

Re-Centring Prospective Sense-Making: Adopting an Experiential Boundary-Crossing Paradigm in Tackling Uncertainty

Authors

Monty Mountford, De Montfort University 

Ed Thompson, De Montfort University 

Contact

Faculty of Business and Law
De Montfort University
The Gateway
Leicester
LE1 9BH

British Academy of Management 2025 Conference

Kent Business School, University of Kent, 1-5 September 2025

Track

Decision-Making Under Uncertainty (Developmental Paper)

Keywords

sense-making, prospective, retrospective, boundary, experiential.

Word Count

2740

Summary

We re-imagine *prospective sense-making* as a mechanism to explore beyond the boundaries of individual and organisational experience. This study challenges sense-making's reliance on temporal division, which frames retrospection and prospection as functions of past and future perfect. We argue that the application of temporal division to sense-making limits contemporary theorising and acts to exclude potential sense-makers. We propose a refreshed focus on *experiential boundaries* as a means of moving beyond the present debate and toward a new paradigm for prospective sense-making. In our study we draw upon an analysis of prospective sense-making about serious and organised crime resulting from interaction between police professionals and academics. Our findings demonstrate the benefits of accessing alternate sources of experience for all participants; they chart active attempts to explore beyond experiential limits, unhindered by the constraints of interpretation using solely the lens of what is already understood.

Introduction

Sense-making is a mechanism for deriving order and meaning (Dervin, 2003; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014). It is a process of translating the unknown and unfamiliar into knowledge and understanding, subsequently internalised as part of our individual or organisational narrative (van Hulst & Tsoukas, 2021). Sense-making exists in partnership with decision-making in a constant cycle of seeking to understand the environment and to decide how best to act within it (Taylor & van Every, 2000). The ability to make sense better and faster than any opponent or threat is essential to maintaining advantage in conditions of dynamic uncertainty (Boyd, 1976; Richards, 2012).

Uncertainty is the natural environment of sense-making, but current models of sense-making place an overt emphasis on retrospection and previous experience (Weick, 1995). The role of looking beyond experience, or prospection, is an under-researched area of study (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015).

Prospection in sense-making remains the subject of debate. Prevailing narratives link outcomes of prospective sense-making to the limits of specific experience (Eckstein, et al. 2024). Existing characterisations are temporally centred with individual or organisational past being the dominant influence (e.g. the prior training and experience of firefighters in finding solutions to crises at hand; Weick, 1993). Anchoring sense-making in temporality carries the risk of the promotion of some experience as more valuable and the relegation of other experiences to a peripheral position (Sadeghi *et al.*, 2024). In organisations where experience and time served are totemic, such as policing for example, the risk of over-weighting established solutions and contributions is magnified (Casey and Mitchell, 2007). Sense-making may become an exclusive domain, the province of a select few, thereby marginalising the novel and creative¹ (Csikszentmihalyi, 2013). Additionally, individuals defaulting to their past as the principal source of interpretation explicitly places greater value on their experience than that of others. Such an approach may explain adherence to sense-making outcomes centred on self in preference to those from other sources even when such alternatives offer the possibility of better outcomes (Sandham, 2025).

Our work challenges current descriptions of prospective sense-making. We look beyond the limits presented by interpretation exclusively via individual experience. In doing so we propose a methodology which searches for as yet unrealised means to make sense of the unknown. Our approach ascribes equal value to all potential sources of knowledge and experience in contributing to the search for understanding, recognising the benefit of open-ness to new interpretation.

We adopt the concept of a metaphorical boundary between regions of familiar knowns and unfamiliar unknowns, a frontier Taleb (2010) describes using the term “Platonic Fold”. The region of unfamiliar unknowns hosts what lies beyond our experience and so beyond our ability to accurately interpret. It may appear chaotic in comparison to the apparent order of our socially constructed and curated realities. In seeking to make sense of the unknown we face a choice: to interpret only through the lens of what is known to us or to also seek new means of interpretation beyond our experiential limits. This choice encapsulates our challenge to existing thinking about prospective sense-making; orthodoxy adopts the former approach; we propose the latter.

