Clashing meanings - Sensemaking and sensegiving in equivocal contexts

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Abstract

When people and groups with different backgrounds and experiences are brought together to cooperate, a shared perspective is often regarded as a prerequisite for coordinated action, i.e. that the people involved must have a mutual understanding regarding the aims of their work. However, previous research has not been able to conclude empirically whether a shared perspective is essential for bringing about joint action or not. This report highlights the results of a study inquiring into the relationship between coincident meaning and coordinated action in situations characterized by heterogeneity and equivocality. How does coordinated action originate in such circumstances? The empirical case reported concerns “FöretagsNära”, a collaboration project between the municipality of Norrköping and the local branch of the state employment agency. The purpose of the venture was to coordinate the efforts of measures aimed at trade and industry development with labor market measures, in order to contribute to a decrease of the unemployment rate in the city of Norrköping. Based on a longitudinal field study, a narrative of clashing meanings, and a striving for mutual perspectives unfolds. The longitudinal approach of the study contributes to an understanding the complexity involved in developing a shared perspective. The case of FöretagsNära shows that the creation of meaning takes on different expressions during different stages of the process. A battle of diverging interpretations arises about the matter of the purpose of FöretagsNära. The connection between developing a shared perspective and joint action is more complex than previous research has suggested. There is no clear connection between coincident meaning and coordinated action. The results of the study are of both theoretical relevance and practical importance.

This HELIX working paper summarizes the main findings presented in a doctoral thesis (Andersson, 2010), defended in January 2010 at Linköping university.
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1 Introduction

Organizing means getting people to act together in order to achieve something they cannot otherwise accomplish. When organizing a venture, a shared perspective of the goals and aims is often assumed to be a prerequisite for successful joint action. The idea of shared goals is embedded in many definitions of organization (c.f. Barnard, 1938/2009). At the same time, achieving a shared perspective is not uncomplicated, especially not in situations where several actors representing different organizations, backgrounds, missions, and aims are involved, i.e. situations characterized by heterogeneity and equivocality. There is a lack of empirically grounded research inquiring into how important a shared perspective, i.e. coincident meanings, actually is for achieving joint action (c.f. Donnellon et al., 1986).

Based on the story of the initiation and realization of a venture characterized by heterogeneity and equivocality, this report inquires into the meaning of a shared perspective in accomplishing joint action. Instead of viewing a shared perspective of goals as a prerequisite for joint action, focus is put on the interaction between those involved and on the meanings they ascribe to joint actions. The term shared perspective refers to a situation where a person’s perspective corresponds with that of others on a particular issue. To express the opposite situation, the term used is diverging perspectives or disagreement about an issue. Joint action is used to term the actions that are coordinated between two or more individuals. The contrasting term used is separate actions.

Collaboration is a common term when it comes to discussing situations that appear to be heterogeneous and equivocal. Collaboration between organizations is common in a number of different contexts and it seems as if collaboration has become a self-motivating form of organizing (c.f. Stenberg, 2000), as well a trend. The case reported here is also discussed by those involved as an effort of collaboration. Increased efficiency was sought through a joining of the efforts of activities aimed at trade and industry support and activities aimed at labour market measures. The case highlights a situation where two public organizations – the local municipality and the local branch of a state authority – made a common cause of trying to decrease unemployment in the city of Norrköping.
“FöretagsNära” (“Close to Companies” in English) was launched as a collaboration project between the municipality of Norrköping and the local branch of the employment agency situated in Norrköping. The project began in March 2005 and ended in December 2006. Before that, work was carried out for a period of approximately a year, organizing and planning the venture. The case is relevant for analyzing how a shared perspective is related to joint action in a setting characterized by heterogeneity.

In Sweden, the municipality is fairly autonomous and has a general responsibility for most of the essential local social functions such as schools, the care of children and the care of elderly. Trade and industry matters targeting local businesses is not compulsory but has become more or less customary. It is the state that is responsible for trade and industry matters as well as for labor market measures. Within the municipality of Norrköping, the labor market office targets specific groups of unemployed. Most of the realization of labor market politics is carried out by state-governed local branches of the employment agency. The FöretagsNära-project entailed an encounter between the local municipality and the state, as well as an encounter between the “public” and “private” spheres.

The project’s main activity was for representatives of the municipality, associated to the municipal trade and industry office, to join with the representatives of the employment agency in paying a visit to all companies of the city. Previously, the municipality had only had established relations to the largest employers of the city. This time, all companies with more than five employees were targeted as relevant for paying a visit. The intention of the venture was to investigate the situation faced by each and every company and to offer the support of the municipality or employment agency. The overall aim was to engage in growth-enhancing support to the companies visited, enabling them to employ more people.

