

Mind the gap! Building bridges between institutional work and critical sensemaking

Institutional
work and
critical
sensemaking

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Albert James Mills

*Department of Management, Saint Mary's University, Halifax, Canada and
Business School, University of Eastern Finland, Kuopio Campus,
Kuopio, Finland*

Päivi Eriksson and Eeva Aromaa

*Business School, University of Eastern Finland, Kuopio Campus,
Kuopio, Finland, and*

Outi-Maaria Palo-Oja

LAB University of Applied Sciences, Lahti, Finland

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this article is to address research gaps relating to agency and institutionalism in new institutional theory (NIT) and institutional work (IW) and use the critical sensemaking (CSM) approach to bridge the debates around agency, especially on issues of language and discourse, actor network theory (ANT) and history.

Design/methodology/approach – A conceptual analysis of the literature is performed to discuss issues of agency in IW and CSM in organizations, and examples of empirical studies are used to illustrate connectivity, contrast and fusion.

Findings – The analysis illustrates points of distance (rather than disconnect), but most importantly, connectivity and the potential for further developments between the literature on IW and CSM.

Social implications – Discussion around new possibilities to focus on agency has the potential to contribute to humanist thinking about the (agentic) character of organizations and the potential for social change.

Originality/value – The article contributes to the discussion of agency in the organization through a starting point (i.e. CSM) outside of NIT.

Keywords Agency, Critical sensemaking, History, Institutional work, Language, Actor network

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

The concept of sensemaking has attracted considerable interest in parallel to the development of the new institutional theory (NIT). Until recently, however, these two theoretical perspectives have remained separate, each focused on different aspects: the social psychology of agency (Weick, 1995) and the structural reproduction of institutions (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), respectively. Despite calls for a greater focus on agency in NIT (Suddaby *et al.*, 2010, 2014; Lawrence *et al.*, 2011; Hampel *et al.*, 2017) and an emphasis on structural and institutional pressures in sensemaking (Helms Mills, 2003; Helms Mills and Mills, 2017; Hilde, 2017), the distance between them has persisted.

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Weick's (1995) approach has largely focused on the socio-psychological aspects of individual sensemaking but has been critiqued (Helms Mills *et al.*, 2010) for neglect of issues of power, structure and discursivity in context. The interplay between these sensemaking factors has subsequently led to the development of a critical sensemaking (CSM), which studies agency (Weick, 1995) in the context of discursivity (Foucault, 1979), structure (Mills and Murgatroyd, 1991) and formative context (Unger, 1987). Recent work that draws upon CSM includes Aromaa *et al.*'s (2019) overview of the growth of CSM, Van Hilten's (2021) application of Bourdieu's study of sensemaking change and Hartt's (2013) study of the influence of history on CSM and organizational change.

CSM recognizes the need to bridge the gap between sensemaking and institutional theory by considering both individual agency and structural influences. By fusing sensemaking and (post)structuralist perspectives, CSM offers a comprehensive understanding of the complexities inherent in organizations within which institutional work (IW) takes place. It represents a significant shift towards a holistic perspective on sensemaking that encompasses both social psychology and (post)structuralist insights.

In this conceptual article, we use the CSM approach to bridge the debates around agency and NIT. We contend that the plausibility (Weick, 1995) of bridging relies on a paradigm shift, or accommodation, that allows for a legitimized (Suchman, 1995) set of understandings and interactions between scholars focused on CSM and those focused on (new) institutionalism. Our argument rests on the notion that CSM and NIT are nested in different streams of literature and theoretical frameworks, each with differing starting points. While institutionalism morphed into NIT in a search for cognition and agency (Powell and Colyvas, 2007), sensemaking moved from an individual-focused cognitive approach to a search for structural and discursive influences on individual cognition (Helms Mills *et al.*, 2010; Aromaa *et al.*, 2019).

