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*Organization Science*, Vol. 5, No. 3. (Aug., 1994), pp. 309-321.

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# Organizational Culture and Individual Sensemaking: A Schema-based Perspective

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## Abstract

Organizational culture encompasses both individual and group-level phenomena. However, to date, the individual-level dynamics of organizational culture have remained relatively neglected. This paper addresses this neglect by focusing on culture's manifestation in individuals' sensemaking structures and processes. Building off the social cognition literature, I propose that organizational culture's influence on individual sensemaking is revealed in the operation of a patterned system of organization-specific schemas. Schemas refer to the cognitive structures in which an individual's knowledge is retained and organized. In addition to being knowledge repositories, schemas also direct information acquisition and processing. They guide answering the questions central to sensemaking efforts: "What or who is it?," "What are its implications; what does it mean?," and "How should I respond?"

After a brief review of schema theory, the categories of schema knowledge relevant to understanding sensemaking in organizations and the cultural influences on their emergence are examined. The conscious and unconscious operation of these schemas in the actual process of making sense of organizational stimuli is framed within a schema-directed, intrapsychic, mental dialogue perspective on social cognition. Specifically, I propose that in the social setting of organizations, individuals make sense out of their experiences based in large part on the outcomes of contrived mental dialogues between themselves (e.g., "I think it means this and I would be inclined toward this response") and other contextually-relevant (past or present; real or imagined) individuals or groups (e.g., "What would my boss and peers think about this? What would they want me to do?"). The content of the argument provided for others is guided by the individual's schemas for those others. I close the paper by discussing the ways in which this schema-based perspective enhances our understanding of the individual experiences of cultural sharing, subcultural boundaries, and psychological attachment.
(*Organizational Culture*, *Schema*, *Sensemaking*, *Mental Dialogue*)

> As the social world under any aspect whatsoever remains a very complicated cosmos of human activities, we can always go back to the "forgotten man" of the social sciences, to the actor in the social world whose doing and feeling lies at the bottom of the whole system (Schutz 1964, pp. 6-7).

Schutz's observation has important implications for the present status of organizational culture theory and research. Generally defined as the shared beliefs, values, and assumptions that guide sensemaking and action in organizations (Ott 1989), organizational culture encompasses both individual- and group-level phenomena (Louis 1985a). As Van Maanen and Barley (1985) observed, "while a group is necessary to invent and sustain culture, culture can be carried only by individuals" (p. 35). However, the bulk of scholarly attention has been devoted to organizational culture's group-level manifestations while its individual-level manifestations have remained relatively neglected. Examples of group-level topics receiving a great deal of attention include symbolic mechanisms such as language, stories, myths, and ceremonies by which an organization's culture is expressed and maintained (e.g., Martin 1982, Trice and Beyer 1984); the demarcation of organizational subcultures (e.g., Louis 1985b, Van Maanen and Barley, 1985); organizational culture as a form of control (e.g., Ouchi 1980, Ray 1986); culture strength (e.g., Kilmann et al. 1985); culture's implications for organizational performance (e.g., Denison 1984, Saffold 1988); and the management and change of organizational culture (e.g., Lundberg 1985, Sathe 1985b). The individual-level dynamics implied by these group-level topics (e.g., culture as a mechanism of control ultimately implies the control of individual behavior) generally remain unexamined and rarely are they explicitly examined in their own right. Notable exceptions include the literatures on organizational entry and socialization (e.g., Louis 1980; Van Maanen 1976), the influence of founders' and leaders' beliefs, values, and cognitive styles on the emergence, maintenance, and change of cultures (e.g., Kets de Vries and Miller 1986, Schein 1985), and individual acts of nonadherence to cultural norms (Golden 1992).

1047-7039/94/0503/0309/$01.25
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Given that organizational culture is ultimately manifested in and maintained by the sensemaking efforts and actions of individuals, neglecting its individual-level manifestations hobbles efforts to fully understand and appreciate the concept. A perspective which provides a clearer specification of the dynamics involved in culture's shaping of *common* sensemaking *across* a set of *individuals* is needed. Questions such as: "How does organizational culture influence the sensemaking activities of individuals?"; "How are cultural meanings manifested at the individual-level?"; and "How is cultural 'sharing' experienced by individuals?" demand more attention. Exploring the nature of the individual-level dynamics and experiences of organizational culture is the purpose of this paper.

The facilitation of shared sensemaking and social cognition within the organization context lies at the heart of most treatments of organizational culture (Barley 1983). Therefore, it follows that social cognition theory and research, with its focus on individuals' interpretations of the social world, offers a useful perspective from which to explore the cultural influences on individual sensemaking. Building off this literature, I propose that the individual-level manifestations and experiences of organizational culture are revealed in the operation of a patterned system of organization-specific schemas held by organizational members. Specifically, I suggest that individuals' organization-specific schemas are the repository of cultural knowledge and meanings and the source of the consensual sensemaking characteristic of culture. In addition, I suggest that the activation and interaction of these schemas in the social context of the organization creates the cultural experience for individuals. This perspective serves to locate sensemaking phenomena at the individual level yet connects them back into the sociocultural reality of the organization. The remainder of this paper is devoted to articulating this perspective.

