



Sensemaking in caregiving narratives: A scholarly analysis of "Em and the Big Hoom"

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Abstract

This paper employs sensemaking theory to analyze the caregiver narrative depicted in Jerry Pinto's "Em and the Big Hoom." Sensemaking, a concept originating from organizational studies, is applied here to explore the cognitive processes through which individuals make sense of ambiguous and uncertain situations, particularly within the context of caregiving. Drawing from Weick and Turner's conceptualization of sensemaking as bridging cognitive gaps, the paper examines how the protagonist navigates the complexities of his mother's mental illness, ultimately seeking coherence amidst chaos. The paper also sheds light on the intricate dynamics of caregiving relationships, highlighting the transformative journey of understanding and acceptance portrayed in Pinto's novel.

Keywords: Caregiving, sensemaking, mental illness, gaps

Introduction

Caregiving refers to the act of providing physical, emotional, or practical assistance to someone who is unable to fully care for themselves due to illness, disability, or age-related issues. It can involve a range of tasks from helping with daily activities like bathing and dressing to providing companionship and emotional support. Caregivers residing with mentally ill individuals face a myriad of challenges. Emotionally, they grapple with the stress of witnessing their loved one's struggles, often leading to anxiety and depression. Financially, the cost of treatments and medications adds strain, exacerbating their burden. Socially, caregivers feel isolated due to stigma, resulting in fewer support networks. Balancing caregiving responsibilities with work and personal life becomes a constant struggle. To navigate this struggle it becomes essential for a family caregiver to make sense of situations and events. The present research paper attempts to evaluate this sensemaking process using Dervin's situation-gap-outcome method. The act of caregiving is inherently intertwined with the process of sensemaking, wherein individuals grapple with the complexities of their roles and relationships in the face of uncertainty. Jerry Pinto's *Em and the Big Hoom* offers a poignant exploration of caregiving within the context of mental illness, presenting a nuanced portrayal of the protagonist's quest for understanding and identity amidst the chaos of his mother's illness. This paper seeks to delve into the sensemaking processes depicted in the novel, drawing from sensemaking theory to elucidate the cognitive mechanisms through which individuals make sense of their caregiving experiences.

Origins and Conceptual Framework

Sensemaking, a term introduced by Karl Weick, in his seminal work "The Social Psychology of Organizing" (1979), encompasses cognitive process of making sense of the unknown in order to navigate and take action within it. This involves constructing a coherent understanding—a mental map—of a world that is constantly evolving and shifting. Individuals engage in sensemaking by gathering information, taking actions, and having conversations with others to test and validate their interpretations of reality.

Through this iterative process, individuals refine, adjust, or discard their mental maps based on the credibility and effectiveness of their interpretations. In essence, sensemaking is a dynamic and ongoing endeavor that allows individuals to adapt and respond to the complexities of their environment.

The theory originated from organizational studies, emerged in the late 20th century as a response to the need to understand how individuals interpret and give meaning to their experiences within complex organizational environments. Weick's exploration of sensemaking laid the groundwork for a multidisciplinary framework that has since been applied across various fields, including psychology, sociology, communication studies, and literature.

Em and the Big Hoom by Jerry Pinto is an introspective novel that delves into the complexities of caregiver's life and mental illness. Set in Mumbai, India, the story is narrated by an unnamed protagonist who reflects on his upbringing in a household overshadowed by his mother's debilitating bipolar disorder, referred to as "Em." The protagonist affectionately refers to his father as "the Big Hoom." As the family combats with Em's unpredictable mood swings and hospitalizations, the protagonist steers the challenges of understanding and supporting his mother while also coming to terms with his own identity and relationships as a caregiver. Through a blend of humor, compassion, and raw honesty, the caregiving narrative explores themes of love, resilience, and the impact of mental illness on caregivers and familial bonds.

At its core, it is a story of the caregiver narrator Baba who attempts to position his 'self' in the chaotic ambivalence emerged from his mother's mental illness. For a child whose mother has managed to live through a number of suicide attempts, spends one third of the month in the hospital, hears unknown voices, shows her unfiltered self to the children and never hesitates talking about subjects like sex, marriage, motherhood, abortion and suicide, it becomes essential to create sense out of chaos.

In the novel narrator's understanding of the world undergoes a profound shift. The chaos and unpredictability of his mother's condition present him with a raw and

unfiltered experience, one that defies easy categorization or explanation. In order to make sense of this bewildering reality, he instinctively seeks to impose structure upon it. He feels the need to carve out some semblance of order from the turbulent flux of his daily life.

In his quest for understanding, the narrator finds himself confronted with a multitude of conflicting emotions and experiences. He struggles to reconcile the image of the loving, nurturing mother with the erratic and unpredictable behavior she exhibits. Each encounter with her illness becomes a new piece of raw material that must be processed and assimilated into his evolving understanding of the world.

Yet, amidst the chaos, there are moments of clarity and insight. As he grapples with the challenges of his mother's illness, the narrator begins to discern patterns and connections that were previously hidden from view. He learns to recognize the warning signs of an impending episode and develops coping strategies to navigate the stormy seas of his mother's mind.

In this process of sensemaking, the narrator not only seeks to understand his mother's illness but also to find his own place within the tangled web of emotions and experiences it brings. Each concept he grasps and labels becomes a tool for communication, allowing him to articulate his thoughts and feelings to others who may share his journey.

Ultimately, the boy's sensemaking journey is one of transformation and growth. Through his struggles with his mother's mental illness, he learns to navigate the complexities of human experience with courage and resilience. And though the path may be fraught with challenges, he emerges stronger and more compassionate, armed with the knowledge that even in the darkest of times, there is always hope for healing and understanding.

