Existentialism and organizational behaviour: How existentialism can contribute to complexity theory and sense-making.

Abstract

**Purpose:** This article aims to develop a conception consisting of insights from complexity theory and additional notions from Weiick’s sense-making theory and existentialism for examining organization behaviour.

**Design/methodology/approach:** This paper carries out a literature review of Karl Weick’s theory of sense-making and some notions from existentialism to discuss the possible contributions to complexity theory and with this a further comprehension of organizational behaviour.

**Findings:** Four existential conditions namely death, freedom, existentialism and meaninglessness give a further comprehension of Weick’s concept of equivocality. Equivocality is an important input for organizing processes. The complexity of organizing processes are an object for examining organizational behaviour from a complexity scientific standpoint. We argue that the concept of equivocality and with this the states of equilibrium in an organization can be approached with examining the states of the mentioned four existential conditions.

**Practical implications:** An important point of application for change managers in an organization is equivocality. The increase of equivocality will lead to a shift in the state of equilibrium in which new themes will emerge and corresponding organizational behaviour. The level of equivocality is due to the presence of existential fears. Hence, change managers should focus to existential themes and anxieties in an organization to advance emergent change.

**Originality:** New in this paper is the usage of notions from existentialism to elaborate Weick’s conception of sense-making. Also this paper discusses the possible contribution of this elaboration to research of organizational behaviour from the perspective of complexity theory.

**Keywords:** complexity theory, complex responsive systems, sense-making, equivocality, existentialism, existential fears

**Classification:** conceptual paper
Existentialism and organizational behaviour: How existentialism can contribute to complexity theory and sense-making.

Introduction
Complexity theory has not only found practical relevance in the natural sciences (Steward, 1989). Economists and social scientists have also tried to apply its principles in their subject areas (Baumol & Benhabib, 1989; Kelsey, 1988; Anderson, Arrow & Pines, 1988; Reed & Harvey, 1996; Wheatley, 1999). Interest in complexity theory as an approach to carrying out research in organisations is not new (Demers, 2007; Cohen, 1999; Maguire & McKelvey, 1999). Although complexity theory is viewed as a meaningful way of explaining behaviour in organisations, there has been a great deal of methodological discussion (Maguire, McKelvey, Mirabeau & Oztas, 2006; Demers, 2007; Cohen, 1999) about conducting research into complexity in organisations. Apart from using formal models and performing computer simulations to examine non-linearity in organisations (Carley, 2002; Morel & Ramanujam, 1999; McKelvey, 1997), researchers (Eisenhardt & Bhatia, 2002; Sorenson, 2002) have used qualitative research as a method of investigating complexity in organisations. This article attempts to develop a conceptual framework to enable researchers to carry out research into complexity in organisations. In this article we will argue that four existential fears will provide a better understanding of Weick’s sense-making concept as an important driver for complex organisational behaviour. To do so, first we will discuss complexity theory and its contribution to our understanding of organisational change. After this, we will introduce some important notions from Karl Weick’s sense-making theory and link this to complexity theory. Finally, we will discuss notions from existentialism and in particular Yalom’s description of existential fears (death, freedom, existential isolation and meaninglessness) in relation to the prior theories discussed in this article with a view to developing a framework within which organisational behaviour can be approached.

Complexity theory
The complexity approach views organisations as non-linear dynamic systems whose behaviour can be unpredictable and far from equilibrium (Baum & Singh, 1994). Depending on the balance between positive (deviation-amplifying) and negative (deviation-reducing) feedback loops over time, non-linear systems may show different types of temporal patterns. Non-linear systems can attain stable equilibrium, either fixed (static) or periodic (cyclical). However, they often develop more complex behaviour characterised as edge-of-chaos behaviour (self-organised critically), deterministic chaos (bounded instability) or random noise (explosive instability) (Anderson, 1999; Morel & Ramanujam, 1999; Carver & Schreier, 2002; Vallacher & Nowak, 2008). Non-linear behaviour is dependent on the competition between positive feedback loops, which reinforce the system towards instability, and negative feedback loops, which subdue change and restore the system’s stability. Thiétart and Forgues (1995) argue that the difference between the system reaching explosive instability, bounded instability and self-organised critically is due to the dynamic combination and the relative strengths of relationships among positive and negative feedback variables. If systems are pushed to change, they will subsequently reach a chaotic state of equilibrium in which repetitive cycles are never followed (Levy, 1994). However, in this state their paths are not erratic; when observed over a long period of time, patterns can be identified, revealing a hidden order. This hidden order
can be defined as an attractor which means that the limits of the system’s outcomes are known (Stacey, 2000).