The people hired to represent the municipality in the company visits were all recruited based on their extensive experiences of working as entrepreneurs, managers or owners of private companies. The recruitment was based on the idea that the representatives needed to be able to speak to the company managers in the company managers’ own language. It was considered that this would help the project gain legitimacy with managers of the companies intended for visits. The situation created thus entailed people and groups of diverging organizational and institutional backgrounds working together.

In this paper, the aspiration for reaching a shared perspective of FöretagsNära, along with the aim of achieving joint action, is analyzed by applying a sensemaking approach. The sensemaking approach is justified as it supports problemizing processes where taken-for-
granted ideas, such as the necessity of a shared perspective in establishing joint action, are constructed and reconstructed. People develop their frames of references based on previous experiences, which implies that individuals react to and interpret the situations they experience differently. Sensemaking is, however, a social phenomenon and individuals influence one another through their interactions.

When using the sensemaking approach in analyzing the FöretagsNära case, I use the theoretical terms of coincident meaning and coordinated action. **Coincident meaning** refers to a situation where the people involved ascribe homogeneous meanings and values to an issue, while **diverging meanings** refer to heterogeneously ascribed meanings. The term **coordinated action** implies behavior that is organized between two or more individuals. To indicate a situation where individual actions are not coordinated with the actions of others, the term **uncoordinated action** is used. The empirical study of FöretagsNära contributes to knowledge on coincident meanings and coordinated actions in organizing processes.

Many studies of organizing take the perspective of the management and research investigating how individuals working in organizations deal with heterogeneous and equivocal situations in their daily work are more infrequent. This is unfortunate as it is the employees who are to perform the actual work and to put into practice the ideas that motivated the venture. Understanding the interaction and translation processes of those involved is essential for understanding why the process develops in a certain way (c.f. Czarniawska & Sevón, 1996; Balogun & Johnson, 2005). This study is focused on how the ideas motivating the venture FöretagsNära are received and translated by those who are recruited to carry out the work.

In situations where expected differences in perspectives occur, it seems reasonable to assume that those involved have diverging ideas about the venture and of what is to be achieved. The concept of sensegiving (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991, 9, 442) is used for the process whereby one person aims to influence the sensemaking of others. The process is most often viewed top-down (c.f. Ericson, 2001; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007), but this paper contributes to the understanding of how sense-givers try to influence the sensemaking using a bottom-up approach.

The focus of the paper is the processes of trying to establish a shared perspective and take joint action in situations characterized by heterogeneity and equivocality, i.e. situations where coincident meaning and coordinated action is expected among individuals with
different tasks and organizational backgrounds, as well as diverging aims and goals. The general research question of the paper is:

How is coincident meaning established and how is coordinated action achieved in situations characterized by heterogeneity and equivocality?

The general research question is answered based on the study of FöretagsNära, focusing on three partial research questions.

- In relation to what issues does a shared perspective develop?
- How is a shared perspective reached and what differences are there as to processes of reaching diverging perspectives?
- Is a shared perspective a prerequisite for joint action?

Taken together, the answers to these three questions provide a basis for contributing to the knowledge on the complexity and variation in sensemaking and on the coordination of action in equivocal settings. As will be evident in the analysis of the case of FöretagsNära, sensemaking takes on several different forms and is manifested in many different ways. The study is relevant for theory as well as for practice.
2 Theoretical points of departure

The phenomenon discussed in this study is both empirically and theoretically complicated, which makes alternative theoretical positions numerable. In introducing the theoretical frame of reference, some of these positions can be integrated into a framework.

The central characteristics of sensemaking can be highlighted by decomposing the following quotation by Weick et al:

“Sensemaking involves the ongoing retrospective development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing. Viewed as a significant process of organizing, sensemaking 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 circumstances.” (Weick et al., 2005, p. 409)

In the daily processes of organizing, people are faced with numerous impressions and events. Sensemaking begins in that chaos and is the process whereby, out of all these impressions, some cues are seen to be more important than others. To notice is to bracket the cue that stands out from all the rest. What is noticed is isolated as an issue. Frames of references play a dual role in sensemaking. The frames of references we use affect what issues are isolated and help us interpret and attach meaning to that bracketed issue (c.f. Ericson, 2001). These are important notions in answering the first partial research question, i.e. in what issues do shared perspectives develop? A shared perspective implies the joint isolation of an issue as well as homogeneity in the frames of references used to ascribe meaning to the issue. There are several ways in which this reasoning seems to be sensible with regards to previous research. Even though sensemaking is a social process, not all meanings are coincident. Research explicitly points to the difficulties for a group to have coincident meanings because of the member’s unique frames of references. Those who argue that meanings in and about organizations seldom coincide for longer periods of time, allude to the omnipresent existence of people who question established truths (c.f. Gray et al., 1985).

