# Organizing is Both a Verb and a Noun: Weick Meets Whitehead

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## Abstract

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Weick's work on organizing and sensemaking has contributed significantly towards efforts in organization theory to explore organization as process. His discussion of the relationship between verbs and nouns in particular has served to highlight central dynamic features of processes. Weick's conception of the verb–noun relationship is one of tension between levels of analysis. We propose, drawing upon the work of Alfred North Whitehead, to draw attention to the formation of nouns and how verbs shape nouns and vice versa. We argue that Weick's work may be extended by looking more closely at the selection of verbs and nouns, i.e. by looking at how selection may be made on the basis of their relationality, thus allowing for their mutual transformation. We illustrate our point using the imagery provided by the 'pseudopod'.

**Keywords:** pseudopod, process theory, Whitehead, Weick

## Process Thinking in Organization Studies

Process thinking has existed since before the early Greek philosophers and continues to puzzle philosophers, as well as natural and social scientists. In early contributions to social science, both Weber and Marx were aware of the importance of process in organizations. Weber developed his theory of bureaucratic structure precisely around the processes of decision making, thinking that the structuring of organizations into formal routines would influence the processes that tied public bodies to rulers as well as to citizens. Marx, in a different vein, focused on labour process as the unfolding logic of productive forces. Weick (1979) is an early contributor towards the theorizing of process in organization studies, particularly by virtue of his analysis of the interaction between actions and meaning creation, what he refers to as sensemaking (Weick 1995). Drawing upon writers within philosophy such as William James and Alfred Schutz and systems theorists such as Heinz von Foerster, Geoffrey Vickers and Gregory Bateson, he probed into the dynamics of organizing processes, notably the relationship between the more fluid and the more stable aspects of organizing. This work is the basis for the verb–noun distinction, a central part of his work (Weick 1979; 1995).

During the last few decades, a number of works have merged to debate the nature of process views and their implications for organization and management theory (e.g. Pettigrew 1987, 1997; Chia 1999; Langley 1999; Tsoukas and Chia 2002; Styhre 2004; Van de Ven and Poole 2005; Carlsen 2006). Some of these

contributions, while referring to Weick's work on process in organization theory, tend to draw their inspiration from the works of process philosophers such as Henri Bergson, William James and Alfred North Whitehead. For example, James and Bergson figure prominently in Tsoukas and Chia's (2002) discussion of the notion of organizational becoming, Styhre (2004) draws upon Bergson in his discussion of knowledge, Carlsen (2006) draws largely upon James in his discussion of identities in organizations, and Chia (1999) makes considerable use of Whitehead and Bergson in his discussion of a metaphysical perspective on organizational change and transformation.

Process basically signifies movement in the sense of flow. Most people may associate flow with physically fluid substances, such as water. Flow, however, may equally refer to activity, information, as well as the passing of time. Process thinking is basically a way of thinking about the world while acknowledging the inherent gradualness of the phenomena under study. This does not necessarily impose on a study the assumption that everything undergoes gradual change. Most studies that could be called 'processual' may assume, explicitly or implicitly, that some of the things under study do not change, at least for some part of the time. Rather than dictate the pervasiveness of impermanence, process thinking directs attention to the analytical distinctions that we actually draw between continuity and discontinuity, between constancy and change, between entity and flow.

In the discussion of organization as process, a key point relates to the analytical conception of *process* versus *entity*, which Van de Ven and Poole (2005) single out as a fundamental ontological distinction in the study of organization. When organization is seen from what Chia (1999) refers to as an 'entitative' conception of reality, process is conceptualized as the interaction between stable entities. These entities (such as actors, roles or technologies) may interact in a variety of ways, but analytically speaking they remain intact. Drawing upon Chia and Langley (2005), this is what we might call a 'weak' process view. It is 'weak' in the sense that the a priori assumption is of the world as consisting of entities, whose interactions constitute processes. In other words, processes take place whenever entities, such as individuals, interact. In this sense, individuals are seen as existing ontologically prior to the processes they engage in; they give shape to processes, while remaining intact throughout their participation in the processes.

Writers tending towards a 'strong' process view, on the other hand, work from an ontological viewpoint of the world *as* process, where entities, as far as they are seen to exist, are products of processes rather than existing prior to them. If anything, they are what Rescher (2003: 53) refers to as 'manifestations of processes'. 'Strong' process views draw their inspiration from early 20th-century process philosophers such as Bergson, James and Whitehead. Among the works in this tradition, a consensus exists that process is a principal category of ontological description (Rescher 2003: 51), which is not an assumption found with weak process views.

There is some divergence, however, at the level of epistemology, and particularly concerning assumptions about the ability of humans to usefully think 'processually'. Here we find some parallels between Bergson and Weick, both of whom differ from Whitehead. Bergson argued that intuition takes us beyond mere representations by allowing us to enter into reality, which he saw as

'uninterrupted continuity' (Bergson 1988: 208). In a similar way, Weick's argument, influenced by James's notion of 'streams of consciousness' and Schutz's (1967) idea of 'pure duration' (Weick 1995: 23–24), leads him to advocate the use of verbs as a means of accepting 'life as ongoing events into which they are thrown, and less likely to think of it as turf to be defended, levels of hierarchy to be ascended, or structures to be upended' (Weick 1995: 188). The quality of the perception of process is described using the term 'mindfulness' (Weick and Roberts 1993; Weick and Sutcliffe 2001). When people are mindful, they continually review and refine expectations in relation to events and context.