When a system attains a state of explosive instability, it produces self-organisation (Koput, 1997). From this spontaneous self-organisation new structures and behaviour are created which cannot be predicted in earlier stages. This new, complex structure is called a dissipative structure because it disperses (dissipates) energy to maintain the system in the new mode (Prigogine & Stengers, 1984; Nicolis & Prigogine 1989). In contrast to a static equilibrium, which requires hardly any energy to maintain and a considerable amount of energy to change, a dissipative structure requires a lot of energy to keep it going and little energy to change it. Fluctuations in the form of variations are incorporated and provide a non-linear system with the capacity to move spontaneously from one attractor to another. Prigogine and Stengers (1984) call this ‘order by fluctuations’ and show that this happens by means of a process of spontaneous self-organisation. When a deterministic, non-linear system moves from a stable equilibrium to a state of explosive instability, it passes through a stage of bounded instability, where it demonstrates very complex behaviour. This is a borderline between equilibrium and instability in which both forces are simultaneously reordered into different, yet homogeneous patterns. These patterns are brought about by self-organisation as a characteristic of the system itself, and are not the result of external positive and negative feedback.

Complex adaptive systems
One approach which applies the idea of dissipative structures to social systems like organisations is the theory of complex adaptive systems. The theory of adaptive systems develops and studies models of interaction between large groups of agents in a system (Reynolds, 1987; Blomme, 2003; Maguire, McKelvey, Mirabeau, and Oztas, 2006). In the complex adaptive systems approach agents are defined as actors, causes and working means. These rules require agents to adapt their behaviour to other agents. A complex adaptive system produces a type of order which is mutable and diverse, and which occurs spontaneously. This order is not programmed and there is no design or plan. Moreover, this spontaneous self-organising activity is vitally important for the continuous evolution of the system and its ability to create something new. However, we cannot predict the new form and in this sense the system is chaotic. In the adaptive system, competition is also important, particularly the competition which goes hand in hand with cooperation. Furthermore, the study of complex systems yields yet another insight: life survives on the edge of disintegration because of the massive redundancy inherent in it. This redundancy is the source of permanence and order.

Agents act locally with each other in a complex system because they share an identity which has developed over time. They do this without knowing how the entire system will continue to develop, and even without having any understanding of what the system’s current situation is as a whole (Thiétart & Forgues, 1995). Following Weick, organisations are based on inter-connected behaviour and not on inter-connected individuals. Individuals do not dedicate ‘all’ of themselves to a particular organisation; rather, they only give a part of themselves. Obligations and inter-connectedness are spread over different groups. Therefore the emphasis is more on the relations between the entities than on the individual constituents themselves. This removes the central position once accorded to the cognizant individual by previous
systems theories. Moreover, what has been newly created is essentially unpredictable. This fact raises more questions about the nature of control (Streatfield, 2001). The position of an external, objective observer is problematic because the new complex theories argue that new forms develop *spontaneously* through the process of self-organisation. The agents in a system are always participants in this system and none of them is able to step out of the system to obtain an overview of the system as a whole, let alone have any idea about the evolution of the system. *The essential point about self-organisation is precisely that none of the agents - either as individuals or as members of the group - can plan or shape the evolution of the system in any other way than by their local interaction.* Although their shared interaction contributes to the evolution of the system, none of them organises the interaction, the self-organisation across the system as a whole. No single agent determines the rules for the other agents to subsequently ‘allow’ them to organise themselves. If this indeed were to happen, we could no longer consider a system like this to be self-organising.

**Complex responsive processes**

We can find the human analogy for these processes in the fundamental idea of social constructivism (Gergen, 1999; Burr, 2003; Danziger, 1997; Usher, 2000), which is that human experience is organised by themes, stories and interaction. Computer simulations reveal patterns of interaction that we call attractors. The analogy that can be made here with human interaction is a recognisable pattern in a series of organising themes, which in turn elicit other organising themes. In computer simulations, diversity – and hence the ability to evolve spontaneously – is provided by chance mutations and cross-replications. Here the analogy could be “faulty communication between people”. The analogy with the complex adaptive system as a whole is human interaction itself. There is one important difference, however. Human interaction is certainly complex, but describing it as adaptive would not be doing justice to what true complexity is. People do not just simply ‘adapt’. It is therefore better to talk about human actions and interaction as being responsive (Stacey, 2000), or as reacting or responding to something, and whether a behaviour may be adaptive in this responsiveness or not. As an analogy to a complex adaptive system, Stacey (2000) uses the expression *complex responsive processes* to describe human behaviour. Experiences, which are the interactions between groups of people and between individuals, are therefore complex responsive processes which are similar to complex adaptive systems.

