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Sensemaking and Emotions in Organizations: Accounting for Emotions in a Rational(ized) Context

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Organizations tend to be guided by a rationality/emotionality duality in which rational behavior is privileged over emotional behavior. Consequently, emotions in organizations have historically been undervalued in favor of rationality. Despite the privileging of rationality, however, organizations are emotion-laden environments. The present study uses sensemaking theory to explore how employees manage the rationality/emotionality duality in the workplace. Using a qualitative analysis of 38 emotional experiences derived from 19 interviews, it was found that participants accept the duality by orienting toward emotions that are associated with the disruption or enhancement of "rational" business practices. Further, participants tended to reinforce the dichotomy by carefully controlling their emotions in organizations through denial of emotions, reframing their experiences, by rationally reciting their emotional experiences, or by relegating emotions at work to appropriate time and place.

Keywords: Sensemaking; Emotions; Emotionality; Work; Dualisms

Historically, emotions in organizations have been undervalued in favor of rationality, both by practitioners and researchers. While an increasing number of scholarly works have begun to explore emotions in organizations (Fineman, 2000b), there is little evidence of a similar evolution by organizational practitioners. In fact, scholars suggest that dualistic assumptions regarding rationality and emotionality in organizations continue to be enforced. For example, Fiebig and Kramer (1998) reported that respondents in

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their study "resorted to rational or logical descriptors to describe how they expressed emotions" further indicating the dominance of rationality in organizations (p. 568).

The privileging of rationality over emotionality in organizations reflects the tendency toward dualities in Western culture (Putnam & Mumby, 1993). The English language reflects and perpetuates these dualities through its creation of meaning within bipolar terms such as black and white, mind and body, rationality and emotionality (Cirksena & Cuklanz, 1992). "Critics have observed that this assumption of dualism generally includes a hierarchical relationship between the terms, valuing one and devaluing the other" (Cirksena & Cuklanz, 1992, p. 20). Organizations tend to adhere to the duality of rationality/emotionality, where rationality is privileged over its binary opposite emotionality (Ashcraft, 2000; Howard, 1993; Meyerson, 2000; Putnam & Mumby, 1993). The practice of this duality can be seen in the organizational appropriation of worker emotions for rationalized and commodified ends (Fineman, 2000a). The rationality/emotionality distinction is, however, a false dichotomy given that "many rational organizational strategies are pursued on highly emotional grounds and much of what we describe as rational is in fact emotional" (Fineman, 1996, p. 550). Indeed, the rationality/emotionality duality is likely a peculiarity of Western business culture and does not extend to non-Western organizations where emotionality and rationality are viewed as intertwined and inseparable (Krone & Morgan, 2000). Consequently, despite the privileging of rationality in Western organizations, organizational members certainly do not stop experiencing emotions when they think about, talk about, and do work (Fineman, 1993; Frost et al., 2000). To the contrary, the process of organizing is itself highly emotional (Weick, 1995). Workers, then, must tread a treacherous path between the emotions they experience and the socialized expectations of rationality in the workplace.

The purpose of this study is to determine how employees manage the artificial duality of rationality/emotionality in the workplace. In so doing, the concept of sensemaking is first examined, followed by a review of literature on emotionality in organizations in an attempt to frame the present study. Finally, we examine how individuals make sense of and experience emotions in organizations through a study on emotions in the workplace.

Sensemaking

Sensemaking literally "means the making of sense" (Weick, 1995, p. 4). It occurs when there is a shock to the organizational system that either produces uncertainty or ambiguity. Sensemaking provides a means to return a sense of stability to the organizational life world. Key to sensemaking is the idea that organizational members make sense of disruptions to the organizing process. While this process has been variously called incongruous events (Starbuck & Milliken, 1988), interruptions (Mandler, 1984), and unmet expectations (Jablin & Kramer, 1998), there is a common recognition that sensemaking occurs when the flow of work is disrupted. It is the notion of "shock" or system disruption that provided the greatest use in the following analysis and therefore is the focus of this section of the paper.

The theory of sensemaking in organizations suggests that people make retrospective sense of unexpected and disruptive events through an ongoing process of action, selection, and interpretation (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking is also prospective in that sense that is made retrospectively affects future sensemaking (Weick, 1995, 2001). By recognizing sensemaking as both retrospective and prospective, sensemaking as process is also emphasized. Specifically, sensemaking is ongoing in duration, having no single point of departure and no permanent point of arrival.

While some argue that sensemaking is purely cognitive (Fineman, 1996), Weick (1995) emphasizes the role of emotions in the sensemaking process. Emotions are involved in both the commencement and outcome of sensemaking: "The reality of flows becomes most apparent when that flow is interrupted. An interruption to a flow typically induces an emotional response, which then paves the way for emotion to influence sensemaking. It is precisely because ongoing flows are subject to interruption that sensemaking is infused with feeling" (Weick, 1995, p. 45). Other scholars provide insight into the link between sensemaking and emotions concluding that "the discrepancy between the expected and the actual" is a primary component of emotions (Mandler, 1984, p. 118). Fiebig and Kramer (1998) concur. In their test of a model of emotional experiences at work, Fiebig and Kramer conclude that it is unmet expectations that serve as the catalyst for emotional experiences in organizations. These findings are consistent with conclusions that sensemaking occurs in response to disruptions in organizing processes (Weick, 1995, 2001; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001). When examining emotions and sensemaking, then, it is important to understand the relationship between the experience of emotions at work and disruptions in the organizing process.

System disruptions serve as the opportunity for organizational members to extract cues from the environment that will then be used as the basis for sensemaking. Extracted cues "are simple, familiar structures that are seeds from which people develop a larger sense of what may be occurring" (Weick, 1995, p. 50). Extracted cues represent what was noticed as worthy of attention. Intriguingly, while people can extract cues that are unusual or inconsistent with their expectations, they tend to extract cues that are consistent with their assumptions about organizational life (Weick, 1995). Extracted cues, then, can provide insight into how people choose to pay attention to emotions in organizations, creating the potential to both challenge and reinforce the rationality/emotionality duality in the workplace.

