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Abstract

This paper contributes a narrative dimension for the temporality of organizational sensemaking. Reconciling sensemaking with a broader understanding of time not only provides a more in-depth treatment of time in sensemaking. It also helps overcome existing dichotomies in temporal theorizing to advance a more dynamic temporal theorizing in organizational research. To extend a temporal understanding of sensemaking, we discuss Ricoeur's theory of narrative and time in light of his prefigurative, configurative, and refigurative modes of time. We then suggest ways that this framework illuminates how three corresponding temporal modes of sensemaking connect through time, drawing on Weick's analysis of the Mann Gulch disaster to illustrate the framework. Finally, we discuss how the recursive features of our framework enable understanding of the situated dynamics by which actors move through time, thus contributing a way to deal with the "stationarity problem" of temporal theorizing.

Keywords

configurative sensemaking, emplotment, indivisible time, narrative theory, prefigurative sensemaking, refigurative sensemaking, Ricoeur, sensemaking, time

"...time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence."

(Ricoeur, 1984, p. 52, italics in original)

Introduction

The full potential of sensemaking theory will only be realized if theorizing incorporates a fuller theory of time than is currently available. A fuller theory of time should explain how

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actors make sense of being in the flow of time and how they combine past and future events through an ongoing present. The dynamics by which actors combine past and future events in an ongoing present help them establish and maintain a trajectory through time as past and future events are enacted and (re)interpreted in the context of a changing present. However, sensemaking theory is still hampered by temporal separations, making it too static to be able to explain the temporal dynamics of sensemaking. One important underlying temporal separation is the distinction between ongoing sensemaking in the present and sensemaking of past or future events. Such a separation, if upheld, prevents us from explaining how past and future events are made sense of through the processes of encountering and navigating the present (Hernes & Schultz, 2020). In order to theorize more fully the temporal dynamics of sensemaking, it is necessary to integrate the different temporalities of the ongoing present on one hand and of past and future events on the other. We intend to show in this paper how this may be achieved by applying Ricoeur's (1984) theory of time and narrative.

It is well established that the experience of being in the present takes the form of indivisible flows of experience (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002) in which temporal distinctions, such as that between "before" and "after," are suspended (Hernes, 2022). This is descriptive of the temporal experience, for example, of being in a meeting where discussions connect back and forth between past, present, and future to form the indivisible experience of the meeting. Such temporal experience is basically indivisible, because isolating different threads of interaction from one another will inevitably change the very meaning of the meeting. At the same time, events before the meeting and anticipated events after the meeting may be depicted sequentially according to a before-and-after conception of time. In other words, while operating in an indivisible present, actors address events that occur before and after the meeting as separate events. The gap between lived, indivisible time and the sequential time of past and

future signifies the coexistence of two different temporal ontologies. Whereas the two ontologies have been discussed separately by organizational scholars, their interplay remains to be theorized.

As argued emphatically by time scholars, the interplay between ontologically different time conceptions cannot be adequately captured by simple juxtaposition. Nevertheless, the present, past, and future are frequently treated as juxtaposed time conceptions in organizational analysis (Ancona, Okhuysen, & Perlow, 2001; Feldman, Worline, Baker, & Bredow., 2021; Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013). Juxtaposition of these prospective views, however, overlooks the ontological primacy of the temporal present and hence the situated activity of addressing past and future events through the ongoing activity of the present (Hernes & Schultz, 2020). Actors operate in a living present, which cannot be put alongside past or future events precisely *because* past and future events are experienced or enacted *through* the activity of the present. Thus, organizational time scholars face the challenge of maintaining the dualism between different time conceptions on one hand while finding ways to conceptually theorize their interplay on the other.

In this paper, we propose a step towards resolving the above temporal dualisms in sensemaking theory and, by implication, in organizational theorizing. We draw upon Ricoeur's (1980, 1984, 1991a, 1991b) work, in which he recognizes the two conceptions of time and how their interplay takes place as actors move through time. By drawing upon Ricoeur's narrative theory we address two closely related lacunae related to organization and time. First, we extend the temporal understanding of sensemaking to overcome temporal dualisms inherent in sensemaking theory. Second, we extend the treatment of time in organizational research by explicating the interplay between the sequential time of past and future and the indivisible time of the present. The latter corresponds to Ricoeur's notion of "within-time-ness" (Ricoeur, 1980, p. 173) in which actors connect disparate events into meaningful wholes.

Because the present is the locus of time enactment, the connecting of events consists of “making present” events from past and future.

Our dual focus on the indivisible present on the one hand and past and future events on the other, is consistent with Sandberg and Tsoukas’ (2020) argument about the necessity of theorizing sensemaking by engaging with different modes of time, which they define as existential temporality, practical time, and chronological time. Our discussion, in addition, helps organizational research explain the temporal dynamics by which actors move through time and hence overcome what Hernes (2022, p. 141) calls the “stationarity problem” of temporal theorizing, which we will address in the latter part of the paper. The stationarity problem occurs when the analysis does not take account of how the agency that unfolds in the present event creates a novel framing of the past that informs the emerging future event.

We structure the paper as follows. First, we briefly review different conceptualizations of time in sensemaking theory and the emerging role of narrative. Second, we discuss Ricoeur’s theory of narrative and time in relation to alternative notions of narrative, then how Ricoeur’s theory integrates the two facets of time. We introduce Ricoeur’s three modes of engagement in time—prefiguration, configuration, and refiguration—and suggest the terms prefigurative, configurative, and refigurative sensemaking. We then tie together these terms to suggest a more dynamic model of sensemaking. Finally, we suggest how our discussion may improve our understanding of the recursive dynamics by which actors move through time.