Interactions lead to the ordering of behaviour (Stacey, 2001). In an interaction, such as a conversation, a theme arises and the conversation develops around this theme until a turning point – a certain remark, for example – gives rise to another theme. New (discourse) attractors arise, patterns of themes which are brought about by certain self-organising associations. These processes organise the experiences of a group of people who talk to each other, enabling individual and group experiences to arise simultaneously (Boden, 1994). Change only occurs if the pattern of conversation (discourse pattern) changes. *Individual behaviour changes only if an individual, silent conversation changes and this can in turn, only change if the individual experience in a social relationship changes.* In this sense, change in a group and in an individual is the same; it happens simultaneously. This way of thinking about change has significant implications both for management and organisations: in brief, it means that organisations can only change if the people in the organisation begin to talk to each other in a different way. Change means making different forms of conversation.
possible. This means that an organisation can no longer be thought of as an adaptive thing-like system or network but as a series of responsive processes. The self-organising agents are not individuals but symbols (Jackson & Carter, 2000) arranged in prepositional and narrative themes which connect them to each other. Themes organise the responsive experiences of individuals. In other words, it is the themes which bring about interaction, and not the individuals (Stacey, 2000; Stacey, 2007; Wheatley, 1999). Narrative and prepositional themes are organised in conversations, both privately and publicly, which can assume different forms such as fantasies, myths, rituals, ideologies, culture, gossip and rumours (Stacey, 2000). In this sense, themes organise complexity in organisations.

Organisational themes with an ideological character are fundamental to human relations because these themes make the existing power relations appear natural. Relations always place limitations on acting, speaking and even thinking. This type of limitation is power. The narrative and prepositional themes form – and are in turn formed by – the power relations between people in an organisation. Power therefore is not located in a manipulating or dominating individual but in human relations. These relations limit all of us and the pattern of these limitations – which appears in our relations - is the configuration of power relations. There are legitimate themes and shadow themes (Fonseca, 2002). Moreover, there is a difference between formal and informal organisation. Formal organisation is defined in terms of goals and tasks, and the members’ roles which have been formally allocated to them. Informal organisation consists of relations which have not been formally defined either by their roles or tasks. The distinction between formal and informal organisation is completely different from the distinction between legitimate themes and shadow themes; formal and informal themes refer to the degree of formality, and legitimate and shadow themes to the degree of legitimacy. The majority of themes that organise experience are unconscious. A striking example of such a theme is when people unconsciously support power relations by talking about differences which foster hatred and acting accordingly. This illustrates the dynamics of those who are either ‘in’ or ‘out’. Although people are well aware of this distinction, they are not usually aware of the purpose this distinction is meant to serve, that is the categorisation of experience in binary opposites, which subsequently become ideologies which make their behaviour look obvious and natural.

**Equivocality**

The variety and diversity required in an organisation is maintained by the imperfection of human communication (Allen, 1998a; Allen, 1998b). This variety in turn produces equivocality (Aldrich, 2000; Weick, 1969; Weick, 1979). Weick views the organising process in terms of evolution. The starting point for the process of organising is a situation in which people experience equivocality. According to Weick, the picture we do not want to conjure up through equivocality is that of an environment which is confused, uncertain and chaotic. On the contrary, we imagine an environment which has an abundance of possible connections which we impose on an equally abundant assortment of possible variables chosen. Weick believes that the term ‘equivocality’ describes these nuances the most accurately. It is especially the plethora and multiplicity of meanings we can apply to a situation which an organisation has to deal with. Equivocality only becomes apparent when people are preoccupied with the world around them, when they attempt to grasp it, study it and fashion it. Weick calls the behaviour through which people ‘grab hold of’ a part of
their environment and make it available for further inspection ‘enactment’. Enactment is not the same as ‘reaction’. It is the active process which enables people to focus on the world and thereby create experience. In Weick’s vision, this process precedes thoughts about reality. Behaviour and attention precede reflection. The concept of an enacted environment is not the same as the concept of the ‘perceived environment’. If the essence of ‘fashioning’ is the perceived environment, then the phenomenon would be called ‘enthinkment’ and not ‘enactment’. Weick emphasises that actors reach at least some degree of consensus about their behaviour and that they look for patterns which form the basis of phenomena, actions and events. These patterns are assumed to be independent of their interpretations.

