

Chapter 4

Dervin's Sense-Making Theory

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ABSTRACT

Dervin's Sense-Making Methodology (SMM) has been frequently referred to and used as a substantive theory, particularly so in the field of Information Science. Yet, SMM was not developed as a substantive theory but rather as a philosophically informed methodological approach for attending to (and researching) human sense-making and sense-unmaking. In the field of Information Science, this "theoretical approach" has been most frequently used to explicate and study variable analytic measures categorized as information needs, seeking, and use. In its uses, SMM can be termed depending on context as theory, as well as meta-theory, methodology, and method. All of these perspectives are relevant to the purposes of this chapter - to position SMM within the Information Science field in terms of its historical origins and to describe how its positioning as meta-theory, methodology, and method has had applications to the study of information needs, seeking, and use, and to substantive theorizing.

INTRODUCTION

In the field of Information Science, Dervin's Sense-Making Methodology (SMM) has been frequently referred to and used as a substantive theory or model for that cluster of human behaviors that although variously labeled fall generally within the meta-categories of information needs, seeking, and use. It is important at the outset to emphasize how slippery the connections are between what researchers refer to as their uses of Dervin's work and to arrive at a stable portrait of these uses.

Part of this difficulty arises from the facts surrounding the development of SMM. In contrast to

the foci emphasized by other theories highlighted in this section, SMM was not developed as a substantive theory but rather as a philosophically informed methodological approach for attending to (and researching) human "communicating." (Dervin & Foreman-Wernet, 2003). The intent, to be elaborated on below, was to develop and implement: a meta-theoretic set of assumptions for conceptualizing the communicatings both internal and external involved in human sense-making; a methodological framework for applying these conceptualizations; and a set of methodologically-informed methods that provide a flexible array of options for research as well as communication practice. Within this context, sense-making and

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sense-unmaking are treated as meta-level concepts within which the many variants of the variable categories information needs, seeking, and use are nested. Hence, SMM can be termed depending on context as theory, as well as meta-theory, methodology, and method. All these perspectives are relevant to this chapter - to position SMM as it has been intended to be applied to the study of information needs, seeking, and use not only within the Information Science field but in a diverse set of other discourse communities.

The importance of differences between discourse communities and how they use language must be emphasized to understand why SMM is described in so many different, sometimes contradictory ways. Discourse communities in academia are most clearly demarked by differences between journals. Even within the Library and Information Science fields, where it is fair to say that SMM has been most cited, there are still myriad different discourse communities and the referents for even the most central terms in this chapter - meta-theory, theory, methodology, and method - vary markedly across these discourses. Too often, unfortunately, academic writing has a rhetorical style that seems to be anchored in essentialist meanings - the idea that terms point to referents in universally agreed ways. This is complex territory that cannot be covered here (Dervin, 2003). Suffice it is say that in many ways SMM's central purpose has been to find ways to bridge gaps across discourse differences without privileging one or the other. In this framing, SMM has been designed as an approach to communicatively bridge communication gaps.

To say this, however, is to ignore the fact that most uses of Dervin's SMM are highly variable and involve researchers selecting this or that piece to serve their research purposes. These pickings and choosings are usually useful but they do not provide a stable portrait of what SMM has been intended to be, and how it is used by those who have worked most closely with its development. This chapter aims to provide that portrait.

SENSE-MAKING AND ITS HISTORICAL ORIGIN

Dervin graduated with a PhD in communication research from Michigan State University in 1971. Michigan State was one of the first US universities to formalize the study of communication. (Dervin & Reinhard, 2010) Then, as now, a major thrust in the emerging field's attentions focused on societal problems. In the 1970s US context, primary among the designated societal problems was poverty and Dervin's work at this point specialized in the media and communication behaviors of the US urban poor (Greenberg & Dervin, 1970). It was this specialty that led to her first academic position at the then Syracuse University School of Library Science. In some ways, this was a formative accident because, on the one hand, there were not yet many communication departments; and on the other, with increasing pressures in the US for public services to attend to the needs of the "poor" and burgeoning immigrant communities, Dervin's specialty was in high demand in public service contexts.

US public libraries in particular were experiencing pressure to learn how to address the needs of diverse sub-populations. While Dervin spent only two years on a library-information science faculty, her stay gave one of the permanent directions to her work. It was at Syracuse that Dervin began to develop what she called a "user-oriented" approach to the study of information needs, seeking, and use (Dervin, 1977, Zweizig & Dervin, 1977). Later Dervin would call this a "communicative" approach to studying communication. At the highest level of abstraction for Dervin to be "user-oriented" requires being "communicative" (Dervin 1976a). Focusing on the communicative requires redefining the concept of "information" from its now normative system-oriented framing to a framing that applies equally to systems and to users. For Dervin, this has meant focusing on how humans communicatively make and unmake sense using the many diverse kinds of

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