

Sub-theme 12: (SWG) The Temporal Experience of Organizing

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Practitioners' use of time in making sense of innovation

Abstract

While the increasing attention has been recently paid to the relationship between time and the innovation process, this area remains under-explored and under-theorized. Through the analysis of managers' own accounts of innovation, this paper provides empirical evidence of the ways practitioners enact their present experiences as part of their past memories and future imaginings. It is through time, as an important lively and open-ended process, practitioners make sense of what is happening. In doing so, they socially construct meaning of innovation in different ways. Drawing from a sensemaking perspective, this paper explores practitioners' use of time in making sense of innovation. This research contributes to our knowledge of researching past, present and future-oriented sensemaking.

Keywords: innovation process, sensemaking, time

Introduction

Since adaptive change is an ongoing process, beneficial effects of innovation activity over time will be enhanced by the ability of an organization to modify the composition of innovations introduced across organizational units and attain leadership within its population by continually adopting innovations over time. (Damanpour et al., 2009: 672)

While greater attention has been recently paid to the relationship of time and innovation process (Garud, 2013; Garud et al., 2013; Van de Ven et al., 2008), this area remains under-examined (Pettigrew et al., 2001; Bartel and Garud, 2009). The dominant perspective considers the notion of time as

objective, linear, a-contextual and measurable in nature (Wolfe, 1994; Kimberly and Evanisko, 1981). Applying this conceptualization to innovation, we tend to think about a-temporal episodes, events or moments in time. While this perspective provides an understanding of specific points in time, it lacks seeing the continuity of our lives (Langley, 2007; Tsoukas and Chia, 2002; Chia, 1995).

The purpose of this paper is to explore the relationship practitioners' use of time in making sense of innovation. Time is viewed as context-dependent, experienced, lively and ongoing process. It is argued that a sensemaking process perspective (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Weick et al., 2005) provides a possible explanation of the ways practitioners use time in making sense of innovation. The paper is organised as follows. The next section reviews previous organizational studies using a time-lived approach, reflecting on the connection between past, present and future. A sensemaking perspective is then introduced as a lens through which to understand practitioners' use of time in making sense of innovation. The narrative method used is then described and the results of the analysis are presented. Some implications of the research are summarized, including the broader temporal basis for sensemaking. Future research directions are finally suggested.

Time and innovation

Researchers have increasingly emphasized the role of time in studying events and processes associated with innovation (Van de Ven et al., 2008; Van de Ven, 1986). Innovation is thought as a dynamic process consisting of individual and collective activities that may change over time. Process philosophers contend that thinking in terms of an ongoing process provides an alternative conceptual lens for understanding organizational change. A processual perspective does not deny the role of entities, structures and substance, viewing them as subsidiary effects or manifestations underlining the process (Chia and King, 1998; Chia, 1995). The reality of living and organizing has been inadequately overlooked by researchers who assume the existence of material entities independently of individuals (Bunce and West, 1995). A processual perspective, on the other hand, emphasizes the

emergence of complex and dynamic social lives. Tsoukas and Chia (2002: 577) argue that only by placing ourselves at the centre of unfolding phenomena can we understand the continuously shifting flux of reality:

Organization phenomena are not treated as entities, as accomplished events, but as enactments – unfolding processes involving actors making choices interactively, in inescapably local conditions, by drawing on broader rules and resources.

More recently, Garud et al. (2013) argue that innovation is a dynamic and complex process. This observation has a range of implications for the methods used to study innovation processes. One could take a longitudinal perspective exploring the complexity, tapping into the temporal experiences of the actors involved. This means their memories, current experiences and future aspirations.