The Myth of Rationality

While the literature suggests a duality between rationality and emotionality in organizations, and further suggests that emotions are an important facet of the sensemaking process, it is not yet clear how organizational members make sense of emotional experiences at work in light of the duality. Fineman's (1996) provocative discussion of the myth of rationality provides insight into three ways organizational members can make sense of emotional experiences at work. His discussion suggests various ways that organizational members can adhere to the rationality/emotionality duality and ways in which it can be resisted.

According to Fineman (1996), traditionally, the myth of rationality in organizations viewed rationality as "a thinking, cognitive process of cool calculation" while "impulsive, emotional, desiring qualities are antithetical to rationality and cognition" (p. 547). The myth typifies the rationality/emotionality duality in organizations, clearly privileging rationality over emotionality. Fineman identifies three approaches to the myth of rationality that have implications for sensemaking in organizations. The first approach supports the myth by charging that emotions interfere with rationality. Primarily springing from the field of psychology, this perspective contends that because emotions cloud judgment, emotional expressions should be carefully segmented, preferably outside of the organization.

A second approach to workplace emotions provides a challenge to the myth of rationality by contending that emotions serve rationality (Fineman, 1996). People in this camp argue that rationality cannot happen without emotions because emotions guide rational behavior. Interestingly, while this approach challenges the myth of rationality, it supports the rationality/emotionality duality by subordinating emotions to rationality. Much scholarly literature tends to support this approach by exploring how both organizations and organizational members use emotions for rationalized ends. Research on emotional labor and emotion work illustrate these processes. In emotional labor, organizations require members to manipulate emotional displays in an attempt to sell a product (Sutton & Rafaeli, 1988) or as a product in and of itself (Hochschild, 1983). Emotional labor is an important "communication accomplishment. It is in and through interaction that we express, repress, or manufacture emotion, in our workplaces and elsewhere" (Shuler & Sypher, 2000, p. 51). Specifically, by creating carefully crafted emotional displays, organizations hope to increase the (rational) success of the organization.

In contrast to emotional labor, emotion work involves the manipulation of emotions by organizational members in order to better interact at work (Dougherty & Krone, 2002). One way individuals accomplish this task is by suppressing negative emotions (Fiebig & Kramer, 1998; Lee & Jablin, 1995; Waldron & Krone, 1991), although after the emotional event, coworkers are more likely to discuss among themselves negatively valenced incidents than positively valenced incidents (Sias & Jablin, 1995). Through emotion work and emotional labor, employees use emotions to achieve rational goals, supporting the notion that emotions serve rationality.

The third approach also challenges the myth of rationality by conceptualizing emotionality and rationality as entwined (Fineman, 1996). It is this approach that suggests ways in which organizational members can resist the rationality/emotionality duality in organizations. In this conceptualization, "rational self-interest is overwhelmingly emotional" (p. 550). Krone and Morgan's (2000) work on Chinese managers exemplifies this approach when they argue that while Chinese managers heavily control their emotions, they do so in such a way that the "mind and heart work together in a coordinated fashion to regain emotional equilibrium" (p. 96).

Emerging literature suggests a fourth way to visualize the relationship between rationality and emotionality in organizations through the privileging of emotionality over rationality. In this conceptualization, emotionality becomes the privileged pole in the rationality/emotionality duality. Sandelands and Boudens (2000) illustrate this polar reversal when they argue that very little talk about organizational life involves job task. For the most part, accounts of organizational life are far more filled with emotional content than task content. The authors equate task with rationality and relationships with emotionality, arguing that when people talk about work, "they talk about relationships, about the intrigues, conflicts, gossips and innuendoes of group life" (p. 50).

The previous discussion suggests some possible assumptions that organizational members may hold when extracting cues for sensemaking about emotions. Of those possibilities reviewed here, the first supports the emotionality/rationality dichotomy by claiming that there is no place for emotions in organizations, the second supports the dichotomy by subordinating emotions to rationality, the third eliminates the dichotomy, and the fourth reverses the dichotomy. While Fineman's (1996) discussion provides an interesting orientation toward emotions in the workplace, it is unclear how organizational members will make sense of the relationship between rationality and emotionality in organizations. Thus the first research question asks:

> RQ1: How do organizational members make sense of emotional experiences at work in light of organizational norms of rationality?

Given the importance of system disruptions to the sensemaking process (Weick, 1995) and the role of similar concepts in emotional experiences in organizations (Fiebig & Kramer, 1998; Mandler, 1984), it is important to understand how system disruptions inspire sensemaking about the experience of emotions at work. Therefore the second research question asks:

> RQ2: How, if at all, do system disruptions inspire sensemaking during interviews about the experience and expressions of emotions in organizations?

Phenomenology as Methodology

Using hermeneutic phenomenology (Van Manen, 1990), we conducted a study on the experience of emotions at work. Interviews were conducted with individuals across organizations because of the need to examine emotional experiences "across a broader range of occupations and organizations" (Fiebig & Kramer, 1998, p. 537). This study seeks to identify patterns or themes in sensemaking about emotional experiences across a variety of organizations.

Phenomenology as Methodology

Hermeneutic phenomenology is distinct from other forms of phenomenology through its focus on interpretation (Van Manen, 1990). While some forms of phenomenology simply describe a phenomenon, hermeneutic phenomenologists attempt to interpret the phenomenon to create a clearer understanding of the human relationship with the phenomenon (Van Manen, 1990). In other words, hermeneutic phenomenology not only answers the question "what is the essence of the phenomenon?" but also attempts to answer the question "how is the phenomenon important to understanding human experience?" Phenomenological research is primarily a return to the root of philosophy: the search for wisdom (Creswell, 1997). Consequently, phenomenological practices require deep contemplation.

Van Manen (1990) articulates several important components of phenomenological research. First, "phenomenological research is the study of lived experience" (p. 9). We cannot isolate a phenomenon from its context and history. It is important to understand human experience as messy, inconsistent, and fantastically rich. Second, "phenomenological research is the explication of phenomena as they present themselves to consciousness" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 9). Unlike functionalism, phenomenological research is restricted to conscious experience because the unconscious cannot be experienced. Third, "phenomenological research is the study of essences" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 10). The essence of a phenomenon is that which makes it uniquely itself. Without the essential structures, the phenomenon could not exist as itself. Fourth "phenomenological research is the description of the experiential meanings we live as we live them" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 11). Van Manen suggests two important issues in this quotation. First, phenomenological research examines meanings and, second, phenomenological research examines meanings as they emerge within human experience. The act of talking about a subject is one means of experiencing and reexperiencing a phenomenon.