## An Overview of Schema Theory

In their intensive review of the social cognition literature, Markus and Zajonc (1985) conclude that schema theory is the most useful and pervasive perspective on the mechanics of social cognition. Not surprisingly, many organizational scholars (e.g., Gioia and Poole 1984, Lord and Foti 1986, Martin 1982, Weick 1979b) have employed schema theory to frame examination of cognitive issues within organizational settings. Some scholars have even recognized, albeit cursorily, the advantages of viewing organizational culture in terms of schemas. For example, Bartunek and Moch (1987) refer to "organizational schemas" as the essence of culture. Similarly, Louis and Sutton (1991) define culture as "shared schemas." However, none of these applications of schema theory to the context of organizations explicitly articulate in any detail the schematic nature of culturally-influenced sensemaking in organizations. Before offering this articulation, the definition, functions, and dynamic nature of schemas are reviewed.

### Schemas Defined

Schemas refer to the dynamic, cognitive knowledge structures regarding specific concepts, entities, and events used by individuals to encode and represent incoming information efficiently (Markus 1977). Schemas are typically conceptualized as subjective theories derived from one's experiences about how the world operates (Markus and Zajonc 1985) that guide perception, memory, and inference (Fiske and Taylor 1984). For example, one's "college class" schema would include knowledge regarding typical attributes (e.g., professor, students, classroom, reading material, and tests) and the relationships between those attributes (e.g., the professor assigns reading material and administers tests to the students) (e.g., Fiske and Taylor 1984).

### The Functions of Schemas

Schemas serve as mental maps which enable individuals to traverse and orient themselves within their experiential terrain (Louis 1983, Weick 1979a) and guide interpretations of the past and present and expectations for the future. As Neisser (1976) and Weick (1979b) observed, schemas guide the search for, acquisition of, and processing of information and guide subsequent behavior in response to that information. Lord and Foti (1986) note that "schemas help reduce the information-processing demands associated with social activities by providing a ready-made knowledge system for interpreting and storing information about others" (p. 38). Summarizing research in the area, Taylor and Crocker (1981) identified seven functions of schemas: They (1) provide a structure against which experience is mapped, (2) direct information encoding and retrieval from memory, (3) affect information processing efficiency and speed, (4) guide filling gaps in the information available, (5) provide templates for problem solving, (6) facilitate the evaluation of experience, and (7) facilitate anticipations of the future, goal setting, planning, and goal execution. The following example drawn from the research of Bransford and

Johnson (1972) highlights several of these functions:

> The procedure is actually quite simple. First, you arrange things into different groups. Of course, one pile may be sufficient depending on how much there is to do.... It is important not to overdo things. That is, it is better to do too few things at once than too many. In the short run this may not seem important, but complications can easily arise. A mistake can be expensive as well. At first the whole procedure will seem complicated. Soon, however, it will become just another facet of life. (p. 722).

What was the passage about? How much of it can you recall? Now reread the passage knowing that its title was "Washing Clothes." When provided with this title, a "washing clothes" schema is evoked and individuals more easily understand the passage and are better able to recall it later. As an interesting contrast, reread the passage considering the title "Organizing Receipts for Tax Purposes." As a result of cuing a different schema, the meaning distilled is vastly different.

As this example demonstrates, the perceptions and interpretations of events and information are shaped by the schemas applied to them. As Taylor and Crocker (1981) note, "When a stimulus configuration is encountered in the environment, it is matched against a schema, and the ordering and relations among the elements of the schema are imposed on the elements of the stimulus configuration" (p. 94). Schemas have been conceptualized as outlines of expectations with certain ranges of acceptability for the values of those expectations (e.g., Rumelhart 1984). If information is missing (e.g., nothing in the clothes washing passage from Bransford and Johnson mentioned choosing water temperature), default values may be inserted (e.g., individuals may recall water temperature information where none existed). This feature of schema-based sensemaking serves to "fill in [information] when there is too little and allow the perceiver to go beyond the information given" (Markus and Zajonc 1985) so as to offer a more "complete" experience than would otherwise be possible. However, it also increases the potential for making incorrect assumptions about the stimulus. So while schemas make sensemaking possible, they also may lead to perceptual mistakes.

### Schema Dynamism

In addition to guiding the processing of information, schemas may be modified as a result of that information. Schemas are expanded and elaborated as they incorporate new information. This type of schema change has been labeled "first-order" change by Bartunek and Moch (1987). Over time, as more stimulus-relevant information is encountered, the schema for that stimulus becomes more complex, abstract, and organized (Fiske and Taylor 1984). The development of expertise in the form of highly elaborate schemas resulting from the incorporation of information from many experiences with a particular issue or area of concern is one example of this form of schema modification (e.g., Prietula and Simon 1989). Sometimes, however, information is confronted which conflicts with the knowledge in a person's schemas. Information conflicting with a schema will either be ignored as an aberration, be cognitively recast to fit current schemas, or generate either schema modification or the addition of a schema subcategory (Lord and Foti 1986). Bartunek and Moch (1987) have labelled the fundamental alteration of a schema "second-order" change.

It is important to recognize that the schema-directed nature of the perceptual process lessens the frequency with which schema inconsistent information is discovered and made conscious. The very nature of schemas act to ensure that drastic challenges to their validity seldom arise. Since schemas direct searches for information, it is likely that the information uncovered will reinforce those schemas. In addition, because schemas represent general knowledge, "No single example fits the schema perfectly, but most fit well enough" (Fiske and Taylor 1984, p. 171). While schemas emerge to facilitate making sense of the world, they can also blind individuals to features of the world that threaten the validity of those schemas or operate outside their purview (Krefting and Frost 1985). Lorsch (1985) refers to this phenomenon as "strategic myopia."