As such, the respective understandings of agency and institution in CSM and NIT are rooted in different paradigmatic frameworks that require some reading across their theoretical frameworks. On the face of it, this makes for issues of plausibility and legitimacy that somehow need to be brought together to study connectivity between CSM and NIT; however, this is a weak point. It can also be argued that the very difference (e.g. two languages and conceptualizations are involved) is strength because it allows us a degree of reframing not usually available when the key concepts of agency and institutionalism are profoundly rooted in a well-established way of thinking. Here, we see an opening for a bridging of positions in the ideas of Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) on IW.

Lawrence and Suddaby (2006, see also Suddaby, 2016; Hampel *et al.*, 2017) identified several research gaps which offer the opportunity to generate new insights into studying agency in NIT. These articles outline a critique of NIT for neglecting or underplaying the role of agency and "for privileging the role of cognition in conceptualizing institutional action" (p. 216). To make their point on the importance of IW, they summarized that—whether intentional (as understood in institutional entrepreneurship) or not—institutions are constituted by purposive action that is taken to maintain, alter or destroy them. IW involves efforts by individuals and groups to shape "enduring elements in social life – institutions – that have a profound effect on the thoughts, feelings, and behaviour of individual and collective actors" (p. 216). More specifically, institutions are "an organized, established procedure" including a set of "standardized interaction sequences" (Jepperson, 1991, pp. 143–145).

IW encompasses a range of practices, including discursive activities, strategic actions and symbolic efforts aimed at influencing and shaping institutions (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence *et al.*, 2009). Therefore, Lawrence and Suddaby's (2006) focus on IW—much of which is beyond the scope of this article—provides space for a discussion on alternative theorizations of agency and institutionalism. This is especially the case in their discussion on discourse, rhetoric and narratives, actor network theory (ANT) and history (Suddaby, 2016; Hampel *et al.*, 2017; Suddaby *et al.*, 2023), all of which are connected to CSM (Helms Mills *et al.*, 2010; Aromaa *et al.*, 2019).

The paper begins with an outline of NIT and the question of agency. In this section, we draw on the works of Lawrence, Suddaby and their colleagues to highlight the gaps identified in the NIT and IW literature and how CSM could help with filling some of these gaps. Thereafter, we discuss CSM and agency, outlining main points of connectivity and distance between IW and CSM and provide three empirical examples of CSM studies to illustrate these. We conclude with a discussion of potentially fruitful ways forward for future research.

New institutional theory: the question of agency

There have been several calls to better incorporate the study of agency into institutionalization (e.g. Suddaby *et al.*, 2010; Lawrence *et al.*, 2011; Suddaby *et al.*, 2014; Hampel *et al.*, 2017). The lack of attention on agency may be due, in part, to the concept of agency itself, which at times seems to refer to embedded collectives of actors (Greenwood, 1981) rather than individuals whose sensemaking activities contribute to the social construction of the idea of the institution. It may also be partly due to the circular argument that equates routinization with institutionalization, making it difficult to envision the role of agency beyond a focus on how routines are established (Lawrence *et al.*, 2002). In this case, we learn little about the process of institutionalization, including the multitude of sensemaking activities that go into a socially constructed phenomenon. This does, however, offer an indication of the power of routinization (extending beyond rules) in the constraints on sensemaking.

Various studies of institutionalization lack a proper understanding of agency (see, e.g. Castile and Davis-Blake, 2002, with a focus on technical and institutional factors). Alternatively, in calls for the study of agency, researchers often neglect the study of micro-processes. In the latter case, the 2002 Special Research Forum of the *Academy of Management Journal* on Institutional Theory and Institutional Change featured only one article on micro-processes among over 75 manuscripts received for review (Dacin *et al.*, 2002). However, the various articles provided interesting clues to potential sensemaking contexts, including social sensemaking and the role of professional associations (Greenwood *et al.*, 2002), which accorded to some extent with what Unger (1987) referred to as the formative context, though it would have helped to flesh out this notion. According to Townley (2002), agency is enacted where institutional change is contested, including shocks to the system and political pressures that require (rather than simply bring about) change.

