



# Sensemaking, metaphors and performance evaluation

Gerardo Patriotta<sup>a,\*</sup>, Andrew D. Brown<sup>b,1</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Nottingham University Business School, Jubilee Campus, Wollaton Road, Nottingham, United Kingdom

<sup>b</sup> Warwick Business School, United Kingdom

## KEYWORDS

Sensemaking;  
Metaphors;  
Performance evaluation;  
Power;  
Students

**Summary** This paper analyzes the linkages between sensemaking, metaphors and performance evaluation in an organizational setting. Drawing on a study of how university students prepared for examinations, it argues that one way people make sense of being evaluated is through metaphors that conventionalize reality and thus contribute to the maintenance of continuity in everyday social action. This is because metaphorical understandings assist people's effort to assign events and situations to familiar categories and thereby turn the 'unusual' into 'business as usual'. Moreover, metaphors are cognitive and more broadly power-laden social resources, which individuals and groups employ in determining how to make sense of and deal with potentially unsettling events such as performance evaluations.

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## Introduction

How do individuals and groups make sense of being evaluated? This is a relevant question for both management theory and practice because evaluative processes occur prominently and pervasively in a variety of organizational settings. For instance, preparation for evaluation occurs when employees get ready for performance appraisals, report on a major project to their senior management team, or practice for a job interview. Routinized preparation for evaluation also takes place when a scholar researches for a conference presentation or a musician prepares for a concert performance. In all these instances, the preparatory activities that individuals and groups engage in prior to, and during processes of evaluation, are occasions in which 'sense' is continuously sought. This is because evaluation tends to be

associated with anticipation, foresight, expectations, and performance anxiety, which generate arousal and prompt sensemaking (Leitenberg, 1990; Weick, 1995). It is therefore fruitful to study in depth the ways in which people in organizations understand and conduct their preparations for assessed performance.

Current debates within the sensemaking literature have focused on the distinction between routine and non-routine events and the cognitive implications associated with them. Non-routine occurrences such as crises (Weick, 1988), disasters (Brown, 2004; Weick, 1993), surprises (Louis, 1980), discrepancies (Orlikowski & Gash, 1994) and breakdowns (Patriotta, 2003) have been theorized as occasions when continuity is breached, experiences become unintelligible or problematic, and people are forced to take notice of, and attribute specific significance to, occurrences. On the other hand, routine circumstances are situations in which reality is experienced as less problematic and largely taken for granted, interruptions are relatively easily dealt with, and individuals rely on habitual forms of action. In relation to the above distinction, performance evaluations provide a particularly interesting focus of analysis because they constitute ambivalent tasks and are therefore difficult to categorize as

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 0115 9515490.

E-mail addresses: [gerardo.patriotta@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:gerardo.patriotta@nottingham.ac.uk) (G. Patriotta), [Andrew.Brown@wbs.ac.uk](mailto:Andrew.Brown@wbs.ac.uk) (A.D. Brown).

<sup>1</sup> Tel.: +44 01225 383841.

either routine or non-routine events. In fact, while evaluation activities take place routinely within organizations and are conducted according to standardized practices, individuals undergoing evaluations experience such moments in highly idiosyncratic and emotionally charged ways. In other words, what appears to be routinized and mundane for the organization can generate anxiety and feelings of insecurity for the individual involved. Under these circumstances, sensemaking processes arise from the individual emotional understanding of ordinary (but potentially unsettling) events rather than the direct experience of crisis situations.

In this paper, we argue that one way people make sense of being evaluated is through metaphors, which conventionalize reality and promote stability. By 'conventionalize' we refer to processes by which people assign ongoing events and situations to ordinary, familiar categories thereby turning the 'unusual' into 'business as usual' (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2002; Farr & Moscovici, 1984). This argument is developed from an ethnographic study on how students at an Italian university routinely made sense of and prepared for oral examinations. While an analysis of Italian university students may seem idiosyncratic, examination preparation activities are kinds of "paradigmatic human events" (Geertz, 1973) which to some extent parallel with other evaluative situations that occur in the work place and that are normally associated with anxiety and fear of failure.<sup>2</sup> The case we present is, therefore, of broad interest because it permits particular insights that allow inferences to be drawn about these behaviors in other kinds of organizations (Siggelkow, 2007, p. 21).