## The Manifestation of Culture in Individual Sensemaking

The brief summary of schema theory offered above should demonstrate that it has important implications for expanding our understanding of sensemaking in organizations and the role of organizational culture in guiding that sensemaking. In the sections which follow, a schema-based perspective on culturally-guided sensemaking is developed. Specifically, I outline the categories of schemas central to cultural concerns, examine the process by which those schemas come to be similar across organizational members, examine the cultural influences on schema salience, and suggest that much of the individual experience of culture is a product of an intrapsychic mental dialogue between self and culturally relevant others.

### Culturally Relevant Schemas

Given that knowledge about any stimulus can be schematized (Rumelhart 1984), individuals have at their

disposal myriad schemas. Which of these are relevant to understanding organizational culture? Because social knowledge is generally contextually bound (Holyoak and Gordon 1984), organization-context-specific schemas will obviously be of most relevance. In their discussion of schemas about other individuals, Cantor et al. (1982) noted that those schemas can have context specific variants (e.g., a schema about a friend versus a schema about a friend out with the guys) which are more elaborate, vivid, and concrete that their noncontext specific counterparts. These "in-situation" schemas represent a merger of the schema for the stimulus domain with the schema for the situation or context in which it is encountered (e.g., Lord and Foti 1986). Following this line of reasoning, I propose that "in-organization" forms of individuals' schemas are particularly central to developing a schema-based understanding of organizational culture. Within the organizational context, individuals encounter social entities (e.g., themselves, others, and organizational groupings), events and situations, and nonsocial objects and concepts that must be perceived and responded to. Building off the categorization schemes of others (Lord and Foti 1986, Taylor and Crocker 1981), five categories of in-organization schemas seem to capture the range of knowledge needed for these sensemaking efforts: self, person, organization, object/concept, and event.

*Self Schemas.* Self-in-organization schemas refer to individuals' theories and generalizations regarding aspects of themselves in the organizational context such as personality, values, roles, and behavior (e.g., "I am a white female accountant who is honest and hardworking and who values a balanced life between work and family") (Fiske and Taylor 1984, Markus 1977). As Mead (1934) noted, much of what an individual comes to define as self is a reflection of the reactions of others to the individual. Therefore, while focused inward, these schemas also are social creations. Self schemas help direct individuals' reactions to organizational stimuli and decide upon responses consistent with self. For example, an accountant who viewed herself as being honest would refer to this schema knowledge when deciding how to react to a client's request to help "cook the books."

*Person Schemas.* Person-in-organization schemas are organized memories, impressions, and learned expectations regarding the traits, goals, behaviors, and preferences of particular individuals (e.g., "my boss is very independent, supportive, intelligent, and extroverted"), groupings of people (e.g., "management can't be trusted"), and organizational roles (e.g., "labor leaders should work to maximize benefits for their constituents") (Fiske and Taylor 1984, Lord and Foti 1986). Developing schemas of others is important because their behavior shapes the reality one is trying to understand. Therefore, in addition to guiding the assignment of individuals into appropriate schematic categories (e.g., "she is in management") much of the content of person schemas will be devoted to summarizing knowledge regarding the beliefs, values, and likely behaviors of others (i.e., educated guesses regarding the schemas by which others' own sensemaking and behavior is determined). Others likely to be particularly influential in organizations, and therefore schematized, are important role senders (Katz and Kahn 1978) and shapers of an individual's experiences including organizational leaders, peers, and subordinates.

*Organization Schemas.* A subset of person schemas, organization schemas, are particularly central to understanding how the culture of an organization is embodied cognitively in individuals. For example, Mead (1934) made consideration of the attitudes of "other" a central feature of his theory of the development of self. Of particular importance to Mead's argument is an individual's perspective on the attitudes of "generalized others": the communities or social groups within which the individual is embedded. Knowledge regarding this generalized other corresponds to organization schemas (cf., Bartunek and Moch 1987), and are particularly central to the perspective being developed here. Organization schemas refer to knowledge and impressions regarding organizational groupings (or subgroupings) as entities (e.g., "headquarters") somewhat abstracted from their individual members (e.g., "the executives at headquarters"). While individuals have schemas for organizations of which they are not members (e.g., "McDonald's values service consistency"), of particular interest here are individuals' schemas for the organizations and organized social groups of which they are members. These organization schemas correspond most closely to an individual's knowledge of his or her organization's culture (or subunit's subculture) (cf. Bartunek and Moch 1987).

*Object/concept Schemas.* Object/concept-in-organization schemas refer to knowledge about stimuli which are not inherently social such as big offices with corner windows or the meaning of "quality" or "participation." These schemas are relevant for understanding culture because they guide the interpretation of physical and verbal cultural artifacts (cf. Lundberg 1985). Since organizational communication is central to

sensemaking efforts, concept schemas facilitate this communication by providing a framework within which verbal terms can be understood.

