

Unplugged - My Own Book Review

Karl E. WEICK (1979), *The Social Psychology of Organizing*, Second Edition.

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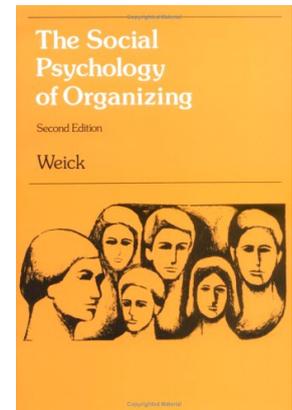
reviewed by himself

The “unplugged” section seeks to experience new forms of book reviews. We regularly grant a wild card to a world-class scholar to review his/her own Classic. In “My own book review”, authors will tell us the story of “what I was trying to do” with sometimes some auto-ethnographic considerations. By recounting the building process of one seminal research with a contemporary lens, they may give some insights for the current craft of research and also share with us renunciations, doubts and joys in their intimate writing experience.

What constitutes a self-review of the second edition of “The social psychology of organizing (hereafter spo2)? Since such a review is supposed to be “performative” and “auto-ethnographic” it won’t necessarily look like a traditional book review consisting of “book, overview, bits of excerpt, some wrangling, some praise, followed by the larger pronouncement” (Birkerts, 2015). Bits of excerpt, however, set this commentary in motion. The very first sentence in the book reads, “This is a book about organizational appreciation.” Appreciation? The last 2 sentences in the book read, “Organizations keep people busy, occasionally entertain them, give them a variety of experiences, keep them off the streets, provide pretexts for storytelling, and allow socializing. They haven’t anything else to give.” That’s appreciation? What goes on in between that ties these two thoughts together? That middle can be described in terms of substance, historical embedding, intentions, form, tools deployed, wishes, and summation.

The substance of this book was described in a disarming fashion by the social psychologist and editor, Charles Kiesler. In the first 1969 edition he described the book as a “fresh theoretical approach that provides us oldsters with new insights while maintaining the proper level of difficulty for an introductory text.” In the second edition he wrote that the book is “an intriguing introduction for the beginning student”. “Fresh” had morphed into “intriguing” but the beginning student was still baffled.

The word “organizing” suggested that the book was more about processes than structures. Attempts were made to articulate organizational life as sequence, motion, implementation of recipes, chains of events, series of actions (Enactment, Selection, Retention), narrative-like constructions with a beginning + middle + end, accomplishing, and streaming. A generic pattern in all of this activity was modeled after Donald Campbell’s summary of sociocultural evolution as variation and selective retention with variation and retention being opposed to one another. Modification of these basics included the replacement of variation with enactment, the shift of environmental impact from selection to enactment, the addition of feedback loops from retention to both enactment and selection,



the stipulation that adaptation and adaptability required that the effects of retention on subsequent action be split and both credited and discredited, and that what was selected was not individuals but interpretations. The evolutionary model was mapped onto human activity by means of the sensemaking recipe, “how can I/we know what I/we think until I/we see what I/we say.” Saying was enacting, seeing was selecting, thinking was retaining. And further adapting meant that subsequent saying and seeing had to be both similar to and different from what had been retained. Abstract as all of this is, it generated themes such as “ambivalence is the optimal compromise, loose coupling promotes adaptation, ignorance is functional, everything flows, adaptation can preclude adaptability, and things keep falling apart” (p. 120).

The “social psychology” that was invoked included mainly interpersonal influence, conformity, the minimal social situation, collective structure, and double interacts. That listing is short because much of the discussion came from other disciplines and literary sources. A shorthand phrase for all of this is implied in my 2006 article (Weick, 2006) titled “Faith, evidence, and action: Better guesses in an unknowable world.” That’s what organizing is and does. “It doesn’t take much to organize” (p. 89). When combined, complex as these themes may sound, they create a world in which small units are crucial, deviation amplification matters, and “a minimalist approach to understanding organizations” (p.236) tells us a lot about organizations. “Organizations are in the business of making sense. If they attend to anything with consistency and regularity, it is to their sense-making activities” (p. 250). People organize to manage ambiguity, puzzles, uncertainty, and equivocality. To reduce ambiguity, they turn the commonplace maxim that “the map is not the territory” on its head, and instead treat their maps as the territory by means of enactment. This suggests, contrary to prevailing organization theory, that organizations are as much closed systems as open systems. They are enclosed by self-fulfilling prophecies. They create the competitive environments in which they are “forced” to compete. In doing so, they claim to be good at adaptation. In fact, they are just as good at fabrication.

A **historical embedding** of this 294 page Second edition begins with the 121 page First edition published in 1969. That 1969 edition elaborated, in terse fashion, seven “Components of a Revised Concept of Organizations.” In paraphrase these include (1) organizing processes must be reaccomplished, (2) control is accomplished by relationships, (3) goal consensus is not a precondition of order, (4) triads are the basic unit of analysis, (5) processes of attention dominate, (6) existence requires a balance of stability and flexibility, and (7) organizing is directed toward removing equivocality from the informational environment (pp. 36-42). Those themes persist in 1979 but connect with a much broader set of dynamics.

