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Academic sensemaking and behavioural responses – exploring how academics perceive and respond to identity threats in times of turmoil

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Reforms and changing ideas about what higher education institutions are and should be have put pressure on academic identity. The present paper explores the way academics in Danish universities make sense of their changing circumstances, and how this affects their perceptions of their organization, their leaders and of themselves. The study highlights how the formal organizations' translations of external impulses and ideas constitute a more severe threat on the perceived identity of the academic staff than the impulses and ideas themselves. The findings indicate that with the tighter couplings of top-level management and the political system, the coupling and identification between academic staff and the formal organization may become weaker. Also, the behavioural responses perceived threats are studied, by examining the 'us'/'them' categorizations of the academics, providing a burgeoning conceptual framework for further studies into how academics change their actions as a result of reforms or organizational change.

Keywords: academic staff; identity; identity formation; academic work and identity; organizational reform

Introduction

Often characterized as a value-laden, relatively static and highly institutionalized field, academia seems to be riddled with values, norms, routines and ideas which significantly impact how it is possible to act and think within it (e.g. Olsen 2005; Smerek 2011). However, over the past decades these highly institutionalized ways of thinking and acting have been challenged by new ideas about what academia is and should be. Some of the more notable ideas affecting the discourse are the concepts of 'the knowledge society', 'the knowledge economy', and notions of flexibility, entrepreneurialism, accountability and what is increasingly known also in academia as 'new managerialism' (Kogan et al. 2000; Gornitzka and Maassen 2000; Deem, Reed, and Hillyard 2007; Lynch, Grummell, and Devine 2012). These impulses and ideas have in most – if not all European countries – led to significant reforms of the higher education systems, targeting not least the governance and management structures of higher education institutions (HEIs) in order to make them more adaptable, powerful and accountable. In Denmark, this became very visible in the debate surrounding the University

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Act of 2003 and the subsequent amendment in 2011, where both the legal, institutional status of universities was changed, as well as the internal management structures. These changes were greeted with significant resistance from the academic staff, as they were seen to break with the very fibres of academia and academic culture, that is, the notions of academic self-governance and academic freedom.¹ But even though the critics were very outspoken and came to dominate the public debate, they were also sometimes considered to be a minority, and particularly reform proponents spoke of a ‘silent majority’ which saw reforms as a positive development, and were more acceptant of for example, professionalized management.

This highlights the importance of looking at perceived identity in studies of organizational change processes – also in HEIs (Henkel 2004, 2005). As Mills, Thurlow, and Mills (2010) point out:

Change within organizations may cause individuals to ask questions such as ‘who are we?’ or ‘how do we do things?’ The way in which individuals make sense of these questions impacts their understandings of their own identities and that of the organization. (188)

The present paper seeks to explore the way academics make sense of their changing circumstances, and how this affects their perceptions of their organization, their leaders and of themselves. These perceptions are assumed to affect the motivation, sense of belonging, and ultimately the performance and actions of organizational members (Dutton and Dukerich 1991; Gioia and Thomas 1996; Hatch and Schultz 2002; Henkel 2004; Ashforth, Harrison, and Corley 2008). The purpose of the paper is to investigate these possible links between perception and action, and via a small-scale study to illuminate interesting avenues for further studies of how academics make sense of and respond to organizational turmoil and change.

The sensemaking framework

The argument that underlies the study is that external pressure on organizations tends to spur sensemaking processes, as this pressure disrupts existing meaning structures and established practices, and that this sensemaking is ‘central because it is the primary site where meanings materialize that inform and constrain identity and action’ (Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld 2005, 409). External pressure, for example, as represented by Danish national reforms of the higher education governance and management structures, or more broadly by the emergence and promotion of new ideas about ‘the knowledge economy’, ‘globalization’, etc. in the discourse surrounding higher education, is in other words seen as drivers of sensemaking, and the purpose of the present study is to investigate how such sensemaking processes play out within the organizations – and with what behavioural consequences.