¹The history of people doing things which were previously thought impossible is sometimes expressed: “They didn’t know it was impossible, so they did it.” – a quote widely attributed to Mark Twain.

Sense-making Orthodoxy

Sense-making as a field of study is dominated by Karl Weick. Weickian thinking is summarised in his Sense-making Perspective (Weick, 1995), which has been the basis of sense-making orthodoxy for much of the past 3 decades. In the orthodox view ‘sensemaking is understood as a process that is [...] retrospective’ (Weick, 1995, p.17). The theoretical integrity of this one-dimensional temporal maxim is maintained by assigning any apparently prospective act of sense-making to an interpretative context which is based on past events (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014). Weick (1995, p.29) describes such a temporal transmutation as ‘future perfect thinking’. In Weick’s view, thinking about the future is wholly dependent upon interpretations through the lens of experience. The implicit prerequisite for interpretation is therefore the possession of relevant experience by either the individual or the organisation attempting to make sense. Such framing risks excluding both experiences not considered relevant and knowledge which lies beyond the experiential boundaries of the individual or organisation.

Prospective sense-making anchored in retrospection involves, at most, brief forays across the frontier between the knowns of experience and the unknowns of the unexperienced before returning to the limits of the known world to consider what has been found (Taleb, 2010). The outcomes of anchoring in retrospection will, by definition, be more immediate and individual centred, we determine what we are experiencing by what drawing upon what we already know. However, adopting the future-perfect approach denies the possibility of extended expeditions beyond the frontier of experience and interpretation within that context. Resultingly, anchoring prospective sense-making in retrospection is intrinsically limited and exclusionary.

Looking within existing experience for cues from which meaning is derived is the common factor in Weickian descriptions of sense-making, including the prospective form. Weick (1995, p.50) describes cues as “familiar structures” implying previous experience of them. Applying an experiential boundary construct to prospective sense-making makes room for both the use of existing experience to understand the unknown - Weick’s future perfect, and for true prospectation beyond experiential limits. Adopting such an approach makes room for cues to sense-making which originate not from familiarity, but also from that which is wholly unfamiliar or different.

Moving Beyond Weick

Challengers to orthodoxy have emerged, for example questioning why sense-making should not be the result of both retrospection and prospectation (Gephart, Topal, and Zhang, 2010). The question of the ambiguity of possible futures and the impact of such ambiguity on sense-making reliant solely upon previous experience is a further source of challenge (Stigliani and Ravasi, 2012). The need to consider sense-making as both retrospective and prospective is revisited more recently in the context of entrepreneurship in surroundings which are cognitively ambiguous and dynamically changing (Harima and Plak, 2024)

A further temporal contradiction is evident in the use of calamitous events such as the Mann Gulch disaster (Weick, 1993) or Bhopal (Weick, 2010) to theorise about sense-making (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015). A focus on single and specific events appears at odds with assigning it the property ‘ongoing’ (Weick, 1995, p.17). Prospective sense-making has been leveraged to explore whether sense-making is wedded to specific events or is a continuous act (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014). Prospective sense-making is proposed as a mechanism of anticipation (Rosness *et al.*, 2015) and used to signpost the need for future oriented thinking in organisations (Patvardhan *et al.*, 2018).

The question of prospection as a full partner to retrospection (Harima and Plak, 2024) versus prospection as subordinate element of retrospection (Gephart, Topal, and Zhang, 2010) remains open. The debate has been expanded by questions about the utility of the dyadic retrospective-prospective temporal lens. Research questioning the dyadic uses a Ricoeurian lens to shift the dial and place the present in a position of primacy over both past and future (Hernes and Obstfeld, 2022). Structurally, such an approach appears not dissimilar to the previous subordination of future to past via the future perfect (Weick, 1995), it remains temporally centred and does not consider what lies beyond the boundaries of experience.