*Event Schemas.* Event-in-organization schemas capture knowledge about social contexts, situations, encounters, and events such as departmental parties, firings, and customer complaints. Scripts are the most frequently studied form of event schemas. Scripts contain knowledge of expected event sequences and appropriate behavior in specific situations (Gioia and Manz 1985, Gioia and Poole 1984, Lord and Kernan 1987, Martin 1982). For example, one's script for a staff meeting might specify the following: one should arrive on time, greet participants, pleasantly joke until the boss takes charge and starts the meeting, listen to presentations, answer questions, ask polite questions, and pleasantly bid farewell after the boss adjourns the meeting.

In addition to capturing scripted knowledge, event schemas also serve to guide interpretation of behavioral artifacts such as ceremonies and rituals. Such artifacts are cultural expressions which serve to reinforce certain meanings. For example, a weekly staff meeting could be interpreted as a control maneuver or as a team building opportunity. The schemas attached to such events are an important aspect of any examination of organizational culture.

Finally, it is important to note that these event schemas can be overlaid on other schema categories to create more specific in-situation schemas (e.g., "In private, my boss is very receptive to bad news but he hates to get it during the weekly staff meeting") than the in-organization ones described earlier. Organizational situations for which in-situation schemas are likely to exist include those circumstances captured in event schemas (e.g., staff meetings, sales calls, strikes, etc.).

Taken together, the schemas described above capture the range of information individuals use to make sense out of organizational life. From a cultural perspective, they serve as individuals' repository for organizational culture knowledge including the values and beliefs attributed to various individuals and collectivities, appropriate behaviors for various situations, traditional ways of doing things, reinforcement contingencies, peer and normative pressures, role knowledge, the meaning ascribed to verbal, physical, and behavioral artifacts, and the defining characteristics of the organization and its subgroups. However, the actual presence of culture requires more than sharing categories of schemas; it requires that the content and relative salience of those schemas be similar across organizational members. The process by which members' schemas come to bear a resemblance to one another is addressed next.

### The Emergence of Schema Similarity

How do an individual's schemas come to resemble those of other organizational members? In part, the answer rests on realizing that all members of the community have a vested interest in the establishment of common meanings so that a predictable social order is possible. Individuals value the ability to predict and understand their circumstances that a shared conception of reality makes possible (cf. Sutton and Kahn 1987). As Schein (1985) notes: "the bulk of the content of a given culture will concern itself primarily with those areas of life where objective verification is not possible and where, therefore, a social definition becomes the only basis for judgement" (pp. 90–91).

Individuals' schemas become similar as a result of shared experience and shared exposure to social cues regarding others' constructions of reality. Since schemas are summaries of experiential knowledge, sharing experiential space and time and the challenges posed by communicating, interacting and solving common problems facilitates and encourages the development of similar schemas (e.g., Schein 1985). Given that members of organizational subgroups are likely to share more immediate experiences with each other than with members of the entire organization, it is not surprising that the schemas which emerge in such subgroups (subcultures) tend to be more specific, more well-defined, and more generally shared than those emerging across an organization's entire membership (e.g., Louis 1985b, Van Maanen and Barley 1985).

Schema similarity is also shaped by the social construction of reality (Berger and Luckman 1966) that occurs through the processing of social information (Salancik and Pfeffer 1978). Through social comparison, individuals gain important information regarding reality by observing the responses of others sharing that reality (Berger and Luckman 1966). For example, an individual's schema for the event of a complaining customer is influenced by witnessing how others construct similar events. In summarizing the social information processing perspective, Salancik and Pfeffer (1978) note that the social environment "provides a direct construction of meaning through guides to socially acceptable beliefs, attitudes and needs, and acceptable reasons for action" and "focuses an individual's attention on certain information, making that

information more salient, and provides expectations concerning individual behavior and the logical consequences of such behavior" (p. 227).

Similarly, Mead (1934) suggests that meaning emerges through social communication. This communication can either be explicit and direct (e.g., "Hey buddy, you can't trust management as far as you can throw them") or symbolic and indirect (e.g., a new hire is ostracized at breaks because of fraternizing with management). Over time and through social information processing, organizational members come to develop similar schemas. As individuals' schemas become more similar, the social information they provide others becomes more focused, clear, consistent, and persuasive. As a result, the group's shared schema knowledge becomes somewhat self-perpetuating.

It is important to note another way social information processing influences schema acquisition. In the process of providing social cues to others, individuals indirectly reveal themselves to those others. In the process of receiving cues about the meaning of organizational stimuli from others, knowledge about those others *and* about their preferred constructions of reality (i.e., their schemas) is gained and used to build and elaborate a schematic representation of them (cf. Pfeffer 1981, Pondy 1983). For example, watching a coworker deal very pleasantly with an irate customer would lead one to infer that customers, regardless of their demeanor, should be treated well. However, hearing the coworker complain after the encounter that "I would have liked to punch that guy's lights out," would shape one's schema of the coworker: "He treats customers well because he feels he has to, rather than wants to."

**Culturally-influenced Schema Salience and Activation**

In addition to schema similarity, organizational culture implies that some schemas are more salient and more likely to be activated (cued for use) than others. At the most basic level, the interpretation of organizational stimuli—concepts, events, people, and groups—is guided by the schemas specific to those stimuli. The appropriate schema is activated because the key aspects of the stimulus match a schema's main attributes (e.g., seeing people in suits sitting around a conference table has key elements which match most people's "business meeting" schema and therefore that schema is activated). However, many organization stimuli have many possible meanings and may have features which match diverse schemas. For example, depending upon one's perspective, a given strategic event can be perceived as either a threat or an opportunity (cf. Dutton and Jackson 1987). In such circumstances, schemas which are salient are more likely to be cued for sensemaking use (e.g., a person looking for threats is more likely to find them). Schema salience and activation is determined in several culturally-sensitive ways.