Bergson has the somewhat idealistic view that humans could, and should, become better at perceiving reality as fluid. His view has some resonance with Weick's (1979: 43) argument that researchers, as well as managers, should become better at thinking in terms of process: 'It is the very fact that processes elude both researchers and managers, which makes it more important for us to suggest ways in which people can gain at least intellectual control over this property of organizations.' Thus we sense that Bergson, like Weick, desires to find ways to represent processes and thereby avoid the dominance of the entitative perception alluded to by Chia. In Weick's writings it is particularly through the language of sensemaking that the processes may be perceived by actors:

'The language of sensemaking captures the realities of agency, flow, equivocality, transience, reaccomplishment, unfolding, and emergence, realities that are often obscured by the language of variables, nouns, quantities, and structures.' (Weick et al. 2005: 410)

To remedy this situation, Weick (1979: 44) urges us to stamp out nouns. But working exclusively with verbs has its problems, which is a point at which Whitehead differs from both Bergson and Weick, and which marks divergence at the level of epistemology. Whitehead would agree with Weick when the latter argues that the reality of process implies impermanence and that the use of nouns distorts the understanding of this reality, and Weick's argument fits well with Whitehead's much cited warning against 'the fallacy of misplaced concreteness' (Whitehead [1929] 1978: 18). Misplaced concretion becomes a fallacy when nouns begin to live their own lives, separated and disconnected from the process that created them.

However, Whitehead would add that entities (nouns) form an essential part of our sensemaking and, more importantly, that it is the *forming* of the nouns (Whitehead [1920: 33] referred to 'abstractions') and their subsequent implications for the process that we should focus our attention on. Hence, while Weick argues that we should stamp out nouns, Whitehead argues that nounmaking is necessary for human sensemaking, and that we are incapable of thinking purely in terms of process. It *is* erroneous to turn nouns into real entities which are independent of the processes that make them because this leads to 'the fallacy of misplaced concreteness'. Hence, even according to a strong process view such as that proposed by Whitehead, nounmaking is an indispensable ingredient for coming to grips with processes, the point being that we make nouns *from* processes in order to make sense *of* processes.

While Whitehead acknowledged, along with Bergson and Weick, that actors may have an intuitive *perception* of process, he did not believe that humans are

able to go beyond an entitative *understanding* of process. According to Whitehead, we freeze processes into entities, precisely in order to make sense of the fluid, 'real' world. In other words, humans may live in a processual world, but they cope in a processual world by means of an entitative understanding of process; they do so because although they may have an *intuitive perception* of process, their understanding of process is nevertheless invariably *entitative*. Thus, rather than saying that humans should become better at thinking processually, Whitehead chose instead to focus on the ways in which entitative thinking forms part of processes. Importantly to Whitehead, however, entities, or abstractions, emerge *from* processes and enter *into* processes in turn. In other words, abstractions are part and parcel of processes and cannot be detached from them.

## Process Illustrated by the Pseudopod

Sensemaking (Weick 1995) is part of the organizing process, intertwined with actions of organizing. Weick's sensemaking analysis corresponds somewhat to what is called the 'linguistic turn' in organization studies (Alvesson and Kärreman 2000), in that his analysis emphasizes the interactive talk and the resources of language in organizing processes (Weick et al. 2005). The latter authors suggest in particular that sensemaking is an issue of language, talk and communication, whereby situations, organizations and environments are *talked* into existence. Whereas on one level, Weick's work focuses on the intersubjective production of meaning (Rhodes and Brown 2005), on another level he draws upon the structure of language as a lens through which to make sense of organization. This is seen most clearly in the distinction he makes between verbs and nouns, which is central to his work.

   To suggest that verbs and nouns are needed to describe process is perhaps to express a necessity, but it remains a crude characterization of process. If we were to move beyond simply saying that process descriptions are made of verbs and nouns, we could explore how verbs and nouns relate to one another, or rather how they transform into one another, which is the sort of interplay that Cooper (2005) refers to as 'relationality'. Cooper suggests that 'relationality is the continuous reminder of the latent as an invisible presence that motivates the movement of being' (Cooper 2005: 1706). Translating this into the verb–noun relationship serves to continually remind us of how verbs and nouns form part of one another.

