From Decision to Action in Organizations: Decision-Making as a Social Representation

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From Decision to Action in Organizations: Decision-making as a Social Representation

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Abstract

How should we understand decision-making in organizations? And how important is it for our understanding of organizations? A wide body of empirical and theoretical research—labeled here as the decision-making perspective—assumes that decision-making is a fundamental element of organizational processes, and aims to identify different types of decision-making processsses in organizations. But what exactly is decision-making? The paper argues that this perspective suffers from insufficient debate on the definition of its research object.

One of the main limits of the decision-making perspective is its understanding of organizational decision-making as series of separate decision-making episodes. Stressing the continuity of organizational processes, an emerging "action perspective" challenges this view. It argues that decision and decision-making are either rare, marginal phenomena, or artificial constructs producing biased observations. Thus, some authors suggest that we would better do without decision-making.

The paper argues that, because people in organizations think of decision and decision-making as realities, the concept of organizational action should not be opposed to decision and decision-making. Decision and decision-making are best understood as social representations: they influence organizations' members' ways of understanding and behaving in organizations. They influence processes, they facilitate action, and they give meaning to what happens in organizations. As organization members think and act in terms of decision-making, a theory of organizational action cannot simply do without a theory of decision-making.
(*Decision-making, Organizational Action; Social Representation*)

Introduction

Since Simon's seminal works (Simon 1957), the perspective on organizational decision-making has developed, with contributions from a variety of scientific disciplines, into a considerable amount of research that greatly improved our knowledge of organizational processes (March 1981). Though the field of decision-making is far from being unified and remains multidisciplinary (Dery 1990a), a few basic ideas inspired most of the research. First, researchers tried to describe, in a realistic way, the making of choices, thus focusing on decisions as discrete events defined around problems and choices (e.g., Janis 1972, Lyles 1981, Nutt 1984, Hickson et al. 1986). Second, one of the basic assumptions in the decision-making perspective is that virtually all organization members are potential decision-makers, as they may influence processes in one way or another (e.g., Simon 1957, March and Simon 1958, Crozier and Friedberg 1977). Third, researchers aimed at identifying an overall logic in decision-making processes—or several parallel ones—thus challenging the idea of a universal form of rationality (e.g., Bower 1970, Allison 1971, Mintzberg et al. 1976, Quinn 1980, Schwenk 1988a).

These ideas have noticeably deepened our understanding of organizations. Yet the very ideas that inspired the decision-making perspective seem to impose serious limitations to its explanatory power. Cutting organizational processes into successive discrete events called decisions seems to hinder analysis or at least, to introduce a bias (March 1988, Mintzberg and Waters 1990). Managers may not be the decision-makers they claim to be (Whitley 1987, Hannaway 1989). Assumed decision-making logics tend to reproduce the universal rational model rather than to seriously challenge it (Huard 1980, Sfez 1981, Johnson 1987). More and more theorists are reluctant to use the concepts of decision and decision-making or allow them only a minor role in their propositions about organizations (e.g., Starbuck 1983, 1985; Brunsson 1982, 1985). Though not really integrated in a unified perspective, a significant amount of converging research can be grouped as a new emerging perspective, which sometimes labels itself an "action" perspective (Starbuck 1983, Weick 1987, Johnson 1987, Brunsson 1989).

But action theorists may give the impression that they are rather hasty in getting rid of decisions and decision-making. They seem to forget that managers see themselves as decision-makers. Many activities in organizations are designed, operated and perceived as decision-making activities, and organization members frequently refer to decisions as realities of their organizational life. Decisions exist in the eyes of managers. This paper argues that, for that reason itself, decisions are a significant part of organization processes. But decision and decision-making are not to be understood in a realistic sense. We use the concept of "social representation" (Doise 1990, Jodelet 1991a) to picture decision and decision-making as forms of common sense, socially built and socially shared, allowing managers to behave as managers in their professional, organizational context. Focusing on the practical effects of these representations, we suggest three ideas: first, decisions can be analyzed as self-fulfilling prophecies; second, managers use the idea of decision-making to become actors in the course of organizational action; and third, through the idea of decision, organization members make sense of what happened around them, and especially of what they have been involved in.

As a consequence, describing action in organizations should take into account decision-making phenomena. Yet, the limits of the decision-making perspective ought to be acknowledged, and the theory of organizational action needs to be more firmly grounded. Reframing decision and decision-making as a phenomenon of social representation will allow the action perspective, to which this paper is undoubtedly committed, to take a step further by integrating and thus going beyond the decision-making perspective.

The Limits of the Decision-making Perspective

The Lost Object of Decision-making

The decision-making perspective developed, at least partially, to challenge the rational, prescriptive, problem-solving approach to the making of choices in organizations, building on the idea that the rational model does not provide a realistic description of what happens in organizations. It highlighted the influence of concrete processes on the substance of choices: process does matter. Through many empirical studies, researchers tried to describe the decision-making process in a realistic manner. They identified numerous and very significant differences between observations and the rational model, revealing bureaucratic processes (e.g., Cyert and March 1963, Carter 1971), political processes (e.g., Bower 1970), psychological processes (e.g., Janis 1972), etc. They constructed process typologies, both theoretic (e.g., Allison 1971, Fredrickson 1983, Chaffee 1985, Schwenk 1988a) and empirical (e.g., Nutt 1984, Shrivastava and Grant 1985, Hickson et al. 1986), and established the ways these processes interact (e.g., Quinn 1980).