Embedding Prospection

There is a growing call to examine prospective sense-making as an enabler of creativity, innovation and preparing for events that are yet to occur (Patvardhan *et al.*, 2018), a call that has yet to be answered. An over-focus on determining the temporal orientation of sense-making may be serving to obscure the very object of sense-making – to make meaning and so establish reality (Dervin, 2003). Linking prospection to the search for ‘future knowledge’ (Caccamo, Pittino and Tell, 2022, p.9) is temporally centred and serves to ignore that while elements of knowledge may be as yet unknown to an individual, they themselves have agency, may already exist elsewhere, and so be in an overall present of their own reality.

By adopting a outcome-oriented view of sense-making which encourages us to shift our interpretative horizons we can move beyond temporal division (Sadeghi *et al.*, 2024). Such an approach encourages us to explore beyond the limits of our own experience, negating the potential for friction between our temporal agency and that of what we seek to understand. Adopting such a standpoint allows for the development of ideas about how to, for example, accept, and prepare for, the possibility of the intrusion of the unknown and unfamiliar into our reality. Prospection in this context may serve to reduce the unknown from the status of the unimaginable to the imagined and help maintain an open mind toward possibility (Masys, 2012). Consequently, it may then be possible to engage more in thinking beyond our individual and organisational platonic folds (Taleb, 2010).

Prospective Sense-Making in Action

60 police professionals and academics from multiple disciplines came together in a series of 17 collaborative workshops extending over a 6-month period. Conversations between participants were recorded and transcribed. 678 meaning elements were selected and grouped under seven themes (Vaismoradi *et al.*, 2016). Following a further phase of analysis 197 meaning elements were coded as prospective. Prospective meaning elements were grouped under 7 parent codes, FN 1 – FN 7, and each group retained a coding link to the larger data set from which it had been extracted.

Workshops took place in a relaxed setting, away from normal work environments. Rank, role, and experience as a factor of time served were disregarded and participants assured of the value of any contribution they wished to make. Prospection beyond experiential boundaries emerged in both questioning and observational forms. In the three examples from FN1 below participants are seen implicitly rejecting drawing upon their organisation’s experiential currency. In the first conversation segment for example the participant recognised the need to avoid the recycling of the past or present. Phrasing their thinking as questions carries the implication that participants are seeking meaning beyond their respective Platonic folds, The use of the word ‘gain’ suggests the additive effect of drawing from knowledge and experience sources beyond their own.

“Could we do something like this, to gain an idea as to what is effectiveness [sic], and what are we trying to achieve, rather than re-inventing the wheel?” – FN1

“How do we generate adaptive capability? How do you develop a system that can adapt to different circumstances, many of which are beyond control?” – FN1

“How [do] you go about conducting an enquiry into the experience of organised crime from the standpoint of [community] resilience and where we would start from in relation to designing something like that?” – FN1

A further example from FN5 illustrates the same questioning approach to acknowledging the need to look past experiential limits.

“How is life going to change? How is the environment in which we live and operate going to change and how is that going to then be exploited by criminals?” – FN5

In examples from FN2 participants acknowledged the limits of organisational knowledge and understanding. Apparent is a willingness to risk drawing upon what lies beyond experience to address complexity and uncertainty. Also clear is a desire for more creativity in policing, implicitly acknowledging need to move beyond the familiar and embrace alternative forms of meaning-making.

“We need to be more open to the notion that we are not sure, but that we think this is the best thing to do given the circumstances...” – FN2

“If what we are trying to say is what ideas have we got, we could throw the doors open and ask everyone’s views.” – FN2

“Creativity is not valued much in policing, but it is perhaps the single reason we aren't beating crime.” – FN2

In FN3 two participants reflected the value of looking not only to their own experience, nor to prospection anchored in their own future, but to drawing upon the experiences of others which are different from, and so beyond, their own.