According to the sensemaking framework, individuals and organizations will, when faced with unexpected, ambiguous or uncertain circumstances, engage in sensemaking processes, attempting to create order in these circumstances in a way that enables further action (Weick 1995; Mills 2003; Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld 2005; Mills, Thurlow, and Mills 2010). Sensemaking thus describes the on-going processes wherein individuals and organizations construct a plausible story of ‘what is going on’ by picking out cues (events, ideas, issues, etc.), which are deemed salient in relation to existing frames (mental modes, cultural scripts, etc.). The stories, that are constructed

in such processes, act as organizing tools which allows certain elements of the past, present and future to emerge and others to wither away (perhaps only to be brought forth in future sensemaking processes). Sensemaking thereby:

unfolds as a sequence in which people concerned with identity in the social context of other actors engage ongoing circumstances from which they extract cues and make plausible sense retrospectively, while enacting more or less order into those ongoing circumstances. (Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld 2005, 409)

By looking at sensemaking processes, we should therefore gain an insight into how academics pick out problems, events, ideas, etc. that they deem relevant, and therefore worthy to act upon. As the definition above indicates a key element of sensemaking is identity construction and maintenance – both to the individual and to the organization. When new ideas emerge about what a university is and should be, or when HEIs are reformed as a consequence of these ideas, organization members are forced to address questions of identity – both their personal and professional sense of self as well as their perception of the organization they work for.

This means that in a sensemaking perspective, an organization's identity – classically defined as that which is central, enduring and distinctive about an organization's character (Albert and Whetten 1985) – is seen to be a contestable and dynamic construct, which is negotiated and reformed in the ongoing sensemaking processes that takes place inside and organization (Dutton and Dukerich 1991; Gioia, Schultz, and Corley 2000; Ravasi and Schultz 2006). The labels we use to describe the elements of an identity might give the impression of a stable, enduring entity, but in fact these elements are 'subject to multiple and variable interpretations' (Gioia, Schultz, and Corley 2000, 75), as organization members are faced with changing environments and impulses.

This also implicates that there may be differing interpretations and constructions of identity within an organization; top-level managers may not have the same perception of what is central, enduring and distinct about an organization as the employees, and there may be similar differences between departments and professional groups. This is particularly relevant in studies of organizations such as HEIs which can be seen as very loosely coupled (Weick 1976), and where professional, disciplinary and departmental culture offers many possibilities for identification.

Henkel (2005), inspired by Taylor (1989), similarly points to the importance of a 'defining community' in identity construction, as it offers the individuals a language, world views, ideas and myths that can be used to create a sensible sense of self. She goes on to note that in the case of HEIs, the institution 'has more power to affect academic working lives, but it may be a weaker source of identification' (Henkel 2005, 164). The question following this is then which sources of identification becomes salient for the academics, for example, science, the academic community, personal (cross-disciplinary) networks, etc. The frames available for sensemaking processes are in other words abundant in complex organizations such as HEIs and creating change is far from a simple matter.

Attempts of willfully changing members' perceptions of the organization and its identity are however often seen in, what in the sensemaking framework can be described as sensegiving attempts. Sensegiving can be seen as the management's effort to provide the employees with a 'viable interpretation of a new reality' and attempting to make them 'adopt it as their own' (Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991, 433); a

process which is then concerned with projecting a new/transformed sense of who they are as an organization.

Identity threats and sensemaking

Perceived threats against what members believe to be the central, distinctive and enduring characteristics of their organizations (or other salient sources of identification) greatly influences how these members relate to and perceive themselves and their surroundings – and indeed how they might change those perceptions as a result (Dutton and Dukerich 1991; Ravasi and Schultz 2006). Research on identity threats traditionally centres round exploring the dynamic interplay between organization members' perceptions of identity, that is, how they perceive themselves, and their construed external image, that is, how they think others perceive them (Dutton and Dukerich 1991; Elsbach and Kramer 1996; Ravasi and Schultz 2006; Brown et al. 2006). A dissonance between these two perceptions constitutes an identity threat and will prompt new sensemaking processes, as such threats question the perceived order of things and challenges the meaning already created. The externally construed images and perceptions of organizational identity can in sensemaking terminology be seen as frames and cues that are available to the organizational members in their sensemaking process, and if these are perceived to be ambiguous or inconsistent, an interpretation and selection will occur.

Threats to the organizational identity are not only assumed to be important to the perception of the organization's identity, but also to the social and personal identity of the individual organization member, as an individual's sense of self is seen to be shaped in part by membership in both organizations (Albert, Ashforth, and Dutton 2000), occupational groups (Van Maanen and Barley 1984; Vough 2012) and work groups (Alderfer and Smith 1982; Vough 2012) – that is, the defining communities. Hence, where a positive perception of the organization's identity enhances a positive self-image, a new threat to the organizational identity may shatter the positive perception held by organization members, and will incite identification with other groups and categories in their sensemaking, for example, disciplinary or professional groups (researcher or teacher) or more generalized categories (mother or piano-player), that is, a type of selective identification and categorization (Elsbach and Kramer 1996). Such responses to identity threats can in this perspective be seen as representations of the sensemaking processes of organization members; as part of the stories they construct in order to retain a meaningful relation to their organization.