   Both Weick and Whitehead explore the verb–noun interplay, that is to say, the interplay between the more fluid and the more stable, but in different ways. In his work on sensemaking Weick grants that verbs and nouns influence each other (Weick 1995), but they operate, he says, in a state of mutual tension, in a kind of dialectical relationship. For Whitehead, on the other hand, the verb and the noun are inextricably interlinked: abstractions emerge from experience in a seamless process, which makes them parts of a complex unity. Herein lies, we think, the potential for using Whitehead's thinking to extend Weick's work; by cutting verbs and nouns from the same cloth, we are in a better position to understand how they may transform into one another, and hence, constitute together a recursive view of organization. A recursive view expresses essentially

Figure 1.
The Pseudopod
(source: Von Foerster
1967)
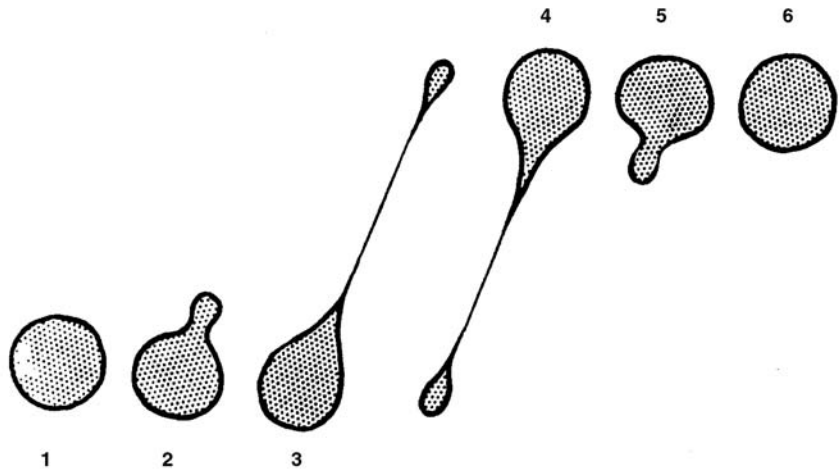


the interaction between the more stable and the more fluid. We return to this point at the end of the paper.

The extent to which a simple verb–noun distinction is crude when it comes to understanding the intricacies of process is demonstrated by the example of the pseudopod. The movement of the pseudopod, shown schematically in Figure 1, illustrates how the relationship between entity and process is one of seamless transition. Weick employs the pseudopod in order to visualize the fluid relationship between verb and noun, which is an example he borrows from the cybernetician and philosopher Heinz von Foerster (1967), who uses the imagery to make a distinction between the explanatory powers of *verbs* and *names*. Von Foerster suggests that names are linguistic representations of spatial abstracts, whereas verbs are linguistic representations of temporal abstracts. His point is that without the abstracting power of both names and verbs, motion and change could not be conceptualized, which is much the same point as Rescher makes (2003), although Rescher refers to verbs and *nouns*, as does Weick.

What we see in Figure 1 is that the unicellular animal moves from one spot to another by pulling itself up (stages 1–6) through its extended capillary (tubular pseudopod). More precisely, we see a sequence of six manifestations of quite distinct shapes. In stage 1 we see the animal as a static entity, which in stage 2 becomes dynamic and moreover does so by changing shape in the direction of its eventual new locus. Stages 3 and 4 consist chiefly of movement towards that new locus, which allows the animal gradually to become an entity in a new locus (stages 5 and 6). With reference to the figure, Weick points out that the spatial aspects of the animal are captured by nouns ('animal', 'spot', 'pseudopod', 'capillary'), whereas its temporal aspects are handled by verbs ('moving', 'extending', 'pulling').

Von Foerster points out (as does Weick) that the animal could not be described without the use of both temporal (verbs) and spatial (nouns) terms. Importantly, however, the 'actual' movement between noun and verb is seamless. Stages 1 and 6 do not make sense without verbs, just as stages 3 and 4 do not make sense

without nouns. Note that the animal's movement from one spot to another can be described as 'pulling itself up through the extended capillary'. The expression 'pulling itself up', however, does not make sense without reference to 'the animal'. Thus the movement defines the animal and the animal in turn defines the movement. In stage 2, the pseudopod as entity gives sense to its movement. Conversely, in stage 3, the movement gives rise to its new location in timespace.

In other words, we are looking at a situation where verb and noun are inextricably interlinked, where each gives sense (meaning) to the other. Furthermore, we are looking at a situation where entity is not just entity and where movement is not just movement, but where entity and movement form a unity. It is, for all intents and purposes, a hybrid situation, which may be expressed by the term *relationality* used by Cooper (2005). Relationality, according to Cooper, 'makes us see the world as a complex network of active connections rather than visibly independent and identifiable forms and objects'.

As Weick points out, the pseudopod is useful because it reveals the intricacies of processes. Processes elude us precisely because they involve simultaneously impermanence and stability. Perhaps the most difficult task is to accurately describe this composite state of verb and noun. The pseudopod example illustrates that a simple separation between the two is by no means obvious, and in so doing it represents a persistent analytical dilemma posed by separation of entity and process. Bateson (1972: 18), for example, illustrates the dilemma by referring to the blind man and the stick:

'If you ask anybody about the localization and boundaries of the self, these confusions are immediately displayed. Or consider a blind man with a stick. Where does the blind man's self begin? At the tip of the stick? At the handle of the stick? Or at some point halfway up the stick? These questions are nonsense, because the stick is a pathway along which differences are transmitted under transformation, so that to draw a delimiting line *across* this pathway is to cut off a part of the systemic circuit which determines the blind man's locomotion.'