The second of the three partial research questions of this paper is concerned with how a shared perspective is reached, and what differences there are in this kind of process as compared to the reaching of diverging perspectives. The more homogeneous the set of frames of references of a group, the more likely it is that a shared perspective develops. Through repeatedly joint actions, such as collective encounters, coincident frames of
The concept of frame of reference is used to denote different points of departure for sensemaking. Frames of references uses input from a variety of sources, such as identity, institutionalized ideas, stories, and scripts. A script is a kind of shared cognitive framework that includes knowledge about collective actions or events that is appropriate for certain situations and contexts (c.f. Gioia & Poole, 1984). Sensemaking also concerns the construction of identity. “Depending on who I am, my definition of what is ‘out there’ will also change”, argues Weick (1995, p. 20). Sensemaking can be regarded as the process of trying to maintain a consistent and positive self image. Identity is continuously constructed and reconstructed in interaction with others and we can talk about identity both on individual, group, and organizational levels. In this study, I mainly refer to the identity of groups and organizations but relate those identity constructions to the identification of individuals.

Research has shown that sensegiving can be an important factor in the development of shared perspectives. Sensegiving is usually defined as “the process of attempting to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others toward a preferred redefinition of organizational reality” (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991, p. 442). If those who try to provide meanings for others are successful, the result can, but need not be, the development of coincident meanings on the particular issue. Research on sensegiving has hitherto focused on who gives meaning to others as well as on how meaning is “given” to others (c.f. Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007, p. 57), and the process of sensegiving has primarily been studied as a top-down process. The triggers of sensegiving have not been investigated to the same extent. The same thing applies to where, when and why sensegiving occurs (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007). Taken together, there is a knowledge gap regarding who, how, what and why sensegiving occurs from a bottom-up perspective. This paper aims to fill some parts of these gaps.

The focus of the third partial research question is the link between coincident meaning and coordinated action. Researchers have argued for different ways of answering the question of how coincident meaning is related to coordinated action. Some depart from the perspective of organizations as “systems of meaning” and argue that coordinated action demands coincident meaning and view meanings as the basis for organization (c.f. Smircich, 1983). Others point to the multiplicity and dynamics of organizations (c.f. Weick, 1979; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992). Instead of viewing coincident meanings as a prerequisite for coordinated action, coordinated actions is then seen as the basis for
creating coincident meaning. First and foremost, this perspective argues, it is the experience of a collective action that is shared, not necessarily the interpretation of the action (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992, p. 18). Yet others argue that meaning and action continuously construct and deconstruct one another in iterative processes (c.f. Gray et al., 1985). Action can be coordinated through “equifinal meanings”, implying that although actions are agreed upon and collectively performed, the actions and the outcomes of the actions can represent different things for those involved (c.f. Donnellon et al., 1986). These diverging lines of reasoning can be illustrated in a continuum:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coincident meaning essential ----------------------------- Coincident meaning not essential for coordinated action (Iterative process)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

All in all, the sensemaking approach presented here is largely a set of discussions about the creation of meaning and accomplishment of action in the interactions between people.
3 Methodological considerations

The choice of sensemaking as the theoretical focus of the study was not made prior to the choice of empirical case. Instead, the case was originally considered a source for “rich” information in studying organizational processes in general, as I was welcomed by representatives of the municipality who wanted researchers to study entrepreneurial processes of organizing within their organization. The type of setting found in the FöretagsNära case is not unique and is rather commonplace in today’s organized society. Collaboration seems to become more and more popular and the case constitutes a “(potentially) powerful example” (Siggelkow, 2007) for exploring the development of coincident meaning and coordinated action in heterogeneous and equivocal settings.

In order to be able to analyze the process of achieving coincident meaning and coordinated action, the research approach had to be designed in a way that allowed for capturing context as well as process and content. Therefore, the study focused on one specific venture, and on studying the process as it unfolded in time. This meant taking part in the events unfolding. Access to the case was achieved through a combination of good will on behalf of those studied and on a research strategy that involved getting close to those involved as well as showing continuous interest in the project. The approach chosen had a lot in common with organizational ethnography (c.f. Rosen, 1991; Schwartzman, 1993; Salzer, 1994). By listening in on conversations and taking part in numerous meetings, I strived to develop an understanding of those involved and of their situations and aspirations. The aim of the methodological approach was to get a full and varied depiction of the processes of initiating and executing FöretagsNära. The ambition was to approach the people involved with “an open mind” regarding the events that taking place (c.f. Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992) and letting the unfolding process guide the focus of the study. My interpretations of the events, focusing on the struggle to develop shared perspectives regarding the aim of FöretagsNära, justified the use of the sensemaking approach.