Dervin's Sense-Making Theory, developed by Brenda Dervin, is a theoretical framework that seeks to understand how individuals make sense of their experiences in a complex and uncertain world. This theory emerged in the field of library and information science but has since been applied across various disciplines, including communication, psychology, and organizational studies. At its core, Dervin's Sense-Making Theory posits that individuals are constantly engaged in a process of sensemaking, wherein they actively seek to make sense of the world around them by interpreting new information in relation to their existing knowledge and experiences. This sensemaking process occurs in response to what Dervin terms "gaps" or discrepancies between individuals' expectations and the realities they encounter.

Sensemaking has been defined as a "methodology between the crack." (Naumer 3) The foundational premise is the intersection of "situation-gap-outcome" triangle. (4) In *Em and the Big Hoom* by Jerry Pinto, through the lens of the situation-gap-outcome triangle, we witness the protagonist recognizing the stark gap between his mother's "micro-weather" i.e. the unpredictable behavior and his desire for a stable family life. Immersed in this gap, he delves into memories, conversations, and interactions, seeking to understand the complexities of his mother's illness and its impact on their family dynamics. As he enacts sense, piecing together fragmented memories and emotions, and bridging the gap he begins to adapt to his new understanding, finding moments of solace and connection amidst the chaos. Through this process, sensemaking

becomes a means of coping, healing, and ultimately, accepting the realities of mental illness within the family unit.

In the novel the narrator is confronted in many situations whose comprehension leads him to an existing gap in his sensemaking journey. He starts recognizing a discrepancy and wide space between his expectation of familial dynamics and the reality he observes. In Dervin's Sense-Making Model, this reflects the stage of recognizing a gap. It "intrigues" the narrator that how his parents' relationship has a unique communication style full of "intricate codes and rituals" (2) Its due to their unconventional interaction that the narrator and his sister grow up addressing their mother as "Em" and father as "big Hoom". Though the unconventionality of narrator's relationship with his mother seems strange to readers yet for the narrator it became a way of life where he and Em are "smoking together" (2) in the balcony and have conversation about the topics like pregnancy, abortion, dilation, curettage and even brothel.

The narrator observes his mother's exuberance when he shares, "She was Em, and most of the time she was Em with an exclamation mark." (7). For a ten year old boy whose mother is suffering from a mental illness, life becomes uncertain and apprehensive. The narrator expresses this ambiguity raised from his dysfunctional family with his insecurity in "dealing with the world" because the world is "too big and demanding" without a "fixed syllabus." (9 His mention of "something wrong" with the family, particularly related to the mother's mental health situation encapsulates the initial stage of sensemaking, where the individual becomes aware of the discrepancies and uncertainties that prompt the need for understanding and meaning making.

The next stage in Dervin's theory is knowing the gap, immersing in it and seeking out information and perspectives that can help an individual make sense of the situation. The narrator acknowledges the existing gap between expectations and the reality of conversing with Em when he compares conversation with Em to "wandering in an unfamiliar town" (26) where nothing is predictable and has no structure. Each path taken in conversation with Em has the potential to diverge unexpectedly, akin to taking a new route in an unfamiliar town and being uncertain of where it will lead. Subsequently the narrator comprehends this gap and starts figuring out to find a "way back to the main street." This quest of looking for a coping mechanism from Em's non-linear and incoherent behaviour becomes a transition ritual for the narrator to delve into the next stage of sensemaking, which is immersing in the gap.

In *Em and the big Hoom* this immersion occurs through narrator's "carte blanche" (18) in reading Em's "diaries and letters." Though he mentions that he could only read Em's journals after her death but since her letters were "public documents" he could sense the origin of his parents' relationship and what might have fueled Em's mental illness. Simultaneously he starts discerning the subjects, people and conversations that might trigger her "manic rages" (47)

This understanding, dissecting and immersing in the prevalent gap leads the narrator towards the next transition ritual which is creating a bridge between situation and outcomes by enacting sense. Individuals in this phase actively construct meaning by interpreting the information they have gathered in relation to their existing knowledge and experience. The narrator understands that Em "plays out

her insecurities” (55), which is allowed by her ‘condition’. She can say what other ‘normal’ women could not. Although in narrator’s case this profundity comes after many barriers where he loses faith in God, becomes an escapist, fear his own madness and even thinks of her mother’s death, yet the acumen and willingness to make sense helps him in removing those barriers and create a bridge.

Thereafter comes the next and concluding stage of sensemaking i.e the “outcome” where Individuals adjust their understanding and behavior based on the new insights gained through the sensemaking process. For the narrator this outcome is acquired in his deeper understanding of the severity of his mother’s illness. He observes that his “mother is now in a state where her mind tortures her. It will not even let her sag into apathy.” (60) This awareness helps the narrator reduce frustration and disappointment, fostering a more adaptive and supportive attitude towards his mother. Additionally, this acceptance enables the narrator to confront mental illness and its repercussion on family members, more effectively. The embracement towards the reality is visible when the narrator’s illusion of depression as “nothing more than the blues, commercially packaged angst, a hole in the ground” turns into disillusionment when he finds “its black weight settling inside” his “mother’s chest, disrupting her breathing, leaching her days of colour and the nights of rest.” (70)

Dervin's Sense-Making Theory emphasizes the dynamic and iterative nature of sensemaking, highlighting that it is an ongoing process rather than a one-time event. The narrator in *Em and the Big Hoom* ultimately reaches to the point of heightened insight where he comes to terms with his caregiving journey which is going to be continuous.

References

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