Making Sense of Myself: Exploring the Relationship between Identity and Sensemaking

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Abstract and Keywords

A considerable body of work uses a sensemaking lens to understand identity processes in organizations. From this perspective, identities are constructed and maintained as individuals attend to, bracket, and draw on cues to enact meanings about who they are. At the same time, however, theories of identity have also been called upon to explain sensemaking. This is not surprising, since sensemaking is grounded in identity construction. As such, the two literatures have multiple, sometimes complicated, points of intersection. In this chapter, the authors explore the complex relationship between identity and sensemaking. They begin by articulating the assumptions that a sensemaking lens brings to identity. Next, they detail several ways in which the relationship between identity and sensemaking has been described in the existing literature. Then, they propose an understanding of the relationship between identity and sensemaking that integrates and extends previous research. The authors conclude by suggesting avenues for future research focused on the interplay between identity and sensemaking.

Keywords: identity, sensemaking, identity work, identification, organizations

Introduction

MANY scholars utilize a sensemaking lens to understand identity and identity processes in organizations. Unlike other frameworks that scholars draw upon to understand identity (Stryker and Serpe, 1982; Tajfel and Turner, 1979), sensemaking is not aimed specifically at articulating identity processes. Nevertheless, the literatures on sensemaking (p. 245) and identity intersect in a variety of ways. The exact relationship between sensemaking and identity, however, is not always clear. In fact, some researchers equate identity processes and sensemaking, using the terms interchangeably. For example, Kohonen (2005: 31) refers to ‘sensemaking (or identity construction)’, Conroy and O’Leary-Kelly (2014) use the term ‘identity sensemaking’, and Moore and Koning (2016: 41) state that they see ‘identity work as a process of sensemaking’. In this chapter, we explore the liter-

ature at the intersection of identity and sensemaking, seeking to gain greater clarity about the relationship between the two, and help pave the way for future exploration in this subfield.

We begin by overviewing what a sensemaking perspective implies for our understanding of identity in organizations. Then, based on a review of scholarly work that explicitly addresses individual identity[1] and sensemaking, we articulate four ways of thinking about the relationship between sensemaking and identity. Building on these insights, we ultimately argue for an integrative approach that conceptualizes identity and sensemaking as two interwoven, recursive processes. We conclude by articulating some ways in which the relationship between identity and sensemaking can be further developed, both theoretically and empirically, in future research.

A Sensemaking Perspective on Identity: Definitions and Assumptions

Both identity and sensemaking have been conceptualized in a multitude of ways. Here, we draw from recent reviews of these literatures (e.g. Ashforth et al., 2008; Brown, 2015, 2017; Caza et al., 2018b; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014) to provide a definitional foundation for exploring the relationship between sensemaking and identity.

Identity

Identity refers to individuals' answers to the questions 'Who am I?' and 'Who are we?' (Ashforth et al., 2008: 327) and can encompass collective memberships (Ashforth and Mael, 1989), interpersonal relationships (Ashforth et al., 2016; Sluss and Ashforth, 2007), roles (Stryker and Serpe, 1982) as well as personal attributes (Brewer and Gardner, 1996). Importantly, individuals do not have a single, monolithic identity; rather, they have multiple identities which may be more or less salient (Stryker and Serpe, 1994).

Organizational scholars' study of identity falls into several clusters. Here, we briefly review those that have also been included in studies of sensemaking. First, studies of identity are often concerned with identification, or the degree to which individuals define themselves in terms of a particular target, often their organization or a group within that organization (Mael and Ashforth, 1992). In this work, the emphasis is on the degree to which individuals do or do not include a specific target in their representation of self (e.g. Bergami and Bagozzi, 2000). Second, research has explored identity motives, or what drives individuals to identify or not identify with particular targets. While scholars have identified (p. 246) several different motives for identification, including needs for affiliation/belongingness, and uncertainty (Ashforth and Schinoff, 2016; Hogg and Mullin, 1999; Wiesenfeld et al., 2001), the self-enhancing benefits of identification have received the most attention (Dutton and Dukerich, 1991; Smidts et al., 2001). Third, other research has taken a more process-oriented view of identity, conceptualizing it as continually in flux, or as flow (Gioia and Patvardhan, 2012; Hatch and Schultz, 2002) and examined