So far, the decision-making perspective has proven to be very fruitful. These works show evidence that decision-making is not easily controllable, that the decision-making is merely one actor among others, and that the decision-making process is far from being neutral in regard to final choices. The evaluation that follows does not deny the contribution of this perspective; rather, it aims at questioning its implicit bases.

The decision-making perspective is not particularly concerned with the definition of decision (Meyer 1990). It generally takes the point of view of an external observer. The observer analyzes the process starting from what he points out as a choice and, working his way backwards, he reconstructs the process that led to this choice (generally through a case study). The decision is looked upon from the point of view of the completed process. It apprehends the object by the only part that a researcher can easily locate, that is to say, the conclusion of the process, the choice that has been made. In order to reconstruct the process, researchers isolate a case through time and space. They locate the decision between the identified result and a beginning yet to be discovered. They restrict the decision to what happened around this outcome, around the "matter", to take the word used in the Bradford Studies (Hickson et al., 1986; this research is considered here as typical of the second perspective). This creates a "slice" of organizational life, inside which the activities of the identified actors are interpreted in relation to the assumed "matter."

Such a decision is in fact a framing similar to the one a photographer chooses to compose his picture. It provides a window on a reality that is actually much more continuous. Actors, or participants, simultaneously engage in activities other than the decision in question. The nature of these activities, as well as the stakes involved, may quite differ (Cohen et al. 1972). Several different problems often link different actions together (Starbuck 1983, Whitley 1987). Research on the organizational and strategic agenda (Kingdon 1984, Laroche 1991, Schneider 1991) suggests that problems accompany decision-making processes more than they initiate them; thus, it seems imprudent to assess a

particular problem as the starting point of a decision. Moreover, problems are interdependent especially because of the decision-maker's limited capacity to deal with several issues simultaneously (Dutton 1988).

Focusing on case studies in this way induces a methodological bias that cannot be neglected. The question here is not the arbitrary cutout of the process in itself. Rather it lies in the fact that this cutout is not thought to be arbitrary. The unit of analysis is not discussed. It is understood as self-evident. In doing as such, the decision-making perspective ends up as a prisoner of its unit of analysis: cases of decision-making. On one hand, it tends to dissolve the notion of decision-making (as an organizational activity) by an empirical and critical approach. It destroys the very idea of decision, because decision-making no longer refers to an identifiable behavior such as problem-solving. On the other hand, it maintains the idea that units of decision-making actually exist, even if research strongly suggests that inside these units reigns a good deal of confusion. The notion of decision is reproduced by the fact that, through a methodological bias, the research program constructs an arbitrary object called the decision.

Managers as Decision-makers

In the midst of these decision cases are decision-makers. Decision-making theories scarcely question the status of the manager as a decision-maker. The rational model of decision-making (Allison 1971) naturally places an isolated decision-maker at the heart of his assertions, to such a point that one could have renamed this model "model of the lone actor" (Nioche 1985).

In the alternative, realistic view of decision-making, the decision-maker is certainly not always a central character. The political school redefines the decision-making as an actor among other actors (Crozier and Friedberg 1977). The idea of actors introduces a distance between the decision and the individuals involved: distance in strategic terms, in the way that actors approach the decisions in relation to their interests and positions in the system; distance in terms of power and control, since the actor is only one of the forces that influence the process. Bureaucratic, organizational or behavioral theories of decision-making (Cyert and March 1963, Carter 1971) demonstrate that many decisions are produced without significant and deliberate intervention of human actors. Decision-makers frequently disappear behind routines and automatic processes.

But, even though both the scope and the power of decision-makers are seriously narrowed, managers remain decision-makers in the decision-making perspective. Their primary concern in organizational life is to make decisions; they are constantly trying to influence decision processes; they aim at building controlled choices. They may rely more or less consciously on automatic processes and routines, but it is only to concentrate on higher-order decisions. They may give up the idea of total control of the process, but doing so makes them more powerful (Quinn 1980).

Research on the manager's activity seriously challenges the idea that managers primarily are decision-makers. Most of this research suggests that the making of decisions is not a central element of the manager's schedule (Mintzberg 1973, Kotter 1982, Delpeuch and Lauvergeon 1986; see Hannaway 1989, for a recent survey of the literature). In fact, managerial tasks reveal characteristics contrary to the idea of decision-making (Whitley 1987). The problems managers handle are narrowly interdependent. Reproduction and change are not separated classes of managerial tasks, but are mixed in a continuous way. The outcomes of managerial tasks are not clearly isolable. These characteristics portray a manager rather different from the image of the decision-maker who eliminates series of distinct problems by well-defined solutions. It even questions the idea of an actor, "maker" of decisions.

How can we explain that decision-making theorists were so shy about challenging the identification of managers with decision-makers, when not reinforcing this idea? First, we must question the origins of the decision-making perspective. Second, we can suspect some form of ideological bias to have influenced students of decision-making.