Sensemaking and Time: a brief review and the status quo

Sensemaking offers a crucial lens through which to study the dynamics of time and organization. First, sensemaking draws attention to the ongoing process of defining and (re)imagining of past and future. For example, Kaplan and Orlikowski (2013) draw explicitly on sensemaking theory in their discussion of

temporal work: the ongoing activity involved in rethinking the past, reimagining the future, and addressing present concerns. Second, sensemaking assumes interplay between situated activity and interpretation in social settings (Colville, Brown, & Pye, 2012; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Rouleau, 2005). Early works on sensemaking also introduced situated activity and interpretation to the temporality of organizational life, notably by bringing attention to the interplay between enacting the future and making sense of the past (Weick, 1995). Taken together, these two aspects of sensemaking and time invite theorizing of the situated dynamics through which time is enacted in organizations.

The temporality of sensemaking theory has evolved since Daft and Weick’s (1984) paper, discussion about the conditions under which organizational interpretation systems evolve and are maintained over time. Taking a more situated view of time, Starbuck and Milliken (1988, p. 51) subsequently defined sensemaking implicitly as activity involving both retrospection and prospection, by suggesting that sensemaking involves, at minimum, the dimensions of “comprehending, understanding, explaining, attributing, extrapolating, and predicting.” Weick (1995) then emphasized the retrospective quality of situated sensemaking, arguing that the fact of events makes them objects of interpretation through the “reflective glance” (Weick, 1979, p. 194). The unknowability of the future, in contrast, makes looking forward in time conjectural rather than an object of interpretation, and therefore reliant on action as a basis for interpretation. Weick justified this by arguing that only action can point to the future. In the absence of action, cognition (about the future) is empty, merely summarizing previous action rather than anticipating future activity.

In response to Weick’s (1995) extensive discussion of sensemaking and time, other scholars have argued against Weick’s exclusively retrospective orientation of sensemaking and have, instead, advocated a prospective view (Gephart, Topal, & Zhang, 2010; Gioia et al.,

1994, 2002; Stigliani & Ravasi, 2012). Gioia, Corley, and Fabbri (2002) follow Weick's discussions of Schütz's (1967) notion of "future perfect," whereby actors envision a future event and then act as though it has already taken place. Offering a different approach, Stigliani and Ravasi (2012) studied how actors used retrospective accounts to arrive at prospective sensemaking. Although these positions modify Weick's sensemaking theory, they do not fundamentally advance the temporal understanding of sensemaking. In spite of extending the temporal scope of sensemaking from Weick's (1995) initial definition, current views remain dichotomous by considering the past and future as separate, both from each other and from the temporal present. Although one could see sensemaking as prospective and retrospective, the problem is not solved by simply turning the sensemaking arrow back and forth between retrospective and prospective orientations. Additionally, as Brown, Colville, and Pye (2015) remind us, much work remains regarding how actors make sense of the future as well as of the past, implying that what is at stake is the conjunctive process of combining past and future through sensemaking. A related concern voiced by Sandberg and Tsoukas (2015) is how retrospective and prospective approaches to sensemaking suffer from different problems. The either-or assumption (past or future) ignores longstanding writings on the philosophy of time that debate the multidirectional temporality in which actors find themselves in an ongoing present (Schultz & Hernes, 2013). The both-and assumption (past and future juxtaposed), while overcoming the shortfalls of the former, does not accommodate the assumption that the past and future are mutually constitutive.

Recent advances in time research drawn from philosophy and sociology have advocated a temporal understanding of the present, past, and future as mutually constitutive and evolving to avoid the dominance of sequential views of time in sensemaking (Dawson & Sykes, 2019). Extending this view to sensemaking implies that although past and future events are

separate in analytical terms, they also become mutually constitutive through sensemaking in the present, which is the challenge that we address in the introduction to this paper, except that we emphasize the phenomenon of addressing separate past and future events through an indivisible present. Several scholars of sensemaking have called for such a temporal view (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Wiebe, 2010). However, research has yet to offer frameworks that combine sensemaking with a richer, more dynamic and integrated present-past-future view of time. Hence, sensemaking scholars have begun to search for more elaborate temporal perspectives that address the interwoven relationships among the present, past, and future (Dawson & Sykes, 2019; Gephart et al., 2010; Hernes & Maitlis, 2010; Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013; Wiebe, 2010). Nevertheless, the temporal dynamics of combining present, past, and future on an ongoing basis remains something of a puzzle in sensemaking research.

Arguably, narrative theory plays a potentially important role in addressing this puzzle by extending our understanding of the temporality of sensemaking. Narrative, or narrating, is the primary form by which humans make time-based experience meaningful (Polkinghorne, 1988) and is, therefore, an essential part of sensemaking in organizations (Weick, 1995). Thus, scholars have argued that narrative theory may advance sensemaking beyond debates about retrospective versus prospective sensemaking (Gephart et al., 2010; Gioia et al., 1994, 2002; Stigliani & Ravasi, 2012), and that actors employ narrative to capture ongoing activity by meaningfully connecting and reconnecting past and future events to establish their trajectory through time (Cunliffe & Coupland, 2011; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015; Tsoukas & Hatch, 2001; Weick, 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). For instance, in their review of the sensemaking literature, Sandberg and Tsoukas (2015, p. 9) state that sensemaking involves focusing on salient cues of an unfolding situation and developing them into a plausible "narrative" about what is going on. In a similar vein, Weick and colleagues (2005, p. 414) suggest that

retrospective attention performs a “narrative reduction” of material bracketed from flows of events to generate a plausible story oriented toward the future, which is also tentative and provisional.