Sensemaking is here regarded as the interactive process of creating meaning in unfolding events and must therefore be studied in a way that “captures” interaction and conversation. The interplay between individuals and groups is what is in focus in this study. Meetings probably constitute the prime arena for sensemaking carried out by arguing (c.f. Weick, 1995). Meetings define and reproduce social entities and relationships as “meetings create pockets of order in an often disordered world, but they are also responsible for reversing, inverting, upsetting, and disassembling organizational worlds”
In doing the field work of the study, I observed a lot of meetings in different groups involved in FöretagsNära. Project team meetings as well as meetings in different steering groups, were observed. The meetings of both the political and the management steering group were observed. Apart from observations, a number of interviews where conducted and documentation of the entire process was assembled. Towards the end of the project, interactive workshops were initiated by me in to create active arenas for reflections, engaging researchers and those involved in FöretagsNära.

The interactive workshops constituted an arena for me to provide feedback to those involved and were initiated as an opportunity for reflecting upon the processes taking place. Interviews with those involved were conducted during the course of the project duration. Documents consisted of project descriptions and reports, minutes and annual reports, along with great deal of formal information about the municipality and of the employment agency.

The “data” constructed in the field work was ordered into a chronologically structured field report consisting of all the descriptions of events and conversations gathered during the process. Through several “readings” of the field report and supported by several different theoretical perspectives, the intrigue of the narrative to be written was constructed – the intrigue being the striving for shared perspectives as to the aim of FöretagsNära. Based on the case material, I extracted episodes, events, and conversations relevant for illustrating how shared perspectives developed and how joint action was brought about. As explained earlier, the sensemaking approach was not given beforehand, but turned out to be an appropriate toolbox for analyzing the case and for explaining what it was that went on in the process. Once the theoretical framework had been chosen and delimited, I used it as a contrasting tool for analyzing the development of shared perspectives and accomplishing joint action in FöretagsNära. Contrasting, as a method for analysis, was also used for analyzing diverging perspectives between individuals and
groups, as well as for analyzing similarities and differences between the developments in
different sensemaking processes. Other important methodological measures were the
refinement and sharpening of the research questions and positioning of the study with
regards to previous research.
4  FöretagsNära – The case

Norrköping, a middle sized city located on the Swedish eastern coast, is said to be in a state of transition from being an industrial town up until the 1990’s to a town with a more diversified trade and industry structure. During the transition process, the unemployment level increased and has been high since then. In the early 2000’s, the unemployment situation was considered a big problem both by representatives of the municipality and by other societal actors. Employment measures undertaken had not been successful enough, and in the year 2004, when this study began, the unemployment rate was some 1900 persons higher than in comparable cities. New ideas and ways of working that could help solve the problem were being sought for. In 2004, the municipality of Norrköping gathered the parties of a diverse set of social actors involved in trade and industry support as well as labor market matters to join the cause of dealing with the problem. This meeting was the starting point for a collaboration venture between the municipality and the state governed employment agency’s local branch. One of the projects launched was called FöretagsNära. The project venture entailed that all the companies in the city was to be paid a call in order to learn whether the companies were in need of public support in some way. The overall aim was to encourage growth in the companies, enabling them to hire more employees. The company visits were to be executed by a team of representatives from both the municipality and the employment agency, working together in the project.

In the autumn of 2004, a project leader was recruited for the task of setting up the project as well as for realizing it. He was working on behalf of the municipality, the party responsible for providing most of the financing of the venture. The employment agency mainly contributed with manpower. When the project leader started his undertaking, he realized that the views regarding the purpose of the venture were diverging. For the politicians in charge, the lowering of the unemployment rate was the first and principle priority. They financed the project as a part of an agenda for growth which they had labeled “2006 more people in jobs by 2006”. The project leader himself, along with the parties of the municipality responsible for trade and industry matters, viewed the project as aimed at trade and industry development. The project leader regarded the diverging views as problematic for the realization of the project, as he saw a risk of decreased legitimacy in the project work if the images displayed of the project were in conflict. The managers of the companies to be visited had to believe that the project representatives were there to help them grow, not to try to force them to hire more people, he argued.
The organization set up for the project consisted of three hierarchical levels. On the political level, a steering group of municipal elected representatives were responsible for governing the progress of the overall agenda. On the managerial level, a team of managers from the municipality’s trade and industry office, the municipality’s labor market office, as well as a representative of the management of the local branch of the state employment agency served as responsible for supporting the project team. The project team consisted of five trade and industry developers, four of who were recruited from the private sector and with the fifth person focusing exclusively on relations between schools and companies, and of seven employment officers. The employment officers all had long experience of visiting companies, as that was an established working method within the employment agency office in Norrköping. It is within and between these three groups that the diverging views of the aim of the venture became apparent as the process unfolded.