The critical theory of decision-making developed, for a significant part, from the works of Simon (1957), March and Simon (1958), and Cyert and March (1963). The centrality of these works is undeniable in the academic field of decision-maker, even though this field is not very unified (Dery 1990a). Simon's principle of bounded rationality implies looking at every organization member as a decision-maker, because as the individual encounters major limits in his ability to process information, the outcome of his cognitive processes can neither be predicted nor relied upon. The idea of the individual as an imperfect information-processing machine was meant to destroy the illusion of a well-oiled organizational machine that functions in a predictable manner, as intended by its designers. Since the individual information processing machine

was a central assumption, it was very difficult for anything else to come out of this theory except an individual decision-maker. The success of the intellectual project encourages that its foundations are never questioned.

This theoretical bias converged with an ideological bias. The identification of managers and decision-makers is not neutral. It gives the managers a certain social identity. In our western societies, the human activity of decision-making carries with it an important symbolic weight. The decision-maker becomes a highly valued figure. It would be easy to enumerate all the positive connotations that the term decision-making evokes and to list the symbolic advantages, not only in the organization, but in society as a whole, from which "decision-makers" benefit.

Management as a whole seems to be about decision-making. Most management books have the ambition to give the decision-maker the proper tools in order to prepare decisions, which are at the same time their responsibility and their prerogative. Managers cherish this image and favor theories that portray them in this heroic stance. Because theorists are also authors, lecturers, and/or consultants, they tend to stay "in the neighborhood" of the practitioners' point of view (sometimes quite voluntarily; e.g., Schwenk 1988a). Departing from this ideology is not only difficult, it is also costly.

Away from Rationality and Back

The debate on the rationality of human behavior in organizations seems to be inexhaustible. It is now common, following Allison (1971), to oppose other models to the rational one. These alternative models are supposed to throw a different light on decision-making processes. But these oppositions are sometimes more apparent than real. The attractiveness of the rational model is amazingly strong. Studying the empirical research may give the impression that the idea of rationality has pervaded the descriptive approaches of the decision-making process, even though they aspired to free themselves of this idea or at least not to presuppose it. We will use three examples.

First, works trying to describe the decision-making processes in an integrative manner (e.g., Mintzberg et al. 1976, Lyles 1981) led to the cutting up of the process in successive phases: (1) problem awareness, (2) problem diagnosis, (3) development of solutions, (4) selection of a solution. This description bears a striking resemblance to the stages described in rationalistic approaches to decision-making (Johnson 1987).

Second, after examining the so-called "nonrational" processes, the empirical studies sometimes end up admitting the existence of a lesser form of rationality. In this way, the Bradford Studies conclude that decisions imply the meeting of three forms of rationality: problem-solving rationality, interest-accomodating rationality, and control rationality. The conclusion is that, after all, the blending of these different rationalities is usually "reasonable" if not wholly rational (Hickson et al. 1986, p. 250).

Third, the "cognitive approach of strategic decision-making" (Schwenk 1984, 1985, 1988b), developing a theory of strategic decision-making from concepts such as cognitive bias, causal maps, metaphor, and analogy, first seems to add cognitive processes to the list of "nonrational" types of decision-making processes. Whereas, in fact, in this synthesis built upon Allison's typology (Schwenk 1988a), its main sponsor puts cognitive processes in the category of the rational model, as an enrichment and revitalization of this model.

Thus, the critique frequently returns to the reassuring shelter of the rational model, or at least does not dare to venture too far from it. This leads one to question the impact of the critique. Looking backwards at the usual presentation of the field of decision-making, Huard (1980) and Sfez (1981) have shown that most of the works classed as concurrent analyses of the rational model can be interpreted as developments and extensions of this model. According to these authors, the result is not, as Allison suggests, the simultaneous presence of competing paradigms, but rather an extended domination of the rational model.

Overcoming the limits of the decision-making perspective means more than refining methodologies and concepts. It rather needs some kind of paradigm shift in our basic assumptions about organization processes.

From Decision to Action

Action First, Decision Later

An emerging trend, which could be labeled the "action" perspective," strongly challenges the realistic decision-making perspective. Organizations are best understood as action generators (Starbuck 1983). Automatic processes dominate by far explicit decision-making activities (Huard 1980). Decision-making is the emerging part of an iceberg of unreflective action. This action is rationalized a posteriori through thinking (Starbuck 1985). Decisions scarcely initiate actions in organizations. Furthermore, good decision-making contradicts good action, because good action needs strong

commitment to a single course of action, whereas good decision-making implies carefully balancing several solutions before taking action (Brunsson 1982, 1985). Rather than aiming at some explicit goal, managers are dealing with interactive "management situations" where they have to react to demands (Girin 1990). Managers are faced with contradictions and competing demands from internal and external stakeholders. They use decisions as instruments to satisfy these demands and legitimize their organization, but these decisions are decoupled from real action which goes on unchanged (Brunsson 1989). In any case, managers' reflective thought is only a minor and powerless component in the flow of events and fortunes that forms action (Weick 1983).

