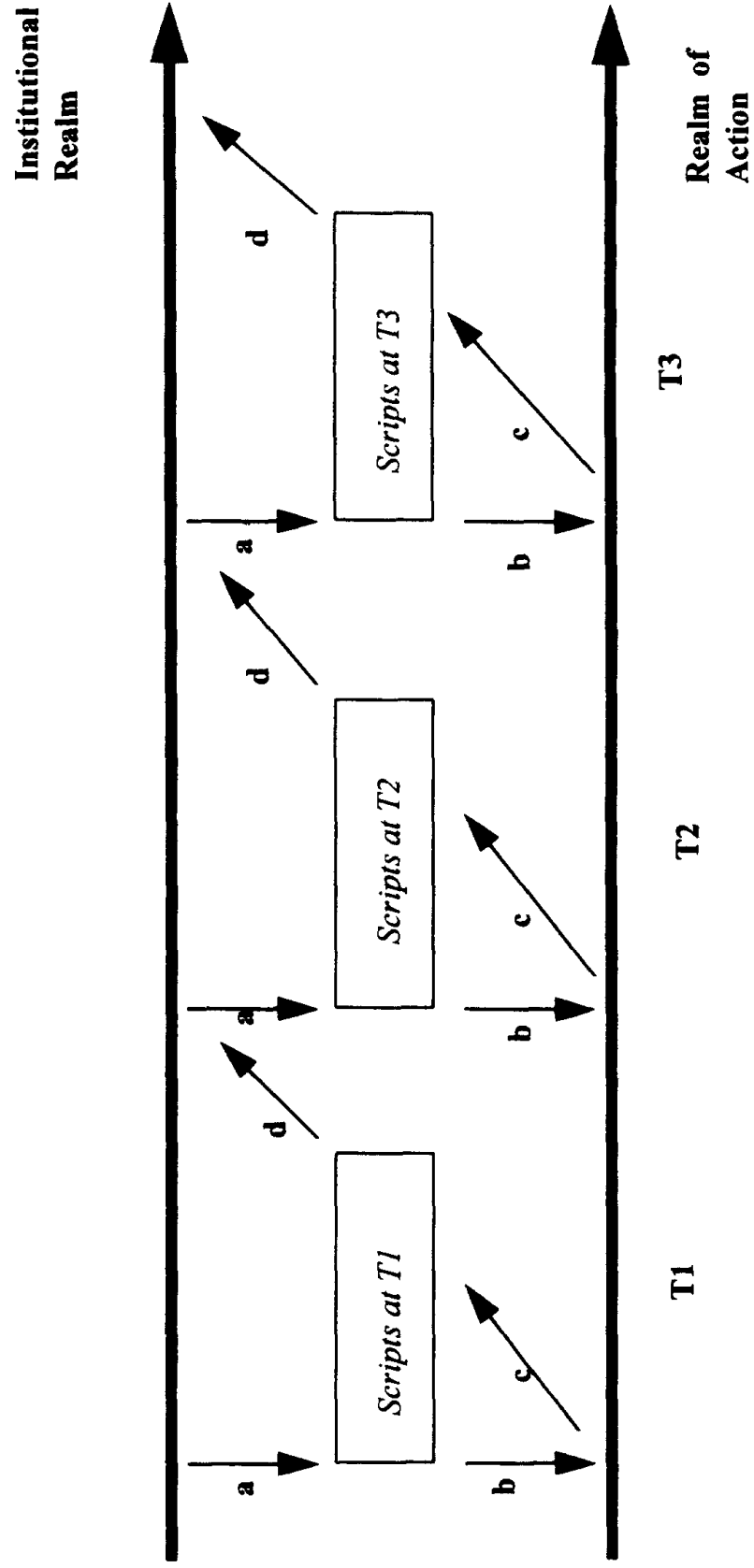
model”. Next, the semi-institutionalization, or objectification, phase is where a consensus forms around certain behaviors perceived as successful and those become normative. This includes the group interpreting process where schemata are developed and the integrating process where the scripts emerge. Finally, in the institutionalization, or sedimentation, phase the organizational form becomes taken for granted. Here the scripts are shared organization-wide through the socialization process and become institutionally embedded. Even though scripts become institutionally embedded, they can still go through revisions. This process is explained using Barley and Tolbert’s (1997) Sequential Model of Institutionalization.

