MAKING SENSE OF WORKPLACE SPIRITUALITY

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The study of workplace spirituality is a relatively new academic endeavour, but interest in the topic has grown significantly over the last 10 years (Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2003). Scholars are being encouraged to undertake empirical work but are believed to be hampered by a lack of appropriate tools. This paper considers Weick's (1995) sensemaking heuristic as one alternative.

As noted, the organizational study of workplace spirituality is a relatively new endeavour. Consistent with an emerging field, workplace spirituality scholars are being encouraged to initiate "excellent theoretical, conceptual and most importantly empirical research" (Dean, Fornaciari, & McGee, 2003). That said however, these same authors acknowledge that many of the "legitimated research methods" lack the tools needed to study workplace spirituality. This paper considers the value of Weick's notion of organizational sensemaking as a vehicle for studying workplace spirituality, highlighting both the strengths and weaknesses of such an approach.

The Roots and Extensions of Sensemaking

Drawing from the sensemaking literature, Weick (1995, p. 3) identified seven properties that he felt had explanatory possibilities and could be used not as some set formula for organizational analysis but rather as a heuristic for such investigations. Using these properties, sensemaking can be seen as a process that is "1) grounded in identity construction 2) retrospective, 3) enactive of sensible environments 4) social 5) ongoing 6) focused on and by extracted cues 7) driven by plausibility rather than accuracy" (1995, p. 17). Weick (1995) suggests that while each of these properties is self contained, with its own specific set of associated research questions, they are also interrelated and inform the ongoing sensemaking process.

Many scholars have utilized these sensemaking properties to study a variety of organizational phenomena, such as the Tenerife air disaster (1990), the Mann Gulch fire (1993) and the Westray mine disaster (O'Connell & Mills, 2003). Helms Mills (2003) and Orton (2000) both used the framework to study the process of organizational change, the former within a provincial power utility and the latter in the U.S. intelligence community. While a sensemaking perspective would seem to have much to contribute to an understanding of workplace spirituality, few scholars to date have made use of such a perspective (Howard, 2002; Lips-Wiersma & Mills, 2002; Pratt, 2000). The purpose of this paper is to consider how sensemaking might allow for a more insightful study of the developing workplace spirituality research stream. I will begin with a brief overview of the domain of workplace spirituality.

The Study of Workplace Spirituality

Over the past decade, the interest in workplace spirituality has grown among management scholars, practitioners, and professionals, as evidenced by the establishment of the *Academy of Management* interest group on Management, Spirituality, and Religion, the proliferation of MBA programs in the United States offering courses on this topic (Garcia-Zamor, 2003), the more than 200 titles on spirituality and work listed on Amazon.dot.com (Weston, 2002). In academia and in the popular and press, there has been an increase in writings on leadership and spirituality (Bailey, 2001; Fairholm, 1997; Graves, 2002; Moxley, 2000) and about the corporate soul and spirituality in the workplace (e.g., Batstone, 2003; Brown, 2001; Canfield & Miller, 1996).

At present, there is little consensus over the meaning of workplace spirituality. In their recently published *Handbook of Workplace Spirituality and Organizational Performance*, Giacoalone and Jurkiewicz (2003) cite some 14 different definitions of the construct, developed between 1975 and 2000. They suggest workplace spirituality is "a framework of organizational values evidenced in the culture that promote employees' experience of transcendence through the work process, facilitating their sense of being connected to others in a way that provides feelings of completeness and joy" (Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2003, p. 6). Burr and Thomson (2002) emphasize the need for "the all" to be included in the psychological contract between the organization and its employees in order to acknowledge connections to community, humanity, ecology, compassion and care, selfless work, and integrity.

Along with the definitional debate there is also disagreement over how best to study the domain of workplace spirituality. Many scholars argue that given the nature of the phenomenon that quantitative approaches are not suitable (Fornaciari & Dean, 2001), while others argue for the need to quantify the possible contributions of workplace spirituality in order to establish its legitimacy (Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2003). For those recognizing that spirituality is very much a personal experience, then finding research approaches that allow for a deeper understanding of that individual experience would seem to be important. With that objective in mind, I will assess the applicability of a sensemaking approach for studies in the area.