In these ideas, all is not quite new. The behavioral theory of the firm (Cyert and March 1963) stressed that most choices did not proceed from a deliberate, explicit, conscious decision-making behavior. But higher-level, strategic choices were left out of this analysis and were believed to escape this fate. This is no longer true. The action perspective does not ignore strategic decision-making. In this view, there is more to strategy-making than an addition or a chain of decisions. The process of strategy formation cannot be analysed solely as a decision-making activity (Mintzberg and Waters 1990).

In the action perspective, interpretation, not choice, is the core phenomena of organizational life (Weick 1969, March 1988). Cognitive structures shape cognitive processes, which in turn shape organizational action; action is followed by cognitive activities of sensemaking, rationalization and justification. Upstream from strategic decision processes, a central cognitive structure in the organization produces a representation of the world, of the organization, and of the organization in the world; it inspires strategic action and shapes strategy formation. Paradigms (Johnson 1987), belief systems (Donaldson and Lorsch 1983), causal maps (Hall 1984), strategic frame (Huff 1982, 1990), dominant logic (Prahalad and Bettis 1986) are names given to this cognitive strategic action generators (see Schneider and Angelmar, forthcoming, for a review of literature on cognition in organizations). Beyond cognitive processes, the strength of organizational reproductive mechanisms, such as organizational culture (Schein 1985) or identity (Larçon and Reitter 1979, Huard 1980, Reitter et al. 1991) challenges the generally acknowledged idea of strategic decisions initiating ruptures and changes. Action theorists then tend to exclude decisions from explanations of both continuity and discontinuity in organizations. Decision-making is

thus relegated to a restricted, local, punctual, and/or symbolic role.

Towards a Theory of Action in Organizations

The emerging action perspective pictures organizational life as a flow of intertwined processes, rather than a sum of juxtaposed decisions. Managers lose their decision-making status and become merely participants immersed in processes they do not control and often even do not understand. The sequential order of decision-making steps, culminating in a choice, gives way to a continuous flow of action punctuated with moments of interpretation and evaluation. Decisions are constructs built either by the observer for his or her research purposes, or by organization members for symbolic purposes.

Theory of action could then be the basis of a renewed approach to organizational processes. Still, authors who promote the concept (Brunsson 1985, 1989, Starbuck 1983, Weick 1987) may give the feeling that they are more about challenging the dominant idea of decision-making than actually setting the foundations for a theory of organizational action. The idea of action is still poorly defined, except as opposed to decision (Brunsson) or to problem-solving (Starbuck). This systematic opposition should give way to a self-sufficient definition on one hand, and, on the other hand, as we will argue later, to a redefinition of decision-making in the field of organizational action, rather than merely setting it aside.

This paper does not have the ambition of building a definition of organizational action. Still, we would like to suggest some ideas for that purpose.

First, setting the grounds for a theory of action should acknowledge a few basic postulates. As a starting point, we propose the following two:

1) Action processes determine, in part, outcomes; in other words, the way things happen matters; this point has been empirically tested by the realistic decision-making perspective, and is not questioned by the limits and biases discussed above.

2) Neither the organization's features (as structure, culture, system, function, etc.), nor those of the environment strictly determine action processes, though the latter are certainly influenced by the surrounding context in a variety of ways; processes unfold largely on their own dynamics, through mixed phases of renewal and change.

Such a theory of action is basically "indeterministic" (Grandori 1987): it acknowledges that no accurate prediction of outcomes and processes can be done, neither by organizational participants nor by external ob-

servers. Research can isolate recurring patterns, forms or figures of action, but the blending of content, context and process produces a unique outcome (Pettigrew 1987).

Second, in the decision-making perspective, decision-making processes are motivated by objectives, preferences, missions, interests, etc. What motivates organizational action from a participant's point of view? Organizations are full of devices designed to control their members, so that action can be initiated and coordinated to some extent. How do participants "interact" with these action generators? This raises the question of the participants' intentions and more generally, of the link between the individual and the organization.

Third, a theory of action should fill in the wide gap between unreflective action and decision-making, the temple of reason. Administrative sciences tend to reproduce this opposition (Dery 1990b). Conceiving of action as intimately intertwined with thought seems more fruitful. Thought shapes action because it is closely tied to action (Weick 1983). Self-fulfilling prophecies are common and important phenomena in organizations. These phenomena should be fully acknowledged by an action perspective. As Weick states:

> A manager's preoccupation with rationality may be significant, less for its power as a problem-solving heuristic than for its power to induce action that implants the rationality that was presumed. (Weick 1983, p. 235)

In other words, the belief in rationality guides an individual's action in such a way that, a posteriori, this action reveals to him a rationality in "what happened".

Fourth, evaluation of action is an important and complex process in an action perspective. Action flows but is punctuated by moments of interpretation and evaluation. Conceiving evaluation processes is relatively simple if one assumes the existence of exogeneous objectives or norms and external evaluators. The classical decision-making perspective attributes this function to staff and/or hierarchy managers conducting evaluation through planning, monitoring and control systems, or through cultural norms and values. It is less easy if one views organizational action, as it unfolds, as moving the reference points which could be used in action evaluation. In fact, evaluation is not exterior to organizational action. Evaluation is in itself part of action processes. It is an endogeneous process, created by action and creating action in return.