Some sensemaking scholars have taken the narrative dimension of time to pursue the question of how sensemaking helps actors move through time as well as the role of narrative in sensemaking (Abolafia, 2010; Cunliffe & Coupland, 2011; Cunliffe, Luhman, & Boje, 2004; Hernes, Hendrup, & Schäffner, 2015). These scholars have argued that actors employ narrative to capture ongoing activity because narratives are experienced in the “living moment by perpetually drawing upon past events and conversations, present interactions, and by anticipating future events and actions” (Cunliffe & Coupland, 2011, p. 67). This notion corresponds to what Wiebe (2010, p. 216) calls “temporal sensemaking,” which he defines as the “the act of configuring (and reconfiguring) the relationship of past, present, and future.” Sensemaking scholars have also emphasized actors’ collective sense of meaning of their pasts and futures as a basis for moving through time (Cunliffe et al., 2004; Cunliffe & Coupland, 2011; Dunford & Jones, 2000; Maclean, Harvey, Sillince, & Golant, 2014).

However, narrative approaches to sensemaking have yet to bridge the dualisms between different time conceptions, as pointed out above, and, more specifically, the ontological divide between the sequential time of past and future on one hand, and the indivisible time of the present on the other. Actors operate with both conceptions simultaneously and it is arguably in the interplay between the two conceptions of time that organizational continuity and change are decided through temporal sensemaking. In what follows, we discuss how Ricoeur’s narrative theory may allow both facets of time in a temporal narrative view of sensemaking. We discuss how his narrative theory enriches the temporality of sensemaking by combining a sequential view of time, found primarily in the refigurative and refigurative modes, with an

indivisible view of time in the configurative mode.

Ricoeur on Narrative and Time

Scholars of sensemaking have described narrative in different ways. One view describes narrative as a form of situated storytelling (Boje, 1995), which is more often story snippets than complete accounts. In addition to being the preferred “currency of sensemaking” in organizations (Boje, 1991, p. 106), stories may be used purposely, for example, to support organizational agendas (Rouleau, 2005) or to reduce ambiguity or equivocality (Colville et al., 2012). Illustrative of this view of narrative is Patriotta’s (2003) study of team members at Fiat Auto Italy, who, when confronting interruptions or breakdowns, referenced shared narratives of past events to solve problems. Patriotta found that actors employed “narrative devices” such as “detective stories” in their search for solutions.

A second, and more structured, view of narrative derives largely from literature (Czarniawska, 2004) and imposes a sequential event structure to explain processes in relation to certain genres. For example, Eshraghi and Taffler (2015) show how fund managers used epic modes of storytelling in their work. In temporal terms, in this view actors narrate reality by the imposition of a beginning, a middle, and an end (Vaara, Sonenshein, & Boje, 2016). This structure enables actors to associate narrative structure with different genres, such as comedy, tragedy, or drama. Barry and Elmes (1997), for instance, suggest that strategy as narrative stands somewhere between theatrical drama, the historical novel, futurist fantasy, and autobiography. This view considers plots to be essential to conveying the meaning of the narrative. Narrative plots may be in the form of tropes, which are figurative expressions, such as metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, or irony (Czarniawska, 2004).

We follow Ricoeur (1980, 1984) in what we see as a third view of narrative that accommodates

the two previous views while showing how they may interrelate. Ricoeur defines narrative as unfolding from within time, as a particular way of being in the world (see also Cunliffe et al., 2004; Pedersen, 2009). We may recognize in his view both the rise of narrative as situated stories created in response to the contingencies of the context and the more structured approach, which relies on emplotment (i.e., of a story line) to connect unfolding episodes to sustain a particular meaning over time. Importantly, for Ricoeur, narrative and time are reciprocal and inextricably linked as a “form of life” (Ricoeur, 1980, p. 169). In arguing for narrative as a way of being in the world, Ricoeur refers extensively to Heidegger (1927) and most notably present-past-future dynamics as coming to be, having been, and making present (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 61). Still, while adhering to a present-past-future view of time, Ricoeur does not abandon the view of actors encountering and coping with sequentially ordered events as they move through time. Rather, he reconciles these two basic facets of time described above, in an account of actors moving through time by sequentially encountering events that form a narrative trajectory. From this narrative trajectory (Hernes, 2022) actors draw on disparate (Ricoeur, 1980) events and experiences to configure their present-past-future narrative to resolve dilemmas or puzzles they confront. The presence of the two distinct modes of time in Ricoeur’s theorizing is shown by the following quote,

[..] every narrative combines two dimensions in proportions, one chronological and the other nonchronological. The first may be called the episodic dimension, which characterizes the story as made out of events. The second is the configurational dimension, according to which the plot construes significant wholes out of scattered events. (Ricoeur, 1980, p. 178)

Ricoeur’s theory may be described as involving first *prefiguration*, which gives primacy to how an actor encounters experiences and events sequentially, as each event adds cumulatively to

the reservoir of experience. In the prefigurative mode, an actor embeds cultural codes and rules in sequentially lived events and experiences through time, from which the actor draws and articulates everyday coping. Ricoeur calls a second mode *configuration*, whereby actors turn events and experiences into a provisional story to resolve new issues or puzzles they confront. This crucial element of Ricoeur’s narrative theory is where he argues that narrative connects to the direct human experience of time. This is narrative time; the non-representative making-present performed by actors (Ricoeur, 1980). Importantly, configuration, while being temporally indivisible, draws on the prefigured reservoir of events, actors, intentions, and outcomes that an actor has encountered sequentially through time. Whereas prefigurative time helps actors cope in society more generally, actors use configuration towards more focused ends. Thus, configuration involves the selective weaving together of prefigured events in the face of situations that require novel solutions. Through configuration, actors “step outside” prefigured time, which enables them to expand their agentic qualities (Rindova & Martins, 2021, p. 3) by holistically creating and assembling an indivisible “story” about what lies in front of them.