questions relating to identity stability and change over time. Important in this line of research is the constitutive process of 'identity work'—the cognitive, discursive, physical, and behavioural activities that individuals engage in to create, repair, maintain, and revise identities (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Brown, 2015; Caza et al., 2018b; Snow and Anderson, 1987). While identity can be thought of as one's understanding of oneself, identity work turns our attention to processes through which this understanding is formed, maintained, or changed over time. Below, we elaborate on how each of these identity-focused constructs have been implicated in the research on sensemaking.

Sensemaking

Sensemaking is the process through which individuals make meaning of novel, unexpected, or equivocal experiences (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1995). It is prompted by situations such as unexpected setbacks (Vough and Caza, 2017) or ambiguous or uncertain events (Louis, 1980; Weick, 1995) that lead people to ask 'What's the story here?' (Weick et al., 2005). It is the process through which individuals in organizations 'translate data into knowledge and understanding about the environment' (Weick, 2001: 251). Sensemaking ensues as individuals craft explanations by extracting cues from the environment which they use to organize a plausible account (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Weick et al., 2005). Importantly, sensemaking is not simply a cognitive process, occurring within the minds of individuals. People make sense of a situation by acting and assessing the consequences of their actions, and engaging in a range of social practices (Gephart, 1993; Maitlis, 2005; Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). Through these actions and interactions, sensemakers inevitably change the world that they are working to understand. Hence, a key feature of sensemaking is enactment, or 'the process in which organization members create a stream of events that they pay attention to' (Orton, 2000: 231), producing opportunities and constraints that did not previously exist (Weick, 1988). This is what distinguishes sensemaking from interpretation.

A sensemaking perspective has four clear implications for the study of identity. First, sensemaking brings a constructionist lens to identity, seeing the sensemaker as 'an ongoing puzzle undergoing continual redefinition' (Weick, 1995: 20). Thus, the self is the fundamental target of sensemaking: an equivocal problem being defined and redefined through interaction with others. Identity is produced through talk and action, and its legitimacy is negotiated as individuals work out, in different social contexts, who they can be. From this perspective, identity is dynamic, mutable, and evolving. As a result, the aim of sensemaking-based identity research is often to explore the various identity work processes involved in the construction, maintenance, and change of identities (Brown et al., 2008; Ibarra, 1999; Ybema et al., 2009).

(p. 247) Second, in contrast to several other approaches (see Caza et al., 2018b), sensemaking tends not to privilege a particular source of identity. In fact, sensemaking has been used to explore a whole range of individual identity types including leader identities (Kohonen, 2005), personal identities (Koerner, 2014), organization-based identities (Pratt, 2000), and occupational identities (Ashforth et al., 2007). Combined with the construc-

tionist stance of sensemaking, this breadth around identity source highlights the processes underlying identity, rather than the content of identities.

Third, sensemaking implicates the behavioural component of identity. Here, the self is considered a work in progress, extracting cues from a continually enacted environment. As Weick (1995: 23) observes, 'People learn about their identities by projecting them into an environment and observing the consequences.' In other words, people define themselves based on their interpretations of what happens as they act in the world. These actions and interpretations are, in turn, shaped by their self-definitions. Enactment and recursivity are thus important features of a sensemaking perspective to the study of identity.