Fifth, and last, should we be content with a theory of action free of the idea of decision-making? The sharp decoupling of decisions and actions by sponsors of the action perspective (e.g., Starbuck 1983; Brunsson 1989, 1990) suggests that decision-making is a marginal phenomenon, an artifact built by conventional researchers, and/or a rhetoric device serving symbolic functions. The latter part of this paper argues that there is no reason to completely dissociate decisions and action and to limit decision-making to one or more symbolic functions. Decision-making is a real and important part of organizational life and should be included in a theory of action. Rather than dissociation or decoupling, we should think of some form of loose coupling, or even variable coupling. Though, decision-making should not be understood in a realistic way as in the decision-making perspective, but rather as a social representation.

From Decision to "Decisions": Decision-making as a Social Representation

Recoupling Decision and Action
A striking characteristic of organizational life is that there is a lot of talk about decisions, decisions that have been made, are to be made, will be made, should be made, will never be made; talk about who makes decisions, when, how, why and with what results. Organization members interpret a significant part of activities around them in terms of decisions. Numerous organizational devices (planning systems, committees, assemblies, votes, etc.) are developed, implemented and operated for the purpose of producing decisions. Managers look at themselves as decision-makers.

There is a wide gap between theoretical descriptions of organizational life proposed by the action perspective and representations of participants and actors in organizations. This of course does not question in itself the relevance of theories, as theorizing is precisely about going beyond ordinary knowledge. Still, it raises some questions that the action perspective has not really addressed: to what extent do organizational participants misunderstand their environment and their own acts? To what point is decision-making a cosmetic ideology for managers to protect their heroic status as decision-makers in the eyes of lower-rank members and in their own (Laroche and Nioche 1992)? Is decision-making a mere illusion and can we ignore the managers' understanding of their own action, as if this understanding has no effect on action?

Mintzberg and Waters (1990) argue that, because it turns out to be an "artificial construct" (except in bureaucratic contexts), decision "gets in the way" of researcher's understanding of action. Understanding organizational behavior in terms of decisions systematically "imputes commitment to action," whereas action can occur without explicit commitment. In order to avoid such a bias—which is consistent with the ones we analyzed above—they simply propose to do without the concept of decision. We agree with Mintzberg and Waters (1990) about the concept of decision "getting in the way" of organizational analysis. From a researcher's point of view, with his or her own frames of reference, a concept may seem relevant or not; if not, it becomes a source of "misunderstandings." But they do not pay attention to the fact that participants themselves believe in decision-making, just as researchers do. Does it "get in their way" too? Should they do without it? How would they do without it? Participants' belief in decision-making is not a methodological stance. It is not an "artificial construct," but a part of their "natural" understanding of their own world. The question then shifts to the functions served by such a construct. And the very reason why decision is not a suitable concept in the eyes of Mintzberg and Waters may give a clue to why managers use the concept: systematically imputing commitment to actions is a way of understanding the organizational world which is consistent with a manager's point of view.

March (1981) goes nearer to our point when he sees the decision process as "a ritual by which we recognize saints, socialize the young, reassure the old, recite scripture, and come to understand the nature of our existence." (p. 232). Rituals convey meaning, and meaning is related to action in organizations. Managers are not helpless members of a primitive desert tribe, building idols and setting rituals to deal with the lack of control on their environments. Though they undoubtedly invent rituals and worship idols and fool themselves in a variety of ways, managers do try to take things in hand and control actions, events, themselves and others. Rituals and idols and even fooling oneself take place in this project of control and sense-making. So do many management practices, and decision-makers. Managers see themselves as conscious decision-makers. This is false in some way, but yet the illusion is a "fruitful error" (Saint-Sernin 1989, Levy 1990). Though observers may be tempted to point out the fallacies and illusions of their ambition, at the same time they have to account for the effective result it produces. For that purpose, organizational decision-making can be conceptualized as a phenomenon of social representation.

The Social Representation of Decision-making

The concept of social representation draws from the European, Durkheimian notion of collective representation. But it goes beyond the latter, stressing the process by which individuals produce and use representations which became social representations through communication and interaction (Moscovici 1991; for a review of the field, see Jodelet, 1991b).

Social representations are "modes of practical thinking oriented towards communication, understanding, and the mastering of the social, material and ideal environment" (Jodelet 1984). As cognitive structures, social representations link a subject to an object. They are both the product of a construction of reality and the process by which this construction takes place in the individual's mind. But beyond their role in thinking and understanding, they convey normative implications as well as feelings, which regulate the individual's relationship with the world and with others, and which organize conducts and interactions (Jodelet 1991a).

Social representations are social phenomena in the sense that their objects are aspects of the social life. But most important is that the system producing and reproducing social representations is a social one. Social conditions—such as status, positions, roles, ideological and historical contexts—influence the cognitive contents and processes of social representations. The cognitive system of a representation is the product of a social metasystem (Doise 1990). Social representations help people master the social world from their position in the social world. Thus, social representations can be studied from a psychological or from a sociological perspective as well.

Though they may have an ideological side, social representations are not closed ideologies impregnating the mind of passive individuals acting under influence. They rather look like "explicit or implicit, more or less organized packages of ideas, judgments and images, which are used to describe, interpret or justify collective actions" (Padioleau 1991). Through social representations, people are able to get a hand on the physical and social world around them, thus becoming actors of this world (Padioleau 1986).