The recruiting of the trade and industry developers was an important part of the process. The project leader, along with the manager of the trade and industry office, was responsible for the recruitment process. They used this opportunity to recruit people who were interested in trade and industry development rather than labor market measures. Thus, the project team had a rather shared perspective of the project purpose right from the start. The employment agents agreed on the view that the venture was aimed at trade and industry development as they considered that to be the best way to support companies, as this, in the long run, would entail the creation of a more prosperous business climate where the companies could grow and hire more employees.

The project was launched in March 2005, and following this, clashes between those who viewed the purpose as one focusing on labor market measures and those who focusing on trade and industry developments took place in numerous ways. The project team engaged in trying to affect the perspectives of those with opposing viewpoints but they were only successful to some extent. They managed to formulate and get support for new goals that were in line with their way of reasoning, but time and time again, they ran into diverging images of FöretagsNära being presented to various audiences.

One inconsistency that arose concerned the extent to which the company visits should be made by both a trade and industry developer and an employment agent together. The project team members all agreed on that they only needed to visit companies together if it seemed necessary, based on a preliminary conversation with the representatives of the company to be visited. The manager of the municipal labor market office, however, thought otherwise and argued, with the support of some of the elected representatives of
the steering group, that this was one of the main purposes of the project. She managed to influence the coordination of the visits, and from then on, more joint visits were made. When the project was finalized, the project team agreed that joint visits had been one of the things that had made the project successful, as this entailed an increased understanding of the other’s working conditions.

When the project was finalized in late December 2006, some 1049 companies (out of a total of some 1100) had been contacted. Visits and dialogues had been held with 815 of those companies, bringing about an increased knowledge of the situation of the companies in the region, as well as the establishment of new relationships between the municipality, the employment agency, and the companies visited. Many of the visits resulted in some kind of issue for the FöretagsNära team to convey, either related to the municipality or to the employment agency. At the end of 2006, when the results were summarized, the unemployment rate of Norrköping had increased rather than decreased. Despite that, all those involved seemed to agree that the FöretagsNära project had been a successful venture. The municipality’s trade and industry office kept the new way of working for some time, but joint visits with the employment officers are finished.
5 Discussion

The discussion section of this paper is divided into three parts, each one relating to the three partial research questions introduced in the beginning of the paper.

5.1 Issues where shared perspectives developed

As a basis for providing an answer to the question of what issues shared perspectives in relation to, a matrix developed by Ericson (2001, p. 121) is used as a framework for highlighting two aspects of sensemaking. The aspects are issue bracketing and the concordance of frames of references used to interpret the issue. Ericson suggests a division of issue bracketing and interpretation, creating four ideal types of coincident meaning between members of a group regarding a certain issue. Thus, the notion of collective meaning in Ericson’s terms implies a situation where the group members all bracket the issue and use homogenous frames of references to interpret the issue. The three remaining ideal types all consist of some kind of diverging meanings on the issue in question. A situation where the issue is bracketed but interpreted using heterogeneous frames of references implies a situation of disparate meanings. A low bracketing degree along with a homogenous set of frames of reference constitutes enclave meaning. A similar degree of bracketing accompanied by heterogeneous frames of references constitutes fragmentary meaning on the issue among the members of the group. In order to determine that a shared perspective has developed on an issue, we need to be able to state that collective meaning, in accordance to Ericson’s framework, has developed. This entails a high degree of bracketing on the issue, along with the use of a homogenous set of frames of references used by the people involved to interpret the issue. In all other circumstances, we can conclude that the perspectives diverge.

In order to be able to answer the first partial research question, and provide a basis for the analysis of the second, the analysis is divided into a number of issues. In the case of FöretagsNära, a number of issues are available for analysis. The issues analyzed have been selected based on specific criteria. In order to provide a basis for analysis the sensemaking of the issue needs to imply:
A. that the issue is isolated and regarded as important by those involved,
B. initially, diverging meanings are ascribed to the issue based on a heterogeneous set of frames of references, and
C. a shared perspective and joint action is not easily achieved on this issue.

The issues selected for analysis are:

1. the purpose of the venture FöretagsNära,
2. the goals of the project,
3. joint company visits
4. politicians participating in company visits, and
5. the future of the new way of working.

