AUTHORING THE ORGANISATIONAL DECISION-MAKING GENRE:
DECISION PROCESSES AS FICTIONAL TALES

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Abstract

Decision-making processes do not exist as formal structures or representations. They are literary creations that represent and interpret organisational life as configured within an organisational decision-making genre. This genre is an institution that functions as a horizon of expectations for readers and as a model of writing for authors. That is, authors write in accordance with the existing generic system; within the ‘model’ of writing proposed by Simon and cohorts. For instance, the traditional plot of a decision story goes like this. A social scientist set out to ‘discover’ and describe how decisions are made in organisations, because decisions are said to be significant. These stories expose the faults of traditional assumptions of how decisions are made, i.e., decisions are not as rational as it was previously thought or they do not conform to a pre-established theory or typology. The narration is always a third-person narration, i.e., an external voice always tells us what is happening in the organisation. The hero of these stories is in most cases the ‘concept’ and through it the author invoked some powerful ideological discourses such as managism and decisionism.

I will be discussing these provocative thoughts in the rest of this paper, which I hope can contribute to enhance our understanding of how decision-making authors construct their decision tales and how organisations themselves can benefit from this approach.

Key words: authoring, management, decision-making, genre, fiction
AUTHORING THE ORGANISATIONAL DECISION-MAKING GENRE:
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Organisational decision-making processes do not exist as formal structures or representations. They are literary creations (stories) that interpret organisational life as configured within an organisational decision-making genre. This genre is an institution that functions as a horizon of expectations for readers and as a model of writing for authors such as, e.g., in the case of Cohen March and Olsen’s (1972/1988) famous organisational decision-making story, *The Garbage Can Model of Organizational Choice*\(^2\).

“A colourful and apt description of the way in which some decisions are made in organizations has been introduced by the Garbage Can Model” (Butler, 1991: 53).

“There is a general agreement that the garbage can is a model of decision-making in organizations” (Czarniawska, 1999: 75).

Based on this literary understanding of decision-making, in this paper I explore how organisational writers ‘created’ decision-making as ‘a truthful story’ of management and organisation and why the story resulted to be only a fictional tale of organisations and their people. It is for this reason, then, that I suggest here that organisational decision-making theory can be constructed as a literary genre of how to write organisation tales, what I discuss in the final section of this paper.

THE ORGANISATIONAL DECISION-MAKING STORY

“This is a story of several decades of speculations about organisational decision-making, a chronology of sorts. The story is fiction in at least two respects. First, it is organised around one person’s work, and life is not. Second, it does not describe how the speculations actually evolved, but rather how they might be imagined to have evolved in a more orderly world. Unlike the former, the latter fiction may be defensible. A record of research

\(^2\) The garbage can model represents organisations as anarchies and collections of choices, hitherto decision-making.
can be written better as an interpretation of an incomplete tapestry of ideas than as a description of the curious chaos of its weaving” (March, 1988: Prologue).

The story of organisational decision-making begins with the so-called paradigmatic shift that took place after the industrial revolution, which redefined our societies as organisation societies (Etzioni, 1964), and with the rise of modernist ideas originated by Enlightenment thinkers such as Descartes, Locke and Kant. Both influenced the creation of an organisation science in which the individual mind of the worker or manager, became the pre-eminent object of study; and where knowledge of the organisation was regarded as a by-product of the individual rationality of the scientific researcher (Gergen & Tojo, 1996).

This development stimulated the production of several theories on organisation and its new administrative activities. Among these theories, decision-making emerged, gaining rapidly in status and becoming by the mid-twentieth-century a well-established institution of the social sciences (March, 1988).

Organisational decision-making was firstly conceived as a descriptive/prescriptive theory of administrative activities found in new ‘modern’ organisations. Chester Barnard (1938/1968) introduced the concept in one of the most influential books of the time, *The Functions of the Executive*. In his book, Barnard proposed that one of the core activities of managers or executives was to make ‘decisions’.

“The acts of individuals may be distinguished in principle as those which are the result of deliberation, calculation, thought and those which are unconscious, automatic, responsive, the result of internal and external conditions, present or past. In general, whatever process precedes the first class of acts culminates in what may be termed decision.” (185).

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3 These ideas posited the individual mind as an “object of curiosity” capable of careful observation and rational deliberation (Gergen & Tojo, 1996), leading to the adoption of scientific thought and a break with religion and superstitions’ explanations of behaviour.

4 Otherwise, organisation studies or theory.

5 Modern or formal organisations defined as a form of co-operation among men that is conscious, deliberate and purposeful (Barnard, 1938/1968).

6 My highlighting.
Defining a decision as a conscious and logical process of discrimination, analysis and choice directed toward the accomplishment of an organisational goal, Barnard thought of decision-making in organisations as something significantly different from decisions individuals made outside this realm.

“Organisational decisions and personal decisions are chiefly to be distinguished as to process by this fact: that personal decisions cannot ordinarily be delegated to others, whereas organisational decisions can often if not always be delegated” (Barnard, 1938/1968:188).

For instance, an organisational decision has to be enunciated by an executive and its corresponding subsidiary decisions by several different members of the organisation. Executive and organisational members, in this way, acted organisationally and not individually (Barnard, 1938/1968:188). Therefore, the context of a business or political organisation mattered when a manager or executive made a decision.

Barnard’s assertions ignited interest in decision-making among other organisation and management writers, even though, he failed to posit his affirmations as the main theoretical explanation of organisation. This was primarily because Barnard was not a scientist but only an amateur scholar. He was a knowledgeable man with plenty of work experience, writing about a number of organisational issues (such as communication, leadership, and organisational operations) from an almost autobiographical perspective, but whose views lacked in scientific validity to prove his main postulates. His assertions, however, did have an effect on one individual in particular: Herbert Simon, the universally acclaimed father of decision-making in organisation.