Finally, this perspective emphasizes the construction and use of plausible and coherent stories. As individuals make sense of their experiences, they put order to those experiences through the creation of a narrative that can reasonably explain the events (Weick, 1995: Weick et al., 2005). Sensemakers do not settle for any explanation, but instead strive to construct coherent, continuous narratives of who they are, developing accounts of their lives that are the sensible result of a series of related events or cohesive themes (Gergen, 1994). From this perspective, identity is understood as narrative in form (Ashforth and Schinoff, 2016; Maitlis, 2009; Ravasi and Schultz, 2006). Such identity narratives, shaped by shared expectations and cultural norms (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010), provide a coherent understanding of who we were, who we are, and who we will become.

While, collectively, these ways of thinking about identity distinguish the sensemaking perspective from other common identity approaches such as social and role identity theories, some of these attributes also underpin much of the constructivist writing that has explored issues of identity over the last couple of decades. In particular, constructivist approaches also highlight the dynamic, narrative-based, and action-driven nature of identity (e.g. Brown and Coupland, 2015; Down and Reveley, 2009; Knights and Clarke, 2014; Linde, 1993; McAdams et al., 2001). In the remainder of this chapter, however, we draw on research that has explicitly combined sensemaking and identity in order to explore the relationship between the two.

The Relationship between Identity and Sensemaking

To understand better how identity and sensemaking are linked, we first searched for research that included both individual identity and sensemaking and then examined how the relationship between the two was conceptualized and depicted in each case. Through this process, we uncovered four ways of thinking about the relationship between sensemaking and identity, captured by the following questions: *How does identity impact sensemaking? How does sensemaking impact identity? What role does sensemaking play in identity* *(p. 248)* *processes? What role does identity play in sensemaking processes?* Figure 15.1 summarizes the core findings related to each question. A fundamental distinc-

tion between them is whether they view sensemaking and identity as separate or whether they view them as overlapping parts of a single process. Research tackling the first two questions tends to separate sensemaking and identity and address how one impacts the other. The second pair of questions assumes sensemaking and identity are component parts of one another; either sensemaking as an element of a larger identity process, or identity as a component of an overarching sensemaking process. Notably, across articles, the focal identity construct differs (e.g. identity, identity work, identity motives, or identification), and we attempt to be explicit about the focus of each work as we discuss it. Additionally, some papers we reviewed address the identity–sensemaking relationship in multiple ways. Thus, the inclusion of any one paper within a section of our framework should not imply that is the only approach taken by the authors. After we outline how authors have answered each of the questions, we then summarize the relationship between them, ultimately suggesting an integrated approach that we hope will form the basis for future research.

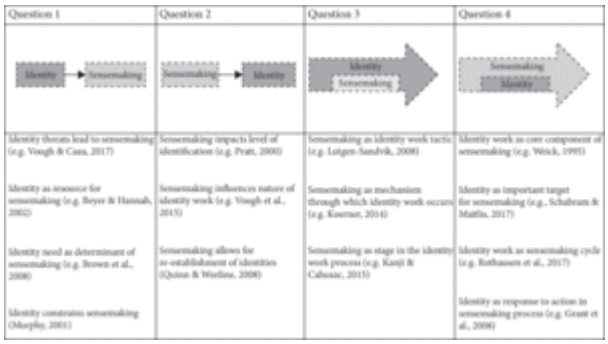

Figure 15.1 Four relationships between identity and sensemaking

Question 1: How Does Identity Impact Sensemaking?

Perhaps the most straightforward way scholars have examined the relationship between identity and sensemaking is by investigating when and how who we are affects how we make sense of events that we encounter. This work suggests that identity precedes and influences sensemaking. Cornelissen (2012: 134), for example, proposes that identity is one of the multiple determinants of how individuals make sense of events. From this perspective, identity can lead to and shape sensemaking in a variety of ways.