Sensemaking in Danish HEIs – analytical strategy

The purpose of the present paper is as mentioned to explore the sensemaking processes of academics in universities under pressure in order to investigate how sensemaking affects perception and action. Sensemaking is seen to be driven and accentuated by the feeling of increasing complexity or unfamiliar circumstances, which makes Danish HEIs a good place to start when exploring such processes. The Danish higher education system has in the past decades been subject to a series of comprehensive reforms, doing away with the traditionally very strong collegiate bodies, for example, the Senate, and replaced them with external majority governing boards, and abolished the elected leader system, in favour of an appointment scheme (Pinheiro and Stensaker 2014; Degn 2015; Degn and Sørensen 2015). At the same time, other

reforms targeted the funding scheme, for example, by making the HEIs very dependent on external funding and by implementing a bibliometric performance measurement system, which favoured international publications in high-ranking journals (Aagaard and Mejlgaard 2012).

Following the framework outlined in the previous sections, the central research questions are thus focused on how the academics construct their sense of organizational identity and enact this onto their environment? The analysis is based on a small-scale study academics from three departments – one Natural Science Department, one Social Science and one from the Humanities – at two Danish universities. The two universities are good examples of organizations where sensemaking is likely to be palpable and thus more easily recognizable, as they were both at the time of the data collection undergoing significant changes – one due to a comprehensive restructuring exercise, and one due to significant economic challenges.

The narratives that form the basis of the analysis were collected via 3 focus group interviews where a total of 12 academics participated² (4 in each group). Each focus group comprised academics from one of the case departments. The design of the focus group study was chosen to gain an insight into the specific logics, norms and values that characterize the interaction in the particular department. Each focus group consisted of academics in the early stages of their career as well as more senior staff, as well as a variation in parameters such as gender, age and subject field was sought. The aim of this selection of participants – and departments – was to achieve as much variation as possible, in order to obtain as many perspectives and angles on the research question as possible. The sensemaking processes of junior staff were expected to be different from those of senior staff, as well as differences across disciplines were expected as the professional cultures, departmental traditions, etc. vary across these borders. The aim was thus to capture as much of this variation in the limited empirical data. This strategy is inspired by the phenomenographic tradition, where the goal is to describe the qualitatively different ways in which people experience and think about their world, and the ambition is to go from testing propositions to mapping differences. The aim is to include as many variations as possible, which is even more important in a limited study, to provide the greatest amount of information about the phenomenon of interest (Marton and Booth 1997; Degn 2014). It is however important to bear in mind that the purpose of the study is not to explain but to explore, and it is therefore best described as a critical case study of how sensemaking plays out in organizations under pressure (Flyvbjerg 2006). The limited empirical basis of the study naturally means that the question posed above will not be answered to the fullest, but the hope was to shed some light on the dynamics of sensemaking processes within highly institutionalized organizations under transformation, and point to interesting questions for further research.

The interviews were structured around questions about motivation for going into – and staying in – the career as an academic, about the perceived conditions of academic work, the perception of the new management and governance structures, etc. The participants were encouraged to discuss these themes freely, and in order to inspire discussion rather than dialogue with the interviewer, the sessions were centred on two exercises which functioned as a ‘trigger’ for explicating sensemaking.

The data analysis initially consisted of a first-order coding of the interview transcripts, inspired by the grounded approach to qualitative data analysis (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Boyatzis 1998). The coding focused on the thematic content of the interview sessions, that is, what did they talk about, which resulted in 16 broad categories,

such as for example, *motivation, relations to top-level management, relations to department head*, etc. These broad categories were then reviewed in relation to the sensemaking framework, and the terminology provided by this and the organizational identity literature, which lead to the development of more generalized and theoretically informed categories, in what could be named a second-order coding (Boyatzis 1998; Balogun and Johnson 2005). Examples of this process can be seen in Table 1.

These categories were then used as the foundation of the analysis, which is presented in the following sections.