A notable subtlety which can be observed in relation to the pseudopod example, however, is that movement is not to be construed as *emanating from* the entity. Rather, as mentioned above, according to a strong process view which emphasizes process over entity, processes are not to be interpreted as actions *carried out* by entities, but rather as actions which *form entities*. Therefore, in Bateson's example of the blind man and the stick, the movement would be seen as forming the man and the stick, and not vice versa.

Whitehead's work is important precisely because he assumes verbs and nouns to be inextricably interlinked, as illustrated by the pseudopod example. Because the pseudopod depicts the hybrid character of movement and entity, we use the pseudopod example below to show that, although Weick and Whitehead might be seen to differ, Whitehead's conception of process may nevertheless be used to further Weick's ideas about the verb–noun relationship.

### Weick on Verbs

In his 1979 book *The Social Psychology of Organizing*, Weick situates the analysis at the level of actions; he sees 'organizing' as the interlocking of

behaviours, an image he borrows from Buckley (1967). Interlocking behaviours are intelligible to actors and, moreover, they form 'grammars' that help actors not only to make sense of past actions and events but also to draw causal maps whereby their past experiences guide their future actions.

Weick connects organizing to verbs because verbs are crucial to process descriptions. The interlocking takes place through actions that connect actors: 'Connections among nouns are the stuff of process,' argues Weick (1979: 44). The thrust of Weick's empirical work lies in his seeing actions as central in the study of person-to-person interaction. For example, in his studies of groups such as firefighters (Weick 1993) and flight crews (Weick 1990), Weick shows how situations such as the rapid spread of a fire can trigger actions and behaviours based on group members' interpretations of how to act, and, furthermore, how actions and interpretations propagate among group members. In situations where rapid reaction is a matter of life or death, dilemmas about what action to take may be acute. In aircraft emergencies, the meaning that flight crews attach to information may be crucial to the outcome of the situation.

Weick also highlights the volatility of situations which call for *organized (learned) behaviour*, wherein actors may choose to stick to prescribed behaviour even when circumstances may dictate that they should do otherwise, i.e. that they should follow their intuition. For example, for a firefighter in a life-threatening situation, it is problematic to drop one's heavy tools and run, because to do so is contrary to one's training. In the case, some firemen ignored an explicit order to drop their tools, behaved according to their training, and perished (Weick 1993, 1996). However, in other situations, Weick shows that the reverse may be the case; therefore, a major achievement of Weick in his studies of groups is that he shows how urgency, instinctive trust between members and the instantaneous codification of cues create opposition to prescriptions of formal, organized behaviour. Therefore, groups in such situations may opt for a verb-based rather than a noun-based understanding, the latter representing elements of formally prescribed behaviour, such as appropriate (learned) routines or learned models of organizing (March 1981).

However, a note is warranted on power in groups. At first sight, Weick's conception of groups appears consensual because it ignores aspects of power. Weick assumes that social structures are formed through interlocking behaviours rather than through a priori commitments to norms or values. The interlocking, however, is potentially unstable and might just as easily result in decoupling. As he shows in several of his studies (e.g. Weick 1990, 1993), equivocality may lead to temporary consensual actions based on learned responses, whereas uncertainty may lead to the temporary dissolution of norms. In a similar way, power is not to be taken a priori as an enduring quality of social groups, because it is always subject to change.

## Weick on Nouns

To be sure, Weick has not ignored the role of nouns in processes. As he points out, actors tend to initiate and make sense of organizing processes using nouns

(Weick 1979). Elsewhere (Weick et al. 2005) the word 'labels' is used, but we shall assume for this paper that labels and nouns are synonymous. According to Weick, the ontological reality in which we act is made of verbs, whereas the epistemological reality in which we make sense of things is made of nouns.

In his studies, particularly of emergency situations, Weick illustrates how patterns of organizing may switch rapidly from intuition to established models of organization, such as routines, which may surface and guide behaviour. This may happen when, at some point in organizing processes, equivocal information needs to be treated as unambiguous. When information is taken to be unequivocal, it becomes a given 'fact' with a label on it, and therefore less attention is focused on the actual process of actions and behaviour. Or, as Weick says, 'New information gets sorted into existing pools (variables) and channels (causal relations) and deepens these pools and channels' (Weick 1979: 211). As he illustrates in his study of firefighters, the patterns of organizing may swing from being spontaneous to being routine; therefore, instead of taking potentially life-saving instinctive action that deviates from the learned routine, the firefighters may stick to the learned routine. In other words, when one is confronted with choosing between a spontaneous action and a learned routine, i.e. between a verb and a noun, one sometimes chooses the noun.