First, given that schemas can be nested in or cross-reference other schemas (Taylor and Crocker 1981), schemas currently activated can increase the likelihood that others will be salient or activated. For example, one's schema for the event of a meeting would direct activation of schemas for the other meeting participants. Some schemas, particularly context-specific schemas such as organizational schemas and event schemas, are likely to be influential in cuing other schemas (Markus and Zajonc 1985). This is particularly important for understanding culture. For example, one's organization schema is likely to make salient other schemas seen as being of central concern to the organization (e.g., quality, customers, etc.). In fact, one of the main ways culture is reflected in the individual act of sensemaking may be the pattern of schema salience across organizational members: to what do they attend and toward what interpretations are they biased?

Second, social information, particularly labels offered by others, has a profound impact on schema activation (Dutton and Jackson 1987, Lord and Maher 1991, Salancik and Pfeffer 1978). In this sense, verbal artifacts such as slogans to which people are exposed may encourage schema salience (e.g., signs throughout a workplace with safety information and messages will likely make safety-related schemas salient).

Third, one's motives and goals serve to make certain schemas more salient than others (Fiske and Taylor 1984). These motives and goals are captured in self schemas and shaped by the reinforcement contingencies summarized in person schemas and influenced by the culture of the organization. Several writers have recognized that reinforcement contingencies are an important artifact of an organization's culture (e.g., Ulrich 1984). Such contingencies hold sway over sensemaking because they shape schema salience. For example, a person in an organization which rewards quality craftsmanship is more likely to be attuned to quality-relevant issues.

**A Mental Dialogue Perspective on Culturally-based Sensemaking**

One major question regarding the application of schema theory to culturally-based individual sensemak-

ing remains unaddressed: How does schema-driven sensemaking occur? Schemas guide organizational sensemaking on two fundamental levels. First, they facilitate answering the question: "What or who is it?" (Taylor and Crocker 1981). In other words, schemas are used to categorize and thus identify stimuli (e.g., "it is a quality problem," "this is an informal performance evaluation session," or "she is a customer"). After categorization, the next step involves determining what the stimulus means so that a response can be formulated. In general, this search for meaning is egocentric (cf., Gray et al. 1985, Schutz 1964): "What should *I* pay attention to?", "Once noticed, what does this situation or event mean for *me*?", "What should *I* expect to happen next?", "Does anyone else have a stake in *my* reaction?", "What would any relevant others expect or want *me* to do?", "How would those relevant others respond in *my* situation?", and "What should *I* do in response?"

It is important to note that schema-guided sensemaking can occur relatively unconsciously or consciously (e.g., Gioia and Poole 1984, Louis and Sutton 1991). In relatively unconscious, automatic processing, schemas drive perception with little conscious intervention, choice, or required schema reconciliation (when more than one schema is activated). In conscious processing, some conscious schema manipulation, reflection, and reconciliation is required. The degree of conscious processing required is largely determined by the extent of experience with the stimulus domain: more experience is likely to facilitate more unconscious, tacit processing. Conscious, reflective processing is generally required in response to novel stimuli (e.g., a new boss), novel features of familiar stimuli (e.g., a new work-team member), or schema-inconsistent information (e.g., an accepted business practice leads to failure) (e.g., Louis and Sutton 1991). Given their inexperience in the organizational setting, organizational newcomers are particularly likely to engage in conscious, reflective sensemaking. However, over time, conscious, reflective sensemaking makes unconscious processing possible. This occurs as a result of elaborating the schema for the stimulus with information regarding the outcome of previous reflective cognition making it less necessary to engage in such cognition later on. I propose that this reflective, conscious cognition in process or as part of schematic memory reveals the schema-based dynamics of sensemaking.

The social cognition literature on schema theory has been most concerned with categorization issues and the structure of schemas. Little attention has been devoted to understanding the dynamics of social sensemaking, particularly the influence the social context has on that process (Schneider 1991). Therefore, to understand how schemas are consciously manipulated to make sense of organizational experiences, we must look beyond traditional schema theory. I propose employing a "mental debate" perspective. This perspective is articulated below.

Consistent with the social information processing (Salancik and Pfeffer 1978) and social construction of reality (Berger and Luckman 1966) views described earlier, Louis (1983) suggests that meaning is negotiated in organizations through "bargaining among alternative meanings differentially preferred by the various parties to an interaction" (p. 44). This negotiation occurs directly and indirectly. As Fiske and Taylor (1984) note, "other people can influence a person's actions without even being present... our perceptions of others actually present and our imagination of their presence both predict behavior" (p. 8). While one's efforts to decide how to react to a customer's complaint will be directly shaped by the customer's actions and the actions of coworkers and supervisors present at the exchange (e.g., a supervisor may come over and offer assistance if an inappropriate response is made), it is the intrapsychic act of evoking the perspectives of others to guide cognition that is central to understanding individual sensemaking. Interestingly, several theorists (e.g., Mead 1934; Weick 1979a) have recognized the sensemaking centrality of individuals' ability to take the perspectives of others to guide intrapsychic debate regarding the construction of reality and behavioral decisions.