Sensemaking as a Vehicle for Making Sense of Workplace Spirituality

As noted, Weick (1995) proposed seven properties as a guide for analysis of organizational sensemaking. He breaks the seven properties into two categories, the first two dealing with the "sensing" aspect of sensemaking and the final five dealing with the "making" activities (Weick, 1995, p. 30). I will begin with the "sensing" activities, identity construction and retrospection, and discuss their applicability to studies of workplace spirituality.
 "Sensing" Activities in Sensemaking

Grounded in Identity Construction Weick (1995) describes identity construction as the core preoccupation of sensemaking and as such it is the first property identified in his sequence. He maintains that the process of sensemaking is fuelled by our need as individuals to have an identity and, in particular, an identity that is consistent and positive. He suggests that the identity creation process is one that is interactive, and this interaction means one's identity is continually being redefined as a result of experiences and contact with others. Weick (1995) says what is

most important is that the sensemaking is self-referential and so we make sense of things by attending to those things that we want to see.

This focus on identity construction would seem to make sensemaking an ideal heuristic for the study of workplace spirituality. From the workplace spirituality literature it is clear that identity – particularly a complete and consistent identity presentation – is something the spiritually inclined a very much preoccupied with. Ashforth and Pratt (2003, p. 93) see this evidenced in the spirituality literature as a preoccupation with "holism and harmony." They suggest that "the desire for holism and harmony is one reason why many people are unwilling to consign their spirituality to off-work domains" (Ashforth & Pratt, 2003, p. 94). The strength of this desire appears to be quite strong. Based on their in-depth interviews with 84 senior managers Mitroff and Denton (1999, p. 87) reported that "most people wished ardently that they could express their spirituality in the workplace. At the same time, they were extremely hesitant to do so because they had strong fears and doubts that they could do so without offending their peers. As a result, they felt a deep, persistent ambivalence toward spirituality."

Other scholars and writers in the workplace spirituality domain suggest that individuals working within large organizations are struggling with their work identities and in particular with the meaning of their work lives. Some scholars suggest there is lack of consistency between what many organizational members aspire to be and what they in fact see themselves doing (e.g. see Briskin, 1996; Mitroff & Denton, 1999). Others have raised the question of whether individuals can even reconcile their faith with a career in business, asking "is it possible to be a success in the business world and still be a Christian?" (McCormick, 1994, p. 6). Still other researchers say that individuals are very much aware that openly expressing their spirituality would not be well viewed by coworkers and so they actively hide this part of their identity (Lips-Wiersma & Mills, 2002). Using a sensemaking heuristic, and in particular focusing on the process of ongoing identity construction, might provide some very interesting insights into how spiritually inclined individuals make sense of their roles within organizations.

Conducted Retrospectively Another distinguishing characteristic of Weick's view of sensemaking is its emphasis on retrospection. Weick (1995, p. 24) attributes the idea of retrospection to Schultz's (1967) study of "meaningful lived experience" and highlights that it is this retrospective characteristic that distinguishes his conceptualization of sensemaking. Here, the sensemaker's focus is on attending to events which have already passed, and making sense of those events retrospectively. There is a sense of "20-20 hindsight" in this retrospection (Parry, 2003). As Helms Mills and Mills (2000, p. 4) describe it "people act and then make sense of their actions."

This retrospective property of sensemaking would seem to be very useful in the study of workplace spirituality. If individuals are trying to live their lives by a set of religious or spiritual beliefs then one would think they would be constantly required to make retrospective sense of their actions and their identities within their organizations. For example, devoutly religious individuals who are employed by organizations that produce harmful goods such as alcohol or cigarettes, or that destroy the environment would seem to be required to undertake significant retrospective sensemaking in order to reconcile their decision to work for and continue to work for firms involved in these industries. This would seem to be particularly difficult where their religious or-

ganizations have outlawed or discouraged particular business pursuits. For example, the National Council of Catholic Bishops has urged American employed in the nuclear weapons industry to "examine seriously their consciences about their work" (McCormick, 1994, p. 6). This industry employs some 600,000 of Americans. With some 25% of Americans identifying themselves as Catholics, there could be as many as 150,000 Catholics employed in this sector. It would be interesting to explore how such individuals make retrospective sense of their employment situations.

"Making" Activities in Sensemaking

Here we move in to the discussion of the second group of properties, those that are concerned with the "'making' of that which is sensed" (Weick, 1995, p. 30).