Conventionally, from here on in this paper, the words "decision" and "decision-making" in quotes refer to the representation of the process in the organization members' minds; it is the label they use to describe the process. Outside quotes, decision and decision-making

refer to other representations, for example scientific ones as in the realistic perspective described in the first part of the paper.

Managers see themselves as decision-makers because making "decisions" is a way of being an actor in the world of organizations.

Managers make "decisions" because "decisions" give meaning to the processes which surround and concern organization members. Organization members explain what they are participating in and what is happening around them in terms of "decisions" which are made, which will be made, etc. "Decisions" point out concrete and symbolic stakes. More precisely, organization members point out to themselves and to others what they consider to be the stakes. Through "decision-making," they discover a world made of problems, choices, decision-makers, and important times and places on all of which their fate of their interests may depend.

Which Representation of Decision-making?

The hypothesis of organizational decision-making as a social representation leads to the question of the contents of this representation. To our knowledge, this question has not been empirically investigated. We will have to draw ideas from research having a different focus.

The cultural and ideological context of western societies gives a central place to the rational model of decision-making. Representations of decision-making are likely to convey ideas and expectations of orderly, linear processes, where free and responsible individuals exercise their intellectual capacity through logical reasoning (Sfez 1981). People tend to make organizations or groups into homogeneous actors, entities similar to the human being; they attribute acts, objectives and willpower to organizations, as they do to individuals. Thus, representations of decision-making are likely to underestimate social and interactive aspects of organizational processes.

This draws a general picture of "decision-making." Yet, the contents of social representations are marked by their conditions of emergence and of use (Jodelet 1984). Thus, significant variations are to be expected. For example, managers of a higher rank seem to grant a larger place to politics in their perception of the processes (Madison et al. 1980). Internal differentiation is likely to be a source of variations in the content of decision-making representations. For example, the temporal horizon of action differs greatly between subgroups in organizations (Lawrence and Lorsch 1967). Speed, both as a perceived characteristic of processes,

and as a normative expectation, is probably an important dimension of representations in the organization (Bourgeois and Eisenhardt 1987; Eisenhardt 1990; Bonarelli 1990). Decision styles can be pictured as an attribute of a manager, of a team (e.g., a top management team), or an organization as a whole (Bailey and Johnson 1992). Though decision styles are not the direct expression of local representations of decision-making, they may well be related, and the variations of the former could be an indicator of the variations of the latter. At a higher level, we can expect cultural variations (Schneider 1989, Schneider and De Meyer 1991), though data is rare and evidence is not clear (Heller et al. 1988, Schneider 1991).

In other words, there would be not one, but numerous social representations of decision. Further research should identify significant dimensions and relate them to the bearers of these representations, as social groups in specific social positions.

But social representations are both content and process.[1] Decision-making refers to the process by which decisions are made. In a similar way, "decision-making" refers to the process by which "decisions" are made. The process of "decision-making" actualizes "decision-making" in constructing a reality of "decisions" and "decision-makers"; simultaneously, such a reality confirms and reproduces the content of the representation. Thus, "decision-making" is an active component of action. We will develop this idea around three points. First, "decision-making," far from being a mirage in managers' minds, influences the substance of organizational processes. Second, from a manager's point of view, "decision-making" facilitates action in the messy world of organizations. Third, still from a participant's perspective, "decisions" help interpret what happened.

"Decision-making" in Action

"Decisions" as Self-Fulfilling Prophecies

Decision as a representation becomes a component part of what is happening around the participants: their activity will direct itself in relation to the "decisions" they locate in the past, perceive in the present course of things, and sense for the future. They will have the feeling of taking part in or being witness to "decisions," and will act or react in relation to this feeling. Even more so, as there is a normative aspect in the social representation of decision, people expect that "decisions" explain most actions clearly. Partici-

pants will then tend actively to build what they will prospectively and retrospectively call "decisions."

In this way, it is natural that bosses make "decisions," that meetings are devoted to the making of "decisions," that notes are written about "decisions" which have just been made, that organization members behave as actors mobilizing themselves in relation to "decisions," that they demand to take part in "decision-making," that they defend their power of "decision," that they ask how such a "decision" could possibly have been made, why a "decision" has not yet been made, that they complain about the absence of "decisions," etc.

Decision as a representation tends to create concrete situations which concretely approach representations. In other terms, the effect of this representation is to actualize itself to some extent. For example, if a group of people think that there is a "decision" to be made, a meeting takes place, at the end of which the participants think that a "decision" has or has not been made. They are more likely to believe this since they came to the meeting with the idea that they were going to "decide," and since they believe that they are experiencing a decision-making process. They communicate between themselves in order to confirm their feelings: before the meeting to assure themselves of what is going to be "decided," and after the meeting to make sure of how it ended up (Sims 1979, 1987). Those who do not participate in the meeting, but know it took place, think that a "decision" was at stake. They look for information about the income by asking: "what has been decided?" Those who are not in the picture will eventually find a reference to this meeting in a report, note or conversation; they will interpret this meeting as the time and place of the "decision," the results of which they can see today.