### **SEQUENTIAL MODEL OF INSTITUTIONALIZATION**

The Sequential Model of Institutionalization shows that institutionalization is a continuous process. The model, shown in Figure 3 below, depicts a sequence of four movements in the institutionalization process. Arrow “a” represents the encoding of the scripts to be used by institutional actors in specific settings. Frequently the encoding is facilitated by the socialization process and is characterized by the actors internalizing rules and interpretations of behavior. Once the script is internalized, the second movement (arrow b) represents the enactment of the script. Organizational actors may or may not enact the script by conscious choice. Some members may follow the script without recognizing they are. The awareness influences the next step, which is replicate or revise. Awareness that one is following a script is more likely to produce revisions to the script than lack of awareness. One cannot be cognizant of potential changes to be made to a script if one is not aware there is a script. The diagonal arrow (c) represents the “replicate or revise” movement. Institutionalized scripts are likely to be resistant to change. Usually an exogenous variable changes and forces the alteration in the script. It is possible scripts could be changed because of “alternative visions of what social life should be like” (Barley and Tolbert, 1997, p. 102) however, without some outside influence driving the change; resistance is likely to be great. If an alternative state is desired over the existing one, it will result in sensemaking to identify the new version of the script. In the final movement (arrow d), objectification and externalization, the altered script and resulting new patterns of behavior take on a normative, factual quality and become the substance of the socialization of members. The degree of alteration to the script (arrow c) will vary depending on the nature of the forces exerting the pressure for change (Barley and Tolbert, 1997).

Models like the “4I” model of organizational learning and the sequential model of institutionalization provide insight into the social construction of institutionalized scripts but they fail to account for an important influence on sensemaking and giving; the stakeholders. A model of stakeholder sensegiving is proposed in the following.

FIGURE 3.  
 A sequential model of institutionalization  
 Taken from Barley & Tolbert, 1997



**Key:** a = encode, b = enact, c = replicate or revise, d = externalize and objectify

## A STAKEHOLDER MODEL OF SENSEGIVING

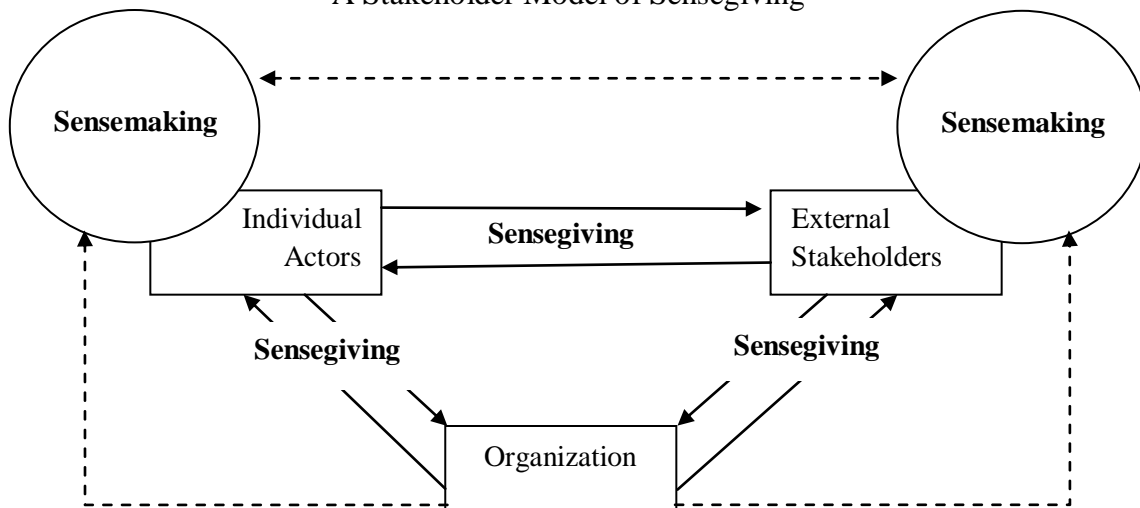
The importance of the role of stakeholders in the sensemaking and sensegiving process has been recognized by a number of researchers (c.f. Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlas, 2005; Maitlas and Lawrence, 2007; Morsing and Schultz, 2006; Pater and van Lierop, 2006). Much of the extant research focuses on the sensegiving role of the CEO while the role of stakeholders is only beginning to be developed.