Enactive of Sensible Environments In suggesting that people enact their environment, Weick (1995) is proposing they create their own reality. He posits that individuals are actively and continually constructing their reality through "authoritative acts", that include drawing lines, establishing categories and coining labels that create new elements of the environments they inhabit (Weick, 1995, p. 31). Once such elements are created they become "tangible, unique, visible, and symbolic" as well as serve as an "obstacle" or "constraint" (Weick, 1995, p. 31). So here, sensemakers can be said to create their environment and then find themselves to be constrained, or in another sense created, by the very environment they created. In this sense it is very much "self-fulfilling action in motion" (Weick, 1995, p. 38). A researcher using sensemaking to study workplace spirituality could use this property to explore the actions individuals take to construct their reality, and then consider how they are tangibly manifested within the organization. Once visible, such acts can then be studied to see how they might actually constrain individuals.

Social This fourth property of sensemaking, its social aspect, acknowledges that the process is contingent on others, whether physically present or not, and this social aspect influences the process of interpreting as well as the resulting interpretations (Weick, 1995). Weick (1995, p. 39) contends that "sensible meanings tend to be those for which there is social support, consensual validation, and shared relevance." In other words, our sense of a situation is more often developed for and within a social context. As Helms Mills and Mills (2000b, p. 3) discuss, an organization's rules, routines, symbols and language will all have an impact on an individual's sensemaking activities and provide routines or scripts for appropriate conduct. Where such routines or scripts do not exist, the employee is left to fall back his or her own ways of making sense.

Given that workplace spirituality is evidenced within particular organizations, then the social aspect of sensemaking would seem to a key area of study. As Weick (1995) highlights, one promising area of inquiry might be to examine how organizations openly promoting spirituality socialize new members. Another important avenue of investigation would be to examine the culture of organizations that actively promote workplace spirituality and in particular to see how that culture is manifested in language, symbols, rules and routines (Helms Mills & Mills, 2000b). Pratt (2000) did this very effectively in his ethnographic study of Amway by reading their books, watching their videos, participating in workshops and weekend seminars and even selling their product.

Ongoing Weick (1995) maintains that the process of sensemaking has no beginning or end. The process never stops; sensemaking flows are constant. To make sense of what is happening around them, individual sensemakers "chop moments out of continuous flows and extract cues from those moments" to shape and reshape their sense of things (Ibid , p. 43). Weick discusses the fact that flows can be interrupted by external events and when this occurs there is typically an emotional response (Ibid, p. 45).

Weick (1995, p. 45) observes that organizations too have events that punctuate the "ongoing flow of actions and words" and suggests these are useful to "focus and crystallize meanings." Using sensemaking as a lens to study workplace spirituality then would necessarily involve looking at such organizational events and considering what meanings they convey and emphasize for organizational members.

Focused on and by Extracted Cues Here Weick (1995, p. 52) quotes Starbuck and Milliken (1988) in discussing sensemaking as a process that "focuses on subtleties and interdependencies… If events are noticed, people make sense of them; and if events are not noticed they are not available for sensemaking." This highlights the fact that the sensemaking process involves people focusing on some elements will completely ignoring others. Weick (1995, p. 52) emphasizes that it is the context that dictates what cues will extracted and he points out that "small, subtle features can have surprisingly large effects on sensemaking."

This focus on cues, and their potential for extraction, also makes sensemaking an appropriate device for studying workplace spirituality. For example, research has shown that when religious individuals are presented with messages that are incongruous with their beliefs that they simply extract the cues that make sense to them. Pargament and Mahoney (2002, p. 652) report on such work saying "As the messages became more discordant, the listeners were more likely to distort their memory of the message to fit with their religious beliefs."

Driven by Plausibility Rather than Accuracy The last property of Weick's (1995, p. 57) conceptualization of sensemaking is the fact that "it does not rely on accuracy and its model is not object perception." He suggests people need to filter and distort information so that they can separate "signal" from "noise", and not be overwhelmed (Ibid, p. 57). He acknowledges that time is often also an issue – people need to make sense of things of things on the fly – and so there is some trade off of accuracy for speed.

O'Connell and Mills (2003, p. 9) suggest that the concept of plausibility provides a researcher with a tool for assessing how "dominant senses of reality are enacted" and insight into the "processes of politics and micropolitics." In an organization supporting workplace spirituality, individuals may be required to reconcile many cues to make sense of their environment. Will all religions be treated equally and if not why not? What reasons does the company put forward for its support of workplace spirituality and are those its real motives? If they are not, what other motives could the organization have?