In other words, the situation is one where actors impose 'entitative' (Chia 1999) labels or vocabularies on a fluid reality, which may succeed in controlling behaviour to a greater or lesser degree:

'[People pull from several different vocabularies of organizations] … But all of these words that matter invariably come up short. They impose discrete *labels* on subject matter that is *continuous*. There is always slippage between words and what they refer to. Words approximate the territory; they never map it perfectly.' (Weick 1995: 107) [emphasis added]

According to Chia (2000), by means of such imposition we construct our world of relative stability from a world where everything is fluid. Similarly, other organization theory scholars make this point; for example, Orlikowski and Yates (2002) illustrate how actors enact their notions of linear time in a processual reality. It must be remembered, however, that when such distinctions are drawn, the nature of the noun used and the process by which it evolved are commonly overlooked. We prefer to think that some entitative conceptions are closer to a fluid situation than others, although they may never 'map the territory' perfectly, to use Weick's expression.

## Weick on the Verb–Noun Relationship: A Tensional View

A crucial link is the connections made between verb-based and noun-based understanding of processes. Weick suggests that organizing lies in the transition between what he refers to as the 'intersubjective' and 'generic subjectivity' (Weick 1995a: 72–73); that is, it lies between the person-to-person level and the structural level. The intersubjective takes place in direct communication between persons, largely unmediated by structural mechanisms such as rules, habits and routines. An example is provided in Weick and Roberts' 1993 study

of aircraft carrier operations, where both pilots and controllers have to respond to contingent (fluid) situations with extreme swiftness to ensure safe landings. The contingencies in such situations are highly local, and the actors' responses to them are based on intersubjective factors that Weick and Roberts refer to as 'heedfulness'. In other words, heedfulness between controllers and pilots is what allows them to respond rapidly to those contingencies. The intersubjective level, characterized by ongoing relational processes, is characterized by verbs rather than nouns, emphasizing attention to process rather than to structure.

The 'generic subjectivity', on the other hand, corresponds to a different level of analysis, and is embedded in structures such as rules, habits and routines. Weick ties the noun-based understanding to what he calls 'generic subjectivity', which is the organizational level above interpersonal interaction. At the level of generic subjectivity we find the nouns that are used to talk about organizations and hence the nouns that are used to organize through structuring. These are nouns such as budgets, plans, roles, strategies, and so on, that enable organizations to outlast their originators (Weick and Gilfillan 1971) and that also make them relatively impervious to personal redefinition (Weick 1979: 35). As mentioned above, organizing consists of incessant fluctuation between the two levels:

'I would argue that organizing lies atop that movement between the intersubjective and the generically subjective. By that I mean that organizing is a mixture of vivid, unique intersubjective understandings and understandings that can be picked up, perpetuated, and enlarged by people who did not participate in the original intersubjective construction.' (Weick 1995a: 72)

Similar distinctions to that between the intersubjective and the 'generic' levels have been pointed out by other writers. Ciborra (2002), in his discussion of the introduction of information technology, distinguishes between procedures and what he calls *bricolage*. Procedures, he suggests, are dominated by clock time, diagrams and sequence maps. Bricolage and improvisation, on the other hand, exist in situated contexts that are local, short and sudden.

The relationship between the two levels of subjectivity is particularly well illustrated by Weick's use of Barley's 1986 study of CAT scanners in radiology departments (Weick 1995: 71–72). In times of stability, generic subjectivity, represented by nouns, takes many forms, which Barley refers to as 'scripts', and defined as 'standard plots of types of encounters whose repetition constitutes the setting's inter-actional order' (Barley 1986: 83). 'Plots' may therefore be taken as synonymous for 'nouns' because their entity-like nature is what enables plots to transcend the limits of the here-and-now experience. Weick suggests, in his interpretation of Barley, that when nouns (scripts) dominate interactions between people, they allow people to substitute for one another, because the focus shifts from people to roles and structure. An example may be found in routines (Feldman and Pentland 2005), which have a noun quality in the sense that they represent labels of standardized solutions to problems, independent of who executes them.

In Barley's study, when the CAT scanners are brought into the department, the prevailing scripts (nouns) change, in the sense that the scanners carry with them a different script for carrying out the work than that which prevailed

before they were brought in. The arrival of the new scanners imposes a new generic subjectivity, and as this new generic subjectivity begins to take hold, the existing intersubjectivity becomes out of tune. In other words, two different plots, or patterns of nouns, at the generic level 'collide' with one another, as the new takes over from the old. Consequently, uncertainty increases, and intersubjectivity (the level of verbs) becomes the focus of the sensemaking activities, because the intersubjectivity was attuned to the old generic subjectivity. Therefore, tension arises between the levels of generic subjectivity and intersubjectivity (Weick 1995: 71).

Two observations may be made about the relationship between the generically subjective and the intersubjective in this case. First, generic subjectivity and intersubjectivity are seen as operating at different levels, where generic subjectivity forms a context for intersubjectivity. Second, and following from the first point, the relationship between verbs and nouns is conceptualized as one of *tension* (Weick 1995: 72), where they are seen as struggling for dominance.

Returning to the pseudopod example, it seems that the movement and the animal come from different realms; that the verb and the noun emerge from different realms of meaning; that the animal and its movement do not make up a single unified entity. Another way of approaching the verb–noun relationship, we argue, would be to view verbs and nouns as cut from the same cloth, where movement belongs to entity just as entity belongs to movement. From this viewpoint Whitehead's process philosophy appears instructive.