The outcome of enactment is formed by equivocal images, which answers the question “What is going on here?”. Several interpretations provide an answer to this question and in the second step of the evolution model – the ‘selection’– the number of interpretations are reduced. Useful interpretations can subsequently be stored for future use, just as natural selection preserves useful genes. In this context Weick talks about ‘retention’, that is, the storing of useful interpretations in the memory. As can been seen in Figure 1, two arrows lead backwards from retention: one to enactment and the other to selection. This means that memory steers not only the attention and the actions of people (the ‘enactment’), but also the interpretation of what they subsequently experience (selection). The model shows the meaning of processes, which reinforce themselves. What individuals do depends on what they know about the environment. What individuals know about the environment is in turn determined by what they perceive. What individuals perceive depends on what they do. This closes the circle: the process of thinking and acting reinforces itself. Weick uses the term ‘enacted environment’ to describe this. People live in a world which they themselves have created by their own actions.

This holds for the individual, such as the manager, who through his own actions creates a work environment for himself, which he himself reacts to. The organising process, however, is primarily concerned with collective processes in which people act inter-dependently (enactment), perceive and interpret (selection), and store images in their shared memory (retention). The collective process of organising always begins in situations that cannot be solved by existing routines. In the model the ‘driving force’ behind evolution can be found in the unconscious processes of acting and attention. This is where the raw material - i.e. equivocality - for sense-making is made. Only then will it be possible to produce useful interpretations (Weick, 1979; Daft & Weick, 1984).

The idea that equivocality drives the organising process provides an interesting perspective when it comes to explaining various states of equilibrium in organisations. If we make a link with the previously-mentioned stages of equilibrium in an organisation, a low degree of equivocality will produce a stable equilibrium and a higher degree of equivocality will produce a more chaotic equilibrium. As attractors, themes determine the breadth of interaction within the organisation and serve to support the behaviour of the organising process. When themes impede the reduction of equivocality, it can be assumed that a state of explosive instability will be

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1 Masculine forms have been used for stylistic ease only throughout the article and assume the inclusion of both genders
attained, self-organisation will arise and new attractors in the form of new themes will be created. New structures and behaviour will arise which could not have been predicted in the earlier stages.

In a situation such as chaotic equilibrium, the free, informal conversations (Stacey, 2001) may be important for an organisation’s development opportunities. The free conversations house the potential for creativity, which allows new patterns of conversation to develop. The combined action of legitimate and shadow themes takes place here. These conversations allow emotions to be expressed and the limits of acceptability to be tested. They are about what is unexpected and equivocal. Conversations are the breeding grounds for new possibilities, for the potential for change: the potential for an organisation’s creativity can be found in these shadow conversations and the tension that exists between these and legitimate conversations. A free conversation in the shadow can be both creative and destructive. The basis for both types is trust. Only if people trust each other can they initiate shadow conversations, be strong enough to test limits, talk about what is possible and what is not, and question the existing power. A system (organisation) can only move spontaneously from one attractor to another if there is sufficient diversity. Although we argue that diversity is an important driver for shifting from a state of static equilibrium to one of chaotic equilibrium in which new themes will arise, scholars (Verhofstadt-Denève, 2001; Løvlie, 1982) indicate that individuals have a tendency to decrease diversity and to remain as an organisational system in a state of static equilibrium. Although power relations are an important reason for maintaining this stability, changing them becomes problematic. The question remains why this shift from a static equilibrium to a chaotic equilibrium is difficult. One possible answer to this question can be found in existentialism, which looks at human behaviour from a particular perspective and describes why humans have the tendency to remain in a state of stability and to enact an ambiguous environment in line with existing organisational themes (e.g. Jackson & Carter, 2000). However, there is a point of contention surrounding the introduction of existentialism as a line of thought ancillary to complexity science and Weick's sense-making approach rather than using the more traditional approaches from social and organisational psychology. In line with the arguments put forward by Greenberg, Koole and Pyszczynski (2004), modern social and organisational psychology focuses on the causal structure of behaviour, whereas existentialism attempts to focus on how human beings grapple, whether consciously or unconsciously, with questions about themselves and about life itself. Organisations, in which human beings spend much of their lives, are an important part of life. One of the assumptions which can be drawn from studying the non-linear dynamics of organisational behaviour is that causal relationships such as those examined by modern social and organisational psychology are less important. In their attempts to reduce equivocality, human beings 'grapple' with others in an environment which is full of ambiguity in order to understand each other. It is especially this 'grappling' behaviour which requires closer examination and which may provide an answer to how human beings deal with equivocality in organisations. Following the arguments put forward by Greenberg et al. (2004) regarding the re-introduction of existentialism as an important approach to human behaviour in general, an existential perspective may also add a new dimension for the examination of organisational behaviour. As such, we have to go back to the nature of man as a sense-making person from an existential perspective.
Existentialism