This is how we see Ricoeur approaching the indivisible dimension of time, by weaving sequential time from past and future into a holistic, indivisible “story” expressed through interwoven processes. By stepping out of the flow of prefigured time, actors enact a provisional and as-yet-untold story (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 74) that does not lend itself to segmentation of temporal elements. Finally, Ricoeur calls the third mode *refiguration* of time, in which configured narrative is translated into action in response to a novel event encountered in the world. Whereas configuration involves the more complex form of indivisible time, refiguration references a more sequential form again, of one action following the previous action. Refiguration moves between newly configured time and sequential prefigured time in the form of action in response to the novel event

unfolding. What emerges is a theoretical frame that captures continuous, situated actions and interpretations in a time-based experience in action. These three temporal narrative modes connect to form an evolving cycle of recursive dynamics, whereby refiguration connects back to prefiguration, as shown in the discussion below.

Ricoeur's narrative theory offers a temporally richer perspective than the one organizational narrative scholars usually employ, which has tended to focus either on the fictional aspect of narrative, when considering narratives as synonymous with stories, or storytelling (Boje, 1991), or an assumed sequential structure of events, often with a beginning, middle, and end. Ricoeur's temporal view of narrative, in contrast, begins with the idea that narrative (note the singular form—Ricoeur does not assume narrative in plural form) is both sequential (prefigurative), in the sense that events are encountered in the order they took place, and configurative, which means that events are arranged into an indivisible whole of interwoven processes to provide meaning to actions. In the configurative part of this sensemaking process, an actor's narrative becomes emplotted—whereby actors create a provisional story that provides meaning for both focal actors and those they enlist. Finally, the refigurative part enables the configurative to become integrated into a new prefigurative mode as actors move through time and engage with new experiences and events.

Towards a Temporal Narrative View of Sensemaking

We now turn to sensemaking in relation to Ricoeur's three modes: prefiguration, configuration, and refiguration. In what follows, we relate the three modes to different aspects of sensemaking theory while drawing upon Weick's (1993) analysis of sensemaking in the Mann Gulch tragedy as illustration. Weick draws upon Maclean's (1992) historical account of the Mann Gulch disaster in Montana in 1949

in which 13 firefighters perished in the flames. The Mann Gulch case is relevant for illustration because it includes experience gained over time by the main actors—Dodge, the crew leader, and the 15-member firefighting crew who had parachuted in to put out the blaze. The Mann Gulch story also examines how the team adapted or failed to adapt to an invented solution to an unexpectedly novel situation. It puts focus on how the configuring moments of inventing solutions were interwoven with previous prefigurative and ensuing refigurative modes. The gist of the Mann Gulch story is that as the fire rapidly approached the firefighter crew, Dodge realized in the spur of the moment that due to the fire's size and rapid approach, they had no chance of putting it out or running to safety, and he tried to engage the crew members in lighting a never-before-attempted escape fire that might enable them to lie down while the approaching fire passed over them. The other crew members, however, not ever having experienced such a situation, nor having ever seen an escape fire before, ran for safety. Only two of them survived by making it through a crevice in the ridge unburned. Meanwhile, Dodge, who invented the escape fire, was the only other member of the crew to survive the runaway fire.

Prefigurative sensemaking

The prefigurative mode in Ricoeur's framework corresponds to sensemaking as the everyday activity of what Boje (1991, p. 106) calls the "dynamic process of incremental refinement of their stories of new events as well as ongoing reinterpretations of culturally sacred story lines." This dynamic process includes noticing and bracketing flows of experience. As they move through time, actors organize their experiences into threads of events and experiences (Weick, 1979) which are encountered and presented sequentially. Organizational actors use sensemaking to synthesize the almost infinite streams of experiences surrounding them (Weick et al., 2005) as they struggle to reduce complexity and create a sense of pursuing a

coherent trajectory through time. As prospective enactments unfold, they become subject to interpretation, and these interpretations of enactments-becoming-past are part of conditioning the emerging future.

The prefigurative mode shares with sensemaking a view of action and interpretation as processes of evolving experiences and events through which actors move through time. In the case of sensemaking, this point derives from the assumption that all knowledge relies on the experience of acting upon the world (Mead, 1932, 1934). Actors, according to Mead, move through time as successive moments of experience that flow into one another but remain nevertheless distinct, yet not separate. The continuous flow of the past into the present constitutes actors' moment-to-moment movement through time. But actors also connect events retrospectively and selectively to represent their forward movement through time. This corresponds to Weick's retrospective sensemaking except that Weick discusses primarily singular events, whereas in a narrative time view, past events make sense relationally as part of trajectories between past and future (Hernes, 2014). In this view, sensemaking is the acting into existence of events based on accumulated past experiential events. When looking back, actors perceive the past as a sequential stream of experiences and events, which they project to the future as continuity.