Looking Ahead: "Decisions" as Useful Illusions

The strength of this process of self-fulfilling prophecies must not be overestimated. In spite of the limits that have been indicated, empirical research on organizational decision-making demonstrates that there are good reasons to believe that social representation of decision-making leads participants to "invent" "decisions" where an observer would be tempted to describe reality in completely different terms. The social representation of decision-making makes up artifacts which participants call "decisions," backing themselves up with numerous potential signs of "decisions" such as speeches, notes, reports, meetings, agendas, deadlines, etc. "Decisions" are constructs which use these ele-

ments as empty shells that they inhabit much like hermit crabs. This "constructing" can be retrospective, through a process of rationalization. It can be prospective, as in a planning process. In can be both, in the way the decisions serve to establish a link between a past (realized) and a future (potential).

It is likely that this process (the making of a "decision") is seldom fully accomplished. In other words, to say that people tend to interpret what is going on around them in terms of "decisions" does not mean that they build coherent, solid and durable interpretations. The function of decision is not to explain the world with a strong degree of truth. Above all, decision enables people to act in this world. Consequently, it is likely that in constructing "decisions," organization members show incoherences; they more or less easily review their interpretations; they forget; they rewrite history, present or future. In fact, their constructions vary in "quality" to a great extent.

The social representations of decision-making help participants make their way in the organizational mess. To some extent, it reduces the mess as coordinated expectations and behaviors stem naturally from sharing of these representations. But this self-fulfilling process is not powerful enough to completely overcome the organizational disorder. Evidence remains that things do not match with their representations. In short, "decisions" are not quite the "decisions" they should be. Participants are more or less conscious of this. A few of them become cynical. Many tell funny and/or bitter stories about flaws in the decision-making process. Yet, nobody really gives up; they all persist in trying to build "decisions." Though it is obviously a rather inaccurate description of real processes, the social representation of decision is not challenged, precisely because it is a social representation.

Feldman (1989) describes this paradox in the behavior of bureaucratic analysts in the US Department of Energy. The analysts work hard to produce information to help policy makers solve problems. But they know policy makers almost never use this information, so that their contribution to the decision-making process appears to them as almost nil. They nevertheless keep on producing reports and papers just as if they did not know it was hopeless. Feldman calls on several reasons to explain the paradox. First, it is their job to do so, and they are motivated by possible promotions and salary raises. Second, their work sometimes happens to be used by policy-makers, and such a glorious possibility is worth the ordinary frustrations. Third, after all, doing their job the best they can is all they

can do to help things go the way they think they ought to go.

In our view, these reasons are certainly relevant, but they would not persist in the long run if they did not benefit from the shelter of an idealistic representation of organizational action. Feldman herself depicts analysts as "captive to the problem-solving or rational perspective' (p. 106–114). This representation of decision-making is precisely the one that justifies analysts in organizations. It supports the analysts' social identity. As a social group, their representation of decision-making cannot be separated from what they are and what they do, and how they legitimize their existence in the organization and in the world as well.

As a consequence, analysts need to believe in problem-solving in order to do their job each time they have to do it. They work to make "decisions": this vision of their role gives sense to what they do and confirms what they have learned to do. It is a useful illusion, and its first use is to allow them to act a priori, to get into the course of action. They do not need things to really happen the way they think they should, but they need to believe they will.

Continuity is the primary condition of such a process. "Decisions" organize the flow of action in endless series of cycles. "What's next?" is the main managerial concern. Being retrospective and focusing on final choices, classical empirical studies of decision-making completely obscured this phenomenon. Managers are primarily oriented towards the future. For them, the past matters only as a starting situation for action and future results. No choice is ever standing alone in the light of their detached judgment. The process of constructing "decisions" through a social representation is not a process of constructing one "decision;" it is a continuous movement of developing cycles of action.

. Organizational routines play an important part in this respect, because they materialize the process. They form an underlying network of concrete motives, to which participants are able to attach their projects of "decisions." They are the solid ground on which the social representation can lean. In this sense, they are "action generators" (Starbuck 1983) or "hidden technologies" (Berry 1983).

The social representation of decision-making conveys a paradox. Because they think of organizational action through social representations, organization members are in a way disconnected from the "real" processes. In this sense, we are right in naming them participants rather than actors. But as their representations help them to engage in action and interact with others in a productive way, they truly became actors rather than more or less absent participants.

Looking Back: "Decisions" as Rationalizations

Not being stupid, analysts (and organization members in general) easily understand that things did not follow their a priori model. Yet they do not question it deeply. Why is this? How do organizational participants accomodate the discrepancies they perceive between what they expected and engaged in, and what they understand that "really" happened?

We have argued that as managers are primarily in a proactive stance, and tend to look forward rather than to look back, they are not likely to be as shocked as external observers might be. Thus, managers partly avoid or minimize this discrepancy. Realizing "after the fact" is not so important. It may be in some cases, when the discrepancies are very obvious, when patent mistakes have been made or when people can see that they have been intentionaly fooled. But the ordinary flow of action takes away a good part of the cognitive dissonance.