Furthermore, the role of institutional entrepreneurs (Garud *et al.*, 2002) in legitimizing certain practices (Lawrence *et al.*, 2002) reminds us of issues of power in the sensemaking process, with some actors having greater power over the process of enactment than others. Garud *et al.* (2002) provided insights into the contested nature of rules that result from competing practices, with interesting consequences relating to how they go on to influence sensemaking possibilities (Mills and Helms Mills, 2017). This relationship brings us to an ironically neglected aspect of CSM and the need to understand how sense is made in contexts characterized by symbolic interactions and meanings. Later in the paper we provide an example of how Hartt *et al.* (2014) deals with the symbolic power of stories-as-histories when using CSM.

Clearly against the grain is Zilber (2002), who focused on how actors, actions and meanings interact within the micropolitics of institutional change. Zilber (2002) maintained that while new institutional theorists call for a research attention on agency, this is often done by referring to the behavioral and structural aspects of institutions. Furthermore, she argued that changes in meaning that are thought to facilitate institutional change are viewed tautologically rather than analyzed, that is, institutional change must have been precipitated by changes in meaning. In other words, we need to analyze the processes through which meaning occurs and how this is translated into action. This is akin to the CSM argument

regarding the need to focus on the sensemaking of relevant actors. Nonetheless, [Zilber \(2002, p. 236\)](#) came close to the CSM approach when she argued that “institutionalized meanings should be analysed not only as qualities of actions and structures, but also as the cognitive process of interpreting actions and structures—as shared and contested cognitive models”.

[Zilber \(2002\)](#) deployed an ethnographic approach involving observations, interviews and textual analysis, all of which are largely compatible with CSM. She differed from CSM in her interpretivist analysis, which drew on grounded theory. Omitted from her analysis were discursive factors that potentially influence sensemaking. For example, how do feminist and therapeutic notions of gendered relationships influence the sense made of the way in which rape victims are assisted? Furthermore, there was no fine-grained analysis of the influence of individual identity work, notions of plausibility and the interplay between individual and social (e.g. feminist) sensemaking. A final difference was the interpretivist focus on understanding the processes of institutionalization versus the critical concern of CSM regarding understanding the possibility of redressing marginalization and barriers to authentic sensemaking.

Nevertheless, [Zilber \(2002\)](#) provided insights into the value of ethnographic work, which allows a CSM researcher to gain a range of insights into sensemaking in action and the role of narrative analysis in allowing the CSM researcher to capture understandings of how sensemaking is translated into social sensemaking and enactment. Importantly, [Zilber \(2002\)](#) drew attention to the potential role of emotionality in the sensemaking process, suggesting that in some circumstances, unconscious or unacknowledged emotions may play a role in enacting a particular sense of specific organizational contexts and group dynamic processes. A potential point of connectivity between IW and CSM could be a greater focus on emotions and emotionality as one of the next steps in CSM research (see [Aromaa et al., 2020a, b](#)). There are some examples of this focus in IW research (see, [Crawford and Dacin, 2021](#)), including discursive approaches of emotionality and IW (e.g. [Goodrick et al., 2020](#); [Moisander et al., 2016](#)).

Critical sensemaking: insights on agency

What insights can we then glean from CSM concerning agency and institutionalization? To begin with, we can remind ourselves of our opening comment that CSM and NIT have fundamentally different starting points. While NIT, and particularly IW, is interested in human activities that create, maintain, transform and disrupt institutions, CSM, as a critical perspective, is focused on understanding the institutional limits of sensemaking and subsequent possibilities for action. Nonetheless, we contend that each literature stream provides useful insights for the other.

The sensemaking approach, introduced by Karl Weick, drew attention from organizational structures to processes ([Czarniawska, 2006](#)) and renewed the perception of organizations as systems formulated by the interpretations of individuals ([Daft and Weick, 1984](#)). However, both structural and discursive power remained under-developed in sensemaking, which emphasizes individual cognitive decision-making as part of social reality. Conversely, the focus of Weickian sensemaking on individuals has allowed the study of agency in organizations ([Nord and Fox, 1996](#)). Furthermore, while Weickian sensemaking does not consider power effects ([Helms Mills, 2003](#); [Mills and Helms Mills, 2017](#)), it does provide tools to explore organizations as environments that both empower and marginalize actors ([Helms Mills, 2003](#); [Helms Mills and Weatherbee, 2006](#)).