Identity threats and identification

The first part of the analysis deals with how the academics construct identifiable categories out of the impulses that they are met with in the work environment. The aim was to explore which defining communities are brought out in the sensemaking processes and how they inform the identity creation and maintenance. Specific emphasis is on how these identity constructions are perceived to be threatened by the rising demands and external pressure that characterizes Danish higher education presently. The second-order categories analyzed in this section is thus primarily ‘organizational identity’ and ‘threats on identity’.³

The characteristics that are mentioned throughout the narratives as being important to the respondents in their practice are features such as *being a critical voice, being quality committed, freedom of thought and methods, autonomy, communality and vanity/prestige*; characteristics that are clearly linked to a more generalized perception of organization, rather than the two formal organizations. In fact, the universities as formal organizations seem to be of little importance in the sensemaking processes, and when speaking of enduring, central and distinctive characteristics, the academics seem to refer to ‘academia’ or ‘The University’ as an abstraction as their primary source of identification, rather than their specific place of employment.⁴

[it is] the love and curiosity towards the academic field, if one is to look at what keeps you in this ... the reason why you haven’t gone elsewhere in spite of the challenges you are met with. (FG3-1)

This resonates well with previous studies of academic identity, which have highlighted the salience of the discipline at the expense of the formal organization in identity narratives (Deem 2004; Henkel 2005), and also speaks to the influence of perceptions of professional identity. The study indicates that the role as an academic – and the understandings of the collective associated with it – seems to be more important than organizational membership.

The characteristics that emerge in the narratives comprise the frame through which the respondents interpret the impulses and ideas that they are confronted with. However, it is when looking at how threats are perceived that the identifications and categorizations become particularly visible in the narratives.

External pressure particularly associated with concepts of ‘managerialism’, ‘performance measurement’, etc. emerges throughout the sensemaking narratives as a threat to this perception of identity. These impulses are however primarily constructed as threats by way of their translations, that is, they are seen as threatening because the political system have interpreted them in a specific way, as in the quote below where the respondent speaks of New Public Management:

Table 1. Excerpt from summary table.

1. Order coding – 16 categories	2. Order coding – 4 categories	Definition of category	Example
Relation to department head	Attitudes towards management	Statements describing the perception of and relation to the local department head	... But I don't have the impression that there is – from the local management – a clear-cut focus on publications in relation to career strategy. At least I remember they told me that ... [...] there were many parameters. But he [department head] is under pressure ... I mean, he is not the one determining that. (FG2-3)
Management tasks	Attitudes towards management	Statements concerning the legitimate tasks and responsibilities of university management/managers	I have written [as part of the exercise] that it is to be the external face of the university, plus ceremony ... he should also sometimes ... hand out diplomas or whatever. And then I think that his main task is to prioritize resources for the faculties. ... Yes, I also wrote the political game, which is also important in this context ... doing some positioning and these things. (FG1-3 and FG1-4)
Coping	Behavioural responses	Statements referring to how interviewees handle (cross-)pressure and identity threats	My way of navigating in this to myself is that I just don't think about it ... I do sometimes ... sometimes I might think that I am so tired of all this, but if I start doing it and then have to spend my time getting annoyed with it, then that is almost a full-time job getting annoyed with all these initiatives coming from above. (FG2)
Motivation – staying on	Behavioural responses	Descriptions of motivation for staying in academia	The attraction is, I guess, also that there is room for immersion. If you hear what your former fellow students are doing then ... faster deadlines and so on. I mean, we still have the possibility of diving into things ... For me, at least, that is a big advantage of being in this business ... not that I have been in any other business. (FG2-4)

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

1. Order coding – 16 categories	2. Order coding – 4 categories	Definition of category	Example
Perceptions of ‘the university’	Organizational identity	Statements describing the ‘university’ as an abstraction (the good university) and its core functions	... we sometimes feel that the whole logic has been turned around ... I mean before, we had a feeling that the administration, the secretariat and the management in some sense was there for our sake ... that was what the university was about, that was what we were doing: research and teaching. (FG3-2)
Organizational culture	Organizational identity	Statements concerning the cultural features of the workplace, for example, norms of attendance, traditions for interaction between groups, etc.	I mean, when I was hired ... there was a meeting once a week, in a room no bigger than this ... and then everyone actually came. It was a bit crowded, but ... even the PhD students, some of them came, and we sort of sat there and talked about things and it was actually there, that we got a lot of information. And it is not like that anymore, at all. (FG1-3)
External pressure	Threats on identity	Statements describing perceptions of pressure	Well, of course you are affected ... both by your own experiences, but you also follow the debate that is going on ... you are also influenced by the information that come from that [professional magazines]. (FG1-2)
Respect and recognition	Threats on identity	Statements describing (lack of) recognition and respect and the significance of this	Some of the steering mechanisms can quickly become problematic, if they do not have the respect or understanding of the academic field. (FG3-1)