We may discern prefigurative sensemaking from Weick's rendering of the Mann Gulch disaster in which he discusses how the firefighting crew constituted an organization balancing resilience and disintegration. The actions of different crew members when faced with the approaching fire may be interpreted in light of their prefigured narrative mode based on the experiences they had accumulated leading up to the Mann Gulch event. From a prefigurative perspective, the Mann Gulch fire originally presented itself as relatively routine challenge, defined by the firefighters' accumulated experience over the years. According to Weick's summary of historical data, the fire gave no preliminary indication that it was novel. It was

originally characterized as a "10 o'clock fire," meaning a comparatively harmless fire that could be surrounded and isolated by 10 a.m. the next morning. According to Weick's account, there was a preliminary period, however short, during which the crew relied on a prefigured narrative as a reference for how to approach the fire. There may have been a period when there were indications the fire was becoming anomalous and potentially lethal. The crew's shared firefighting experiences, however, likely served as a basis to dismiss or normalize such signals and adhere to prefigured narrative around the usual progression of a wildfire that would be expeditiously contained. We might speculate, in addition, that the prefigurative sensemaking of crew members likely deviated from Dodge's. Per Weick (1993), because Dodge had been with the Forest Service longer than anyone else on the crew, he may have been more aware of precedents to the escape fire: the importance of starting a backfire, or turning into the fire in order to try to work through it. We learn about this divergence in narrative, in part, because of Dodge's later radical invention of the escape fire that his crew neither understood nor chose to follow.

Configurative sensemaking

Whereas prefigurative sensemaking deals with actors' day-to-day coping (such as training for—and putting out—10 o'clock fires), occasionally actors are required to resolve novel issues through a more complex configuring of experience. This focuses on sensemaking "as the experience of being thrown into an ongoing, unknowable, unpredictable streaming of experience in search of answers to the question, 'what's the story?'" (Weick et al., 2005, p. 410). It should be noted that Ricoeur, in discussing configurative time, also refers to Heidegger's (1927) concept of thrownness into the temporal present, with the various contingencies that are not of the actor's own choosing. In such situations, Weick and colleagues (2005) argue that people try to talk a present-past-future narrative into existence, which they can use as a basis for

action. Here, as per narrative theory, actors draw on selected past events to create a story that helps them address a challenge in the imminent future. Configurative sensemaking corresponds also somewhat with what Weick et al. (2005, p. 414) call “narrative reduction,” a story or account that informs actors’ actions to address problems confronting them. We stress, however, that such accounts are not sequential, although they may eventually be implemented through sequential steps, but are better described as holistic and interwoven accounts. Such accounts are essentially indivisible in the sense that dividing them into separate streams or stages will fundamentally change their meaning.

In the configurative mode, sensemaking involves selective connecting of past and projected future events, which together make a story that subsequently guides actors in their next steps. We might understand Weick’s familiar dictum “complicate yourself” (Weick, 1979, p. 261) as accumulating the broadest set of experiences in prefigured time, and then curating them, in the moment, into temporarily configured narratives that combine past and future events into an intelligible whole that responds to a new, unforeseen challenge. Prospective events may never actually occur, but they are necessary for actors to formulate a story of how to move on. This is part of the essence of Schütz’s (1967) take on time and temporality: what he calls “future perfect” is an imaginary future “in-order-to” event (or set of events) which actors weave into “because-of” events from their past. In other words, according to Schütz, past and future events, while serving different purposes, become closely interlinked the same way that we assume: that past and future events are made mutually constitutive, moreover that their combination enables actors to move into an uncertain situation with a set of alternatives.

The Mann Gulch incident quickly confronted the firefighters with an occasion for configurative sensemaking, in part because the fire demanded they depart from a preestablished 10 o’clock narrative to determine what,

from their experience, was relevant to the situation of an approaching, seemingly out of control fire. They had to draw from experience to alter the story about what they would do next. In Weick’s rendering of the tragedy, there were multiple indicators that the smokejumpers’ engagement with an unusual fire would be a natural prompt for configurative sensemaking. However, evidence suggests that the crew’s prefigured sensemaking did not include practices such as making escape fires, which meant they could not draw on such practices in their own limited configurative sensemaking. Meanwhile, as mentioned, Dodge, when faced with the same indicators, likely drew from a different repertoire of prefigured experiences and present cues to configure a different story of how the wildfire was unfolding, and how he and the crew might respond.

The evidence that Dodge was constructing a different narrative unfolded in a dramatic turn of events. According to Weick, at a perilous moment when the raging fire approached the crew, “Dodge yelled at the crew to drop their tools, and then, to everyone’s astonishment, he lit a fire in front of them and ordered them to lie down in the area it had burned. No one did, and they all ran for the ridge” (Weick, 1993, p. 629). Dodge had configured his experiences into a “story” of how to survive the approaching fire. This “story” may be seen as a holistic, indivisible narrative of interwoven streams of action in the face of an unexpected, puzzling, or otherwise demanding situation. Although, as Weick points out, he had probably not ever lit such a fire (where he was trained, the vegetation would not allow an escape fire to be lit successfully), his past training included several elements that would make lighting an escape fire a plausible solution.

Assembling events from prefigured sensemaking does not imply mere repetition of what has been done previously but imagining how the situation can be handled in the intersection between sometimes creatively selected past events and possible future events. Geiger, Danner-Schröder, and Kremser (2020) provide a good example of non-repetition in their

analysis of firefighters who, although they enter new situations with standard routines, must always adapt these routines to the present situation in anticipation of possible future events. Hence, even if Dodge had been trained to light an escape fire that had already been invented, every situation is unique, depending on local topography and vegetation. The actions had to be narrated as connected parts of a complex whole rather than a simple sequence of actions, which is what Ricoeur (1980) calls narrative time (see also Pedersen, 2009). For instance, imagining the lighting of an escape fire involves imagining several mutually interwoven actions through time, each of which may alter the overall pattern, hence, narrative configurative time may be seen as “open time, that is, time [that] can be defined in many different ways; as historical time, as living time, as foreshadows of time, or as time bound to space” (Pedersen, 2009, p. 390).