## Whitehead on Verbs (Experience)

Whitehead's contribution to 'process philosophy', epitomized by his 1929 book *Process and Reality*, derives from his assumption that the world is ultimately processual. Accordingly, he rejected any a priori notion of entities and developed a conceptual scheme about the 'becoming' of things whereby processes consist of what he called 'actual occasions' rather than of physical entities. Actual occasions are experiential events, or 'drops of experience'. In Whitehead's scheme, events take place in timespace and carry within themselves other events; furthermore, they come together to form a unified event, which in turn is the basis for the formation of new events. The process of experiencing is thus a perpetual unification of a pluralistic reality that, once unified, immediately becomes pluralistic again; thus, it is never fully (finally) unified (Hartshorne 2003). Accordingly, events do not occur in a linear fashion; on the contrary, Whitehead's timespace is atomistic and pluralistic, consisting of multiple processes spread out in a field-like manner over regions of space (Rescher 1996) evolving through time. In this atomistic order everything is in principle interrelated; everything is connected through process. Indeed the world, including the subject, is constituted by process.

For Whitehead, as for Bergson and James, intuitive experience is the most complex form of perception and hence such complex perception best comes to grips with the dynamics of process. Experience reflects 'brute facts'; it reflects the actually felt, what Whitehead refers to as 'the realization of our essential

connection with the world without, and also of our own existence now' (Whitehead 1938: 72). It represents facts that are real, individual and particular (Whitehead [1929] 1978: 20). Similarly, Cooper (1976), using Whiteheadian reasoning, refers to 'the situation' which he sees as the

'immediately perceived field of actualities (objects, events), the concrete context in which we carry out our lives. It is the pith of existential meaning, where the perceptions do their work and find a unity. The situation is the rudimentary morphology of everyday experience — discrete, vivid, multiple.' (Cooper 1976: 1006)

Translated into Weick's verb–noun distinction, concrete experience is verb-related because it relates to the ability to perceive process. Whitehead sees concrete experience as being of two different types. The first type is what we may refer to as 'direct experience', which belongs in the unconscious, spontaneous, instinctive-intuitive realm. The second type of concrete experience is what Whitehead (1938: 166) calls 'conceptual'; such experience involves discrimination and choice. It is experience made sense of in a matter-of-fact way, where choices are made according to the relative importance of the matter being decided. Conceptual experience relates to the ability to rationalize and to make consistent choices between many alternatives based on experience. We will illustrate below how, according to Whiteheadian reasoning, experience may evolve to form abstractions, which is the Whiteheadian term which most closely reflects Weick's 'noun'. In a continuum with direct experience and abstraction at opposite ends, conceptual experience lies somewhere in between.

## Whitehead on Nouns (Abstractions)

Although Whitehead rejects a priori assumptions of concrete entities, he considers abstractions, such as persons, goals, and so on, as indispensable for understanding processes. Abstractions are subjectively created; they are models of the mind by which we cope in a fluid world. All perceived entities, according to Whitehead, are abstractions created from process. But he argues that as we create these abstractions, they tend to shape subsequent events and thus influence those events as processes of convergence, what Whitehead refers to as 'concrescence'. Thus, when entities acquire subjective qualities they attract attention and become 'data' for ensuing occasions. In a fluid reality this is the order of the world once things take on subjective dimensions. But as entities they are not only outcomes of, but also participants in, processes. Thus, processes, viewed in this way, are the interactions between concrete experience and abstractions.

From a Whiteheadian perspective, models of organizing would exist in the subjective world rather than in the natural world. Abstractions are entities created out of processes and are re-entered into processes in turn. According to Whitehead (1938: 123), they serve the purpose of distinguishing totality from its details; they are formations that unite attention. Abstractions are more or less random choices from a complex reality, but once they are formed they reproduce our understanding of the world, which makes them powerful and which makes their *formation* an important object of study. They are seen as indispensable for

concerted actions because they unite attention, which may give the impression that they restrict the possibility for change. On the contrary, precisely because they unite attention they make possible a more complex understanding of the world, thus enabling change. Whitehead ([1929] 1978) argues that it is the creativity built into the construction of generalities that produces possibilities for diversification of process, i.e. change.

We might say that abstractions are performative, thereby implying, as Feldman and Pentland (2005) do, that routines are performed as labels for a particular type of organized activity. Thus, for example, when a routine is adopted by an organization it is adopted as a name for a particular pattern of programmed activity. The example is relevant to organization studies because routines are arguably constitutive of formal organizations. They are part of what March and Simon (1958) in their seminal work saw as 'programmes' around which activity develops. Thus, when a routine is adopted, it is actually the script of connected nouns making up the routine that is adopted. The adoption of a routine, analysed from a Whiteheadian perspective, would not however be seen as the importation of a script from the outside, but rather as the gradual emergence of an abstraction from within (local experience). Even though a routine may have a name and a pattern of nouns that are recognized within a field of organizations, its emergence is seen as taking place through the evolution of local experience.