(p. 249) To begin, sensemaking can be triggered by threats to one's identity. Identity threat occurs when individuals experience the potential for harm to one or more of their identities (Petriglieri, 2011). For example, in their work on people engaged in 'dirty work', Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) suggest that sensemaking is likely to be particularly prominent, especially early on, as individuals face identity threats due to the disparaged nature of their work. Examining injured musicians, Maitlis (2009) further elaborated on the ways in which threat leads to sensemaking. She found that physiological trauma threatens musicians' identities, serving as a jolt that interrupts existing ways of thinking and behaving,

thereby triggering sensemaking. Yet, it is not only a threat to current identities that catalyses sensemaking. Theorizing about the impact of a failure in career advancement, Vough and Caza (2017) proposed that sensemaking is prompted when individuals' hoped-for future selves are threatened by a denied promotion. Here, the identity threat engendered by the denied promotion triggers sensemaking about, one's failure to progress, individuals' strategies moving forward, and their possible selves. Thus, threats to existing and hoped-for future identities can be an impetus to sensemaking, both about the self and the situation.

Other research shows how identities can serve as resources or orienters during sensemaking. Here, identity does not necessarily initiate sensemaking but is drawn upon in the course of sensemaking. For example, in their study of how previous roles influence individuals' experiences in new jobs, Beyer and Hannah (2002: 650) include identities as a type of personal resource that new hires deploy as they make sense of their new roles. Specifically, they suggest that newcomers with diverse prior identities are able to adjust quickly to the new settings because they have a rich toolkit of resources to draw from during sensemaking. Others have investigated how existing aspects of identity orient the objectives for sensemaking. Brown and colleagues (2008) draw on Coopey and colleagues' (1997) work to highlight how individuals' identity narratives influence the sensemaking process, leading individuals to develop differing accounts of the same set of events. In particular, as people strive to satisfy various identity motives such as self-enhancement and self-consistency, they construe events in ways that meet those needs.

In addition to triggering and orienting sensemaking, existing identities can also constrain sensemaking. In a study of airline staff, Murphy (2001) showed how gender identity constructions around the feminized accommodating role of flight attendants served as a barrier to sensemaking in a crisis. Because they understood their role to be providing a service and being a calming presence, flight attendants had difficulty responding authoritatively in an emergency, or even seeing this as a possibility. Weick (1988: 311) highlighted a similar dynamic in the context of Union Carbide employees in the Bhopal disaster when he observes, 'people see those events they feel they have the capacity to do something about'.

In sum, both theory and empirical evidence underscore the notion that identities impact sensemaking. Threats to identities can initiate sensemaking, yet strongly held identities can also inhibit sensemaking in threatening situations. Identities can also provide resources for, motivate, and orient sensemaking. Thus, even in exploring the unidirectional relationship between these concepts, there is some complexity. One thing that distinguishes this set of work from those that follow is its focus on the influence of identity in shaping sensemaking processes. Here, individuals have particular identities that serve as inputs into, or shapers of, the sensemaking process. While this way of thinking does not preclude downstream identity change, the predominant focus of this work is answering questions related to when, how, and why identity serves as an antecedent to sensemaking.

(p. 250) Question 2: How Does Sensemaking Impact Identity?

Scholars have also investigated the inverse of this relationship: sensemaking as a shaper of identity. As we make sense of the world around us and the situations we find ourselves in, we form, reconsider, reassess, or confirm how we understand ourselves. Due to the more dynamic nature of identity from this perspective, studies tend to explore how sensemaking leads to shifts in identity, levels of identification, or identity work.

For example, sensemaking can shape the degree to which individuals identify—or have a feeling of 'oneness'—with a collective (Mael and Ashforth, 1992). For example, in Pratt's (2000) influential work on Amway distributors, sensemaking prompted by corporate practices such as 'dream building' and 'positive programming' led distributors to develop either positive or ambivalent identifications with Amway, or in some cases to disidentify with the company. These individuals' identity-based attachments to Amway were a function of their sensemaking about the company. Building upon this work, Karreman and Alvesson (2004) found that due to managers' attempts to control meanings in a large IT/management consultancy firm, there were only two possible identity-based outcomes of the sensemaking process: positive or ambivalent identification. Any other type of identification (e.g. disidentification) would almost guarantee a departure, voluntary or involuntary, from the company.