This paper is structured into five main sections. First, we review the literature in order to explore the links between sensemaking, performance evaluations and metaphor. Second, we discuss our interpretive research design, methods of data collection, and approach to data analysis. Third, we describe and analyze the metaphors underlying pre-examination activities within a community of Italian university students. Finally, we discuss the theoretical implications of our study for understanding of metaphor-driven sensemaking in the context of performance assessment and outline some directions for future management research.

## Sensemaking, evaluation and metaphors

### Sensemaking and performance evaluation

Sensemaking constitutes a central feature of processes of organizing (Weick, 1979, 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). Traditionally, the concept has been used to denote processes of interpretation and meaning production whereby individuals and groups establish understandings of their

world, display these understandings to others, and enact the mutually shared social order in which they live (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Garfinkel, 1967). From this perspective, making sense involves the ongoing development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing. Sensemaking is ongoing because sense is continually being made and remade as events unfold, and people seek to reduce uncertainty and ambiguity and to enact order into the situations they encounter. Sensemaking is thus linked to the human need for giving form to everyday experiences, and maintaining an ongoing sense of situations in the face of events that might threaten existing orders.

There are several reasons why performance evaluation processes are a trigger for sensemaking. First, performance evaluations constitute one particular category of unsettling events, which are often associated with anxiety, overload pressures, arousal, and issues of self-esteem. This is because evaluation represents an assessment of an individual's worth to an organization or community (Brown & Benson, 2005). Second, there are ambiguities in the performance assessment process. Given the difficulty in making meaningful distinctions in performance, assessors may apply idiosyncratic, and often implicit, criteria in determining their performance rating (Murphy & Cleveland, 1991; Nathan & Alexander, 1985). Furthermore, ambiguities may arise from the interaction between the rater and the ratee. For example, assessors may rely on self-presentation tactics or impression management rather than the ratee's actual performance. Ambiguities in the assessment process may generate ratee's concerns regarding rater accountability, fairness of the appraisal, and trust in the overall appraisal context. Third, evaluation can create cognitive dissonance, that is, a perceived discrepancy between time and effort invested in preparation and performance evaluation outcomes (Weick & Prestholdt, 1968).

Individuals undergoing performance appraisal do not know in advance whether their performance will be adequately evaluated. Accordingly, they adjust their expectations/commitments in order to deal with a potential discrepancy between effort and reward. Finally, performance evaluation is associated with a system of rewards and punishments that often involves asymmetric relations. This reinforces and reproduces hierarchical power relationships and organizational control mechanisms (Bergström, Hasselbladh, & Kärreman, 2009; Foucault, 1977; Townley, 1993). The power gap between rater and ratee is, therefore, a further trigger for sensemaking.

### Sensemaking and metaphors

To make sense of and deal with unsettling events, such as performance evaluations, organizational members often resort to symbolic processes, which allow them to re-establish shared understanding, move away from the confusion it engenders and ultimately maintain stability and social continuity (Greenberg, 1995). We argue that performance evaluation activities 'make' sense within broader symbolic systems through which everyday social reality is constructed, interpreted and maintained. Metaphors constitute an important aspect of such symbolic systems. A metaphor is a figure of speech in which a descriptive term is transferred to something different from, yet analogous to, that which it is

<sup>2</sup> We of course appreciate that there are also differences between students preparing for evaluation and employees in work organizations. For example, students tend to have different and often more distanced relationships with their professors than do employees with their bosses. Nonetheless, our focus is not on the interpersonal relation between assessor and the assessed. Rather, we concentrate on the ambivalent status of evaluation activities and the sensemaking that results from the encounter between an individual and an organizationally defined routine.

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