Fifth, "phenomenological research is the human scientific study of phenomena" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 11). In the past, some have argued that interpretive research is "soft" because it fails to provide a systematic means of studying human beings (Lindlof, 1995). However, phenomenology is a "systematic, explicit, self-critical, and intersubjective study of its subject matter, our lived experience" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 11). Phenomenology represents a human science because of the focus on the lived experiences of human beings while simultaneously emphasizing the rigorous nature (science) of phenomenology. Sixth, "phenomenological research is the attentive practice of thoughtfulness" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 12). To do a phenomenological study, it is necessary to think constantly, carefully, and deeply about the subject matter. Finally, "phenomenological research is a search for what it means to be human" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 12). By uncovering the essence of an experience, a researcher can begin to uncover what it means to be human, and in the process make us more fully human.

Methods

Interviews

Interviewers were instructed to interview two individuals, one male and one female, they did not know well.[1] All interviews were conducted using the same interview guide, although interviewers were encouraged to explore unexpected issues that arose during the interviews. This open-ended style of interview was chosen because of its focus on key issues and its allowance for probes into unexpected answers (Stewart & Cash, 1997). The interview guide asked each participant to relate two emotional experiences at work: An emotion experienced by themselves and an emotion they saw another experiencing at work [See appendix]. Initially 42 emotional experiences were related. Before analysis, interview transcripts were examined by the first author to determine if the interviewers had followed the study protocol. The data from two interviewers (representing four interviews and eight emotional experiences) were removed from the study because the primary investigator was not comfortable that the interviewers understood the interview process. All interviews were audio taped and transcribed by the interviewers. The transcriptions were then checked for accuracy by the second author prior to analysis.

After completing the initial analysis, the first author conducted two additional interviews as a check to ensure that phenomenological saturation was achieved. Phenomenological saturation is the point at which little new information is obtained from additional data collection (Creswell, 1997). While these interviews followed the same protocol as the previous interviews, the researcher also was able to use the initial thematic analysis as a guide for probing questions. These interviews served primarily to strengthen the existing analysis, increasing the authors' conviction that the themes presented in the present study are an appropriate interpretation of the participants' experiences. A total of 38 emotional experiences derived from 19 interviews, then, were used to arrive at the present analysis.

The participants

Nine men and 10 women were interviewed. Participants ranged in age from 21 to 70 with a mean age of 38. Organizational experience averaged 14 years. Participants had to be currently employed and have one or more years of full-time work experience. These constraints were imposed because it was believed that current employment status and experience with full-time work may influence perceptions of emotions in organizations through socialization processes and daily routines.

Data analysis

A thematic analysis was conducted. According to Van Manen (1990), thematic analysis "refers to the process of recovering the theme or themes that are embodied and dramatized in the evolving meanings and imagery of the work" (p. 78). Initially, emotional experiences were analyzed separately by both authors. Separate analyses served as a form of peer review, an accepted alternative to member checking when members are not available (Creswell, 1997). The second author began the data analysis process using the three phases suggested by Lindlof (1995). First, the data were physically reduced, which means to "sort, categorize, prioritize, and interrelate the data according to emerging schemes of interpretation" (Lindlof, 1995, p. 216). This was accomplished by reading through the data and making notations on sticky notes placed next to the data. The sticky notes were then categorized to create initial themes. The second part of reduction is more complex. The analyst develops a conceptual structure that emerges from the data. This can be problematic because "the analyst must be careful not to impose an external system on the data" (p. 217). Reduction was accomplished by rereading and color coding data that both supported and rejected the emerging themes. During the third phase, concepts are judged and either accepted, rejected, or modified as needed. The analyst then makes sense of the concepts within the context of the theory chosen for the analysis. It is important to remember that these steps are interrelated and occur simultaneously.

During the second phase of analysis, the first author read the second author's analysis and then began the process of reanalyzing the data. Using the second author's analysis to orient toward the data, the first author read the data and made numerous notations on the data. Notes about emerging themes were made on a separate piece of paper. The data was then reread and colored sticky notes were placed next to emerging themes. Counter-data, or data that seemed to reject the themes was marked with a star. The first author then built on the second author's analysis by recategorizing and subcategorizing the findings. The second author concurred with the first author's development of the initial themes. The first author then conducted two additional interviews. The analysis was adjusted again after the last two interviews were conducted.

Verification

Verification serves as a standard of quality for qualitative research. Qualitative researchers should seek verification that their interpretations provide a good fit with their interview data (Creswell, 1997). Creswell recommends that at least two forms of verification be used for a study. For this study, two types of verification procedures were implemented. First, peer review was used, which Creswell (1997) defines as a person who "asks hard questions about methods, meanings, and interpretations" (p. 202). By analyzing the data separately, the authors were able to verify the presence of the emerging themes. Second, the two participants interviewed by the first author served as member checks. Both members concurred with the analysis in this paper.

Thematic Analysis

Two primary themes emerged during the data analysis: accepting the dichotomy and reinforcing the dichotomy. Each of these primary themes and related subthemes contributes to both an understanding of how the duality between rationality and emotionality is maintained within organizations and to the sensemaking processes triggered by emotional experiences at work. The emotional experiences recounted in this study capture a moment in the ongoing flow of the sensemaking process. Sensemaking came before the interviews and continued after, always influenced by the social constraints and enabling elements of the communication context. Because sensemaking never occurs in isolation of the social world, social norms and rules influence each of the following themes and strategies.

Disrupting/Enhancing Good Business Practice: Accepting the Dichotomy

For many, the workplace is an important source of human contact and relationships. Friendships and personal bonds characterize much of what is done at work, even though these bonds are not a "rational" product of the organization. Given these relational bonds and human complexity, the workplace is undoubtedly filled with multiple types of emotional experiences. However, as the following subthemes illustrate, a prevalent finding from this analysis is the tendency of participants to describe emotional experiences in which rational business practices were disrupted or enhanced. Fineman (2000b) argues that "organizations are often presented as rational enterprises. Because human beings are able to think and act rationally to maximize their gains, organizations can capitalize on this capacity to efficiently and economically produce their goods and services" (p. 10). Consistent with this position, these participants focused on disruptions of business practices they perceived impacting the efficient production of goods and services.