Refigurative sensemaking

Whereas configurative sensemaking consists of assembling selected past and future events into a narrative to resolve issues actors face, refigurative sensemaking implies the acting out of the “now and then” of actual, lived time. Weick and colleagues (2005) indicate: “If the first question of sensemaking is ‘what’s going on here?’, the second, equally important question is ‘What do I do next?’ This second question is directly about action. . .” It is the answer to this second question that demarcates the transition from configurative sensemaking to refigurative sensemaking. This is what Ricoeur calls restoring the story to the time of action; the activity that arises in the nexus between the world of the text and the lifeworld (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 180). The expression “time of action” is important because it signifies how actors put the story into action in the temporal “now.” Whereas configuration connects past and future events into a holistic story of how to proceed in the face of issues, refiguration describes ensuing interactions as actors enact a story. Refiguration restores the story not only

to the time of action, but also to sequential time. This mode is consistent with Weick’s (1979) view of enactment, which he defines as acting a possible future into existence. Whereas configurative sensemaking involves a selection of events to construct a story of how to proceed, refigurative sensemaking involves selection of actions to proceed according to the narrated story, not as indivisible time but as sequential time. It should be noted that the “story,” being a complex whole, cannot in itself be translated directly into actions, but is *enacted* through a series of sequentially ordered actions. Project organizing is an example of how a complex whole is organized into sequential steps of actions to enable synchronicity and avoid cost and time overruns. In such cases, sequencing is a way of taking control of time (Vaagaasar, Hernes, & Dille, 2020).

We return to the Mann Gulch incident to suggest that while configurative sensemaking led to the possibility of creating an escape fire, Dodge’s invention of the escape fire itself was the crux of Dodge’s refigurative sensemaking. Per Weick (1993), Dodge yells for the crew to drop their tools, lights a fire in front of them, and orders them to lie down in the burned area. His orders are clearly aimed at how to act and are therefore spelled out sequentially. This is the story’s “refigurative moment,” where notably different actors choose different lines of action. Where Dodge had engaged in a configurative lead-up to the escape fire, the firefighting crew refigured their sensemaking differently. They did not engage in the same configurative sensemaking as Dodge. Instead, they resorted to a default solution found in prefigured experience—running towards exits from the canyon. Dodge’s refigurative sensemaking is largely individual, in that none of the crew followed his lead, but it resulted in him improvising an approach to firefighting that helped save his life. We can see the different role of configuration in the transition between prefigured and refigured sensemaking. Dodge, who configured through improvisation, pursued a completely different course

of refiguration than he had been used to in the past. The other crew members, however, did not configure their sensemaking sufficiently to allow a break between their prefigured and refigured sensemaking.

Extending the Temporality of Sensemaking

Although Weick has repeatedly called attention to the action and process dimensions of sensemaking, and famously argued for attention to the verb rather than the noun (Bakken & Hernes, 2006), scholars have yet to provide an account of sensemaking that dynamically incorporates the present, past, and future alongside the narrative dimension that weaves these perspectives together. A temporal narrative theory of sensemaking offers a concrete response to how to navigate the onslaught of urgent challenges that individuals and organizations continually confront if studies of the situated dynamics between the three modes of time are considered. Real-time and micro-level studies could help analyse situated dynamics in more detail. Actors influence their narrative trajectory over time through their configurative sensemaking, which connects to the other two modes through the ways that experiences or solutions are selected from prefigurative sensemaking on one hand and the ways that the configured narrative is converted into refigurative sensemaking (enactment) on the other.

While there are always individual opportunities to configure and refigure in the face of unforeseen challenges, the most daunting sensemaking challenge concerns the ability of an individual or group to invite others into reconfiguring a narrative and the action tied to it. Our view of configurative sensemaking posits the actors continually mediating between the present, past, and future. As mediators, they select and assemble past events, people, and objects into plausible, compelling narrative form that generates followability. In prefigurative sensemaking, habit and routine take precedence, while in configurative sensemaking, creativity and agency are introduced and

realized through refigurative sensemaking as the narrative is enacted through unfolding practices.

In the action characteristic of refigurative sensemaking, we also argue that the actors are mediators or brokers, not only between past, present, and future, but between the different actors they wish to enlist and influence with their narrating. We assume that enlisting others in a refigured narrative, or in collaborating in refigurative sensemaking, requires time and communicative social skill. Obstfeld (2017) identifies “moving among the past, present, and future” as one of five core attributes of the knowledge articulation crucial to brokers who bridge different social collectives. Here again, skilled actors might be mediators (or *tertius iungens*) in social space, assembling narrative to bridge different interests, each with their own sense of history, challenges in the current moment, and possibilities for the future. Assuming sensemaking occurring in social space, prefigurative sensemaking corresponds most closely with knowledge transfer that involves simpler movement of prefigured ideas shared between diverse people arrayed across social boundaries. Configurative and refigurative sensemaking requires a more dynamic engagement of different perspectives where new possibilities are imagined. We can infer that in transforming knowledge in highly innovative contexts, actors must be sensitive to how to connect time-based experiences and a shared future that reflects and connects a diverse set of organizational interests (e.g., marketing, manufacturing, and engineering) to a design challenge, to assemble a narrative that key actors can share.