These observations served as a starting point for fusing Weickian sensemaking with more structural and post-structural accounts of organizational reality, leading to the development of CSM. In CSM, [Helms Mills et al. \(2010\)](#) retained a re-theorized focus on sensemaking as a heuristic, or core ingredient, for understanding agency as a process supplemented by a macro-level formulative context ([Unger, 1987](#)) and organizational rules ([Mills, 1988](#); [Mills and](#)

Murgatroyd, 1991), together with structural and discursive dimensions of power at the mesolevel (Helms Mills *et al.*, 2010).

To explore how CSM has been used in organization research, Aromaa *et al.* (2019) conducted an analysis of the CSM literature published between 2003 and 2018. The objective was to analyze the potential and significance of CSM in understanding agency. They examined a collection of 51 studies that applied CSM, 25 of which specifically investigated various aspects of agency within the CSM approach. For instance, Carroll *et al.* (2008) addressed power and resistance; Mills and Helms Mills (2017) examined agency in the context of organizational rules; Cherneski (2018) studied the influence of macro-level discourse; and Ruel *et al.* (2018) investigated identity. Other studies focused on the interplay between power and agency, such as Paludi and Helms Mills (2013), Montonen *et al.* (2018) and Ruel (2018). Of the 25 papers analyzed, seven studies specifically highlighted the value of CSM in understanding agency and capturing its local meaning in various contexts, such as organizational change (Thurlow and Helms Mills, 2009), immigration (Hilde, 2013, 2017; Hilde and Mills, 2015, 2017), restorative justice (Bishop, 2014) and work and care (Tomkins and Eatough, 2014).

Points of connectivity and distance between CSM and IW

To explore how CSM and IW could be connected to each other the authors of this article conducted a search for CSM papers published between 2011 and 2022 in the SCOPUS and Web of Science databases. As a result, a total of 291 studies, including articles, PhD theses and book chapters, were found. The articles using CSM were analyzed to explore how agency was studied and whether connectivity between CSM and IW could be identified. Among these, 80 studies focused specifically on agency, offering valuable insights concerning the gaps identified in the IW literature (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006; Suddaby, 2016; Hampel *et al.*, 2017). In what follows, we outline the gaps and opportunities with the seemingly strongest connecting points between CSM and IW: language and discourse, ANT and ANTi-History.

Language and discourse

An important gap and, therefore, opportunity concerning agency in IW is the role of language and discourse. Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) maintained that different forms of IW involve speaking and writing, through which institutions are created, maintained, transformed and disrupted. Furthermore, they identified discourse analysis as a promising avenue to study IW. Within the CSM framework, several researchers have employed discourse analysis (Foucault, 1979; Phillips and Hardy, 2002). For instance, Thurlow (2007) studied language, agency and discourse in organizational change, and Hilde (2013, 2017) analyzed agency and discourse in the context of immigration. Cherneski (2018, 2021) examined discursive processes alongside discriminatory practices that contribute to the gendering of corporate social responsibility leadership and the re-construction of the sensemaking of female leaders in this context. She defined CSM as a methodology that bridges the local site of sensemaking with broader sociocultural discourses, highlighting processes and structures that allow certain narratives to be legitimized while guarding the status quo.

Lawrence and Suddaby (2006), see also Hampel *et al.* (2017) also highlighted the heterogeneity of discourse analysis, which encompasses different forms of organizational discourse (i.e. rhetoric, narrative and dialog), each of which sheds light on specific categories of IW. According to Cheney *et al.* (2004, p. 79), rhetoric involves the use of “symbols to persuade others to change their attitudes, beliefs, values, and actions”. While the relevance of rhetoric has been highlighted in prior research as an under-used form of IW (e.g. Heracleous

and Barrett, 2001; Greenwood *et al.*, 2002), Suddaby and Greenwood (2005) identified two of its key elements: the institutional vocabularies and rhetorical strategies used by actors to influence change. Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) identified narratives as key vehicles of discourse in IW because they present chains of interrelated actions and events containing temporal aspects. Actors engaged in creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions have been found to rely on various narrative devices (Angus, 1993; Kitchener, 2002). Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) further maintained that narratives could be employed in IW and NIT to study the relationships between cultural associations, narrative structures and their performance as institutional devices.