Mead (1934) argued that individuals define themselves and make behavioral decisions relative to the social world by engaging in internalized conversations between self and others. Such conversations require taking the perspectives of others. Of particular importance to Mead were the internalized conversations which individuals hold with generalized others: the community or social groups within which the individual is embedded. The generalized other's dialogue is directed by the individual's abstracted knowledge regarding the attitudes of the social group. As demonstrated in the following argument, Mead's theory is particularly relevant to understanding cultural influences on individual sensemaking:

> It is in the form of the generalized other that the social process influences the behavior of the individuals involved in it and carrying it on, i.e., that the community exercises control

> over the conduct of its individual members; for it is in this form that the social process or community enters as a determining factor into the individual's thinking.... And only through the taking by individuals of the attitude or attitudes of the generalized other toward themselves is the existence of a universe of discourse, as that system of common or social meanings which thinking presupposes at its context, rendered possible (Mead 1934, p. 155).

Similarly, Weick (1979a) suggests that social cognition in organizations often involves contriving implicit conversations with "phantom others" (p. 67). He offered the following quote from Lofland (1976) to support this assertion:

> All encounters involve people in immediate interaction, but not all interactants need be in separate bodies. By means of memory, consciousness, and symbolization, humans summon particular past humans (more accurately, a residue composite of one) and composite categories of persons ("them," "my family," "the government," etc.) into the forefront of consciousness, taking account of what are projected to be their belief and action when dealing with a situation. No other person need physically be present for there to be social interaction in this sense. It is *social* interaction in that the individual is taking other people into account when constructing his own action (p. 100).

This "mental dialogue" mode of social cognition offers a useful perspective on the process by which the broader cultural context of the organization manifests itself in the sensemaking efforts of organizational members. Specifically, I propose that in the social setting of organizations, individuals enact their experiences and choose to behave in response to those experiences based in large part on the outcomes of contrived mental dialogues between themselves and other contextually-relevant (past or present, real or imagined) individuals or groups. This "mental dialogue" perspective on social cognition is consistent with the intersubjective weighing of personal attitudes and perceptions of norms in the creation of behavioral intentions described by Ajzen and Fishbein (1980). According to them, individuals' intentions to behave are based on a reconciliation of their personal attitudes with the perceived normative expectations of contextually-relevant others. From a mental dialogue perspective, the arguments supplied for each of the parties to the conversation are basically the verbalization of normative and cultural pressures.

I also propose that an individual's schemas make it possible to take the various perspectives required to craft mental dialogues. The "I" perspective is supplied by an individual's self schemas. The perspectives of relevant others—S/he, They, My Organization, or My Subgroup—are abstracted from the person schemas specific to them. Consistent with social information processing models, this "mental conversation" treatment of social cognition helps identify how the normative pressures arising from the behaviors of others (resulting from their own organizational schemas) in an organization can influence an individual member's schema-driven cognition.

This mental dialogue process is likely to influence sensemaking in a relative conscious and reflective manner when novel or unexpected social stimuli are encountered. The reflective dynamics of this process are most likely evident in the sensemaking endeavors of organizational newcomers (e.g., Louis 1980). Newcomers enter organizations with a wealth of schemas based upon their previous experiences. Through anticipatory socialization activities, they will also have some very general organization-specific schemas. Upon entering the organization, the newcomer's "newcomer" event schema will direct him or her to define relevant social actors and social groupings (i.e., "who is important here?") and to consider broadly the perceived social definitions and normative pressures emanating from them (i.e., "what do they believe, value, and want from me?") so as to inform person and self schema creation and elaboration. The resultant schemas provide the perspectives from which mental dialogue-based introspection regarding meaning and action occurs. For example, a newcomer may hit upon an idea that would boost productivity. To determine how to act with regard to this idea, he will be compelled to consider his preferences (I) and the preferences of workgroup members (My Subgroup), supervisor (She), management (They), and the organizational entity (My Organization). This intrapsychic dialogue can reveal both agreement ("My supervisor would agree with me that this idea should be made public") and disagreement ("But my peers would be against such a pro-management activity, particularly one that would upset the status quo"). Such dialogue outcomes serve to elaborate the schema for the stimulus under consideration. For example, the newcomer's schema for production-improvement ideas would be elaborated by indicating that the supervisor's perspective agrees with his own while that of coworkers does not. In addition, the individual's mental resolution of any conflicts will also become part of schema knowledge (e.g., "Since I am the new kid on the block, I decided to keep the idea quiet in deference to my coworkers"). Many forms of conflict resolution are possible, even altering self schemas to create consonance with the perceived preferences of influential Others (Mead 1934).

As the newcomer gains more experience with various stimulus domains in the organization, develops more elaborate in-organization schemas, and conducts more mental dialogues, sensemaking for these domains begins to require less conscious effort. Conscious mental dialogue need not be evoked under several circumstances. For familiar or routine stimuli, the results of previous, conscious dialogues (conducted when the stimulus was not familiar or routine) which have been incorporated into the schema for the stimulus inform sensemaking in a relatively tacit, unconscious, and "effortless" manner. In particular, dialogue need not occur when previous dialogues regarding the stimulus have resulted in agreement between I and the other party or parties to the mental dialogue and that agreement has been included in the schema for the stimulus. I propose that these agreements generally lead to a "We" experience for that stimulus domain and that this "We" experience is used to elaborate the active schema. This treatment of We is similar to that of Schall (1983):

> As interacting participants organize by communicating, they evolve shared understandings around issues of common interest, and so develop a sense of the collective "we" (Harris and Cronen 1979), that is, of themselves as distinct social units doing things together in ways appropriate to those shared understandings of the "we" (p. 560).