George Bataille (1962) wrote in *L’expérience Intérieure* that we have the ability to reflect on our existential opportunity and that this distinguishes us, for example, from animals. At a given time in our development the individual is suddenly struck by the biggest, yet daunting realisation that he exists. Feelings of wonder and joy may result from this, but so too can feelings of powerlessness and fear about one’s own destiny. Even though a person may want reality to be something external and a threat to other people, the individual in his existence is nevertheless caught off-guard by the clearly immutable realisation that death is the only certainty in life (Camus, 1965). Camus points out that this consciousness of existence gives us the freedom to make choices in our existence. This means that we are continually forced to make choices and we must be personally responsible for our decisions. In the words of Verhofstadt-Denève (2001): ‘A person cannot not make a decision’. Every decision that is made has consequences for our future actions. Whatever the decision may be, people often try to focus either on the future, or on the unpredictable, or on the past because the past represents what is reliable and familiar to them. Focusing on the future is appealing because it presents the individual with a challenge and opportunities for development. People judge their roles critically, take risks, experiment with new things and thus contribute to the actualisation of their potential. However, they are also still responsible for their decisions. This consciousness produces loneliness and fear which is related to the existential fear that is specific to the threat of total destruction (Verhofstadt-Denève, 2001: 54). This is why there is a tendency to focus on the past, which brings back the feeling of safety, that is, the safety offered by structure and what is familiar. Lovlie calls this *repetitive action*: ‘The themes are lived repetitively to avoid anxiety’ (Lovlie, 1982; 65). Meaningfulness and the behaviour which this produces is therefore the result of decisions which stem from the consciousness of one’s own existence. Different scholars (e.g. Yalom, 1980; Greenberg, Koole & Pyszczynski, 2004; Koole & Van Den Berg, 2004) in the field of research into existential anxiety and its relation to (psychodynamic) behaviour distinguish four existential fears: death, freedom, isolation and meaninglessness. Every person deals with these concerns in their own way. The existential confrontation leads to a deeply, often unconsciously felt anxiety. Within existentialism, the term ‘driver’ is replaced by ‘awareness of ultimate concern’. The behaviour resulting from the propensity of human beings to avoid thinking about the ultimate fears of existence provides them with a sense of safety, but at the same time restricts growth and limits experience. This points towards what some existential philosophers have said about human nature.

An example by Albert Camus can be used to illustrate this aspect of human nature. In his seminal work ‘The Myth of Sisyphus’ Albert Camus describes the absurdity of life. According Camus, life is absurd and the ‘absurd human being’ is constantly looking for ways to accept life and reality as people know it. The feeling that life is absurd originates from the confrontation of the human mind which focuses on unity, clarity and meaning with a world that remains silent. This is something the individual has to discover. In this search the feeling that all activities and life itself are absurd can overwhelm an individual; he feels estranged and uncomfortable. Camus does not look for answers in religions or institutions. In his opinion these make the individual weaker, because they distract the individual from his personal responsibility to find meaning. The absurd human wants to live without external justifications. If an individual lives for the future, for some external reality or for something eternal, he
diminishes his here and now. Camus’ answer is that the absurd human wants to be aware of his here and now every moment of his life. The absurd human passionately revolts against all possible unsuitable ideas and convictions. He wants to live and work with the reality of life, as he knows it. His joy lies in the way he is able to accept his fate. The hero of absurdity is Sisyphus. This Greek myth shows the meaninglessness of our existence; the permanent influence of human actions is mostly negligible. At the end of the myth Camus says: “We have to envision that Sisyphus is happy”. The myth describes the life of Sisyphus who has a passion for life and who is punished by the gods with a never-ending dull and meaningless task. Sisyphus has to push a rock up a hill and as soon as he reaches the top of the hill, the rock rolls down again and he must start anew. Sisyphus is aware of his actions; he knows the rock will roll down again. He accepts this fact and passionately resists the hope that next time the rock will remain at the top of the hill. He has no false hope. He acts in accordance with and takes responsibility for his fate; he refuses to escape from reality. By doing so, he triumphs over his fate and he finds joy and happiness. If life has no meaning, why not die? This question is asked many times in Camus' book “The Myth of Sisyphus”. The answer to this question is because there can be meaning in every moment of the here and now. Life is all a human being has. For Camus, the ultimate freedom to choose is a condition for the personal fulfilment of life. It may cause anxiety, but an individual will need this freedom to be able to accept his fate as his own. In the acceptance of personal life as it unfolds lies existential isolation, which has to be accepted personally. Camus proposes that the condition for dealing with this anxiety lies in the acceptance of this existential isolation as a fact of life, with no false hope that this will diminish. Dealing with anxiety means that human beings have to look for meaning within themselves.