Within the CSM framework, several studies have focused on narratives, rhetoric and agency. Thurlow and Helms Mills (2015) investigated the legitimating discourses contributing to plausibility in organizational change narratives within a Canadian community college. They explored how the college's top management (president and chief executive officer (CEO)) legitimized these narratives by employing rhetorical strategies that appealed to the key sensemakers in this organization. Murray (2014) examined organizational change in transforming university campuses into polytechnic institutions and defined agency as the authorship of narratives through which authors can reshape events by controlling emphasis and embedding meaning in speech acts (see also Czarniawska, 1998).

Czupryna (2019) focused on narratives to explore the influence of corporate cultural discourses on the identities of internal consultants through sensemaking. Ruel *et al.* (2020) investigated the discursive practices of antinarratives in the space industry in Canada and their role in constructing the work of Alouette women in the past. The authors argued that social realities and interactions cannot be fully understood without considering these discursive practices. Ferreira *et al.* (2021) studied heterogeneous innovative social action to understand how powerful social actors impose their narratives on others, and Moilanen *et al.* (2021) explored agential narratives of start-up entrepreneurs. Focusing on knowledge sharing between local communities and universities, Peres-Cajías *et al.* (2022) drew on Helms Mills *et al.* (2010, p. 949) to suggest that CSM is "attentive to the ideological aspects of language, competing narratives of change, and power imbalances within organizations and wider society".

Actor network theory and ANTi-History

According to Lawrence and Suddaby (2006), ANT provides a valuable perspective through which to study IW, with the concept of translation offering a pathway for this exploration. In the context of ANT, the term translation is used to capture a process where network actors mobilize support by creating coherence from different interpretations, meanings and motivations. Over time, the network in question is taken for granted, and the actor doing the translation work transforms into an object of translation itself. This kind of translation process conceals the power dynamics within the network, much in the same way as agency in institutions becomes obscured as the surrounding institutions gain legitimacy (DiMaggio, 1988; Fligstein, 2001). A focus on the translation process provides both a methodological and conceptual approach to go beyond traditional research on institutions that primarily focuses on isomorphic processes where organizations conform to common templates (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Although ANT recognizes the diffusion of templates, it places greater emphasis on how local variations in the motivations to adopt similar practices emerge and the diverse outcomes associated with this. An important feature lies in rejecting the assumption that all actors within a network act uniformly or have the same motivations to act. By delving into the complexities of translation, ANT allows for a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics at play within networks and the multifaceted nature of behaviors and motivations.

Within the CSM field, [Hartt \(2013\)](#) explored the application of CSM and ANT in understanding network power by examining what he called the non-corporeal actant as a link between ANT and CSM. His study on Air Canada demonstrated how network power can be influenced by non-corporeal actants, that is, ideas and theories that possess agency. Drawing from the same framework, [Hartt and Jones \(2013\)](#) analyzed the failure of new small firms and their challenges in establishing themselves. By combining ANT and CSM, they gained insight into the interactions between network actors and how the power of human and non-human actors shape the sensemaking processes. In these studies, the fusion of ANT with CSM provided an opportunity to enter the world of semiotics ([De Saussure, 2007](#)) to analyze complex networks.

The concept of history has long been recognized as vital for bridging the gap between historical and organizational scholarship ([Suddaby, 2016](#); [Suddaby et al., 2023](#)). Consequently, [Suddaby \(2016\)](#) proposed that ANTi-History offers significant potential in connecting business history and management theory. ANTi-History emerged from the radical humanist research sphere, where history is viewed as socially constructed knowledge within a world characterized by radical and ongoing change. This construct emerged from the application of ANT elements to historiography ([Durepos, 2009](#)) and posits that history is not merely socially constructed but is also actively produced by expanding networks of actors that function as agents. This insight is particularly valuable for institutional theorists who recognize that much of what is considered objective is, in fact, socially constructed.