Sensemaking occurs when there is a disruption or shock to the system. For these participants, emotions provided the disruption necessary for sensemaking to occur. However, participants tended to extract cues from their emotional encounters that focused on rational business practices. In so doing, the myth of rationality was supported in surprising and unexpected ways. By subordinating emotionality to rational business practices, these participants supported the dichotomy privileging rationality over emotionality. This theme was so strong that of the 38 emotional experiences related by the participants, 36 were related to the disruption/enhancement of good business practices. Only on two occasions did participants instead describe strong emotions that were related to disruptions in interpersonal relationships at work.

While participants chose to talk primarily about emotions related to disruptions of good business practices, it is important to note that some participants also discussed emotions related to enhancing good business practices. Enhancing good business practices were those events that improved the performance of the organization. For example, one restaurant manager described a new process he created to withstand the pressures of the busiest day of the year. The success of that new process created feelings of pride. Although emotions related to enhancing good business practices were present, the bulk of the emotional experiences described by the participants were related to the disruption of good business practices. This focus on negative emotional experiences is not particularly surprising given that previous research has also found that negative emotions were more memorable for organizational members (Kitayama, 1996). Disruptions of good business practice were those events that were viewed as harming rational business performances. Although a number of disruptions to business practices were mentioned, the most frequently mentioned disruptions of good business practices were: wasting time, unfair work, improper work, and process disruption. These disruptions represent extracted cues that support rationality in the workplace. Each of these practices will be illustrated.

Wasted time

The first disruptive business practice that was associated with emotions at work was the extracted cue of wasting time. It is not particularly surprising that participants would extract time as a cue for sensemaking given that "time" has become an important metaphor for good business practice in the United States. For example, "time is money," deadlines, time clocks, working lunches, and real-time business are all common business phrases that illustrate the time sensitive nature of good business in the United States. Not surprisingly then, the participants frequently described emotions triggered by wasting time:

> It makes me disgusted because I have to spend three times as much time preparing their material to be shipped as I do with the people that I work with. (book binder)
>
> Their biggest complaint is the monumental waste of time. (public relations)
>
> Um, one emotion is that I don't have time to be bothered by this. I don't have time to sit around and chat about the next person because I just struggle just to get half of my work done in a day. (information specialist)

These participants recalled emotions that were triggered by time-wasting behaviors. One male salesperson illustrated this subtheme. When asked to describe an emotional experience at work he described a meeting with his sales manager who he perceived as wasting his time:

> [The meetings] Seemed like a good idea, but as a sales manager, you'd think that he would format the meeting and have some things to go over. We had, I think three of those meetings . . . and the first time we talked for an hour and all he did was tell us about what was going on with his love life and then we went and played golf. And the second time . . . he called the day before the meeting and asked [coworker] if she would lead the meeting . . . you know it's frustrating to have . . . to have him call these meetings—pull us away from our normal activities, our duties, our responsibilities in our territory and what not, and then he has absolutely nothing of value to do. Except waste our time.

This participant's expectations regarding work relationships were clearly violated by his manager. The meetings described were viewed as a waste of time because salespeople need to be in the field to make money. Because the manager violated good business practices related to time, the sales manager created tension and frustration among his employees.

Similarly, one draftsperson felt that supervisory meetings created tension and were unproductive. Time was wasted on accusations, fighting, and uncontrolled emotions:

> I just wish that people would try and control themselves more at work. The reason I say that is I know in a lot of our superintendent meetings there's a lot of fighting that goes on and a lot of like . . . not so much yelling but a lot of you know, accusation type stuff. God, we could all save so much time, you know what I mean, if we would take a minute you know step back and come back later and go, "You know that thing you said, the hell with you and I'll tell you why," you know?

This woman's experience is particularly interesting because time was wasted as a result of uncontrolled emotional expression. It is intriguing that this participant did not choose to focus on the emotional encounters that seemed to characterize these meetings. Instead she focused on "saving time" and recommended ways to achieve emotional efficiency so that good business practices would not be disrupted, a clear illustration of these participants' tendency to accept the emotionality/rationality duality by orienting their sensemaking to those emotions linked to rational business practices. This practice is consistent with Weick's (1995) claim that sensemaking will be highly constrained by expectations and past experiences in organizations.

References to wasting time seemed to be a form of shorthand for these participants, allowing them to express complex human emotions in simple, yet rational, terms. From a sensemaking perspective, time appears to be an extracted cue that can be used to confirm what individuals already believe to be true (Weick, 1995)—that organizations are essentially rational environments.

Unfair business practices

The second disruption of good business practice associated with emotions was the extracted cue of unfair business practices. Participants believed that organizations should be fair and equitable institutions. Consequently, unfair business practices were frequently mentioned as sources of emotional experiences. For example, one individual indicated that having a waitress working too many tables when the restaurant was understaffed was unfair but unavoidable, revealing a preserved expectation of fair treatment despite recognition that understaffing does occur. A retail sales associate mentioned how unfair it was that college students were being hired for the same amount of pay she was receiving after being with the company for 21 years.

> It does not feel fair that they [college students] can come in and talk on the phone at night, discuss their dates, picture shows, things like that and not have anyone around to tell them "you should be folding clothes."

This participant clearly believes it is unfair that college students receive less supervision at work than she does. Unfair work distribution, supervision, and "teacher's pets" were all mentioned as unfair work practices. Other types of unfair labor practices included nepotism and sexism. For example, an office manager described nepotism in her office as a major source of emotional tension:

> The bottom line is the guy has a son that uh, will never be able to work on his own. So he's quote "a business manager"—in other words he draws a large salary, that people that have worked with this doctor for 22 years do not get, strictly because he is the boss's son. He doesn't really do anything.

This participant was disturbed because the boss's son did not do work and still drew a substantial salary. Given a rational business orientation toward pay as a reward for workplace production, this nepotistic practice was viewed as unfair and as a trigger of reasonable workplace emotions.