The social division of work is another factor favoring the persistence of beliefs in decision-making. Feldman's (1989) analysts are a small part of the huge machine of policy-making, and they know it. This is why they have to believe in decision-making, to find their place in the machine. But when they are faced with how things really go, being so powerless allows them to think that they are not to blame. After all, they did their job properly. Because they truly believe in problem-solving as the correct way to handle policy-making, they cannot see why they should change their ways. Quite on the contrary, being an island of rationality in a messy world conforts them in their rationalistic behavior. In most cases in organizations it is not clear why things did not turn out the right way. People say that the "system" is responsible for that. In any case, the participant himself is not to blame. We can hypothetize that the feeling of not having an active part in the flaws of the process allows participants to readily acknowledge these flaws, though, as Feldman shows, they may be quite bitter about it.

Other organizational participants—and especially managers who think of themselves or are regarded as central in the making of "decisions"—may need greater coherence between their prospective expectations of what should happen and retrospective interpretation of what really happened. As visible discrepancies would require justifications in their eyes and to others, they have to adopt some sort of strategy.

The basic strategy is to interpret what happened according to the normative aspects of their social representation of decision-making. The rational model of decision-making offers many opportunities to do so. It is a remarkable explanatory garbage can. For instance, it easily:

• reframes violent political struggles as useful and normal debates—though maybe a little too passionate ones—that give more depth to collective deliberation;

• reinterprets heavy constraints put on participants by bureaucratic procedures as rational methods saving time and efforts and preventing actors from wandering in vain;

• legitimizes discretionary power of a single actor as the only way to integrate diverging opinions and interests.

Other strategies acknowledge the discrepancies, but minimize them greatly. Managers may pretend that the perceived gap is an exception. Things normally go right but happen to go wrong. Exception proves the rule. Or they may pretend that on the whole, in spite of a few marginal events, things went right.

Of course, double strategies are to be expected. There are ways of believing without believing. "Distant familiarity" (Matheu 1986) allows managers to partly dissociate what they do and what they think, what they really think and what they should think. Complete dissociation leads to unbearable stress, to bitter resignation or to plain cynicism. But partial dissociation helps organizational participants play the organizational games with more efficiency both for the organization and for themselves. Building a tolerance to discrepancies may be a distinctive competence, as organizations frequently distrust both innocents and cynics.

Looking back mobilizes the social representation of decision-making as well as looking ahead. We can hypothesize that participants construct "decisions" as more or less isolated cases, thus becoming able to explain things and to attribute responsibilities to actors (including themselves or not). Doing this may imply reorganizing their initial ideas about the process. Normative aspects of the representation are likely to play a central role in these retrospective interpretations, as justification and legitimation are frequent issues in looking back. Discrepancies between the normative expectations and perceived realities are not likely to be fully acknowledged, as accurate descriptions of processes seldom make good post-decisional justifications (Crozier 1989). In any case, acknowledging these discrepancies does not lead participants to seriously challenge their representation of decision-making. Thus,

they engage in the ongoing course of action in the same way as they did before. Both the representation and the concrete forms of action are then left unchanged for the most part.

The idea of a social representation of decision-making may enrich existing models of organizational action. For instance, it suggests that "action generators" may activate managers through their representations of decision-making rather than take them along in a passive, unconscious and mechanistic way. It could help develop the action view of the strategic process (e.g., Johnson 1987): "decision-making" plays a central role in the actualization of the organization strategic paradigm and, through dramatic episodes of "strategic decision-making," in the burst of strategic revolutions. Referring to "strategic decision-making" is in itself a way of categorizing issues and actors, and thus, it may be an aspect of the "strategic discourse" (Knights and Morgan 1991).

Summary and Conclusion

Students of decision-making tried to depart from what appeared as overly rational, normative and inaccurate descriptions of organizational choices, by empirically investigating many aspects of decision-making processes. This stance is "realistic" in two ways: first, as intended, the decision-making perspective has tried to "stick to the facts"; second, as not explicitly intended, it conveyed the idea that decisions themselves are facts. This paper argued that decision-making is best understood as a process of reality creation through organization members' representations of their own role and activity. Decision as a social representation is a part of a general, broader process of organizational action. Considering decision-making as a social representation phenomenon draws some kind of a missing link between the realistic decision-making perspective and the emerging action perspective. It is not meant to integrate the two at the same level, but to help the action perspective to reinterpret the realistic decision-making perspective rather than to oppose decision and action in an artificial and unfruitful manner.

Organizational researchers undoubtedly have to broaden their perspective and build descriptions and explanations of action processes, not of decision processes solely. But no theory of action can develop without integrating the fact that, to a significant extent, organizational members think and act in terms of decision-making. Decision-making is a relevant phenomenon for a theory of action, not a marginal one.

The idea of social representation is a way to reformulate the idea of decision in the action perspective.

Endnotes
[1]This has methodological implications for the study of "decision-making." Reviewing methods of empirical investigation of social representation would in itself be the subject of an article. Approaches vary from experimental/quantitative methodologies to anthropological/qualitative ones (see examples in Jodelet 1991a). Though the content of the representation of "decision-making" can certainly be studied through a large range of methods, it seems that studying both content and process—that is, the complete phenomenon—would rather require qualitative, in-depth empirical investigation.

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