**Four hallmarks of existential fear**

The question arises how the notions from existentialism discussed above can be applied to complexity theory and Weick’s sense-making concept to describe organisational behaviour. Organisations are pre-eminently social networks. People organise their work in these social networks and are motivated to do so because of their need to reduce equivocality. In the previous paragraphs we have argued that this reduction of equivocality is influenced by existential fears. To avoid existential fear people have the tendency to make sense of their present ambiguous environment by drawing on their past experiences and contexts. This leads to stability in the organisation and anxiety avoidance. From the perspective of complexity, it could be argued that anxiety avoidance leads to negative loops, which subdue instability and change. Therefore with the avoidance of death, freedom, existential isolation and meaninglessness, people make sense of existence so that they can predict the organisational context. That brings us to the question of how organisations change. From the perspective of complexity theory, organisational change can be defined as the point when attractors represented as organisational themes change, which results in the change of interactions and organisational behaviour. Organisational themes are maintained or changed by the sense-making process of human beings, the purpose of which is the reduction of equivocality. From the perspective of existentialism we have argued that this sense-making process is limited by anxiety; human beings make sense of their ambiguous environment by trying to avoid anxiety, which appeals to existential fears. The existential perspective also answers the question why effective change is an emergent and gradual process. The conclusion that people have to look for significance in their lives bearing in mind the importance work has in this, also
gives an indication regarding the effective conditions for change. The four existential fears (death, freedom, existential isolation and meaninglessness), which will be discussed below, are introduced in Yalom’s seminal work (1980). Although Yalom himself points out that these four are not complete, other scholars stress that these four existential fears are a good basis to describe the conditions for change (e.g. Greenberg, Koole & Pyszczynski, 2004; Taubman & Ari, 2004). The following paragraphs will deal with the four existential fears and their relationship with change.

1. Death
The first condition for change can be described using the theme of death. With regard to the existential fear of death, Yalom argues that it is very painful for an individual to confront the foundation of their own existence. The biological border between life and death is physical and clear. However, the psychological border is much more diffuse. In his seminal work ‘Sein und Zeit’ Heidegger says: “The concept of death saves us from death”. A deeply felt experience of the end of personal life can sometimes lead to the “sudden” choice of a meaningful existence. Death forces us to live genuinely. According to Heidegger, there are two positions in life: forgetfulness of being, a position concerning the activities of everyday existence, or mindfulness of being, a position concerning existence itself and the responsibility felt by an individual to have a meaningful life. Death or finiteness is a fact of life. Human beings find it hard to accept that life goes on, even when their personal life comes to an end. This unpleasant feeling of anxiety produces two different personal responses or coping modes: 1) personal inviolability and being untouchable, i.e. being too unique to die (specialness) or 2) believing that there is an ultimate rescuer. These coping modes are similar in that the individual avoids the true confrontation with his own ending, which could either be his own ending in terms of physical death, or the ending of activities, status, power positions and responsibilities. In the coping mode of specialness, the individual focuses on his own autonomy, on his being unique, and he looks at himself as being separate from others. These coping mechanisms will lead to stability, the maintenance of the existing organisational themes and the routines of organisational behaviour. The fear of death may intensify if the sense-making process does not reduce the feeling of anxiety. If the individual constructs new meanings in an ambiguous environment which do not help to reduce anxiety and existential fear, fear will increase. The sense-making process will increase anxiety rather than subdue it, and as a result organisational behaviour will be governed by coping behaviour. This is the moment when the organisation finds itself in a condition of explosive instability. Referring to Camus, the acceptance of a possible death or ending will decrease the anxiety which will open the possibility for conversations in which shadow themes will develop and new organisational behaviour will emerge. If the individual is in state of continuous denial, coping behaviour will paralyse the organisation which may actually result in the death of the organisation. Hence, the first condition for change in relation to the fear of death is to allow the organisation to accept its finiteness, which will provide the possibility to look for new themes evoking new organisational behaviour. From this perspective, emergent leadership should be nurtured amongst all the organisation's members to impede coping modes and to encourage shadow conversations, which will lead to new organisational behaviour. To quote Camus: people should be able to revolt against the fear of finiteness (Camus, 1951).