Sensemaking

Weick's (1995) sensemaking perspective is undoubtedly one of the most influential process approaches (Cornellissen, 2012; Hernes and Maitlis, 2010; Weick et al., 2005). Weick's work rejects rational and hierarchical models of organization in favour of focusing upon the behaviour of individual actors within dynamic organizational contexts. The literature debates whether sensemaking takes place continuously or in an episodic fashion (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014). Traditional work on sensemaking has framed it as a retrospective process (Weick, 1995). Retrospection is one of Weick's sensemaking properties. The notion of prospective or future-oriented sensemaking has long been part of the literature (Gioia et al., 1991), yet only recently has attracted greater attention (Kaplan and Orlikowski, 2013; Gephart et al., 2010). These authors argue that focusing only on retrospective aspects neglects the historical or temporal embeddedness of sensemaking. Gephart et al. (2010) contend that future-oriented sensemaking is embedded in past and present temporal states providing sense of proposed future. They adopt the ethnomethodological perspective, arguing that sensemaking is a continuous process of making sense of past, present and future:

“Sensemaking is an ongoing process that creates an intersubjective sense of shared meaning through conversation and non-verbal behaviour in face to face settings where people seek to produce, negotiate, and sustain a shared sense of meaning”. (p.9).

Prospective or future oriented sensemaking seeks to construct and project images of future objects and phenomena. Stigliani and Ravasi (2012) share this perspective in studying design team. They propose that prospective sensemaking is based on interrelated cycles of retrospection. The researchers recognise that differences regarding the nature of sensemaking may not be resolved, and there is a demonstrable need for a more detailed examination of how sense is made and remade to enrich our understanding of sensemaking.

Method

This research conducted thirty three semi-structured interviews with managers from UK construction-related firms. The interviewees came from a range of different backgrounds with a diversity of core qualifications. This qualitative exploratory research utilizes narrative analysis to understand how managers, drawn from all levels of their organizations, make sense of innovation from the perspective of time. In analyzing managers' narratives, the researcher sought their individual experiences and constructions of meaning and whether these emerged into common patterns. In the case of each interview, the adopted unit of analysis is a lived narrative of innovation as mobilised by an individual practitioner. Across all interviews, the lived narratives are progressively conflated to provide a broad unit of analysis which focuses on a collective of narratives. The research questions are (1) To what extent are innovations immediately recognised as such by everyone in the organisations? (2) Do past experiences influence present and future innovation? (3) Do you re-interpret the past in order to re-construct the future?

Empirical findings

Approximately a third of the total number of interviewees claimed that the innovation label followed retrospectively. Their attention was directed backward at a particular point in time:

I think innovation was not the word which was in a vocabulary of the organisation. So, it was not something that was used in that quite explicit sense. I think we would retrospectively look at the origins of that that it was seen as quite innovative and an opportunity to do something quite clever. But it is a chief executive who arrived with a very sort of innovation-oriented mindset. We have introduced the word “innovation” into the vocabulary of the organisation. (Strategic project manager, Public construction firm).

A few interviewees connected retrospection with prospection. From this perspective, looking backward was connected with looking forward, viewing innovation as an ongoing process that unfolds over time. In some respects, the interviewees made a connection between retrospection and prospection, arguing that innovation can be sustained by ‘having continuous points of looking back and looking forward’ (Supply chain director, Consultancy). This argument was reinforced by the supply chain manager from a public construction firm who pointed towards a contextual understanding of innovation: deriving from past experiences and memories, lessons learned were used in present and future:

I think in the context of innovation we all bring our experience of previous projects and previous lives and cooperative lives into the project. I think the innovation is about looking forward: how do we organise all that experience, all that creative thinking in a context of the firm and get the best of everybody to get delivered.

In addition and in relation to the above quotation, the interviewee offered an interesting viewpoint on prospection, arguing that individuals create looking forward. The argument was that innovation is an evolving activity over time, rather than an existing activity at the past or present:

I think you are creating a look forward. I like the idea of creating futures. I like the idea that innovation or the method or ambiance of innovation should be part of luck people. They are not luck people forever, they are future innovation. You are creating that. You are, as

construction sector, creating that. You are not borrowing that as it does not exist.

What is especially notable in the above quotations is the way the past is supposedly connected with the present and the future. Of particular note, the interviewee used verbs (e.g. creating, borrowing) over nouns in order to develop an argument. It was contended that looking forward is a social process of construction that unfolds over time, rather than a stable process. This claim emphasised that innovation is, perhaps, more reasonably understood as an ongoing process of creative activities and perceptions, rather than an objective entity or a linear progression of stages.