## Whitehead on the Verb–Noun (Experience–Abstraction) Relationship

Although Whitehead conceptualized reality as a flux of events, he stressed the importance of unity in process; he stressed that many disparate processes can attain some sense of commonality (unity). Entities that emerge as unities out of processes are abstractions. They arise from processes and they form in turn the basis for further processes. Abstractions are always 'becoming' rather than 'being'; they are always in formation, and never exist as entities in themselves. For this reason, they cannot be seen as separate from their processes of becoming. Everything must be understood in the light of its development over time and space, according to Whitehead. In fact, everything *is* how it has developed: '*How* an actual entity *becomes* constitutes *what* that actual entity *is*' (Whitehead [1929] 1978: 23).

This point, intrinsic to Whitehead's philosophy, is crucial for a reconceptualization of the verb–noun relationship because it explains how verbs and nouns emerge from the same process. They are not disconnected terms struggling for dominance in an ongoing tensional process as one might infer from reading Weick. On the contrary, one can infer from reading Whitehead that verbs and nouns co-evolve as inseparable, yet analytically distinct.

The interaction between the two types of experience mentioned above and abstraction may be exemplified by looking generally at the formation of organizations. The initial stage may be characterized by direct experience, consisting of interactions between persons and ideas. This is the stage before concerted action is required and before organizational structure becomes necessary; what

matters is the flow of experience and ideas within and among groups. As some ideas begin to crystallize, however, concerted action becomes necessary because ideas need to be tried out. At this stage, choices and selections have to be made, which marks the transition from direct experience to conceptual experience. Possible courses of action will present themselves, and some will be selected over others. As commitment is made to a long-term project with specific intentions, the need to establish institutional legitimacy in relation to other organizations arises, which calls for the development of recognizable characteristics, such as goals, a name and control procedures. These emerge in the form of labels (Weick 1995) that unite attention (Whitehead 1938) in the form of institutionally legitimate abstractions. It is thus possible to appreciate, at least in a simple, basic way, how experience may evolve through stages into abstractions. Throughout this evolution, abstractions are gradually formed, which again form the basis for direct experience and conceptual experience in turn.

Of course, the actual evolution of an organization is far more complex. However, our point is that abstractions in this case emerge from experience and form the basis for experience in turn. We are, in a sense, back to the pseudopod, where the transition from entity to movement and back to entity again is 'seamless', like Bateson's blind man and his stick.

## Whitehead–Weick Complementarity and the Challenge of a Recursive View

Perhaps Weick's most significant contribution to organization studies has been to distinguish verbs from nouns, thereby encouraging increased focus on the processes of organizing. As pointed out above, this was a much-needed step at a time when the field was dominated by entitative views. To draw explicit distinctions between verbs and nouns was necessary in order for verbs to be given their due attention in organization studies. However, by distinguishing verbs from nouns, verbs acquired a different ontological status, with the result that the relationship between verbs and nouns in organizational analysis became dichotomous. We can see an example of such reasoning in a 2005 paper by Van de Ven and Poole devoted to process thinking in organization theory, where they essentially distinguish between two views of organization: one sees organization as a social *entity* whereas the other sees it as composed of solely organizing *processes*. Debates about such distinctions, however, belong to the ontological backdrop of classical philosophical debate, and do not capture the epistemological and ontological considerations in process thinking derived from Bergson, James and Whitehead referred to at the beginning of this paper. Importantly, the distinctions tend to consolidate and exacerbate, rather than reconcile, the dichotomy between verbs and nouns.

A problem in working with dichotomous notions is that they cannot be seen to interact relationally. To be sure, this is not a new challenge in social science. A persistent problem in organization studies as well as in social science at large lies in connecting the more fluid to the more stable. Theorists such as Giddens (1984) and Luhmann (1995) have proceeded from the idea that recursive

relations exist between process and structure, where process is the more fluid and structure the more stable. Pursuing the idea of recursivity, for example, Luhmann developed a framework for describing the interaction between process and structure whereby they are defined in such a way that they may form part of one another even though they might be kept *analytically* apart (Bakken and Hernes 2003). Luhmann's view of recursivity regards processes as flows of communication consisting of decisions, whereas it regards structure as codes of communication pertaining to a particular organization. Hence, because both process and structure are conceived as communication based, it becomes possible to study how they engage in mutual transformation. A major advantage of defining process and structure such that they can be seen to interact recursively is that the dynamics between the more fluid and the more stable can be studied. Such study allows, for example, a better understanding of how and when organizational practices may change from being stable to being unstable, as stability is not assumed to be associated with a final equilibrium state.