Nepotism is certainly a difficult and problematic situation but equally distressing are sexist issues:

> He had a big problem with me because I was young and I was a woman. And I can't help but wonder if he doesn't have the same problem with the guy we hired. He's young and he's black. (drafts person)

> One of my best friends who no longer works there who is about 15 years younger than I am, was absolutely beautiful and behind her back, they referred to her as Marilyn Goodbody. Um we have maybe 5 women officers to 45 men officers. I,

> I think that indicates something. I think the smartest woman, the smartest person in the company is a woman officer and um in my way of thinking she should be the next president, but that will not happen. (manager of corporate communication)

While female participants typically articulated sexism as a problem, one male nurse also experienced sexism from women in his organization. For these participants, sexism created unexpected workplace disruptions, despite the fact that most reported prior experiences of sexism at work. One woman manager of corporate communication illustrated this process when she described the anger a female colleague experienced when the men in her office took their work-related issues to a man rather than to her, even though it was in her area of responsibility:

> It was a situation when, uh, a woman officer who works in the company and, um, she works with very difficult personalities and she's worked with them for years and in this case, it was, it was something that happens to her on a relatively regular basis where even though it's in her, her area of responsibility, they will go to somebody else, simply because she is a woman, he's a man, and they would rather go to the man, and she became very angry over this, um, justifiably so.

This woman argued that because of their sexism, the men in this story violated the chain of command, creating anger for the woman who was the focus of this sexist practice. Following the proper chain of command is viewed as an important indicator of good business practice in Western organizations.

Despite the long history of discrimination and irrational behavior that characterizes business practices in the United States (Trethewey & Ashcraft, 2004), not surprisingly there continued to be an expectation of fairness in good business practices by these participants. When expectations of fairness were violated, these participants experienced strong emotional reactions. In the United States, the myth of rationality (Fineman, 1996) has created the expectation that businesses will be rational with a primary focus on production. Simultaneously, in the United States, in opposition to the myth of rationality, businesses are known to use unfair business practices that may be harmful to production. In this study, participants used both sets of expectations as extracted cues when making sense of their experiences.

Improper work

The third disruption of good business practice associated with emotions was the extracted cue of improper work. Improper work by colleagues and other business associates tended to inspire discussions of strong emotions by the participants.

> It's just . . . you know, [I] let him know that I had a nice hit [sale]. And, he you know, for lack of a better term, he [manager] just pissed on the whole thing. I said, "well, okay then—I'l1 do it [sale] anyway." (sales person)

> It was very stressful . . . She would have been an excellent teacher of hygiene, I mean she could have taught hygienists, but she just wasn't good at, at what she was doing. (dentist office manager)

Improper work often created more work for the participants or it threatened the integrity of the business. Improper work could be the product of improper training, inadequate skills, or a lack of care. One woman sales associate at a retail store illustrates this experience:

> When I came into work on a Saturday morning after being off Thursday and Friday and merchandise was just piled high on my register counter where I generally work that should have been taken care of the night before, but some part-time kid did not do it. I was both angry at them for not doing it and management for not making the part-timers do their full share.

Similarly, a male sales manager described an employee who used improper writing etiquette in a letter to a customer:

> *Manager*: Um, a lot of people I'm working with are not familiar with the proper way to write a letter . . . Last week I was approving a letter that was going to be sent out, umm, they had the customer's name and some of the information in bold. Umm, well, I was telling him that that's similar to screaming at somebody over the telephone, umm, and he just thought that was ridiculous and had never heard that before. Umm, so we got in a discussion about it but basically I made him redo the letter.
>
> *Interviewer:* Describe the emotions you experienced.
>
> *Manager:* I think I experienced a little bit of disgust that he didn't care. . .I suppose I felt, I guess a little angry.

It was the improper work by colleagues that served as the extracted cue for these participants when describing strong emotions at work. The emotions discussed by these participants were about work that was not being done properly. This form of extracted cue is not surprising given that when "working," people do "work." Clearly these individuals chose to discuss the emotions that arose when the rational business practice of work was violated.

Process disruption

The fourth disruption of good business practice associated with emotions was the extracted cue of process disruption. Process disruption occurs when others disrupt a business process that the employee deems to be rational and goal oriented. This disrupted process was generally presented as a rational means of organizing and the emotions generated as a logical and rational consequence of that disruption:

> It hurts because they're [parents] more into what they're doing rather than how it's affecting their children and that tends to really upset me, for the fact that my job is to get everything back in order rather than constantly redirect the parent to not talk about the situation during the visit [with their children]. (social worker)

> I was also angry and frustrated. Because I had told him what we needed to do, you know I explained the whole thing when we listed it [property for sale], but it's like he expected me to do—either that or he wasn't listening to what I told him needed to be done. Or he expected something that I was not willing to do. (realtor)

Process disruption is characterized by an unwanted interruption in business activities. Participants in this study had a strong sense of what they were supposed "to do" for their job and became quite upset when that process was disrupted. For example, when asked to describe a recent situation where a coworker felt strong emotions, one male credit manager described an emotional experience by his boss that paralleled his own emotional experience at work. Customers who quit paying their bills inspired the emotions. The employees were then forced to take legal action:

> One situation that comes to my mind is, it involves my manager. It was a deal where we had a mortgage for our customer, and for some reason, the customer stopped making their payments. He [manager] went through basically the same process that I described earlier [referencing his own emotional experience]. My manager warned the customer of the consequences of not paying, and after many repeated attempts to collect the account he was forced to foreclose on the home. Now I don't know a lot of the details because he handled the majority of the case, but I know that it was a very long, drawn out process that took over, over a year and a half to clear up all the details.

This individual later explained that the process his manager was forced to take was a disruptive business practice because:

> We are in the business of lending money, not suing people or taking their homes, you know, because this is a big hassle and we waste our time on things like this when we could be doing more productive, um, business development activities.

The acceptance of the rationality/emotionality duality is readily apparent when the participant explains that they are not in the business of "suing people or taking their homes." Here he had the opportunity to discuss the emotional trauma of leaving people homeless. Notice instead how this participant described taking homes as "a big hassle" and as a waste of time because it prevented employees from engaging in "more productive" business processes. Not only does this man's experience support the previously mentioned subtheme of wasting time, but it also illustrates the significance of process disruption as an extracted cue during sensemaking. Clearly, for this participant the experience of strong negative emotions was a rational response to the disruption of rational business processes. Having to engage in unproductive business processes was a disruption of the function of the business and warranted an emotional reaction. By focusing on those emotions linked to "rational" business processes, these participants reified the importance of those processes.