“I think, by pulling all of the different partners together we can build quite a rich picture of what we [including all experiential sources] already currently know, which might not have been done in the same context previously and will be a useful exercise.” – FN3

“There is definitely something in terms of that future piece of how we prepare ourselves as Law Enforcement organisations, both internally, but also how we integrate with academia and industry to help us prepare for those.” – FN3

During discussion about the use of data and technology to counter SOC one academic contributor described how looking beyond organisational experience in analytic design could lead to greater value being extracted from existing data

“It seems like there is a consensus view that the Police have lots of data and that is analysed in some way but I don’t know exactly in what ways is it analysed and I am almost convinced it would be different from the ways that I would analyse it and yet others on the call and others in the faculty would analyse it and there maybe utility to looking into whether those different kinds of analysis that we do would yield different results or complimentary results from the same data” – FN4

An example from FN6 demonstrates the question of agency described earlier and acknowledges that individual and organisational experiential limits must not be taken as universal. The example acknowledges the agency of experience beyond the participant's own.

"To what extent can we learn from what has happened elsewhere, in mainland Europe, for example. It is looking at the creativity, what's new in the UK, may not be new to those organisations, or maybe it is. What can we learn from European cases and investigations for example?" – FN6

Also evident in FN6 is participants using imagination to think about what might be possible, even when they have no experience of it. The example below demonstrates exactly the sort of creative thinking called for in the earlier FN2 example. The use of the phrase "I wonder" is indicative of questing beyond experiential limits.

"I wonder whether there is some sort of research around business modelling and OCG's, and the crime networks we look at?" – FN6

FN7 relates to measures of effect, in the examples below can be seen participants questioning the value of measurement mechanisms which are centred on how policing currently makes sense of what it does. A desire for new ways of thinking about measuring effect, drawn from beyond the organisational Platonic fold, is clear.

"We need to understand how effective we are in what we do now because there is no point in us going and sharing something with the wider audience if it has no impact whatsoever and because we have done it, we think it has an impact" – FN7

"We are out there doing lots of things all of the time and one of the things that is constantly on my mind is a way to establish what aspects of this actually works. How effective is it and how do we focus our activity into those things that work instead of the things that don't" – FN7

The examples given here show participants seeking to cross experiential boundaries – prospective sense-making in action. They further show that, far from being a subset of retrospection or anchored in experience, prospective sense-making recast as looking beyond experience is inclusive and open, with the novelty as an anticipated outcome (Augier and Barrett, 2022).

Limitations

The data and subsequent analysis presented are, although derived from multiple workshops, limited in their derivation from one type of organisation, policing. Furthermore, due to the restrictions during the Covid Crisis of 2020-2022, most workshops took place online and so judgements about prospection are the result of the author's interpretation of transcripts in the main. Additional research is necessary to expand the data available and develop the experiential boundary-crossing method as a mechanism of prospective sense-making.

Conclusion

The contribution we propose is understanding sense-making not solely as dependent upon experience from individual or organisational sources, but as also seeking what lies beyond the limits of such sources. This reshaping of the dyadic debate around retrospective and prospective sense-making values both components and emphasises the value of inclusivity and openness. Prospective sense-making assumes its rightful place as a full partner to retrospective sense-making without diminishing the value of the latter. Underpinning the refreshed methodology is an environment in which sense-makers are freed from organisational constraints, where difference of interpretation is a strength, and where all experience is valued.