Ricoeur’s perspective on time provides new insight into both occurrences by capturing how an actor necessarily locates and inserts an outcome that motivates a configured and refigured narrative. Actors draw that future outcome, somewhat paradoxically, from the raw content found in prefigured time. Some future states are drawn from past experiences within an iterated routine. Other future states involve a more salient leap in the form of a trajectory projection or

imagined future state that motivates and guides action (Obstfeld, 2012). Paradoxically, such a trajectory projection, even if involving a novel entrepreneurial outcome (Obstfeld et al., 2020), ultimately involves an actor who combines and recombines ideas drawn from prefigured time. Moreover, as organizations navigate new distributed and pandemic-infused contexts, the search for valid future states becomes unavoidably more complex. It is difficult to draw on past individual or organizational experience to function effectively in an organization completely reliant on home-based employees who meet via Zoom. Similarly, as emerging distributed forms of organizing draw on more heterogeneous populations, often with actors who have less shared prefigurative experience, additional challenges arise for how they navigate that novelty collaboratively. Nevertheless, organizational actors must necessarily draw (like Dodge in the Mann Gulch example) from what is available in prefigured time and compose future states that motivate and guide future action.

Beyond Sensemaking: Steps towards a situated model of how actors move through time

Ricoeur's theorizing may help us not only transcend existing temporal dichotomies in sense-making theory. It may also help theorize the situated dynamics by which actors move recursively through time. In the context of temporality, recursiveness implies that past and future events condition ongoing activity while being conditioned by that activity in turn. For example, while bringing forward experiences and events from the past to confront a potential future, or, conversely, using future scenarios to search into their past (Hernes & Schultz, 2020), a novel present emerges with a different past and a different future conditioned by previous events. If we combine present-past-future with sequential time, as Ricoeur's thinking invites, we may picture an indivisible "moving present" in the centre, with past and future

dimensions of sequential time stretching out from it. These pasts and futures are continually "presenced" to address the everchanging "contingencies of the moment" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 963), which evolve through the changing interplay between past and future (Lord, Dinh, & Hoffman, 2015). The added complexity of this perspective in relation to existing studies of organizational temporality is that it takes account of how the past and future change as a result of moving through time. By considering the recursive dynamics by which actors move through time we suggest a response to Bergson's (1922, p. 5) description of how the past "gnaws into the future [and] which swells as it advances." The "gnawing of the past" takes place through the present, and *how* the past "gnaws" into the future depends on how actors in the present orient their activity towards past and future.

Such dynamics invite the conceptual challenge of analysing how a present event is partly the result of future-oriented activity at past events while forming past of new future events in turn. Whereas in the last decade, organizational scholars have advanced the present-past-future view of time (Hernes, 2014; Hussenot & Missonier, 2016; Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013; Reinecke & Ansari, 2015; Schultz & Hernes, 2013), they have yet to explain the recursive temporal dynamics by which actors move through time. Instead, present-past-future theorizing is hampered by what Hernes (2022, p. 141) calls the "stationarity problem" of temporal theorizing, in the sense that it does not explain what happens when the present-past-future tangle moves through time as new "presents" emerge (Mead, 1932) and successive events emerge from events whose enactment they condition in turn. This corresponds to what Mead (1932, p. 23) implies when he refers to the emergence of an event "as something which is more than the processes that have led up to it and which by its change, continuance, or disappearance, adds to later passages a content they would not otherwise have possessed." When the indivisible present moves, the sequential pasts and futures undergo corresponding

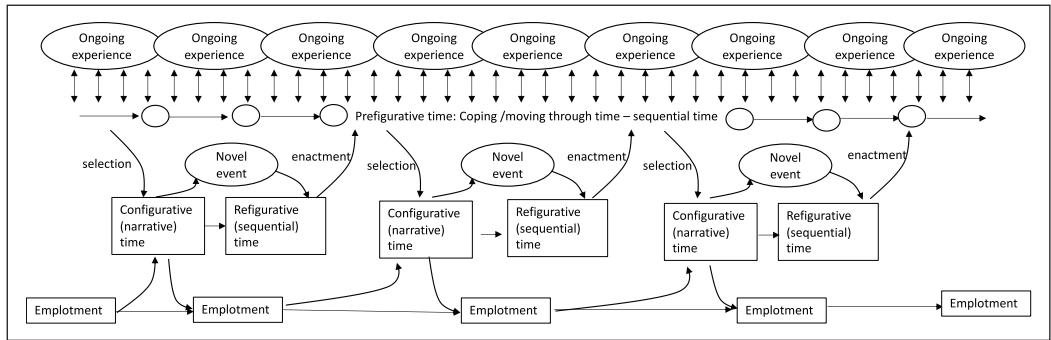


Figure 1. A recursive view of how actors move through time.

changes. For instance, the range of sequentially ordered pasts become extended as novel experiences coalesce into additional past events with the flow of time, which in turn provide new lenses through which more-distant events are interpreted.

Although organizational scholars have taken an increased interest in Ricoeur’s work and particularly his three temporal modes (Rindova & Martins, 2021), little attention has been given to his point about the three temporal modes interconnecting recursively through time. It is broadly understood that the three modes are closely interconnected, but their interconnectedness around a “moving present” remains to be discussed in the organizational literature. Still, thinking about the present-past-future view of time in such a way is consistent with the intentions behind his narrative theory of time (Ricoeur’s, 1984, p. 67). A key question is, what guides the choice of past and future events in the present? Ricoeur’s answer is an emplotment which forms a “core” of the recursive processes of moving through time. Emplotment, which weaves disparate events into an ongoing, intelligible story (Ricoeur, 1980, p. 171), provides directionality of the narrative trajectory, which enables actors at different times and places in the organization to act more or less intelligibly and consistently without knowing the precedents and consequences of the various activities and events. Ricoeur (1984) also calls this “narrative core” (p. 64) the “kingdom of ‘as if.’” By this he means that emplotment both guides

actors’ trajectory through time and enables them to imagine how the trajectory could be different. This is possible insofar as the emplotment expresses the directionality of the narrative trajectory (Hernes, 2022). In other words, recursive interaction between the three modes around a “narrative core” enables “followability” (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 67), or recognizability, of the narrative trajectory as it extends through time (See Figure 1).