By employing ANT and CSM to the analysis of the written history of a teachers' union, [Hartt et al. \(2012\)](#) explored the role of history in shaping gender dynamics at work and how networks of actors influenced these dynamics. [Hartt \(2016\)](#) further investigated how employees' values, beliefs and ideas impacted the organization's written histories. Applying ANT and CSM, he used the non-corporeal actant concept as a critical influence within the network and in the documentation of histories. [Hartt et al. \(2014\)](#) further contributed to the ANTi-History approach by analyzing a key event in Air Canada's history, namely, the hiring of the new CEO Yves Pratt in 1967 (see [Hartt, 2013](#), in the next section). In their historical analysis, the authors sought to comprehend how individuals enrolled in networks translated their understandings and made sense of events as history.

CSM and IW: illustrating connectivity, contrast and fusion

We chose three empirical studies ([Thurlow, 2007](#); [Hilde, 2013](#); [Hartt, 2013](#)) to illustrate the connectivity, contrast and fusion between CSM and IW, focusing on how CSM helps make sense of institutions and institutionalization. First, we analyze the study by [Thurlow \(2007\)](#) to illustrate a connection between CSM and IW through the study of language and discourse. Thereafter, we highlight the study by [Hilde \(2013\)](#) to show contrast between CSM and IW in how agency in context deals with the potential for overcoming organizational problems. Finally, [Hartt's \(2013\)](#) work indicates how a fusion of CSM and IW could help move the agency debate forward.

Language, discourse and agency

[Thurlow's \(2007\)](#) work on changing organizations was one of the earliest studies to adopt CSM to examine language, discourse and agency. Her objective was to understand the impact of organizational change language on producing and maintaining discourses of change. Using Foucauldian discourse analysis, she investigated the connections between broader social discourses and specific organizational locations (a community college and a hospital) where change was created, implemented, resisted and given meaning through narratives.

She employed various organizational texts in her study (e.g. annual reports and memos, government reports and media texts) and utilized textual analysis to analyze the discursive nature of change and its potential to disrupt or maintain institutional practices. To gain insights into actors' subjective experiences of organizational change, Thurlow conducted interviews using CSM as a heuristic of discourse analysis. This approach highlighted the significance of power effects in discourse and identified the components of the change process that contributed to individuals' understanding of change.

According to Thurlow, institutionalization is an ongoing sensemaking process that draws from, and is influenced by, the sensemaking and discursive processes of various actors. In the context of change management, influential individuals reflect the powerful discursive influences surrounding the request for change rather than engage in individual sensemaking. She saw organizational change as a discursive process involving the reciprocal shaping of language and identity.

Her approach resonates well with Jepperson's (1991, p. 143–145) suggestion that institutions can be seen as "patterns of sequenced interaction supported by specific mechanisms of control". Thurlow further uncovered how powerful professional groups shape the perception of an altered organization by drawing upon identities presented in various discourses. Agency emerges through the interaction between institutional practices and discursive influences. However, focusing solely on discourse cannot fully explain how agency operates or how powerful discourses translate into a widespread understanding of change. CSM provides an analytical approach to explore the privileged language of change within organizations and its impact on discourse and agency.

Agency in context with the potential for overcoming organizational problems

Hilde's (2013, 2017) work focuses on Hong Kong Chinese immigrants to Canada by exploring how they experienced the immigration process and navigated institutional forces such as the Canadian government's immigration policies and practices. Drawing on her own experiences as an immigrant from Hong Kong to Canada, she was intrigued by the experiences of other immigrants and sought to understand why so many of them did not remain in Canada.