Theme summary

According to Weick (1995), sensemaking is likely to occur in the face of disruptions to organizing processes. The present theme suggests that sensemaking about emotions at work tends to focus on a particular type of disruption—disruptions of good business practices. In the present analysis, those disruptions occurred in the form of wasting time, unfair business practices, improper work, and process disruptions. It is important to note that enhancement of good business practices also occasionally triggered sensemaking about emotions at work. Consequently, Weick's notion of disruptions of organizing processes could be interpreted as either positive or negative events. These participants made sense of their emotions in such a way that they supported the myth of rationality—not by claiming that emotions were inappropriate in organizations, but by subordinating emotions in the workplace to rationality. In this way rationality was privileged over emotionality in these participants' sensemaking about emotions at work.

Controlling Emotions in the Workplace: Reinforcing the Dichotomy

One interesting finding of this study was the carefully controlled emotion work accomplished by these participants. As mentioned in the literature review, emotion work occurs when the individual controls the emotional display. Of particular interest to the present analysis were the strategies participants used to maintain emotional control. As will become clear in the following analysis, these control strategies reinforced the rationality/emotionality duality guiding individuals in the workplace. From a sensemaking perspective, these strategies provide insight into extracted cues. First, they suggest various ways in which cues can be extracted for sensemaking. Second, these strategies suggest ways in which cues are deselected for sensemaking. This deselection process provides an important contribution to sensemaking theory by demonstrating how organizational members actively choose not to attend to a given cue. Thus the process of deselecting cues is understood as an active component of extracted cues. By deselecting emotions as extracted cues, these participants were able to adhere to social norms of organizational rationality. It was through the joint processes of deselecting and extracting cues that these participants sensemaking supported rationality over emotionality. A number of communication strategies were used but the most frequently cited strategies included denial, reframing, rational recitation, and time and place. Each of these will be discussed.

Denial

Denial is defined as not admitting that an emotion was experienced. These participants enacted the rationality/emotionality duality by telling an emotional story and then denying it was emotional. In this way, participants actively deselected emotions as cues available for extraction. This strategy created a means of limiting sensemaking and allowed for nonreflective behavior. What was fascinating about this process was that these participants clearly knew at one level that their experiences were emotional since they were specifically addressing questions that asked them to relate an emotional experience. Simultaneously, however, these individuals denied that the experience was emotional. They were able to acknowledge a disruption in the system but were able to limit sensemaking by simultaneously denying the emotions clearly associated with the disruption. When one man, a bookbinder, was asked to relate an emotional experience at work he first claimed that it was difficult to identify emotional experiences because of the general incompetence on the part of his colleagues. He then claimed that "when I work with the people on my shift that I work with they they um seem to have the idea that it's easier to do it right than to have me scream at 'em and uh because I'm the only one I guess around there that screams at people anymore." He then suggested that emotions did not play a role in his work:

> It doesn't make me feel anything . . . That person did a poor, uh, job of binding, did not cut 'em apart, they gave 'em to another clown to go ahead and trim 'em. And he messed 'em all up. Okay. It doesn't make me feel anything, I'm sorry for the company, I'm sorry for the poor sick people that keep on working that way, some

> of 'em been there 10, 12 years. That's longer than I've been there, and they don't have to work that way. They do it because they don't care.

The man clearly experienced strong emotions related to other workers' incompetence, but he carefully controlled his emotions by simply denying that he experienced emotions at work. In fact, this man denied experiencing emotions at work on five separate occasions. A general manager of a restaurant also denied experiencing emotions at work. In this instance he was confronted by a customer who felt that the server had made a racial slur by asking the black customer and her white date if they wanted separate tickets. The general manager tried to explain the policy and then gave up and gave the customer a complimentary meal:

> *Interviewer:* What were your emotions during that?
>
> *General Manager:* None. I wanted to hear what the problem was. See, uh, how significant the problem was. Umm. I never felt that I lost control of the situation. Umm, my blood pressure didn't rise or anything like that.

Again, this participant told a story about an emotional incident and then denied that it was emotional. Interestingly, he supports his position that he did not experience emotions by indicating that he never lost control.

The use of alternative language to suggest emotions is intriguing. In the first example, the book binder called his coworkers "clowns" and claimed that they were "sick" at the same time that he claimed to experience no emotions. Similarly, after describing an emotional event in which her boss rejected a project that had taken many hours to complete, one corporate communication manager claimed that she did not experience strong emotions. She just felt weary and tired:

> No, I'm 58. I don't [experience emotions]. Um most women worry—and I would have maybe 10 or 15 years ago. Um, I'm not so emotionally distraught over things like this anymore. I just get weary and tired more.

By using alternative language, such as "weary and tired" these participants were able to deselect emotions as available for sensemaking while making available alternative language as extracted cues about sensemaking.

Denial as a means of maintaining the rationality/emotionality dichotomy was particularly interesting from a sensemaking perspective. These participants deselected their emotions by claiming they did not experience any emotions. By failing to acknowledge their emotions, these individuals were able to avoid sensemaking about their emotions.

Reframing

A second strategy that participants used to control their emotions was reframing the event in such a way that emotions were not an appropriate response:

> I need to remember that it's not, it's not a personal thing. It's the job. It's never aimed at you personally. And I think if people can keep that in perspective, you know, it will help you a lot—if you're sane. And especially for someone who, especially for someone like me who gets hurt easily. (office manager)

Like with denial, the reframing strategy allowed the participants to extract some cues and deselect others in such a way that sensemaking about emotions becomes limited. In reframing, emotions are extracted as cues for sensemaking. However, emotions are constructed as impersonal—"it's never aimed at you personally." In this way emotions as personal are deselected as cues for sensemaking.

This process is further illustrated by one male bank manager who used the following strategies to reframe other's emotions so that he could better control his own emotional display:

> I guess what's important, well, when somebody is expressing emotions toward you in a professional setting and you have to ask yourself A) are they mad at you, are they mad at the situation, are they mad at the institution? More, more times than not they are not mad directly at you. Most the time they are not. So you need to have empathy, you need to, even if it does upset you. You know when somebody is calling you a failure, maybe they just need to vent. They may not mean it personally and you need to somehow step away from that, step aside and not let it, even if it does get to you. You need to at least not show it. And then deal with it after they are gone. Because it won't do anybody any good to turn around and let them have it back.