Conditioned by the emplotment, the activity in the present may be oriented towards events at different temporal distances from the present, which may confer different degrees of agency of the present. We can imagine events located at different distances from the present along the past and future dimensions, going from near-future/past to distant-future/past. By evoking distant past events or addressing distant future events, the present activity may well exhibit stronger agency than if events closer to the present are addressed. Such activity is consequently more likely to influence later events and the temporal distances addressed at those events. Past and future events are considered sequentially ordered. But note that the before-and-after logic of sequentiality does not necessarily imply that past and future events are interpreted as isolated events. They may be interpreted as related immanently (Hernes, 2014, 2022), which means they are seen as intra-connected. Connecting intra-actively rather than inter-actively means that events are related through what goes on in the events

rather than through their outcomes, which implies the becoming of a temporal trajectory as an on-going process of relating events immanently through time.

A consequence of studying movement *through* time, as opposed to *over* time (Feddersen, 2020) is to see the temporal modes as they connect recursively with one another. We may describe this interaction using Ricoeur's three modes as follows (see Figure 1). In the prefigurative mode actors cope with ongoing day-to-day experience. Actors encounter experiences sequentially as they move through time and develop appropriate practices as a way of coping. Events become represented in a sequential understanding of time, in which events, although immanently connected at the time of their occurrence, are interpreted as separate and accomplished. This is also the time of historicity (Ricoeur, 1980) established by actors to provide a sense of causality: "one thing after another and one thing because of another" (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 41). Prefigured time and events can be seen in the upper part of Figure 1. Sequential time, in other words, provides actors with explanations of how their historical trajectories evolve to then be inscribed into actors' emplotment of their trajectory.

As experiences accumulate and novel events emerge, the experiences add to the evolving stock of prefigurative experience that actors employ to cope with the world while moving through time. Novel events, as discussed above, require configuration of experience to address a particular situation at hand. Configurative time as holistic and indivisible (Pedersen, 2009; Ricoeur, 1980) is applied as actors imagine solutions to novel issues that cannot be resolved satisfactorily by creatively combining past experience. Indivisible time, as mentioned, is expressed through complex wholes of interconnected actions that actors imagine in the present, both in the light of selected past events and of potential future events. But given that there are multiple possible combinations leading to different solutions, actors are guided by ongoing emplotment, which forms the lower part of

the figure. As mentioned above, emplotment plays a dual role: while guiding the actions taken, it also enables actors to imagine how the trajectory could be different. Figure 1 demonstrates how emplotment forms a recursive relationship with configurative time.

Reconnecting to the sequential time of the prefigurative mode requires that the indivisible time of the configurative mode is translated into sequential time. Whereas indivisible time is imaginary and complex, sequential time, as applied in the refigurative mode, takes the form of sequential steps pursued by actors as the enactment of what is to come. Thus, although the refigurative mode emerges from the configurative mode, it also feeds back into the prefigurative mode and contributes to the evolving process of moving through time. In Ricoeur's own words, "We are following therefore the destiny of a prefigured time that becomes a refigured time through the mediation of a configured time" (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 54).

The configurative mode of time plays a key role here, by revealing the emplotment in the form of a persisting narrative "core" instantiated by actions in the present. For instance, in his analysis of how actors at the Federal Reserve made sense of complex and ambiguous environments, Abolafia (2010) describes how they constructed plots from past events to anticipate the future. It should be noted, however, that emplotment in Ricoeur's narrative theory is a verb and, therefore, denotes an emergent process of ongoing accomplishment rather than outcome. Emplotment, Ricoeur (1984, p. 33) emphasizes, implies composition, and composition implies working recursively with known materials towards an anticipated outcome. Emplotment works a bit like the residue of "narrative reduction" (Weick et al., 2005) that actors have performed multiple times in the past. The imaginary nature of the configurative mode enables it to be related to ongoing emplotment, which enables the overall trajectory to be conveyed and shared as an intelligible whole (Ricoeur, 1980, 1984). In this way, emplotment works as a historically informed and enduring

framing of successive instances of configuration. Emplotment enables both a sense of continuity across time and change from that continuity. There is a slight parallel to Weick's (1979) sensemaking model of selection, retention, and enactment, although Ricoeur's theory adds the element of followability, expressing how a certain narrative becomes sustained over time through emplotment. Thus, Ricoeur's narrative theory explains how the recursive dynamics of prefigurative, configurative, and refigurative sustain a certain direction through time, revolving around emplotment as emerging process intertwined with continuity and change.

Conclusion

By relating sensemaking to Ricoeur's framework, we have been able to connect the historical sequential time dimension of narrative to the situated configurative dimension, to then translate the configured back to the realm of action. This has enabled us to resolve the dualism between different time conceptions found in sensemaking theory and in organizational research more broadly. We conclude by suggesting that time is not one facet of sensemaking but provides the ultimate context for how actors respond to challenges, particularly novel, unfamiliar challenges for which routine responses are increasingly inadequate. It is important, we argue, to consider sensemaking not merely as taking place in time, but also constitutive of time. The situated nature of sensemaking and the ways in which it combines practice and interpretation into a present-past-future dimension of time invites further time theorizing for organizational research. Beyond the field of sensemaking, an undertheorized topic is how actors move through time as pasts and futures continually feed into each other via a moving present. We have discussed how Ricoeur's narrative theory, through emplotment, can help time theorizing account for the changing reality of actors as they through time as a non-stationary process.

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