I think what frustrates me a lot is that they have not gone all the way. Now, I came from 15 years in the private sector [...] and there I was used to doing performance measurement, and setting up targets and ... and then we also discussed salaries based on the performance of the year ... But here it is like they have made this hybrid-thing, where you are measured on some things, but not on all things, and it is very hard to determine why it is exactly these things that are measured and not others ... It seems we have gotten an absurdum out of it ... (FG1-4)

New Public Management is thereby not necessarily seen as a threat, however, the political and organizational translation and interpretation of this set of ideas might. This is especially visible when the academics address the bibliometric performance measurement system, and the increasing pressure for international publication (i.e. performance measurement and management). The system is constructed as a political interpretation of an international tendency and is clearly seen as a threat, especially to the 'quality commitment' characteristic.

This is really where we have a schism, because [...] we are suffering pressure on the resource side and on all these measurement things that have come in. Because before, it was perfectly fine if [...] an employee said: now I'm going to focus on writing an educational book for a couple of years and do some good teaching. And nobody came and beat him over the head, because he didn't produce his 2,5 papers a year. Today ... you sit in the middle of a counseling session with a student and you think: well, I could have written half a paper. (FG1-4)

However, another interesting trend is that a significant amount of identity threats are seen as stemming from the formal organization, that is, the specific university, and its interpretation of external pressure:

And that is one of the things I find most frustrating, that is that the upper levels ... It seems sometimes that the upper levels have no idea what research is and what it is about. And they have some ideas about managing it, without having a sense of what drives the actual researchers. (FG2-1)

Internal pressure, as a result of the organizations' interpretations and translation of external pressure, is in this way seen as a bigger threat than the 'initial' impulse. These perceived threats on identity stemming from inside the organization are seen as much more 'serious' and 'hurtful' as they are linked more closely to the personal identification of the academics.

... right now it [organizational change] is happening with such force and with a – in our opinion – lack of understanding and insight and lack of respect for disciplinary traditions etc., that you feel completely detached. And there is a long way to go from such a self-governance culture, where you actually feel like the core and ... just suddenly being these 'laborers' ...'. (FG3-1)

The experience of these threats as more severe than the external ones is clearly linked to the personal identification with the organization and thus the link between personal and organizational identity. Some accounts almost resemble stories of betrayal, when speaking of the initiatives of the top-level management of the organizations:

That experience that ... the shocking experience that one of our own ... I always imagined that they had their hands tied; I mean that it was all dictated from above ... this standardization ... It was just going to be implemented, and 'if you want to keep your job, you'll

do it, or we find someone else' ... But of course, it is naïve to think it is that simple, but I think I lured myself into thinking it, because I simply couldn't understand ... the lack of understanding (FG3-1)

Even though not all accounts are this dramatic and personal, most respondents demonstrate the same tendency to perceive threats stemming from their own organization as more severe and indeed more threatening than external ones.

These upper levels are often described as political, as detached from academic practice and as lacking legitimacy, indicating again that the formal organization is less connected to the salient frames used in the sensemaking process. The relationship with these 'upper levels' is often characterized by lack of recognition, appreciation and respect:

... the further you get up to that political level, the Dean's level, there you have the feeling that they simply have not sense of what we are doing. And they have no respect for it, and that's what makes you tired right? And demotivated (FG3-3)

It is evident that the sensegiving attempts of the top-level management are dismissed in the sensemaking processes of the employees. This dismissal is as the quotes indicate founded in a perception of irrelevance; that the cues that the sensegiving projects are perceived to be irrelevant to the frames that are important to the respondents. This also results in a disassociation in identity between the academic staff and the top-level management layer, that is, they are not like us, we do not understand their logic and they do not understand ours.

The closest level of management, that is, the department head, is very often 'protected' from the negative categorizations of the other management levels, and characterized as 'one of us' or 'not a real manager'

... the problem is that he needs to be protected right? Because he can't [...] ... He is trying to be a Department Head as in the old days, to be everywhere and listening to people ... And that's it, a Department Head needs to know his people. There shouldn't be more employees than he will be able to know ... know their story (FG3-1 and FG3-2)

The perception of management thereby also seems influenced by the academic frames, with its notions of 'communality' and 'autonomy'. This indicates that the academics construct very clear boundaries between who 'we' are and who 'they' are, which resonates well with Bernstein's (1996) claim that identities are strongest and most stable in within the context of strong classification. It is clear in this way that the top-level management – and by extension the formal organization – is excluded from the defining community and thereby more easily dismissed as irrelevant. There is in this way no doubt that identity threats are present, and that they affect the sensemaking processes of the academics. However, as mentioned, sensemaking is also assumed to impact action, that is, the behavioural responses to threats.