Unconscious, tacit sensemaking is also possible for stimulus domains where previous mental dialogues resulted in disagreement. That disagreement must have been fully and permanently resolved and notation of this resolution added to the schema for the stimulus. Any remaining tension or conflict between mental parties, such as for "one time only" resolutions, will cue future dialogue. For example, in the example of the newcomer with an innovative idea, he chose to withhold it because of his newcomer status. As a result of this tentative resolution, any new ideas he has will have to be processed consciously. However, if his resolution had been less tentative ("I believe in improvements and will always share them with others even if they resist"), then making sense of new ideas would require relatively less conscious mediation.

Many organizational scholars have argued that organizational cultures are manifested along hierarchical levels demarcated by degrees of visibility and conscious awareness (e.g., Ott 1989, Sathe 1985a, Schein 1985). Most scholars employing a levels perspective suggest that the most fundamental level of organizational culture comprises the set of basic assumptions about organizational reality. It is clear from Schein's (1985) discussion of these basic assumptions that they correspond very well to the in-organization schemas whose sensemaking guidance has, over time, become more tacit and unconscious:

> When a solution to a problem works repeatedly, it comes to be taken for granted. What was once a hypothesis, supported by only a hunch or a value, comes gradually to be treated as a reality.... Basic assumptions... have become so taken for granted that one finds little variation within a cultural unit.... What I am calling basic assumptions are congruent with what Argyris has identified as "theories-in-use," the implicit assumptions that actually guide behavior, that tell group members how to perceive, think about, and feel about things... (p. 18).

It is important to note that conscious dialogue can be cued again for stimulus domains which were previously resolved and operating unconsciously. Such is the case when discrepant information becomes salient or when the context introduces new salient features (e.g., a new person who is outside the bounds of previous agreements or dispute resolutions). For example, a visitor observing a small group interact will make conversation and interaction within that group more effortful than was normally the case. Topics and communication styles which had previously been schematized will now be forced into consciousness and engaged in dialogue against the other (e.g., "how should we act with her around?").

## Implications for the Experience of Culture

I have proposed that organization culture is reflected in the emergence of congruent schemas, which are similarly salient, and which shape, and are shaped by the social sensemaking process of intrapsychic mental dialogue between self and others. This perspective has important implications for our understanding of the ways in which organizational culture is experienced by individuals. Several of these implications are explored below.

### The Experience of (Sub)Cultural Sharing

Although most organizational scholars agree that the sharing of beliefs and values (captured in schemas) is a prerequisite for the existence of culture in organizations, there is no agreement on exactly what sharing means, how much is required, or how it should be measured (e.g., Martin et al. 1985). For example, Bartunek (1984) talks about shared assumptions but doesn't define what those are or how this sharing is

manifested at the individual level. In these cases, questions such as "Does sharing require that the parties to that sharing be aware of its existence?" are problematic.

The existence of sharing is not necessarily the same as the individual-level experience of sharing. It is possible for individuals to share a schema without being aware of that commonality. However, since organizational culture is bound up in notions of the community, it seems reasonable to assume that the *psychological experience* of sharing is of importance in its own right. This is consistent with Schein's (1985) observation that "'Shared' understanding means that the members of the group recognize a particular feeling, experience, or activity *as common*" (p. 168). Efforts to treat sharing as simply a group-level aggregation of the number of individuals holding particular beliefs and values neglects the fact that such an approach may not capture the extent to which individuals experience sharing.

I propose that cultural sharing can be experienced at two levels: directly and indirectly. The direct experience of sharing results from the realization of agreement between I and Other in schema-based mental dialogues. This agreement generates the experience of "We" (cf., Harris and Cronen 1979, Schall 1983) for the particular stimulus being considered. In this sense, sharing can be experienced on a stimulus-by-stimulus basis. An individual may experience sharing in certain contexts and not others or may experience sharing with one group in one context and with another in a different context. Obviously, the experience of sharing is enhanced to the degree that agreement between self and others occurs across stimulus encounters.

The direct experience of sharing can also result even after agreements resulting in the We-feeling are schema encoded. This is most likely to happen when interpretation of a stimulus domain on which agreement exists between self and other (the We perspective) is challenged by another social entity (e.g., a new leader challenges the status quo in an organization). In this case, a mental dialogue between We and Other is required. I suggest that as a byproduct of crafting the arguments for We's point of view, awareness of sharing enters the individual's consciousness.

The experience of sharing can also be indirect and tacit. In social settings, the absence of sharing and the resultant social discord is likely to lead to discomfort and tension. Because resolving social conflicts over meanings requires conscious reflection, the effortlessness of unconscious sensemaking (made possible by previous social agreement or resolution) can be experienced as an absence of discord. In essence, tension is not experienced. Individuals can attribute this lack of tension to fitting in with the collective We.