2. Freedom
The argument of *freedom* can be used as a second condition. According to the existential vision of life and the world, there is no Big Plan for human beings and the earth. A human being is born without being asked or without choice; he lives and dies. He is responsible for his actions and for the course of his life. According to Heidegger, human existence has a dual nature: the individual is an object in the world, he is ‘there’ (‘da’), but he also constitutes what is there. This is the duality: the individual (Heidegger calls him a ‘Dasein’) is an empirical ego, an object, but also a transcendental ego, which constitutes itself and the world (Yalom, 1980: 220). Freedom is closely linked to responsibility. Without freedom, that is the choice to construct the world in any number of ways, the concept of responsibility has no meaning. According to Camus, a person not only is responsible for the actions he takes in life but also for his failure to act. When individuals become conscious of the fact that they themselves bear responsibility for their lives, a feeling of anxiety can arise. Nowadays we have to learn how to make our own choices in life. The external structures and institutions that tell us how to live are decreasing. There are seemingly endless ways in which we can construct our individual lives and this eventually forces us to confront ourselves. This confrontation consists of two sides. One side is about taking responsibilities for one’s own personal life and autonomy. The other side is about being fully aware of the choice of life or in Yalom’s term being ‘willing’. According to Yalom, “An individual wills himself into being what he is”. Fundamental choices in life have to be based on responsibility. Being fully aware of one’s existential situation means that one becomes aware of self-creation (Yalom, 1980: 319). The awareness of the fact that the individual himself is responsible for becoming who he really is, without any absolute, external, Right Answers leads to the awareness of the personal fundamental groundlessness. This is the basis of the fear of ultimate freedom: who decides whether a person’s choices in life are the right ones? Freedom makes a person responsible. The conflict experienced internally makes individuals look for the real person within them. The way an individual directs his actions is based on the personal responsibility he feels to become the human being he really is. Responsibility is the possibility to construct a personal life. The will to find suitable activities makes an individual direct his personal life the way he wants. Personal will leads to intentional actions. Hannah Ahrend (1958) makes a distinction between choice and wish. Choice refers to the choices that have to be made between goals and objects. Wish refers to ‘spontaneously beginning’, imagination and vaguely visible outlines of new, desired realities. The answer to ultimate freedom thus begins by embracing responsibility for personal life. According to some philosophers, the most important responsibility in life is that an individual becomes the human being that he truly is deep down inside. This could be the wish, the responsible driver that directs all activities in one’s personal life. As such, the consequence for change in relation to the theme of freedom as a second condition is providing the organisation’s members with the autonomy to fulfill their wishes and to align these with the identity or being of the organisation constructed by everyone in it.

3. Existential isolation
The third condition will be examined using the argument of *existential isolation*. This does not only include social isolation, but also refers to the fact that an individual is fundamentally alone and the only person who can steer his own existence in a particular direction. He alone is the one who knows his deepest thoughts and reflections. Existential isolation can be experienced when death is near, but it can also be experienced when an individual takes control of his own life. In general, the
anxiety related to existential isolation is not experienced directly, because it is the basis of many layers of activities and daily routines which are embedded in personal and collective meaning. The individual coincides with his activities. The questions “What am I ultimately made of?” and “What is my bottom line?” take the individual back to the most private and thus solitary answers. Fear of existential isolation is the main driver behind human relationships. The human individual arises from fusion (between his parents), grows from the mother’s womb and develops into a separate human being. One human being springs from another human being but has to evolve into an individual of his own. This is what makes the fear of existential isolation so unique and why it plays an important part in every relationship. No relationship can eliminate isolation, but it can compensate for the existential pain. According to Buber, a philosopher who combined deep philosophical insights with religious dedication, human beings are capable of engaging in a ‘need-free’ relationship with another human being. Buber states: “A great relationship breaches the barriers of a lofty solitude” (Buber in Yalom, 1980: 363). Buber (2004) distinguishes between two kinds of relationships: the ‘I-it-relationship’ and the ‘I-thou-relationship’. An I-it-relationship is a functional relationship. The other person is seen as a means to attain certain goals. An I-thou-relationship is about reciprocity. In such a relationship the individual ‘I’ is felt to be a part of the other (‘thou’), because the ‘I’ is created anew in the context of the relationship. An I-thou-relationship is about genuine dialogue and recognising the self in the other person. In this respect, Maslow makes a distinction between relationships that are deficiency-motivated or growth-motivated. Some human beings are focused on others who are useful to them. Some human beings are focused on others in order to grow and shape new realities. Erich Fromm (1941) addressed the question of the nature of need-free love (Yalom, 1980: 369). In his view, a grown-up relationship is a relationship in which two people are involved with their whole being. In a mature relationship there is room for understanding, respect and consideration for the uniqueness and integrity of the other. Hence, the third condition is the feeling of inclusion in the social community which provides human beings with a sense of belonging and a recognition that they are allowed to be human beings.