The issues 2-5 are all related to the first and more general issue (1) of the purpose of the venture. The second issue was formed around the start of the project, when diverging meanings concerning the purpose of FöretagsNära became apparent and dealing with the situation was considered important by the project team. The third and fourth issues connect the purpose of the venture with company visit activities. The fifth and final issue was future oriented and concerned what would happen with the new way of working once the project reached completion. The issues are analyzed in terms of issue bracketing and interpretation with regards to the set of frames of references in the group being either homogeneous or heterogeneous. The table below summarizes the main findings and displays the selected five issues in relation to sensemaking dimensions central to the analysis.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Issue</strong></th>
<th>The purpose of FöretagsNära</th>
<th>The goals of the project</th>
<th>Joint company visits</th>
<th>Politicians participating in company visits</th>
<th>The future of the new way of working</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dimension</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bracketing degree</strong></td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low at first, than higher</td>
<td>Low at first, than higher</td>
<td>Low at first, then high</td>
<td>Low at first, then higher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Frames of references − homogeneity or heterogeneity</strong></td>
<td>Homogeneous in an isolated group, heterogeneous considering all those involved</td>
<td>Homogeneous in an isolated group, heterogeneous considering all those involved</td>
<td>Homogeneous in an isolated group, heterogeneous considering all those involved</td>
<td>Homogeneous in an isolated group, heterogeneous considering all those involved. Increasing homogenization.</td>
<td>Homogeneous in an isolated group, heterogeneous considering all those involved. Increasing homogenization.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Shared or diverging perspectives? (with time)</strong></td>
<td>Disparate meaning, collective meaning in factions</td>
<td>Enclave meaning followed by disparate meaning and collective meaning</td>
<td>Enclave meaning followed by disparate meaning. Later collective meaning</td>
<td>Enclave meaning is followed by disparate meaning and collective meaning</td>
<td>Disparate meaning is followed by collective meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Triggers of sensemaking</strong></td>
<td>Equivocality, sensegiving</td>
<td>Equivocality, sensegiving</td>
<td>Actions, expectations, sensegiving</td>
<td>Actions, expectations, sensegiving</td>
<td>Actions, equivocally, expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sensegiving direction</strong></td>
<td>Top-down, bottom-up</td>
<td>Bottom-up</td>
<td>Top-down, horizontally</td>
<td>Top-down, horizontally</td>
<td>Bottom-up, horizontally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Joint action in relation to the development of shared perspectives</strong></td>
<td>Joint action in terms of coordinated sensegiving activities</td>
<td>Shared perspectives before joint actions</td>
<td>Joint actions before shared perspectives</td>
<td>Sensegiving precedes joint actions, which precedes shared perspectives</td>
<td>Shared perspectives in factions precedes joint action</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In several of the issues, the processes of developing a shared perspective follow the same pattern. Disparate meanings, or enclave meaning, is followed by joint action, from which a more common perspective develops. One matter departs a great deal from this pattern. That is the issue of the purpose of the venture. The issue is isolated by those involved but is interpreted using diverging sets of frames of references. It proved difficult for those involved to reach a shared perspective and instead a meaning struggle developed.

The analysis shows that shared perspectives developed in some issues but not in all. In several issues, the mutuality is limited to one faction (c.f. Gray et al., 1985) of all those involved in the venture. This aspect is not included in the framework provided by Ericson and needs to be interpreted separately. In this type of situation, collective meaning exist only in one faction of those involved in the arrangement. In FöretagsNära, disparate meaning is often a situation where meaning is collective in a faction. The analysis also point to that one issue can be isolated as a result of diverging perspectives in another issue.

5.2 A meaning struggle

The second part of the analysis focuses on the second partial research question; how a shared perspective is reached and what differences there are between such a process and a process where diverging perspectives develop. The analysis in this section concerns the use of coincident and diverging frames of references and highlight aspects of identity, scripts and institutionalized ideas. The team of “industry developers” recruited to FöretagsNära from private enterprises found themselves in a conflicting situation leading to problems of identity construction. The identity constructed was one of both kinship with the municipality and one of dissimilarity. The experiences of the team brought about a situation where they disidentified (c.f. Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001) with the municipality when it came to various aspects of organizing that they found to be in conflict with their self-image and the scripts in use. The employment officers positioned themselves as sympathetic towards companies, thereby creating a common ground with the industry developers. The project team, i.e. both industry developers and employment officers, developed a rather homogeneous set of frames of references and sense of shared identity, despite their diverging backgrounds.

The main difference in mindsets, when looking at the larger picture of all involved in the venture, was displayed with regards to the purpose of FöretagsNära. Whereas those
politically responsible for the venture viewed the effort as one aimed at decreasing unemployment, the project team saw the primary purpose as one of trade and industry development. This conflict also entailed diverging images of FöretagsNära, which can be understood as an identity conflict. Taken together with the project leader’s ambition to create a shared perspective of FöretagsNära, a meaning struggle developed in which involved actors participated by sharing their (diverging) views of FöretagsNära.