**Implications for the Experience of Subcultures**

Closely related to the experience of sharing is the experience of subcultures. Many organizational scholars have argued for the importance of focusing on organizational subcultures rather than organization-wide cultures (e.g., Louis 1985b, Van Maanen and Barley 1985). The schema-based approach to the individual experience of cultural sharing helps clarify the demarcation of subcultures comprising a larger, more encompassing culture. An individual's ability to distill My Subgroup or They perspectives from their person-in-organization schemas provides evidence of the existnce of subcultures. If individuals can articulate different arguments they would expect to be posed by different groups, evidence for subcultural differences between those groups is provided. For example, if a plant manager faced with a problem perceives that the corporate engineering function (They 1) and the corporate marketing function (They 2) would deal with a problem in fundamentally different ways, one can infer that from the perspective of the individual manager a clear and important subcultural difference exists between these two groups. The individual's schema-defined rules of inclusion for these subgroups define the subcultural boundaries that the individual experiences.

The ease with which one can mentally construct a group's perspective for use in intrapsychic dialogue is a gauge of the degree to which that group is a cultural entity. A more elaborate, detailed schema for a group makes taking their perspective easier and is suggestive of coherent culture. If an impression of a group is hard to form for a particular stimulus domain, that group cannot be considered to possess a cultural stance on that domain (at least from the perceiver's experience) and supplying a cogent, scripted dialogue will be difficult.

**The Experience of Psychological Attachment**

The literature on organizational commitment suggests that there are at least two basic dimensions along which an individual can be psychologically attached to an organization: normative (or attitudinal) and compliance (or calculative) (see Mathieu and Zajac, 1990, for a review of this literature). The schema-based perspective articulated in this paper offers insight into the individual experience of psychological attachment along these two dimensions.

Normative commitment refers to attachment based upon an internalization of the values and beliefs char-

acterizing the organization and valued affiliation with the organization (e.g., O'Reilly and Chatman 1986). From a schema-based mental dialogue perspective, this form of psychological attachment would be experienced as a result of agreement (We-feeling) between self and the generalized other of the organization (or organizational subgroup) during mental dialogues.

Compliance commitment refers to attachment based upon subordinating one's own preferences to the wishes of the group in expectation of extrinsic renumeration (e.g., pay and continued employment) (e.g., O'Reilly and Chatman 1986). Such commitment is reflected in resolutions of conflict aroused in the process of mental dialogue between I (or We in the case of a subcultural group) and Other in Other's favor. Individuals comply in the hopes of gaining valued outcomes and avoiding unpleasant outcomes under the control of the Other (Kelman 1958, Kiesler and Kiesler 1969). Organizational members whose commitment is primarily compliance based would be expected to have few "We" experiences with the organization.

## Conclusion

I have proposed and described a schema-based perspective on the individual-level dynamics of culturally influenced sensemaking in organizations. This perspective represents a step toward greater explicit consideration of the importance of studying organizational culture within the domain of individual sensemaking and offers a framework which can serve to stimulate and direct future organizational culture theory and research.

One benefit of the perspective I have proposed is stimulation of new approaches to the study of culture. First, it offers several propositions which require empirical examination. Second, the perspective suggests the appropriateness of adapting the diverse research designs employed by social psychologists studying schemas for the study of the schema manifestations of organizational culture. Third, it argues for the appropriateness of focusing on the individual experience of culture and as a result suggests that I, They, S/he, and We may serve as useful referents in both quantitative and qualitative data collection. Fourth, the perspective suggests that invoking a real or contrived Other may prove useful in surfacing individual's I and We perspectives and making them more available for study. This phenomenon naturally occurs in newcomers rendering them excellent candidates for culture study (e.g., Louis 1980, Schall 1983).

The perspective advanced here also has implications for improving understanding of traditionally group-level topics in culture studies. For example, the dynamic quality of schemas makes the approach a potentially useful perspective from which to consider the maintenance and change of culture. In particular, the schema-based perspective would suggest the centrality of tension between I or We and They in surfacing culture and motivating its change. This is consistent with many writers on culture change who suggest that new leaders are in advantageous positions from which to instigate culture change (e.g., Lungberg 1985). From the schema perspective advanced here, such a new leader becomes an influential Other and stimulates the reconsideration of reality through the mental dialogue efforts of organizational members.

In conclusion, it is important to note that while the schema concept is widely embraced by social psychologists, it is not perfect (Markus and Zajonc 1985, Wilcox and Williams 1990). Schema theory applied to organizational culture is not a cure for all that currently ails culture theory and research. However, the perspective on culture offered by schema theory is significant because it highlights and challenges the neglect of the individual-level dynamics of organizational culture that exists in the literature and the conceptual truncation caused by that neglect. I hope that the perspective I have outlined can serve to facilitate building a more well-rounded understanding and appreciation of organizational culture in all of its multilevel complexity.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Jim Meindl and four anonymous reviewers from *Organization Science* and Kevin Mossholder for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this manuscript. I would like to extend a special note of thanks to Doug Cowherd for his invaluable assistance in helping me think through the ideas contained herein. I would also like to thank Bob Kahn, Noel Tichy, Kim Cameron, and Rick Price for granting me the leeway to begin exploring these ideas in my dissertation. A much earlier version of this manuscript was awarded the 1989 Lou Pondy Award for the best paper based on a dissertation by the Organization and Management Theory Division of the Academy of Management.

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*Accepted by James R. Meindl, Charles Stubbart, and Joseph F. Porac; received November* 1991. *This paper has been with the author for* 2 *revisions.*