4. Meaninglessness

We will define the last condition in relation to the last existential fear which is the concept of meaninglessness (Yalom, 1980). Human beings need meaning, direction, values and ideals in life. Without them, the individual lives in fear of life itself. At the same time, we can never know what the meaning of life really is. There are no external or absolute answers; we are not born with the meaning of life programmed in our brains or with an implicit blueprint of values. How do we find meaning, which we intrinsically need in order to live, in a world that in itself is meaningless? This is what Camus called the human absurdity. We are meaning-needing creatures in an indifferent world. In our modern secular world it is essential that the individual finds personal meaning in a world of cosmic indifference. This means that the individual has to discover his own values and create his own guidelines. Yalom distinguishes five categories of activities in secular society that provide a sense of purpose in life. These are: 1) altruism, our endeavours to make the world a better place; 2) dedication to a cause, such as family, state, political party and science; 3) creativity, the fact that we live to create; 4) hedonism, the idea that life is a gift that must be opened and lived to the full, and 5) self-actualisation, the idea that we should exploit all the possibilities we are given in life. The psychotherapist Viktor Frankl (1997) distinguishes three
categories of purposeful life. Each individual constructs the meaning of life in a personal way, and these can be categorised as follows: 1) meaning from what the individual achieves and gives to the world, 2) meaning from encounters and experiences and 3) the attitude towards suffering and fate which cannot be changed. In short, purpose in life is based on creativity, experience and mindset. Humans are capable of looking at the world and their own existence in it from a distance. When viewed from outer space, the earth and its inhabitants do not seem to have any particular meaning. This perspective is also known as the ‘galactic view’. For Schopenhauer, this led to the conclusion that there is nothing in life worth living for, yet he found the energy to create. There may be no cosmic meaning, but there are many things in life that mean something to the individual. Sartre and Camus eventually come to this conclusion. Every man has a deep desire to live a dedicated life, connected to the world, others, to nature, to all that is. Human beings do not feel comfortable when there is no larger scheme or grand design and no recognisable pattern for their activities. Human beings are meaning-seeking individuals and thus organisations consist of meaning-seeking employees. They are looking for the bigger picture that the organisation can provide. Individuals with mature self-knowledge have an understanding of the bigger picture that they want to part of. The more structure the organisation can provide, the more effective the contribution of the individual can be. This brings us to the fourth condition. This condition encompasses the provision of enough autonomy for conversations and sense-making under the umbrella of an official ideology in which the present and future existence of the organisation is depicted. When individuals in the organisation know themselves, when they are able to engage in genuine relationships and when they can see clearly what their possibilities are and those of the organisation, then there can be a mature relationship between the individuals and the organisation.

5 Existential fears and change
If the four conditions described above are fulfilled so that anxiety arising from the four existential fears is reduced, this will lead to movement and the possibility of a change in themes. This in turn will produce behaviour with which will make it possible to adjust to variety in the environment. One of the assumptions is that the provision of room for personal growth leads to organisational growth. Organisations that include the possibility to reflect on the fundamental question ‘What is our organisation about’ will be better able to create or follow market developments than organisations which continue to carry out activities in a routine and predominantly functional way. Giving up a position in a power relation means giving up a person’s own position of specialness. The way individuals in an organization deal with the naked fact that the activities they carry out will eventually cease to exist will lead to other ways of working in the organisation. The feeling that personal activities will - by definition - end can lead to priorities, focused goals and the preservation of old routines. This will be the basis of their professional decisions and actions. The personal guiding principle in these cases may contribute to the overall continuity of the organisation as long as this is significant and relevant for the continuation of the present themes and power relationships.

Conclusion
On the basis of the discussion presented above, we would like to argue that Weick’s sense-making theory and notions from existentialism may provide valuable insight into how a conceptual framework can be created to conduct organisational research
using complexity theory as a basis. We have underpinned this using the following structure in this article. In the initial paragraphs about complexity we discussed how we can use the theory of complex systems as a perspective for organisational behaviour. Using Weick’s concept of sense-making, we have argued that equivocality might explain how complex organisational behaviour originates. In the paragraphs about existentialism and the four hallmarks of existential fear we have discussed important notions from existentialism in relation to change and how these can explain the different stages of equilibrium (static equilibrium, chaotic equilibrium and explosive instability). Hence, we argue that notions from existentialism may increase our understanding of organisational behaviour.

One possible way of carrying out research into complexity in organisations is to focus the research on the appearance of the four conditions described in this article for movement and change, the appearance of coping modes and the way in which these organise conversations, themes and organisational behaviour. The appearance of coping modes may refer to the three stages of equilibrium. Our recommendation for further research is to develop a research model with which the relationships between the variables described can be examined.

References