This individual contextualized the reframing within a "professional context," suggesting that this strategy has limited application and is bound by the unspoken rules of professionalism. The reframing strategy clearly humanized the emotional individual and then depersonalized the emotions so that the bank manager could better control his emotional display. In this way the rationality/emotionality dichotomy was reinforced. By depersonalizing emotions, these participants supported the myth of rationality, arguing that emotional experiences interfere with rational work processes.

Rational recitation

Similar to the findings of Fiebig and Kramer (1998), some individuals, particularly the men, tended to discuss emotions in a rationalized way. These participants did not deny that they experienced emotions, but instead they discussed those experiences in such a clinical and rational way that the emotional experience seemed to be almost emotionless. In fact, outside of the context of the interview and the specific question being asked, it would be difficult to identify these experiences as emotional. For example, one male restaurant manager who was accused of racism toward a customer recited his experience in this way:

> Ok I got a good one, um, a guest walked in with his, um, girlfriend, wife, I don't know. The wife went to the women's restroom and he stood off to the side waiting for her. I came up to the desk and said "hello" to him and he said "hello" back, um, still waiting for his wife. Another couple came in, uh, came to the front desk while his wife was coming up to him, they said "two for non-smoking" and I took them in. The next thing you know this guy is coming saying that I'm racial because I didn't seat him first when they walked ahead of him and I said "I apologize, you know, that I didn't take you in but they walked right [in] while you were around the corner." He said, "no, it's a racial thing" then he walked out and then he came

> back in and wanted the number to the corporate office. I said "I would be glad to seat you" he said "I wouldn't eat here," whatever.

Weick's (1995) property of enactment informs our understanding of rational recitation. Emotions are clearly extracted cues for sensemaking. However, these individuals enacted the rationality/emotionality dichotomy by relating emotions in an unemotional way. While this individual specifically indicated that this was a negatively valenced event that inspired negative emotions, it would be difficult to identify this as an emotional event outside of the context of this interview. This individual simply recited the facts of the incident without the addition of emotional language or tones. Through a rational recitation this man was able to retain his professional identity in light of an emotional experience at work. He used a rational recitation to minimize the appearance of emotions experienced at work, thus reinforcing the rationality/emotional duality in a surprising way. Interestingly, during rational recitation, the myth of rationality is simultaneously accepted and challenged. By acknowledging that they were experiencing emotions, these participants verbally constructed a role for emotions at work. However, by reciting their emotional experiences in such emotionless ways, these participants nonverbally enacted an environment devoid of emotional displays.

Time & place

Participants also reinforced the dichotomy between rationality and emotionality by dividing their emotional displays into appropriate times and places. In clear support of the myth of rationality (Fineman, 1996), these participants extracted cues in such a way that emotional expression was deemed appropriate only if it was privately displayed. For example, one minister articulated the social rule against men's expression of emotions, stipulating that there is a time and a place for men's emotional displays:

> We are expected in our society to behave in certain ways, uh, at certain times.... Guys aren't expected to cry, aren't supposed to cry, um, we wouldn't want guys crying all the time, but there's certainly appropriate times to express tears or emotion.

Similarly, a draftsperson declined to show her rage toward her boss when he undermined her in public because:

> *Draftsperson:* I really believe in a professional situation in any kind of job, you don't ever want to let your emotions get the best of you if you can help it, you know.
> *Interviewer:* But in this situation...
> *Draftsperson:* Right, they did get the best of me, but not in public.

A real estate assessor who discovered at a department meeting that she was not selected for a new position explained that while disappointed, she not only felt there was a more appropriate place to be told, she also recognized it was not the time or place for her to react:

> *Interviewer:* How exactly did you react and act after the fact?
> *Real estate assessor:* Well, um, everybody found out who was going umm and

> who wasn't going at a whole department meeting so it wasn't exactly the right time or place to have any kind of reaction but umm, after that ya' know I guess I just tried to come to my own conclusion as to the people they chose and the people they didn't choose.

This participant used time and place to segment her emotional display. It was clear that, for this participant, emotions should not be displayed in a public place. Participants who used the time and place strategy were able to reinforce the rationality/emotionality dichotomy in the workplace by privatizing emotions, stipulating that emotional displays were inappropriate in a public setting. In this way, the myth of rationality was clearly enforced.

Theme summary

According to Weick (1995), sensemaking is always social and ongoing. Sensemaking about emotions by these participants suggests that organizational members pull from social norms when making sense of emotional experiences at work. Denial, reframing, rational recitation, and time and place all allowed the participants to enact social norms privileging rationality over emotionality. Given that the interviews for this study were conducted away from the workplace and with people the participants did not work with, social work norms clearly continued to be enacted outside of organizational boundaries. It seems likely, then, that organizational rules and norms are infused within the U.S. culture and enacted both inside and outside of organizational settings.

Discussion and Conclusion

The English language is replete with dualistic language pitting one concept against another (Cirksena & Cuklanz, 1992). One commonly accepted duality in organizations is between rationality and emotionality in which rationality is the privileged term. Rationality is considered to be the desired process in organizations in which members are controlled, efficient, goal oriented, and strategic. Organizations become weak and irrational when emotions cloud judgment and members show passion or develop caring relationships. This rationality/emotionality duality, however, represents a false dichotomy given that organizational members are human beings whose life worlds and experiences are filled with emotions. The goal of the present study was to understand how organizational members manage the rationality/emotionality duality in the workplace. Two research questions were addressed.