In summary, the empirical findings demonstrate that both looking backward (retrospective) and looking forward (prospective) thinking are embedded in the process of making sense of 'innovation'. Past and future are not temporal episodes distinct from the present, but rather they take part in the making of present experience. Prospective or future-oriented sensemaking is seen to be an important part of an unfolding process.

Discussion

In the analysis of the interviews, retrospection plays a purpose in explaining how particular organizational activities become recognized as innovations. The majority of interviewees demonstrate that organizational activities are often not labelled as innovations at the outset. Referring back at past periods in time, organizational activities are seen as 'solutions to a problem', 'challenges' or 'extra work', rather than innovations per se. Organizational activities became labelled as the innovations or as 'being innovative' retrospectively – after activities have been completed. From a flow of ongoing organizational activities some became labelled as innovations by the interviewees. By paying attention to retrospective time, the interviewees interpret and make sense of activities that have already occurred during organizing processes. A few interviewees explicitly stated that the label of innovation appeared retrospectively, accompanied with a CEO arriving with some 'sort of innovation-oriented mindset'. This is in keeping with Van de Ven (1986) who argued that innovations become part of the conceptual structure of the social system and appear

in retrospect. He further contended that innovations remain institutionalised for as long as the 'regime remains in power' (Van de Ven, 1986: 593). The theme of retrospective labelling is consistent with the sensemaking property of 'retrospective', providing one possible explanation of the empirical data. Weick (1995) and Weick *et al.* (2005) explain that people can only know what exists by paying attention to what has already been completed.

Prospective understanding

Emerging from retrospection and past experiences, the interviewees make presumptions about the future. Past actions and activities became clearer as they unfolded over time. The narratives mobilized by the interviewees are reflective of both past- and future-oriented sensemaking processes. Both looking backward (retrospectively) and looking forward (prospectively) thinking is embedded in the process of labelling (and continuously re-labelling) activities. This resonates with sensemaking that is described as both past- and future-oriented processes (Weick *et al.*, 2005). If sensemaking indeed involves construction of an understanding of activities retrospectively and prospectively, then this would go some way towards explaining the way past is brought forward from and is used in new representation in the present, making sense of the future.

The 'ongoing' property of sensemaking indicates that innovation can be considered as a narrative mobilized by the interviewees in ongoing situational contexts (Weick *et al.*, 2005). Past history is brought forward to the present in order to make sense of the future. This is in keeping with Cunliffe and Coupland (2011) who describe narratives as a means of connecting past, present, and future actions. They emphasize that narratives shift beyond a simple chronological sense of time, generating a sense of timing as an ongoing process. The interviewees construct (and continuously re-construct) meanings within a flux of ongoing circumstances. This signals that multiple perceptions and interpretations change over time as the contextual circumstances unfold.

It has been argued that practitioners make sense of innovation retrospectively and prospectively, mobilizing their narratives over time. Sensemaking is described as both a past- and future-oriented process (Weick, 1995; Weick *et al.*, 2005). From the

sensemaking perspective, past experience and knowledge are brought forward and are used in a new representation in the present that make sense of the future. The discussion indicates a link between 'retrospective' and 'ongoing' sensemaking properties. The interviewees make sense of the ongoing flux of activities both retrospectively and prospectively. Narration of innovation is seemingly made for the purposes of speaking and promoting an innovation to the target audience.

Conclusions

Organizational activities become labelled as innovations retrospectively and make sense prospectively. Sensemaking uses past orientations that provide histories, present understandings that provide contexts and future intentions that project and propose further events and situations. Prospective or future-oriented sensemaking is part of an unfolding sensemaking process that incorporates past and present orientations. Sensemaking is hence thoroughly temporal, not just retrospective or prospective. Time is seen as experienced, lively and ongoing. Examining narratives of innovation from the perspective of time lived enhances our understanding of how innovation is socially constructed and contested. Different managers temporarily make sense of innovation in different ways.

Future studies examining the use of time in making sense of innovation may include researchers from other temporal contexts. Other theoretical approaches could be utilized. Further research should incorporate a longitudinal design to see of and how temporal construction change.

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