Sensemaking also shapes identity through its influence on identity work. In some cases, the kind of sensemaking that takes place affects the kind of identity work that is done, as was the case in Pratt and colleagues' (2006) study of medical residents' identity customization. Here, they found that sensemaking about high magnitude discrepancies between who one was and the work one was doing resulted in identity work that drew on additional identities in the form of either identity patching or identity splinting. Sensemaking about low magnitude discrepancies, in contrast, did not require other identities, and resulted in identity enrichment. In another study, Vough and colleagues (2015) found that as individuals made sense of their retirement experiences, it triggered identity work about who they were relative to the retirement experience. Specifically, managers and executives drew upon extracted cues from their environment to make sense of whether the process of retiring was an identity threat or an identity opportunity. In turn, their construction of retirement as threat or opportunity led to different kinds of identity work through which they maintained, enhanced, protected, or restructured their identities.

However, sensemaking does not only lead to the creation of new identities, but also can help individuals bolster and maintain existing identities. In a compelling study of the passengers aboard United Flight 93, Quinn and Worline (2008) suggested that the passengers used the resources at hand in order to impute sense into their terrifying and confusing experience which ultimately allowed them to re-establish personal identities as well as develop a collective identity. For example, passenger Mark Bingham used the time and telephone available to him to call his mother, a relationship that made sense to him. In so doing, and through his mother's expression of belief in him, Mark was able to regain his

sense of self as trusted and believed son. Thus, sensemaking may enable identity-related processes that involve maintenance as well as change.

Engaging in sensemaking about the events that happen to people can lead them to adjust or reconfirm who they are. These can occur through shifting identity-based (p. 251) attachments or engaging in identity work to update the content of their identities. Research in this vein again presumes two separate constructs and a unidirectional relationship between sensemaking and identity. In contrast to this and the preceding set of studies, other research has conceptualized the relationship between sensemaking and identity as more interwoven and inseparable. In this research, the focus is very much on identity work, the process through which identity is formed, maintained, or revised. Below we first explore the role of sensemaking in identity processes, and then the role of identity in sensemaking processes.

Question 3: What Role Does Sensemaking Play in Identity Processes?

In this body of research identity work is seen as a broad, overarching process, of which sensemaking is one component. In Lutgen-Sandvik's (2008) work on bullying, for instance, alongside reconciling, repairing, grieving, and restructuring, sensemaking is regarded as one of seven forms of identity work individuals engage in when responding to bullying. According to this research, sensemaking is an interpersonal process that seeks to resolve ambiguity around environmental perceptions, identify the causes of the abuse, and validate the value of the self.

Sensemaking can also be viewed as a mechanism through which identity work occurs. Ashforth and Schinoff (2016) theorize that sensemaking is an integral process that helps individuals construct and situate personal identities in their endeavour to become a desired self. In her research on workplace courage, Koerner (2014) depicts sensemaking as the intermediate mechanism in an overarching identity work process. Here, identity tensions prompt a sensemaking process which takes place through courage-based identity work. The result of this process is the ultimate reconciliation of the initial identity tension. Finally, Tracy and colleagues (2006) detail how humour functioned as a sensemaking device that aided new human service workers to overcome identity threats and collectively construct more positive identities at work.

Kanji and Cahusac's (2015) work represents yet another way in which sensemaking can be seen as part of a larger process of identity construction. These authors studied how professional women transitioned to staying at home after they became mothers, with an emphasis on the identity repercussions of this transition. They depicted a four-stage model wherein women shift from experiencing threat to their professional identities to accepting their at-home identities and looking towards the future. While sensemaking occurred to some extent at each stage of identity work, it played an especially prominent role in the second stage. In this stage, women dealt with regret and loss, felt satisfied with looking after their children, found ways to do work at home, and engaged in collective sensemaking with other women about employment. In an interesting reversal of this work-to-

home transition, in their study of how Japanese housewives become involved in social enterprises, Leung and colleagues (2014) found that ‘emergent identity work’ occurred through a spiralling process of action, learning, and sensemaking. Here again, sensemaking is viewed as one of the stages in a multi-stage identity work process.