Research question one asked how organizational members make sense of emotional experiences at work in light of organizational norms of rationality. It is clear that organizational members support the rationality/emotionality duality in diverse and interesting ways. By focusing only on emotions related to the disruption of rational business practices and by controlling their emotions through the use of various strategies, these participants both accepted and reinforced the duality. Of particular interest was the use of two concurrent processes that allowed participants to privilege rationality over emotionality. Through the use of extracted cues participants were able to orient toward socially accepted norms of rationality. Through the process of deselecting cues, participants were able to orient away from the socially unacceptable experience of strong emotions at work. Each will be discussed. Extracted cues for sensemaking about emotions centered around the disruption of good business practices. It was intriguing that participants primarily recalled emotions that occurred when business was disrupted. The authors expected that they would find more interpersonal conflict listed as the cause of emotional experiences. However, emotions related to interpersonal relationships were only mentioned twice within the 38 emotional experiences described by these participants. Instead, participants recalled emotions that occurred when their work was disrupted. In this way, then, the participants were able to make rational sense of their emotions.

The second process used to make sense of emotions at work is the deselection of cues. Not only did participants extract rational cues for sensemaking, but they deselected emotions as cues for sensemaking by denying emotions, reframing emotions, rationally reciting emotional experiences, and by segmenting emotions to a proper time and place. In this way participants used various strategies to support norms of rationality in the face of emotional experiences at work.

The second research question explored how, if at all, system disruptions inspire sensemaking during interviews about the experience and expressions of emotions in organizations. These participants recalled emotional experiences most readily when their expectations of good business practices were violated. This disruption in organizing practices provides the necessary precondition for sensemaking to occur (Weick, 1995). In some instances, such as wasting time and improper work, these disruptions seemed to be a form of shorthand that allowed participants to express emotions in simple yet rational terms. In other instances, such as unfair business practices, emotional expression was much more complex. Here participants extracted competing cues of rational and irrational workplaces. None of the participants seemed surprised that unfair workplace practices occurred. They did seem surprised—and outraged, however—when these practices happened to them or someone they knew.

Not only is it interesting to understand what disruptions occur, but it is also important to understand how disruptions bend sensemaking in a particular direction. In this study, participants "bent" the disruptions through denial, reframing, rational recitation, and time and place such that disruptions centered on emotional experiences adhered to norms of rationality. By telling emotional stories and then rationalizing those stories in some way, these participants bent or framed their emotions in very rationalized ways.

These findings contribute to our understanding of organizational sensemaking. First, the prevalence of the rationality/emotionality dichotomy in the workplace provides the historical context within which sensemaking about emotions must occur (Weick, 1995). In this study, individuals extracted cues for sensemaking based on the historical expectations of a rational organization. Consequently, when telling stories about emotional experiences at work, these participants tended to extract cues that were related to *rational* business practices instead of extracting cues related to interpersonal and group relationships.

Not only does sensemaking inform this study, but this study also informs a scholarly understanding of sensemaking. The most significant contribution is to the notion of extracted cues. In essence, extracting cues involves two concurrent and intertwined processes. Specifically, extracting cues involves both the selection and deselection of cues. Historically scholars have focused on how cues are selected or extracted, leaving the deselection process fairly unaccounted for. This study suggests that deselection is a highly active process in which certain cues are carefully avoided, such as through denial, leaving them unavailable for extraction and the subsequent related sensemaking.

Future research should explore the relationship between rationality and emotionality in situ. The current study asked organizational members to discuss their emotions outside of their workplace, after the emotional experience occurred. Given the ongoing nature of sensemaking, it is likely that the stories told for this study represent refined versions of the sensemaking process that have been revised and smoothed over time. It would be interesting to capture a more raw and immediate version of the sensemaking process by observing organizational members experiencing emotions in the workplace.

Emotions are obviously everyday occurrences and present in the workplace. Furthermore, it is clear that organizational members have adapted to the complex constraints and needs of organizations. Consequently, it is important that these adaptive practices not be unilaterally changed or critiqued in the name of creating a more human organizational experience. Emotional control does serve an important function in organizations. Consider some of the more explosive forms of emotional expression in recent years. Organizational violence in the United States has destroyed numerous lives and even has its own name based on a wave of workplace violence at the U.S. Postal Service: "going postal." Of course, this extreme form of emotional expression may well be the consequence of excessive emotion control in organizations where there is limited opportunity for healthy emotional expression. Organizational members need to be cognizant of the complex and necessary role emotions play in organizational contexts. As previously discussed, Fineman (1996) suggested three approaches to the myth of rationality, while a review of the literature revealed a fourth approach. However, it is our opinion that all of these approaches, simultaneously, conflictually, and irrationally, operate in organizations. Ironically, organizational members would be far successful at producing rational outcomes if they spent less time and effort trying to shove their emotions into rational norms—this can only happen if the duality is closed and organizations are recognized as both emotional and rational locations for sensemaking.

Note

[1] Similar to other qualitative research studies (Baxter 1990, 1992; Sias & Cahill, 1998), the present study used face-to-face, open-ended interviews conducted by upper division undergraduate students. The undergraduate interviewers were enrolled in an upper division research methods course. The course provided an intensive overview of the theory and

practice of qualitative interviews. Readings included an overview of the philosophy of qualitative research, qualitative interviewing texts, and research papers that used qualitative interviews. Each of the individuals who conducted interviews for this study demonstrated an understanding of qualitative interviews. Interviewers then faced extensive training on how to conduct a qualitative interview. The interviewers first read transcripts from the first author's previous interview studies and discussed the content of the transcripts and the researcher's role in the construction of that content. Interviewers then used the interview guide (appendix) to interview a classmate and then were interviewed themselves. The role of the interviewer and interviewee were then discussed including a discussion about probing questions and the role of an interview guide. Students then repeated the process and once again questions were answered. Those students selected to interview for this study demonstrated a basic understanding of the qualitative interview process. Each interviewer then conducted and transcribed one interview for this study, after which the students once again discussed the interview process. These interviewers once again demonstrated an understanding of the interview process. The second interview was then conducted and transcribed.

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Appendix

Interview Guide

1. Tell me about what you do for your job.
2. Think about a specific recent situation when you experienced strong emotions at work. Describe the situation to me.
   - Describe the emotions that you experienced.
   - Tell me about the actions that you took.
   - Describe your thoughts during this experience.

3. Think about a recent situation when you observed another person experiencing strong emotions at work. Describe the situation to me.
   - Describe the emotions that person experienced.
   - What did that person do?
   - What actions did you take?
4. Would you describe these experiences as positive or negative?
5. Please reflect on why you focused on these situations.
6. Is there anything else you would like to add or emphasize that might help me understand when people experience strong emotions at work?