Strengths of the Sensemaking Heuristic

As Weick (1995) himself suggested some properties of sensemaking are more important than others in the ongoing sensemaking process. In the study of workplace spirituality, those that would seem to be most central are those concerned with identity construction and retrospection. As Ashforth and Pratt (2003, p. 102) point out "the locus of spirituality is necessarily the individual." Pargament and Mahoney (2002, p. 647) point out "People can selectively filter, block or distort material that threatens their sacred beliefs, practices and values." Given these characteristics, Weick's heuristic seems a particularly appropriate tool for the study of workplace spirituality. For even though we are examining spirituality within a work context, we are still very concerned with the individual's experience of the phenomenon and how they make sense of it within their work context.

Another obvious strength of the sensemaking heuristic for the study of workplace spirituality is the attention that it accords to shocks. Weick (1995, p. 91) identifies a shock as a "sensemaking occasion" and he identifies two types of such occasions. The first is where there is ambiguity and so people are required to engage in sensemaking because they are confused by a multitude of interpretations. The second instance is where there is uncertainty and here Weick suggests sensemaking is undertaken because people are "ignorant of any interpretations" (1999, p. 91). In the spirituality literature there is considerable discussion of the factors that have contributed to a renewed interest in spirituality both on an individual level and at a broader group or organizational level, and there are obvious links to Weick's notion of "shocks".

At the individual level, the literature describes events such as a life threatening illness, death of a family member, friend or coworker, and financial crisis, as shocks that trigger a profound sensemaking exercise in individuals. From their study, Mitroff and Denton (1999, p. 88) suggest that such a shock is almost a necessity, saying "One factor, however, became clear from the general interviews. A person must experience a severe crisis in order to embark on the search for meaning." And as Pargament and Mahoney (2002, p. 653) discuss such "crisis become spiritually meaningful, or even opportunities for growth."

On an organizational level, the sensemaking heuristic has been used to make sense of organizational disasters or upheaval. If we consider the substantive changes that have occurred in North American organizations over the last 10 to 20 years, and the impact on individual employees, one could easily describe the situation as disastrous. The massive layoffs and reorganizations that occurred in many organizations during the 1980s, 1990s and that have continued into this millennium have been characterized as unprecedented (Tsui & Wu, 2005). Citing various sources, Tsui and Wu (2005) report that between 1984 and 1986 some 600,000 middle and senior managers lost their jobs, and between 1987 and 1991 another five million white collar jobs with Fortune 1000 companies were eliminated. And the cutting has not stopped. Between 2000 and 2003, Tsui and Wu report that an additional 2.7 million jobs have been eliminated. Such massive job cuts and restructurings are said to have had a negative effect on many employees – both in terms of their mental health and their social lives (Mohamed, Wisnieski, Askar, & Syed, 2004). It would not be surprising if such events are responsible for triggering people's reassessment of their lives, the role played by work and their ultimate life purpose (Wrzesniewski, 2002). Using Weick's (1995) sensemaking framework, researcher could explore how employees have made

sense of these dramatic changes in their work environment. Possible research questions include how has having to continue to work under such conditions forced people to somehow reconcile the amount of time and energy they devote to their work? By reinterpreting their work as a "calling" and "finding meaning in their work" are employees just making sense of their long hours work existence so they can maintain that all important consistent, positive identity?

Limitations of the Sensemaking Heuristic

Scholars making use of the sensemaking framework have pointed out some of its limitations. Helms Mills (2003) has noted that one important gap is that Weick's conceptualization does not provide any insight into the role of organizational rules on the sensemaking process. Pratt's (2000) analysis of Amway showed there was potential here for rich insights to be gained from an examination of organizational rules, both spoken and unspoken.