(p. 252) In sum, some authors suggest that sensemaking plays an integral role in identity work. Specifically, sensemaking has been conceptualized as a tactic parallel to other tactics, a mechanism through which identity work occurs, and a stage in the identity work process. Identity work and sensemaking are not separate processes influencing one another, rather they are intimately interwoven such that identity work is the overarching process in which sensemaking is carried out.

Question 4: What Role Does Identity Play in Sensemaking Processes?

Other scholars invert this relationship, arguing that identity work is one of many processes that occur when individuals engage in sensemaking, and investigate the various roles identity work plays in the larger sensemaking process. This research often draws directly from Weick’s (1995) foundational book on sensemaking in which identity construction is one of seven key properties of sensemaking. For instance, Boudreau and colleagues (2014: 2) premised their paper on the notion that the establishment and maintenance of identity is one of the ‘core properties of the sensemaking process’. Similarly, the stream of research on critical sensemaking draws on Weick (1995) to cast identity construction as one component of the critical sensemaking (CSM) process. Mills and colleagues (2010: 188) characterize the relationship between the two processes in this way: ‘Sensemaking describes a process of identity construction whereby individuals project their identities into an environment and see it reflected back. Through this process, they come to understand what is meaningful about their own identities.’ They later refer to identity construction as ‘a pivotal element of critical sensemaking’ (Mills et al., 2010: 193), again suggesting that identity construction is but one part of the process. Similarly, Carroll and colleagues (2008: 62) write ‘we conceptualize CSM as a continuous socio-psychological process where individuals exercise power through multiple relationships and construct identity through meanings within the framework of the influence of rules, discourse and formative context.’ As such, CSM includes identity work alongside other processes such as striving for plausibility and the exercise of power (see also Tomkins and Eatough, 2014).

In a study of animal shelter workers, Schabram and Maitlis (2017) showed that individuals engaged in sensemaking about their identities when they encountered unexpected and often shocking challenges in the work that they believed they were called to do. For example, finding themselves engaging in mass euthanasia when they had thought they were going to improve the lives of animals disrupted workers’ accounts of themselves (their identity) as well as their sense of purpose. Through sensemaking, these individuals revised their identities (e.g. from being uniquely gifted to help animals to being uniquely

able to bear the burden of the work) and their reasons for being there, allowing them to make their lived experience of shelter work plausible.

Rothausen and colleagues (2017) also argued that identity is an element of a broader sensemaking process and suggested that identity processes constitute one of two sensemaking assessment cycles. Their in-depth analysis of leavers and stayers revealed that when individuals are thinking about leaving their work, they engage in sensemaking cycles focused on identity and on well-being. Specifically, they found that the individuals they interviewed (p. 253) used cues from their environment to assess threats to six core elements of identity: purpose, trajectory, relatedness, expression, acceptance, and differentiation. Once a threat was assessed, they engaged in behaviours to cope with this threat, with the objective of lessening its impact. The authors found that a similar but separate cycle occurred for well-being.

Grant and colleagues (2008) take yet a different tack to understanding the role of identity processes in the broader sensemaking process. These scholars use a sensemaking lens to investigate how organizational giving programmes led to affective organizational commitment. They suggest affective commitment develops through two prosocial sensemaking routes, one concerning the individual and one concerning the company. At the individual level, employees began by contributing to the cause. They then made sense of this act by interpreting their contribution as an act of caring. This interpretation, in turn, reinforced their personal prosocial identity. This reinforced identity was perceived as a psychological benefit from organizational membership that employees returned via affective commitment. Thus, personal reinforcement of a prosocial identity serves as an element of the prosocial sensemaking process that is an outcome of the interpretation of one’s actions.