Dissatisfied with the survey methods used in previous studies and the generalized accounts of immigrant experiences resulting from them, she aimed to delve deeper into how immigrants make sense of their experiences. Her goal was to comprehend how immigrants construct meaning from their experiences, particularly in relation to their professions and employment, within the formative context of the prevailing discourse and policies on immigration from Hong Kong to Canada. To achieve this, she conducted interviews with immigrants and combined CSM with critical discourse analysis to analyze sensemaking and the discursive therein.

In the realm of sensemaking and institutionalism, Hilde explored the interplay between the local relational context and the broader institutional context (Zuckerman and Simons, 1996). Her findings suggest that the agency of individuals who are outsiders – such as newcomers to a country – can be obscured by pre-packaged understandings of the immigrant experience offered to them in highly structured surveys and interviews. Hilde's suggestion was that studying immigrants' experiences through the CSM approach could unveil the hidden discourses affecting these experiences, ultimately empowering those experiencing marginalization by providing a stronger sense of agency. She further argued that, in her study, the institutional forces at play were reinforced by existing discourses on immigration, which emphasized Western values and Canadian knowledge and experience as ultimately shaping the materials that promote immigrants' having lower expectations.

Critical sensemaking, history and actor networks

Hartt (2013) explored the interlinkages between sensemaking, history and actor networks. His primary aim was to understand how history is produced within institutionalization

processes. Specifically, he examined how particular historical accounts contribute to the institutionalization of organizational practices and eventually become established histories. To accomplish this, he studied Air Canada and how past narratives traveled through relational networks on the path to institutionalization.

Hartt's (2013) archival study was based on ANTi-History (Durepos and Mills, 2012), which approaches historical accounts as knowledge production outcomes within actor networks (Latour, 2005). The central question is not just what history is but also how it is produced. Furthermore, these two questions are interconnected, as the latter elucidates the former. From this perspective, he traced the relationships that formed a past narrative and explored how key actors made sense of this narrative.

Hartt's (2013) study on Air Canada focuses on a specific story: the controversial appointment of Yves Pratte as the company's chairman and CEO in 1967. This decision, made by the government against the wishes of unions and senior management, provided a compelling case for investigation. Hartt utilized ANT (Latour, 2005) to analyze the interactions between human and nonhuman actors, such as pilots and airplanes, in shaping the concept of an airline. In this process, he employed CSM to examine how government entities, unions and airline managers made sense of the decision-making process.

The study yielded significant insights, highlighting the instability of institutional accounts or histories. He identified three competing narratives concerning Pratte's appointment, each strongly held and inhibiting the construction of a dominant airline history at a specific time. He further proposed that histories can act as influential non-embodied entities, referred to as con-corporeal actants, whose presence extends beyond individual sensemaking or non-human actors. While an airline socially constructs its purpose and boundaries, it does so by incorporating fragments of the airline concept. These findings shed light on institutionalization by emphasizing the powerful influence of non-embodied ideas, the interplay between competing discourses and the role of non-corporeal actants in agency production.

Discussion

In this paper, we argued that CSM, rooted in a focus on the individual in organizations (Nord and Fox, 1996), is a useful heuristic for understanding the role of sensemaking in change and resistance. Through its embrace of interpretivism, post-structuralism and critical theory, it can be a useful heuristic for understanding how actors help to construct organizational and inter-organizational realities and themselves in the process. As we have illustrated in this paper, the recent iterations of CSM have examined the role of discourse, actor networks and histories in sensemaking opportunities, outcomes and agency, all of which have been identified as gaps in IW research (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006; Suddaby, 2016; Hampel *et al.*, 2017).

Furthermore, while formative contexts have formed part of the understanding of structural and discursive power on sensemaking, the role of institutions, defined as "enduring elements in social life" (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006, p. 2016) has been under-researched in the CSM literature. This is due in part to CSM's critical stance and the conservative character of much of NIT as well as a lack of NIT accounts of the individual other than structurally embedded notions of agency. It can be argued that the latter approaches to agency and the circular arguments about routinization and institutionalization have led to a neglect of both critical outcomes and more social constructivist accounts of agency. Here, the work of Zilber (2002) is an exemplar of the possibilities of such accounts as well as their limitations, with a predominant focus on institutionalization rather than human need and development.