Sensemaking is triggered by situations that are interpreted as equivocal (c.f. Weick, 1995). An important aspect of understanding joint sensemaking is therefore how those involved enact the situation with regards to equivocality. In FöretagsNära, those involved experience the equivocality of the situation differently. One example is the unclear goals, which was interpreted as a problem by the industry developers but not by the employment officers. When a situation is regarded as equivocal, more sensemaking is called for in order to deal with the situation, thereby providing an opportunity for joint sensemaking and the possibility of reaching a shared perspective.

Research on sensemaking has indicated that conflicts are central to processes of sensemaking (c.f. Weick, 1995, p. 136), but since most studies of sensemaking disregard matters of power (Mills, 2003; Weick et al., 2005), the image of sensemaking as displayed in the literature is one mainly of consensus and smooth considerations rather than of struggle. The efforts of trying to reach a shared perspective and of influencing others’ sensemaking concerning the purpose of FöretagsNära can be analyzed in terms of sensegiving.

The development of shared perspectives demands either homogeneous sets of frames of references or the homogenization of the frames of references. Joint action plays an important role in overcoming heterogeneity, as coordinated action can function as a shared experience that creates a new and joint frame of reference (c.f. Langfield-Smith, 1992). Sensegiving can be such a joint action. Several strategies for giving meaning to others were used in the case of FöretagsNära, such as stories, reports, and issue selling. Some of the strategies require certain conditions to be fulfilled. Only people with access to relevant arenas can engage in direct sensegiving, while those lacking such access must develop alternative strategies. One such alternative strategy was to use others who do have access as a means of selling an issue upwards in the organizational hierarchy. In the case of FöretagsNära this was mainly displayed by the trade and industry developers who used the municipal trade and industry manager to sell in their issues to municipal managers and politicians. Meetings constitute a central arena for sensemaking and are
important for the possibilities of developing shared perspectives in an issue. When interaction is limited, sensemaking becomes parallel instead of shared.

In the case of FöretagsNära, diverging perspective initially developed in several of the issues investigated, but in four of them, apart from the issue of the purpose, shared perspectives developed over time. With regard to the issue of the purpose of FöretagsNära, a meaning struggle was brought about by diverging perspectives and due to sensegiving processes where none of the involved wanted to change perspectives. Three aspects are central in the development of a meaning struggle in the FöretagsNära case: sensemaking, sensegiving and identity construction.

The issue of the purpose of FöretagsNära caused a need of sensemaking, as well as identity construction and sensegiving as the images of FöretagsNära were diverging. The purpose was closely linked to the self-image of those involved, which triggered the need for more sensemaking and sensegiving. Sensegiving became a means of trying to re-establish a consistent and positive self-image.

All in all, the results show that it is more difficult to reach a shared perspective in some issues than in others. A number of factors foster the development of a shared perspective. The analysis highlights various aspects, such as relevant access to interaction arenas, as well as a homogeneous set of frames of references for bracketing and interpreting an issue. Successful sensegiving can provide others with new frames of references. Another relevant aspect is the difference between different types of issues. It is easier to come to a mutual understanding in an issue that is of little importance for those involved than in an issue connected to identity construction.
Factors that prevent the development of a shared perspective include instances when an issue is regarded as important by those bracketing it and when people engage in sensegiving with equivocal messages. A heterogeneous set of frameworks used to assign meaning to an issue fosters diverging perspectives, as do situations where those involved have no arenas for interaction and take part in parallel sensemaking processes. If the situation is characterized by an unwillingness to change perspectives and by diverging sensegiving, a meaning struggle can arise as the people involved strive to establish their meaning as the prevailing one in a larger group of people.

5.3 Coincident meaning and coordinated action: Three types of processes

In the discussion of previous research and different positions regarding the relationship between coincident meaning and coordinated action, two main positions were crystallized, as well as one position in between (c.f. the continuum on p. 5). This third section of the analysis focuses on the third partial research question; *is a shared perspective a prerequisite for joint action?* Based on the previous analysis, related to the first and second research questions, and in relation to the positions in the continuum, several diverging types of processes can be considered, each explaining some of the relationship between coincident meanings and coordinated actions.