Taken together, this research addresses sensemaking as a more general process that includes identity work within it. From this perspective, identity processes accompany other processes that assist individuals in making sense of their experiences. The core difference between this and the previous body of research is authors’ focus on understanding sensemaking or identity processes. The chosen emphasis determines which of these constructs is primary and which is more secondary.

An Integrated Model of the Relationship between Identity and Sensemaking

According to our analysis, there are four key ways that the previous literature has conceptualized the relationship between identity and sensemaking. One of the core differences in these conceptualizations is whether these two constructs are viewed as more static and unidirectional or dynamic and embedded. Questions 1 and 2 view identity as influencing sensemaking and sensemaking as influencing identity. Questions 3 and 4, instead, see sensemaking and identity as embedded in one another. Between 3 and 4, the difference lies in whether sensemaking or identity is the overarching process of which the other process is a part. While on the surface these perspectives may seem conflicting, we

suggest that they may ultimately be compatible, each representing partial snapshots of the larger set of relationships between sensemaking and identity.

Weick (1979) proposed that the sensemaking process depends on double interacts, meaning that our understanding evolves as we act in response to others' responses to our actions. In a parallel fashion, we suggest that identity and sensemaking exist in the form of a double interact. Our identity influences how we make sense of an event, which in turn can change our identity. As this identity changes and we face new occasions in which sense must be made, this new identity shapes sensemaking in response to these new events. All of this occurs within a social context in which others are part of both our sensemaking and our identity work. Thus, in line with Gendron and Spira (2010: 297), we see sensemaking and identity work as two intertwined processes that have a recursive effect on one another.

(p. 254) Where Do We Go from Here?

In the process of constructing this chapter, we found ourselves often struggling to understand how scholars have articulated the relationship between sensemaking and identity. This led us to believe that there is considerable conceptual ambiguity that may impede the progress of fruitful further research in this domain. Accordingly, we call for those studying these phenomena to be more explicit about how they view the relationship between sensemaking and identity. This will involve clearly identifying which elements they are observing, measuring in their data, or theorizing about. At the same time, we encourage scholars not to be too narrow in their focus. Instead, they might consider their positioning within the broader framework we provide as a way of situating their findings and conclusions relative to the other components of the dynamic and recursive relationship between sensemaking and identity. In the remainder of this section, we briefly outline some ideas for future research at the intersection of identity and sensemaking.

Most of the work we reviewed emphasized the relationship between current identities and sensemaking. However, scholars have increasingly recognized that there are a variety of identities beyond current identities that can have an impact on employees' understandings and actions. Specifically, employees have past identities (Strahan and Wilson, 2006) that may linger on beyond when they are still relevant (Wittman, forthcoming). They may have future identities, both desired and feared, that are used as goalposts to assess current situations (Markus and Nurius, 1986; Strauss et al., 2012). They also have identities related to whom they chose not to become (Obodaru, 2012). How each of these identities shapes the sensemaking process is an important avenue for future research. Thus, we call for greater attention to the various types of identities that can play into the sensemaking process and how they may interact during sensemaking.

Another important direction for identity researchers taking a sensemaking perspective is to seek to better understand identity plurality in organization. As organizational scholars, we often privilege one identity in our theorizing and empirical investigations. Yet, individuals do not check their other identities at the door when they come to work (Ramarajan

and Reid, 2013) and can be multifaceted even within their organizational roles (see Creary et al., 2015; Ramarajan, 2014; for a review). Furthermore, the changing nature of the economy, which promotes short-term engagements with organizations and even occupations, means that more workers will have multiple work identities over the course of their careers and sometimes even hybrid work identities (Caza et al., 2018a; Leavitt et al., 2012). Despite the reality of identity plurality, our examination of the literature suggests that while a sensemaking lens would seem to be ideally suited for examining the experience and implications of identity plurality, past research has largely failed to do so.