Responding to threats

Sensemaking processes enact and legitimize certain types of actions, and the following part of the analysis will demonstrate that there seems to be several types of responses to the perceived threats, which might be placed on a continuum from continuation of

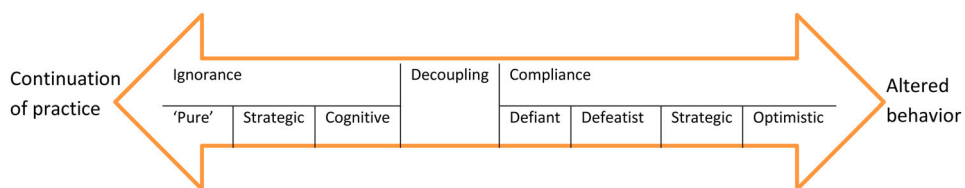


Figure 1. Responses to threats.

practice (ignorance) to altered behaviour (compliance). The category analyzed in this section is thus primarily ‘behavioural responses’. In Figure 1, the types of legitimized responses found in the sensemaking narratives are summarized.

Ignorance and defiance

One way of responding to identity threats – and disruptions of practice in general – is through ignorance. This response is, according the sensemaking framework, a common initial response when disorder or ambiguity is encountered, because it naturally requires the least amount of alteration (Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld 2005). However, as the quote below indicates, ignorance can also be used strategically – in order to destabilize the proposed new order of things, that is, the sensegiving of the managers (Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991):

It’s again a question of co-ownership. Because people are creatures of habit. They will do what they are used to. And all these new structural changes, it takes energy to work with it. To invest in it so to speak ... And if you don’t think it makes sense, and if you cannot see yourself in it, but find it counterproductive and so on ... well then you just continue doing what you’re doing until someone says: You can’t do that, or you shouldn’t have done that. And you sort of check out and say: well, that’s fine, you can have all your changes, but I will keep going as I do. And then we will see when things crash ... (FG3-1)

A second type of ignorance might be labeled cognitive ignorance:

My way of navigating in this to myself is that I just don’t think about it [organizational changes] ... I do sometimes ... sometimes I might think that I am so tired of all this, but if I start doing it and then have to spend my time getting annoyed with it, then that is almost a full-time job getting annoyed with all these initiatives coming from above. (FG2-2)

This response might resemble compliance, as it indicates changed behaviour, that is, in compliance with the initiatives from top-level management, but cognitively the strategy is to ignore the disturbances and thereby not let it influence your sensemaking process. These responses are linked with minor disturbances, which are perceived to be ‘senseless’, that is, they are perceived to be very different and irrelevant to the frames that are used in the sensemaking process – ‘you don’t think it makes sense, and you cannot see yourself in it’.

Decoupling

Decoupling is another type of response to the perceived threats:

we can find our way out of this, I mean, then you can say: if I have three projects, Monday from 8 till 14 I work on this project, Tuesday on this project and so on. I could do that, and then you could see in my calendar that I have worked on it. So, we will find our way, if you try to register these things. I don't think they will get anything out of it, and it will just be a nuisance to us. (FG2-2)

Decoupling is a common response to change initiatives described in organizational literature, which lies somewhere between continuation of practice and altered behaviour. Decoupling describes the practice of creating gaps between talk and action or formal policies and action (Brunsson 1986). In the present study, decoupling as a response to perceived threats seems to appear when ignorance is not an option, that is, when pressure is too strong to ignore, but the disturbance is still seen as incongruent with salient frames, that is, the academic values mentioned above.

Compliance

The final type of response that emerged in the sensemaking narratives was compliance or altered behaviour. This response also took many different forms, ranging from defiant or defeatist compliance to strategic or optimistic compliance.