In Lawrence and Suddaby's (2006) well-received review on IW, we see several points of connectivity, potential developments and distance (rather than disconnect) between CSM and IW. The primary distance between CSM and IW is the respective focus on the individual and

points of practice. Following [Nord and Fox \(1996\)](#), while CSM is mainly concerned with the individual and their primary freedom (see [LeCoure and Mills, 2008](#); [Yue and Mills, 2008](#)), IW seeks to explain how human activity contributes to processes of institutionalization and de-institutionalization ([Oliver, 1992](#)). It does so through the study of practice, which involves “embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understanding” (p. 218). Nevertheless, IW seeks to infuse NIT with a critical approach, thereby offering us a point of connectivity:

One of the important facets of the “old institutionalism” that has largely been lost with the shift in emphasis associated with the “new institutionalism” is the highlighting of power relations and their relationship to institutions in organizations and societies. ([Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006](#), p. 247)

The paper provides novel insight suggesting that CSM, while geared towards making sense of institutionalization, helps in explaining the potential constraints to or facilitation of sensemaking outcomes. These include factors associated with creating (e.g. defining advocacy, constructing identities), maintaining (e.g. enabling work, mythologizing) and disrupting (e.g. disconnecting sanctions, undermining assumptions and beliefs) institutions ([Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006](#), pp. 221–235). These factors expand on notions of organizational rules ([Mills and Murgatroyd, 1991](#)) and the formative context ([Unger, 1987](#)) in which sensemaking occurs. They provide the potential for more detailed analyses of specific influences on sensemaking outcomes. Furthermore, IW and CSM share a similar approach to the role of organizational rules, that is, understanding “how actors accomplish the social construction of rules, scripts, schemas and cultural accounts” ([Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006](#), p. 218). IW and its account of mythologizing as a key “way in which actors work to preserve the normative underpinnings of institutions . . . by mythologizing their history” (p. 233) finds an echo in [Hartt’s \(2013\)](#) notion of the non-corporeal actant and the role of history.

Other key points between CSM and IW that we have discussed in this paper involve some of the research gaps identified in IW literature. According to these IW would benefit from more attention to discourse, ANT and history, all of which have been addressed in CSM research. We have discussed these by providing empirical examples (see, [Thurlow, 2007](#); [Hartt, 2013](#)) that illustrate both connectivity and possibility for fusion. Furthermore, a point of contrast between CSM and IW was illustrated in the work by [Hilde \(2013, 2017\)](#), which focuses on finding solutions to organizational problems shaped by institutional forces.

Finally, an important and mutually interesting point of connectivity continues to address agency and its relationship with institutionalization. Less discussed and more recent developments of connectivity include the role of emotions and emotionality in CSM and IW. We suggest that more focus on emotions and emotionality could build fruitful connectivity between CSM (see, [Aromaa et al., 2020a, b](#)) and IW (see, [Crawford and Dacin, 2021](#)), also extending to discursive approaches of IW that deal with emotionality (e.g. [Goodrick et al., 2020](#); [Moisander et al., 2016](#)). Related to language and discourse, the analysis of dialog may prove useful to IW in understanding the ways in which meaning is formulated and dispersed as well as CSM in understanding how sensemaking is negotiated and enacted.

Conclusion

We have illustrated in this paper how the work of [Lawrence and Suddaby \(2006\)](#) on IW, with its critical approach within NIT, fruitfully opens up the possibility of cross-pollination between two (otherwise) related literature streams. For NIT, CSM offers novel insights into the role of interacting sensemakers through a more fine-grained focus on how individuals make sense of the processes and practices in which they are engaged. For CSM, IW opens up insights into the various sensemaking possibilities that are formulated, negotiated and

constituted through a variety of IW activities (e.g. policing, mythologizing, enabling work, etc.). For IW, CSM provides the possibility of (even) more critical analyses through a focus on and concern with the role of the individual sensemaker in interaction with other sensemakers.

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Corresponding author

Päivi Eriksson can be contacted at: paivi.eriksson@uef.fi

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