In a similar way, one could infer from Whitehead's theory that nouns may be seen as temporarily stabilized constellations of verb-based processes. Importantly, experience and abstractions (verbs and nouns) would not be seen as being different in kind, but rather as representing various degrees of stabilization, where the abstraction carries a label that is perceived as sufficiently stable to form a basis for understanding and concerted action. What we have seen in Weick's work, on the other hand, are hints of a tension between verb and noun, a sort of dialectical relationship where verb and noun originate from different levels — the structural and the intersubjective (Weick 1995) — and where they are different in kind, one being structural and the other being social. In Whitehead's view, on the other hand, they would interact in a process whereby they grow out of one another and do not merely exist as different phenomena 'grasping for' one another. As pointed out above, the pseudopod example evokes the transitional relationship between verb and noun whereby at no point is something either completely verb or completely noun: movement defines entity and entity defines movement.

Thus, Whitehead's achievement lies in accentuating the importance of *relationality* between verb and noun, where verbs are made from nouns, and vice versa. Rather than being seen as ontologically different from verbs, nouns may be seen as temporarily stabilized configurations of recurring processes, which are given labels. Moreover, Whitehead brings attention to how such configurations are shaped as complex unities over time.

If we accept that Whitehead's notions are complementary to Weick's, the implication is that Weick's work on the verb–noun relationship may extend our understanding of processes if we take a closer look at the choice of verbs and nouns based on their possibilities to interact with one another. In recent years, a number of verbs have been chosen, such as act, behave, operate and practise. The choices have been made, usually through ethnographic studies, due to the need to describe accurately what takes place in organizations. However, nouns, on the other hand, have been chosen primarily on the basis that they reflect illustrative metaphors. Weick (1979: 50), for example, asks why military metaphors have such a grip on managers, and postulates two possible explanations: the

first is that they represent 'war situations', i.e. that they are tough, macho and exciting; the second is that they impose control mechanisms to lend the impression of order where there is disorder. Whatever the rationale, a problem with metaphors is that they tend to be insensitive to the workings of processes. Consequently, rather than being chosen on the basis of how they evolve through verbs, they are chosen on the basis of how they form *context*s within which verbs operate.

Weick's suggestion is that in organization studies we should become better at 'mutating' (Weick 1979: 50) metaphors, thereby creating a wider diversity. We would suggest that nouns might also be chosen based on their compatibility with the verbs that make them. Although terms such as 'organizational culture' make sense as metaphors, they tend to be far removed from the processes that go on in organizations. Latour makes essentially the same point, arguing that abstractions, such as structure, culture and norms are too distant from local situations to provide good explanations (Latour 1999: 17) of how things evolve. Nouns, such as organization, strategy, culture and so on, were not chosen because they could be seen to emerge from processes that make them, for them to re-enter those processes in turn, but because they were implicitly seen as quasi-stable states, forming stable contexts for processes.

Choosing nouns based on the need to make them interchangeable with the processes that create them may open the way for different and eventually more promising process approaches to organization studies, such as by making it possible to describe how organizational arrangements actually emerge through the processes. We have mentioned programmes and routines previously; both are examples of nouns in the sense that they are labels of processes. Feldman and Pentland (2005) and Feldman (2000) have studied different aspects of routines. Whereas routines may seem to be a mere incidental aspect of organizations, Feldman and Pentland argue persuasively that, on the contrary, they are intrinsic to organizational identity. What they called 'routines' were similar to what March and Simon (1958) called 'programmes', which they identified as basic constituents of organizations. Whereas programmes and routines both have the character of being essentially problem-solving processes, it is equally possible to see them as important institutional features of an organization, i.e. as recurring sets of activities that serve to distinguish one organization from another, or to connect an organization to a field of organizations (Feldman and Pentland 2005).

We would like to add a final note on verbs and nouns. We have briefly touched above on the issue of power in relation to Weick's work on verbs; we point out that he does not elaborate on power in groups, which might suggest a consensual view of group processes. Power is not an issue with Whitehead either. Therefore, it seems that power is not an important issue as far as process analysis is concerned. On the other hand, it is important to point out that the use of nouns for processual analysis cannot be disconnected from power, especially if nouns are seen as the 'scripts' that Barley and Weick refer to. Scripts guide behaviour, and the choice of scripts therefore cannot be deemed innocent, either for managing in organizations or for organizational analysis. Including the formation of nouns as an integral part of processes, as we suggest in this paper, may also make process analysis a useful tool in studying power in organizations.

## Conclusion

One of Weick's major contributions has been to encourage organization scholars to pay more attention to process and less to entities. His advice was seen as more radical in 1979 than it would be today, in view of recent contributions in the process literature. Nevertheless, Weick's work is unparalleled in relating process thinking to original empirical application, which is what gives richness to his contribution. Although more empirical studies pursuing Weick's efforts would always be useful, we think that it is also useful to search for complementarity between Weick's work and the theoretical insights from process philosophers. While Weick has drawn on James in different writings (Weick 1979, 1995), our attempt has been to search for complementarity between Whitehead and Weick, who gave a somewhat different role to nouns in human sensemaking. As we have tried to illustrate in the paper, Whitehead provides a rapprochement between verb and noun that allows for a different reading of the sort of transition made manifest by the pseudopod example. His contribution highlights the potential for selecting verbs and nouns on the basis of recursive relations, which challenges researchers to use verbs and nouns more creatively in organizational analysis.

**Note**

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