The defiant and defeatist compliance responses lie closer to the decoupling responses described above, as they describe a type of cognitive decoupling, that is, creating a gap between thought and action. The salient frames used to make sense of the new ideas and impulses are clearly challenged, but the answer seems to be to project a defiant attitude towards the disturbance, while altering the behaviour associated with it. The mental model is in this way not changed, but legitimate or necessary actions are:

But now we just go for those points [in the publication model] ... so in that way I think it has something counterproductive in it ... the research, the quality is reduced, as we deal less and less with each other in these point-systems and administrative systems that are built ... (FG2-1)

You try to use the data in a way that you haven't done before, to 'pour it' into many types of channels. And that might also be a good strategy if you want to stay in the system, because if you don't deliver those publications ... you probably won't get hired. (FG2-2)

At the other end of the continuum, we see responses that could be termed strategic or optimistic compliance. These types of compliance all imply an alteration of behaviour and also to some extent a change in sensemaking frame. This indicates a movement towards a change in identity perception – 'it's a part of my world' and 'a normal part of the circumstances'.

That's my strategy anyway; I mean I need to learn to write articles [as opposed to books]. That's what I'm assessed on, end of story. Then perhaps, some of the articles that you'll write, time could have been better spent, but I mean ... I think that is a premise you have when you are young ... [...] And then maybe your boss says that he doesn't care so much about articles, but I have chosen to completely ignore that. It's fine that he has that strategy, but for me ... it has had a huge impact on the way I disseminate my research. (FG2-2)

But there is still this pressure for publication. So that is obviously something that's always on your mind ... [...] But at the same time, then this has been a part of my world

throughout my research career, so it's not something I ... It's just a normal part of the circumstances, so it is not something I think about anymore (FG1-2)

Discussion and conclusions

As the previous sections have shown, the perception of salient identity characteristics certainly frame sensemaking processes for the academics studied here. However, the identity of the formal organization – University of A or B – plays a very minor role, and is subordinated the perception of what it means to be an academic. It seems then that the perceived threats bias the academic staff towards identification and association with a more general or professional category as the primary source of identification, that is, selective identification and categorization (Elsbach and Kramer 1996; Hogg and Abrams 1990).

Interestingly, however, this selective identification and categorization does not seem to be a strategy to avoid or reduce threats, that is, by highlighting memberships to unthreatened groups or roles, as the valued characteristics are evidently seen as being under pressure. The academics do not seek to reduce the degree of dissonance felt between the perception of desired identity – what and who we should be as an organization – and the perception of construed external image – what and who others think we are as an organization. Instead, they actively try to make sense of this dissonance by categorizing the disturbing elements as being irrelevant measured by salient scales, for example, when claiming that ‘the upper levels have no idea what research is and what it is about’. This type of categorization thus also acts as justification for certain types of responses, for example, ignorance or decoupling. This finding adds important knowledge to the field of organizational identification (e.g. Elsbach and Kramer 1996; Ravasi and Schultz 2006; He and Brown 2013), as it points to the different strategies for identification and suggests that the mechanisms behind identification are very complex, and should be studied and conceptualized further.

A related tendency that emerged from the study is that the sensegiving attempt of top-level management is seen as more threatening than the ‘original’ impulses, for example, new public management ideas. Sensegiving, as mentioned, describes the intentional communication of a vision or plan, in a way that maximizes the possibility of success (Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991; Maitlis and Lawrence 2007), and in the present study it is clear that the sensegiving of the top-level management in the two organizations is seen to be quite at odds with the frames that are used to make sense on ‘production floor level’. On the other hand, the department head level still seems to have a certain degree of legitimacy in terms of sensegiving; that is, the department head may ‘give the same sense’ as the top-level management, but since he/she is seen as a part of the academic staff/as more legitimate, they is ‘excused’ or protected from the negative categorizations that the top-level managers are suffering. This indicates that the boundaries – or perhaps the front line – between ‘us’ and ‘them’ have moved significantly, possibly due to the massive transformations within the Danish higher education system. Where boundaries were previously drawn between institution and state, the demarcation line now seems to be constructed at the level of departments, thus linking the formal organization more with the political level than with the academic one.

This finding could prove important to discussions of whether universities are still best described as loosely coupled organizations (Weick 1976) or whether the

reformation of HEIs in order to make them resemble private enterprises have resulted in more tightly coupled organizations (De Boer, Enders, and Leisyte 2007). The present study however indicates that the coupling between political system and management might be tighter – or is at least experienced by the academics as being tighter, but the coupling to the production level has become even looser. This could have significant implications for the understanding of how for example, reforms are implemented in HEIs, as it both challenges the rational, linear implementation perspective, but also adds perspective to the non-linear perspective, for example, expressed in the ‘Scandinavian’ institutionalist school of thought, where focus is on how ideas and translation processes influence implementation and policy processes (Brunsson and Olsen 1993; Czarniawska and Sevón 1996, 2005; Czarniawska 2008; Sahlin and Wedlin 2008).