References

- AUGIER, M. and BARRETT, S.F.X., 2022. March-ing to the Beat of a Maverick Drummer: Insights from John Boyd to Inform Behavioral Perspectives. *Journal of Management History*, **28**(1), pp.89-106.
- BOYD, J.R., 1976. *Destruction and Creation*, *Unpublished manuscript*.
- CACCAMO, M., PITTINO, D. and TELL, F., 2023. Boundary Objects, Knowledge Integration, and Innovation Management: A Systematic Review of the Literature.
- CASEY, J. and MITCHELL, M., 2007. Requirements Of Police Managers and Leaders from Sergeant to Commissioner. In: M. MITCHELL and J. CASEY, eds, *Police Leadership and Management*. Sydney, Australia: The Federation Press.
- CSIKSZENTMIHALYI, M., 2013. *Creativity - The Psychology of Discovery and Invention*. 1st edn. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics.
- DERVIN, B., FOREMAN-WERNET, L. and LAUTERBACH, E., eds, 2003. *Sense-Making Methodology Reader - Selected Writings of Brenda Dervin*. Cresskill, N.J: Hampton.
- ECKSTEIN, G., SHRESTHA, A. and RUSSO, F., 2024. Thirty-five Years of Sensemaking in the Business & Management Research: a Bibliometric Analysis, Review and Discussion. *Management Review Quarterly*, **Online First**.
- GEPHART, R.P., TOPAL, C. and ZHANG, Z., 2010. Future-Oriented Sensemaking: Temporalities and Institutional Legitimation*. In: T. HERNES and S. MAITLIS, eds, *Process, Sensemaking, and Organizing*. Oxford University Press, pp.275-312.
- HARIMA, A. and PLAK, C., 2024. Where Will My Future Be? Adaptive Sensemaking of Refugee Camp Entrepreneurs in Perpetual Liminality. *Entrepreneurship & Regional Development*, (Online First), pp.1-25.
- HERNES, T. and OBSTFELD, D., 2022. A Temporal Narrative View of Sensemaking. *Organization Theory*, **3**(4), pp.1-18.
- MAITLIS, S. and CHRISTIANSON, M., 2014. Sensemaking in Organizations: Taking Stock and Moving Forward. *The Academy of Management Annals*, **8**(1), pp.57-125.
- MASYS, A.J., 2012. Black Swans To Grey Swans: Revealing The Uncertainty. *Disaster Prevention and Management: An International Journal*, **21**(3), pp.320-335.
- PATVARDHAN, S., GIOIA, D.A., MAITLIS, S., OBSTFELD, D., RAVASI, D. and SUTCLIFFE, K.M., *Exploring Prospective Sensemaking in Organizations*, Academy of Management Conference Proceedings, Aug 2018.
- RICHARDS, C., 2012. *Boyd's OODA Loop (It's Not What You Think) Introduction: A Non-School of Strategy*. Blue Hole Press.
- ROSNESS, R., EVJEMO, T.E., HAAVIK, T. and WÆRØ, I., 2016. Prospective Sensemaking in the Operating Theatre. *Cognition, Technology & Work*, **18**(1), pp.53-69.

SADEGHI, Y., ISLAM, G. and VAN LENT, W., 2024. Practices of Periodization: Toward a Critical Perspective on Temporal Division in Organizations | Academy of Management Review. *Academy of Management*, **50**(1), pp.51-71.

SANDBERG, J. and TSOUKAS, H., 2015. Making Sense of the Sensemaking Perspective: its Constituents, Limitations, and Opportunities for Further Development. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, **36**(S1), pp.S6-S32.

SANDHAM, S., 2025 Sensemaking in Organizational Storytelling: From Linear Storytelling to Antenarrative. *Public Relations Inquiry*, **14**(1), pp. 69-87.

STIGLIANI, I. and RAVASI, D., 2012. Organizing Thoughts and Connecting Brains: Material Practices and the Transition from Individual to Group Level Prospective Sensemaking. *Academy of Management Journal*, **55**(5), pp.1232-1259.

TALEB, N.N., 2010. *The Black Swan*. 2 edn. London, England: Penguin Books Ltd.

TAYLOR, J.R. and VAN EVERY, E.J., 2000. *The Emergent Organization: Communication as its Site and Surface*. 1 edn. Routledge.

VAISMORADI, M., JONES, J., TURUNEN, H. and SNELGROVE, S., 2016. Theme Development in Qualitative Content Analysis and Thematic Analysis. *Journal of Nursing Education and Practice*, **6**(5), pp.100-110.

VAN HULST, M. and TSOUKAS, H., 2021. Understanding Extended Narrative Sensemaking: How Police Officers Accomplish Story Work. *Organization (London, England)*, pp.1–24.

WEICK, K.E., 1995. *Sensemaking in Organizations*. Revised edn. Thousand Oaks, Calif. [u.a.]: Sage.

WEICK, K.E., 2010. Reflections on Enacted Sensemaking in the Bhopal Disaster. *Journal of Management Studies*, **47**(3), pp.537-550.

WEICK, K.E., 1993. The Collapse of Sensemaking in Organizations: The Mann Gulch Disaster. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, **38**(4), pp.628-652.