Several themes in SPO2 reflect its placement in earlier development of organizational theory. Cybernetics and systems theory were prominent at the time as reflected in citations to the work of Walter Buckley, Stafford Beer, George Miller, Eugene Galanter, Karl Pribram, James G. Miller, and Magoroh Maruyama. The recurring theme that action leads rather than follows cognition, reflects the continuing influence of post-decision reduction of cognitive dissonance through justification, Harold Garfinkel and Alfred Schutz’s exploration of retrospective accounts, and Daryl Bem’s self-perception theory (Bem, 1967). Warren Thorngate postulated that no theory can be simultaneously general (imagine a clockface with “General” at the 12:00 position), accurate (4:00), and simple (8:00). Intermediate positions such as a mixture of general and accurate at 2:00 were noteworthy since they were as far away from the third position – in this case “simple” at 8:00 – as it was possible to get. These tradeoffs helped to position what was happening in the mid-70s in organization theory. They also positioned what was happening in SPO2. At times the arguments were meant to fit all organizations (general) by locating an explicit unit of social behavior in all of them

(accurate). This meant of course that the third property, simplicity, disappeared. But no sooner had simplicity disappeared than it reappeared as general and simple theorizing at 10:00 (e.g. it's all nothing but retrospective sensemaking) and accuracy disappeared. Those sudden shifts in order to drive home a point undoubtedly lie behind the insistence throughout the book that it is a book about theorizing rather than theory. It's a book about trying to grasp the complexity of organizations by means of complex conjectures.

At the time SPO2 was being written the concept of cognitive maps was salient. And we, under the brilliant guidance of Michel Bougon, had published our own variant labeled "cause maps" using data gathered from a year-long observation of the Utrecht Jazz Orchestra (Bougon, Weick & Binkhorst (1977)). Much like the hammer that converts all the world into nails, our enthusiasm for cause maps found them everywhere. Little did I realize just how restrictive a schema based mostly on variables and causes and effects could be. It was tidy for presenting data but not of much help to those musicians who were generating those data.

Given the preceding material, what were my **intentions** or as the editor put it, "What was I trying to do?" Remember, I think retrospect is a big deal and hindsight for me is less a bias than normal functioning. I was trying to sound like a social psychologist but found that to be an unexpectedly confining niche. There really wasn't a social psychology of organizing in the late 60s although there was a remarkably strong social psychology of organizations written by Katz and Kahn. So I was trying, in a true sensemaking sense, to bracket concepts that produced a plausible rendering of organizing. I was also trying to make the book "interesting." In the 70s, Murray Davis's essay "That's interesting!" had many of us trying not to sound absurd, irrelevant, or obvious and trying instead to disconfirm assumptions that were weakly held. That doesn't make for a cumulative discipline but it can spice up one's reading. And the 1969 book did need to be enlivened...although there is a constituency to this day that regards the '69 book as the better of the two editions.

I was also trying to assemble provocative juxtapositions, to demonstrate that a micro perspective matters, to reconcile systems with modular constructions, to avoid getting bogged down in entities, to stamp out nouns, and to express an indebtedness to the work of Schutz, Garfinkel, Campbell, March, William James, Kelley, and Bateson, as is suggested by the citations.

The **form** of the book meshes with its substance, history, and intentions. That form resembles a collage, a mosaic, an eclectic assemblage, a series of mini-essays, texts awaiting exegesis or, for want of a better description, "a Swiss army knife for design" (p. 240).

A different kind of evidence is mustered. The work that is used to depict organizing ranges across people such as Robert Redfield, Tom Schelling, Georg Simmel, John Steinbeck, Walker Percy, Kurt Vonnegut, Heinz von Foerster, Gordon Allport, Floyd Allport, Sir Frederic Bartlett, Kenneth Burke, Otto Fenichel, Daniel Kahneman writing about attention and effort, Arthur Koestler, Edmund Leach, and Constantine Cavafy.

The evidentiary quality of citations such as these lies in what they evoke in the reader's own experience. That's why much of this book is framed as organizational theorizing rather than organizational theory. This argument is summarized on pages 27-35, which is titled "Know what you're doing." Pages 27-29 provide two examples of what that title means. The first is John Steinbeck's vivid contrast of a Mexican Sierra fish when pulled out of a jar of formaldehyde in a laboratory and when pulled out of the Sea of Cortez thrashing at the end of a fishing line. The second exhibit, from Mad Magazine, shows a rare event that is destroyed by an overzealous research specialist. Both images have their impact when they evoke equivalent first-hand experience in the reader. Those

1. See pages 51-60 in SPO2 for a detailed discussion of Davis's argument.

evocations are the evidence I'm interested in. Those evocations are part of the everyday grounding for the more abstract ideas that are being presented.

Several tools deployed conceptually in the book helped hold the argument together at the time and have continued to do so ever since. For example, Leonard Meyer's "presumption of logic" (p. 138) argues that comprehension is based significantly on what one presumes will have happened to make a current strange experience more sensible. A field experiment with jazz orchestras exposed to the same new music portrayed as written by a high or low credible composer, produced more or less attentive performances that "confirmed" the attributed credibility (Weick, Gilfillan & Keith, 1973).