Morsing and Schultz (2006) proposed three corporate social responsibility communication strategies involving stakeholders and their sensegiving activities. The stakeholder information strategy is a one-way information flow where public information is sent to organizations. The second strategy is the stakeholder response strategy where stakeholders engage in sensegiving in response to organizational actions. Again, there is no real feedback or dialogue that emerges. The preferred strategy is the stakeholder involvement strategy where stakeholders are involved with organizations, participating and suggesting corporate actions. This is a collaborative effort involving jointly sensegiving and sensemaking efforts (see Pater & van Lierop, 2006).

Maitlas (2005) identified four forms of organizational sensemaking in her study of three British symphony orchestras. Of the four forms, she found that “guided organizational sensemaking” provided the same the same collaborative efforts suggested by Morsing and Schultz (2006). Continuing in this line of research, Maitlas and Lawrence (2007) found a distinct set of triggers for sensegiving by stakeholders. Their research suggested stakeholders were more likely to engage in sensegiving activity when they were facing issues perceived as important to them or to another stakeholder group whose interests they represented or to the organization at large and the degree of competence they perceived the leaders of the organizations commanded.

The elements of sensemaking and sensegiving can be combined with the participants in the sensemaking and giving process to develop a stakeholder model of sensegiving (see Figure 4). For the purpose of this model, the participants are individual organizational actors, external stakeholders, and the organization in the sense of the rules and procedures, diagnostic systems and routines. This view is based on the socially constructed nature of the organization through its members and accounts for the constructionist influence of the stakeholders. The model begins with individual actors and stakeholders engaging in sensemaking activities. Once schemata are in place, language develops that allow for a sharing of information through communication

FIGURE 4.  
A Stakeholder Model of Sensegiving



between individuals and between individuals and the stakeholders. As suggested by Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) once understanding is in place individuals and stakeholders turn to sensegiving. They begin to discuss and share their ideas with others. As they engage in dialogue, they may be purposefully seeking to influence each other in a manner that would favor them or they may be more magnanimous in their sensegiving. Individuals will communicate their fledgling ideas with others inside the organization and the group will begin integrating ideas until a script emerges. That script will be “given” to the organization; this is where the organization is said to be socially constructed, which begins the process of institutionalization (as suggested by Barley and Tolbert, 1997) where the routines, diagnostic systems, and rules and procedures are formed. Once the organization receives the scripts it too begins sensegiving through the socialization of employees and through its interaction with stakeholders. It is important to note that sensegiving is a two-way, collaboration between all parties involved in the event or situation. Sensegiving, just like sensemaking, is at its core communication.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has been an exercise in sensemaking and sensegiving. An endeavor was made to consider various categories of information and to reach some semblance of understanding at how they fit together (that is, sensemaking). From the level of understanding achieved, a schema was proposed in the form of the Stakeholder model of Sensegiving, thus the paper represents sensegiving. The ideas that have been shared are hoped to enhance the sensemaking process of others and to join the collaboration of scholars in seeking to develop scripts targeting management practice.

As affirmed by Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) and Maitlas and Lawrence (2007), sensegiving and sensemaking are critical processes for the understanding and constructing of issues in organizations. Issues are viewed differently by various stakeholders, organizational actors, and organizations. The delineation of the relationships suggested in the models above (the relationship between sensemaking, schemata, and scripts, the sensemaking-sensegiving model, and the stakeholder model of sensegiving) point to gaps in the existing literature and interesting areas for future research. Efforts should be made at expanding the dialogue and research on stakeholders and how they approach sensegiving not only with organizations but also with individuals, for example, considering public relations campaigns and their influence on individuals; investigating the ties between Durkheim’s “social facts” and sensemaking (and therefore sensegiving); examining the role of legitimacy between stakeholders and organizations and how it impacts sensemaking and sensegiving between them; exploring the leader’s role in sensegiving to individuals in times of crisis and non-crisis is important in setting strategy and goals for organizations; and finally, Institutional Theory has a number of potential avenues to pursue that would help explain the nature of the social construction that takes place and the isomorphism within fields.

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