The two pieces that explicitly address this issue illustrate the future opportunities for investigating sensemaking around multiple identities. First, Vough (2012) investigated how individuals made sense of their professional, occupational, and workgroup identities, finding that individuals used different logics as they made sense of each. Second, Sluss and colleagues (2012) described how one's relational identification with one's supervisor could generalize to identification with one's organization via behavioural sensemaking. Specifically, their theorizing suggests that to the extent that the behaviours consistent with their relational identification with their supervisor (e.g. helping and fulfilling expectations) (p. 255) are aligned with organizational goals, employees will infer through sensemaking that they identify with the organization. Taken together, these pieces indicate that we cannot assume that sensemaking is similar across different types of identity targets and that sensemaking may also form a bridge between various identities. There are, no doubt, many other pathways scholars could take to explore sensemaking in the context of multiple identities.

One reason why issues of identity plurality may have been largely overlooked in existing sensemaking research is the emphasis on the creation of a plausible identity narrative. Thus, one particularly intriguing lingering question is how do individuals construct plausibility and coherence among multiplicity? We know that individuals can be motivated to construct coherent identity narratives (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010; McAdams, 2001), but how are they able to construct such narratives when they are simultaneously multiple things? There are at least three possible answers to this question. First, individuals may create multiple identity narratives, one for each central identity and engage in practices that allow these storylines to coexist. Alternatively, individuals may create narratives that make sense of the intersecting elements of their multiple identities, reconciling them into a single plausible narrative. Finally, individuals may come to terms with their narrative incoherence (Gergen and Gergen, 2011). It is also possible that individuals experiment with all three approaches and even employ them at different times.

In addition to tackling these new research questions, our understanding of the relationship between sensemaking and identity would also benefit from a broadened methodological repertoire. The study of identity from a sensemaking perspective has been very largely inductive, with most studies utilizing qualitative interviews as data. As we turn towards identifying mechanisms and contextual moderators, we may benefit from opening the door for more quantitative investigations in order to isolate and understand the nature of these mechanisms. For instance, experimental studies that manipulate identity character-

istics such as salience and observe the effect of this manipulation on sensemaking processes would be enlightening. Such studies could be conducted either in the field or in the laboratory. One example of such a study is Leavitt and colleagues' (2012) study of dual occupational professionals. These authors demonstrated that individuals make different moral judgements depending on which occupation is most salient. These findings suggest that context (and its priming of particular identities) shapes the way individuals make sense of moral situations. Similarly, Hekman and colleagues (2016) found that whether physicians viewed their work through the lens of diagnosis or treatment depended on their occupational and professional identities as well as the perceived regulatory focus of their colleagues. Another important methodological consideration for future research is to make an effort to gather more dyadic level data, using either quantitative methods or qualitative, conversational analytic approaches. While the socially constructed nature of both sensemaking and identity work is well accepted, researchers often fail to gather the dyadic level data required to truly understand these relational processes.

Conclusions

A sensemaking lens helps identity scholars to understand and articulate the dynamic, narrative, and enacted aspects of identity and identity processes in organization. While (p. 256) research in this area is flourishing, the nature of the relationship between sensemaking and identity is often ambiguous. In order to bring clarity to this subfield, we have articulated four different ways of thinking about this relationship found in previous research and then argued for an integrated, dynamic perspective. We see great opportunities for future research on sensemaking and identity and believe that continued empirical and conceptual work at the intersection of these domains stands to make valuable contributions to our understanding of both identity and sensemaking.

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Notes:

(1.) While there is also work examining identity and sensemaking at more collective levels (e.g. organizations), due to the focus of this handbook, we draw primarily on work examining individual level identity processes.

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