But this is hardly the only tool that recurs. A provocative start to almost any organizational inquiry is Herbert Simon's "empty world hypothesis," most things are only weakly connected with most other things (p. 111). That pattern of tight within stable sub-assemblies and loose between them, articulated in 1962 and reaffirmed in subsequent work on loose coupling, begs for refinement in the current supposedly hyper-connected world. Maybe we still function in an "empty world" but what is tight and loose and within and between and stable all have changed. Another useful starting point in organizational inquiry is to look for cause loops that are either deviation amplifying (an even number of positive relationships between variables in a loop) or deviation counteracting (an odd number of positive relationship between variables in a loop)³. In a crude sense, deviation counteracting cause loops organize and epitomize organizing whereas amplifying loops disorganize and move toward anomie and entropy.

Discussed in SPO2, and appearing since then are durable ideas such as ambivalence is the optimal compromise because it does not dilute resources for adaptation (p. 219); people enact their own constraints (p. 149); and, the more independent sensors in a medium, the greater the likelihood of achieving a workable level of certainty (modeled after the functioning of a contour gauge on p. 190). Closely related to the idea that a fine grained contour gauge is a reasonable model for perceptual sensitivity is the recurring counsel, complicate yourself. If there is an "obsession" throughout SPO2, it is with the idea of requisite variety, the experience that it takes complexity to register complexity. My heavy reliance on this principle is evident in the variety of images already used in this review to articulate organizing, including a heavy turn toward the humanities. Rereading SPO2 36 years later, there are several topics I wish I had developed more fully. For example, decision-making, a perennial hot topic in organization theory, was mentioned exactly one time (p. 175). "Decision-making in the organizing model means selecting some interpretation of the world and some set of extrapolations from that interpretation and then using these summaries as constraints on subsequent acting." That neglect is not surprising since my own research was on pre and post decision behavior rather than on the making of the decision itself. As things begin to make sense, options shrink, they narrow the choice which, once it's made, triggers justification.

The concept of organizing as a grammar was introduced right at the outset (p. 3) and was embedded in this definition: "Organizing is a consensually validated grammar for reducing equivocality by means of sensible interlocked behaviors." But the concept of grammar was much less prominent thereafter despite its promise as a means to articulate process. I simply found it easier to use the idea of "recipe" (e.g. pp. 45-47) to do the work of a grammar².

One can't invoke an evolutionary model without close attention to environmental selection. To move away from a macro population ecology emphasis and to move closer to social psychology, the environment was "moved" closer to action and its terminology was changed to "ecological change" (e.g. p. 130). The intent was to bring in more context by calling the external world an "ecology." Furthermore, I wanted to clarify that the ecology had an impact mostly when there was a "change" such as an interruption and that human actions

2. See pp. 81-89 in SPO1 and pages 72-88 in SPO2.

3. The power of the idea of grammar is evident in discussions such as Pentland, B. T. (1995).

(enactment) could modify ecology just as it could modify enactment. Again, in the enthusiasm to develop the notion of enactment, ecological change drew less attention, something that now may change as philosophical realism becomes resurgent.

The verb “impose” appears frequently in the text. But, while we know what may be imposed (e.g. cause map, schema, frame of reference), we don’t know who or what is doing the imposing. This is a natural point for a strong connection to institutional logic, but that did not happen in the late 70s. Another word, this one the adjective “equivocal,” may have discouraged followup from those people more comfortable with the word “ambiguity”, a close synonym. Equivocal seemed to have more connotations of multiple meanings rather no meanings, and that’s why I kept it.

I wish more had been done to position the organizing argument in relation to Katz and Kahn’s (1966/1978) “Social Psychology of Organizations.” Their focus on “interdependence” was complemented by my focus on interaction but that combination is only visible in our joint discussion of partial inclusion. They had more access to real organizations than I did, while I made more use of the laboratories that were ready to hand.

The concepts in SPO2 are borrowed heavily from the literature of visual perception, but much of this metaphorical usage could be deepened. A good example is the distinction between figure and ground. That image shows up at least 8 different times in the book (e.g. equivocality is a potential figure-ground arrangement, p. 131) but the process by which one is separated from the other is not discussed. That’s unfortunate because such separating is the essence of sensemaking and equivocality reduction. Imagine for example a figure ground reversal (p. 201). The ground relative to the figure gets larger, faster. As this happens less and less makes sense. With the benefit of hindsight, that sounds a lot like a “cosmology episode” (Weick, 1993).

In summation, while working on this commentary I kept thinking about Bergson’s observation that “A true philosopher says only one thing in his lifetime because he enjoys but one contact with the real.” Apparently my one contact must have started with the question, “How do you organize to enact order into streaming ambiguity?” And my answer continues to be, “Beats me!” I do have hunches. But they are not discipline-specific. And that may be the best I can do in response to the editor’s request to say something about craft for the current generation. If you want to register complex coordination, embrace complex ideas. And 140 character digital summaries are not my idea of complex registering. Then again, I’ve already had my one contact with the real. As the last sentence in the book said, I haven’t anything else to give.

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