Another concern that has been raised is that the perspective does not acknowledge the issues of organizational power and politics. In discussing sensemaking, Helms Mills and Mills (2000, p. 67) point out that "although it may be true that everyone can be said to engage in the process, it is far from clear that everyone is equal in the process." As a result, Helms Mills and Mills (2000a) suggest that Weick's sensemaking heuristic minimizes the role played by more powerful organizational members. In the study of workplace spirituality this is a particularly problematic gap as one of the concerns frequently expressed about the "dark side" of spirituality centre around issues of power and control. For example, one concern is that spirituality will become yet another tool to be used my management to control the worker. Ashforth and Pratt (2003) discuss that while some organizations are not rushing to embrace workplace spirituality others are not so reluctant. They suggest "some – with or without good intentions – are using spiritual strivings to co-opt the individual" (Ashforth & Pratt, 2003, p. 96).

Another justified concern is whether workplace spirituality represents an attempt to "re-engineer the thought processes of employees" (Tourish & Pinnington, 2002, p. 165). As Ashforth and Pratt (2003, p. 95) point out "Organizations are collectives that require their members to mesh to some degree, to share a common culture and perspective: Unbridled individuality in the form of idiosyncratic spiritual journeys is thus a potential threat to the coherence of the organization." From this one can expect that there would be only so much tolerance for organizational acceptance of a variety of spiritual perspectives and that there would be pressure to coalesce around the religious belief system of the majority. Tourish and Pinnington (2002, p. 165) view this as form of corporate cultism.

Pratt (2000) highlighted this very issue in his study of Amway. He speaks of the organization using traditional Christian spiritual values and beliefs to create an ideological fortress: a worldview that is seemingly impervious to attack from those who oppose it" (2000, p. 35). Pratt (2000) highlights that the roles of men and women in the Amway ideological fortress are very traditional ones. This raises a valid concern about how such ideologies then influence the creation of very gendered identities for men and women. These very traditional constructions could be expected act to constrain both men and women, but particularly women.

Such ideological fortresses could also be used to exclude and therefore discriminate against groups of people. With the dominant paradigm being traditional Christian values, there have already been cases where individuals' rights to religious freedom have been compromised. McCormick (1994) details one example where a business owner attempted to hire only born again Christians as managers for his chain of sports clubs. The individual was convicted of violating the Minnesota Human Rights Act. Rather than comply with the law, he subsequently sold his business (Ibid). There is also the possibility that workplace spirituality could be used as an ideology to justify certain actions. As Boje, Rosile, Dennehy, and Summers (1997) suggest, corporations created and promoted a storyline to justify their organizational re-engineering efforts. Some of the same themes are evident in the discourse about the benefits of workplace spirituality, namely that it is a means of achieving increased organizational performance (Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2003), and increased competitive advantage (Klein & Izzo, 1996). Others are making equally grand truth claims of a somewhat different nature, speaking of organizations facing a "commitment crisis" (Klein & Izzo, 1996, p. 105). There are also dire predictions about the future of organizations that do not embrace spirituality, questioning their ability "to survive for long without spirituality and soul" (Mitroff & Denton, 1999, p. 91). In the face of such strong rhetoric, it would seem to be difficult for "disbelievers" to question, let alone resist, corporately sanctioned workplace spirituality initiatives. For what employee would want to see their employer fail or not be able to remain competitive?

And lastly, some scholars are asking whether organizations will draw the line at involving themselves in their employees' spirituality or simply consider everything to be fair game. Nash (1994 as cited in Tourish & Pinnington, 2002, p. 165) has offered accounts of evangelical CEOs becoming actively involved in their employees' home lives and sexual habits on the grounds that they directly affected business.

Conclusion

In speaking about the sensemaking framework, Weick (2001, p. xi) himself has acknowledged that "a way of seeing is a way of not seeing," making him appear well aware that a sensemaking perspective has its strengths as well as its shortcomings. Relative to a study of workplace spirituality, I have suggested that its strengths are its focus on ongoing individual identity construction in a social setting. Like Helms Mills (2003), I would suggest its most serious shortcomings are its lack of consideration of power and politics. Given the importance of these factors in organizations and the potential for deliberate manipulation of workplace spirituality in the interests of organizations, I would suggest that on its own the Weickian sensemaking heuristic would not allow for a complete analysis of workplace spirituality. Given the discussion of the "dark side" of the workplace spirituality movement, I think Weick's (1995) properties should be used in concert with the critical, rules-based approach suggested by Helms-Mills (2003). In this way, I think scholars will achieve what many are looking for in the workplace spirituality arena; "a way of talking about spirituality in organizations that is critical, analytical, theoretical and not reductionist" (Benefiel, 2003, p. 385).

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