One type of process begins with shared perspectives developing out of homogeneous frames of references and working as a foundation for collective action, here termed *joint action based on common ground*. From the FöretagsNära case, the issue of project goals is used to illustrate this process. In this issue, sensemaking was triggered by equivocality regarding the purpose of the venture, and a shared perspective developed within the project team concerning the need for sensegiving. The shared perspective supported joint action in terms of coordinated sensegiving activities as well as actions to construct goals that the project team could agree upon as being correct and reasonable. The process type supports the position that coincident meanings play an important role for coordinated actions to take place (c.f. Smircich, 1983).
A second type of process departs from sensemaking that leads to diverging perspectives and a supporting of converging perspectives via joint action (c.f. Langfield-Smith, 1992). This type of process is termed common ground based on joint action. The process type can be exemplified using the issue of joint company visits. Sensemaking was triggered by diverging actions in this issue. One of the managers protested against the small extent to which companies had been visited by both a representative from the municipality and a representative of the employment agency together. From the manager’s perspective, this was the main purpose of the venture. Using the influence of other managers and politicians, she managed to force the project team to coordinate their actions to a larger extent. This did not directly entail a shared perspective, as the project team members believed that joint company visits were only necessary in circumstances where the company managers actually needed them to do so. But after all company visits had been conducted, the joint company visits proved to be one of the main causes of the success of the project. Thus, a common perspective can be said to have developed in this issue – but not until later on. The process illustrates both the relevance of the position where coordinated actions need not rely only on coincident meanings (c.f. Weick, 1979), but also on equifinal meanings, (c.f. Donnellon et al., 1986) implying that joint actions can be agreed upon also for diverging reasons. The example illustrates the importance of “collective encounters” (Langfield-Smith, 1992) in the development of coincident meanings, i.e. that joint actions create a new and joint frame of reference which can be used for further joint sensemaking.
Finally, a third type of process can be discussed in relation to the FöretagsNära case; a process type where struggling for shared perspectives is the driving force. This process type is termed *struggle based process*. In a struggle based process, sensemaking leads to diverging meanings and is followed by sensegiving from several parties in diverging directions. The process is characterized by a struggle for a consistent identity and by several colliding different intentions, as well as unwillingness for the parties to change their perspectives. In such situations, no mutual perspective is formed, other than in factions. The process type is best exemplified by the purpose of the venture FöretagsNära. The struggle over interpretations contributed to coordinated actions, but mostly in the form of coordinated sensegiving activities conducted in factions. When different parties give their meaning of the purpose in a way that is not accepted by others, those “others” are triggered to engage in a sensegiving of their own. Sensegiving both triggers sensemaking and fuels the struggle based process.

The results show that coordinated action is possible without a situation where perspectives are shared. The absence of a shared perspective actually triggers action, particularly in terms of sensegiving activities which are often coordinated between two or more people in the process. Coordinated action brings about additional joint experiences, which *can* imply a more homogeneous set of frames of references from which shared perspectives *might* develop (c.f. Langfield-Smith, 1992).
6 Conclusions

Up until now, research on sensemaking has produced but a few empirical studies illustrating sensemaking processes (Weick et al., 2005, p. 417). The results of the empirical study accounted for here demonstrate how joint sensemaking processes, with time, take on different shapes. The longitudinal approach contributes to a process analysis which highlights important aspects of reaching a shared perspective. Based on the empirically founded analysis of the case of FöretagsNära, I can conclude that coincident meaning is not a prerequisite for coordinated action, and that coincident meanings support coordinated action. Thus, there are important implications to be found in all three positions highlighted within previous research (c.f. the continuum on p. 5). All three perspectives need be employed in the analysis if we are to fully grasp the complexity of sensemaking in processes of organizing collaboration ventures.

Identity construction and sensegiving are central processes when it comes to sensemaking in settings characterized by heterogeneity and equivocality. When these processes are highlighted, joint sensemaking emerges as a complex and dynamic process in which numerous actors take part and where issues and meanings coincide and diverge in an interconnected way. The ambition to create a shared perspective of the FöretagsNära venture and its purpose develops into a meaning struggle. Sensemaking processes are often stressed as being smooth and without much conflict, as sensemaking seldom take aspects of power into account (c.f. Mills, 2003; Weick et al., 2005). This paper illustrates how sensemaking processes also can be characterized by disagreement and struggle, and supports the notion that there is a need to integrate aspects of power into the sensemaking perspective (c.f. Mills, 2003).

In the introduction to the paper, I argued that collaboration has become a popular form of organization, and it seems to be increasingly so. But at the same time, ideas of rationalism in organization and management are also growing stronger (c.f. Røvik, 2008), sometimes labeled as New Public Management. Goal congruency is a central aspect in this line of ideas. There is a paradox in the intersection between striving for goal congruency and in collaboration. Collaboration means the bringing together of differences while goal congruency implies a demand for similarity. One implication of this study is the notion that focus needs to be reallocated to joint action as an alternative basis for collaboration which in time, can result in a shared perspective (c.f. Weick, 1979).
7 List of references