The present study adds empirical knowledge and insights to this perspective by pointing to how micro-level sensemaking impact the symbolic structure of the organization, and thereby how organizational translations are ‘re-translated’ within the organizations themselves.

Another aim of the study was to explore the behavioural implications of sensemaking processes and identity considerations. The analysis revealed several response strategies, ranging from no change to altered behaviour. These response patterns speak to the diversity of actions that the identity constructions allow for. The literature on responding to identity threats in an organizational context have so far been primarily concerned with either organizational (collective) responses (e.g. Oliver 1991; Ravasi and Schultz 2006) or with the cognitive implications for individuals (Elsbach and Kramer 1996), but the sensemaking perspective provides a more explicit focus on how this identity work enacts a certain order back into the environment of the sense-maker, setting the premises for future actions by legitimizing certain patterns of behaviour.

Avenues for further research

The study in this way, despite its small scale, makes an important contribution to the conceptualization of the dynamics of social and personal identity, by exploring how these identity construction processes lead to action – not solely to cognitive re-affirmation or alteration.

Further studies are however needed to explore the conditions under which the various responses come about and the factors influencing this. The hope however is that the findings of this study might serve as a conceptual tool for such studies of the behaviour of academic staff in changing organizations. The behavioural model in Figure 1 might as such be constructively used to explore specific situations wherein certain responses occur, in order to qualify our understanding of the conditions that foster and hinder certain types of behaviour. Further studies of the conditions under which the different responses emerge would be of significant value, both to higher education professionals and to scholars of organizational change and behaviour.

One particularly important question that arises in the wake of the present study pertains to the matter of incentives and reward systems. The analysis revealed that some types of pressure – or some ideas – for example, the implementation of bibliometric measures, are very likely to influence the sensemaking processes of the academic – and that this pressure seems to bypass the sensegiving attempts of the managers, even when this is more congruent with the salient identity characteristics than the new idea:

And then maybe your boss says that he doesn't care so much about articles, but I have chosen to completely ignore that. It's fine that he has that strategy, but for me ... it has had a huge impact on the way I disseminate my research. (FG2-2)

This means that even though the possibility – and even the support – for decoupling or ignorance is present, compliance is still opted for under certain circumstances. One possible explanation for this might be that we are seeing a movement towards a redefinition of some of the identity characteristics due to the emergence of new ideas. This would be consistent with the fact that this response was predominant in the junior staff, that is, the ones who had not developed a full and coherent professional/academic identity. The study points to the possibility that younger researchers may have more 'penetrable' identities, making it easier for them to integrate new ideas into their on-going identity construction. Further studies are however needed in order to explain why this is the case – and indeed dig deeper into how behaviour changes. What this analysis cannot tell us is how incentives and rewards impact this behavioural change – if at all.

Along the same line, the findings point to the importance of looking more closely at the complex construction that is 'the academic identity' (cf. Henkel 2000; Ylijoki and Ursin 2013). As the analysis revealed, the academics would rather struggle to make sense of being an academic than change the perception of self to a more un-contested and unproblematic identity construction. On the other hand, the performance management systems seem to have a transformational effect on the identity of particularly younger researchers. This highlights that there are several dynamics at work in the identity constructions of 'production floor academics' and further research into these processes would be very valuable, both to policy-makers, higher education management and scholars of academic practice.

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Notes

1. For an overview of the national debate, see <http://professorvaelde.blogspot.dk/> (in Danish).
2. The selection of participants in the focus groups was conducted with aid from the local department secretariat, which was contacted by the interviewer and then pointed out possible participants. These potential participants were then contacted and asked to participate. A total of 25 potential participants were contacted in this process.
3. The narratives are numbered, for transparency in the following way: FGn refers to the focus group interview (1: the Natural Science group from University B, 2: the Social Science group from University B, and 3: the Humanities group from University A). The number after the hyphen refers to the participant in the focus group (1–4).
4. Note that the respondents were never asked explicitly to list the central, enduring and distinctive characteristics of their organization, but that these characteristics emerged in the discussions concerning the motivation for becoming and remaining in an academic career and concerning the terms and conditions of their own practice and daily work.

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