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7 An organisational goal was defined as a desired state of affairs which the organisation attempts to realise (Etzioni, 1964: 6).

8 See Andrew’s comments in the 30th edition of his classic book.
Herbert Simon, Creator of Decision-making

Herbert Simon (1947; 1957; 1960), winner of the Nobel Prize for economics, wanted to discover a well-founded scientific theory that could explain organisations. Specifically, he wanted a theory that could explain both, the administrative processes and the structural aspects of organisations (Shapira, 1997). From his work in economics and psychology and from his involvement in the creation of other scientific disciplines (artificial intelligence and cognitive science) Simon managed to produce a well-founded theory to describe and explain management and organisation based on the suggestion that these were decision-making processes.

“... Administrative processes are decisional processes: they consist in segregating certain elements in the decision of members of the organisation, and establishing regular organisational procedures to select and determine these elements and to communicate them to the members concerned” (1947:1; 8).

“I shall find convenient to take mild liberties with the English language by using ‘decision making’ as though it were synonymous with ‘managing’” (1960:1).

Simon proposed that organisations were computer command procedures (Taylor & van Every, 2000), divided like a three-layered cake within which two types of decisions could be identified as the following picture illustrates.
The bottom and middle of the cake (the limbs of the organisation) were formed by program decisions. These decisions were characterised as largely routine and repetitive. Typically, these decisions governed the day-to-day operations of the manufacturing and distribution system of an organisation (Simon, 1960).

By contrast, the top of the cake was formed by non-program decisions, decisions which are novel, unstructured and consequential (Simon, 1960) – i.e., the brain of the organisation. They are decisional processes required to design and re-design the entire system, to provide it with its basic goals and objectives, and to monitor its performance (Simon, 1960). This, obviously, has more to do with the work of management.

This representation of organisation, according to Morgan (1986), acts as a kind of institutionalised brain [problem-solver] that fragments, customises and bounds the decision-making process in order to make it manageable, i.e., the organisation seeks to satisfy rather than optimise any solution to a (decision) problem.

Simon’s theory had an immediate impact in the development of organisation and management studies. For starting, he founded a new school of thought based on decision-
making (Mintzberg, 1973). He made decision-making the prime unit of organisational analysis (Miller, Hickson & Wilson, 1996) and a paradigm for further research (Shapira, 1997). He established decision-making as a cognitive interpretation of organisation (March & Shapira, 1982), persuading others to see decision-making as an organisational metaphor (Morgan, 1986) and as a management ideology (Brunsson, 1982). Most importantly, Simon turned decision-making into something that exists (Mintzberg & Waters, 1990); something that can be researched and investigated. Consequently, an organisation became, de facto, a decision-making process.

“The anatomy of the organisation is to be found in the distribution and allocation of decision-making functions. The physiology is to be found in the process whereby the organisation influences the decision of each of its members – supplying these decisions with their premises” (Simon, 1947:220).

What contributed to his theory becoming a panacea of management and organisation was, on the one hand, Herbert Simon’s own prestige as a scientist. In academic terms, his theory was better grounded and more persuasive than earlier theories of organisation – including Chester Barnard’s. Furthermore, according to Taylor and van Every (2000), his work achieved a kind of ‘grand’ synthesis that brought together diverse theoretical strands – from economics, psychology and sociology – to the emerging field of organisation. This, unreservedly, provided the theory with its scientific credibility and substance.

On the other hand, there is no doubt that the rise of management as a celebration of achievement and efficiency in the Western World (Drucker, 1955; Mintzberg, 1973) significantly helped the decision-making cause. In this respect, special merit should be

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9 The Carnegie Business School, where Simon was working and from where his disciples, such as Cyert and March (1963), produced some seminal studies on organisational decision-making and from where many of his followers emerged.

10 This is primarily as a consequence of his involvement in cognitive science, whereby he saw organisations as the result of computational processes.

11 In terms of what Alvesson & Willmott (2000) suggest as decisionism, i.e., the reduction of management to a decisionistic process that is exclusively concerned with the computer-assisted calculation of means (p.148).
given to Peter Drucker (1955; 1977), who elevated management to the role of essential institution and superior ideological force in Western society (principally the United States).

“Our society has in this century become a society of organizations. Organizations depend on managers, are built by managers directed and held together by managers and made to perform by managers” (Drucker, 1977: 32).

And who, just like Simon, happened to believe that management was the result of decision-making processes:

“Indeed, he may not even realise that he is making them. Or they may affect the future existence of the enterprise... but management is always a decision-making process (Drucker, 1955:310).

Therefore, with Drucker’s support, one of the first management gurus, decision-making gained further legitimacy. Above all, the theory gained ideological strength, establishing itself as a new science of management (Simon, 1960) and as a ‘solid’ body of knowledge claims (Weiskopf & Willmott, 1997) on which to describe/prescribe management and organisations. In short, decision-making was firmly established as a legitimate endeavour of management and organisation research, from which many formal model-representations emerged (e.g., Mintzberg et al., 1976; Nutt, 1984; Beach, 1990; Bazerman, 1998).

Notwithstanding the significant achievement of Simon and followers, it has been established a wide discrepancy between what formal representations and structures of decision-making assert, i.e., in terms of the defining characteristics and dimensions of decision-making, and what in practice happens in organisations (Harrison and Pelletier, 2001). Wallsten (2000), for instance, suggests that these formal-models of decision-making are fundamentally based on invalid assumptions. More recently, Das (2003) has pointed out that the type of research conducted to support their claims is highly spurious, therefore, inconsequential for managers and organisations. Most importantly though, Langley et al. (1995) have suggested a core of three central issues that posits the formal representation of
organisational decision-making as a fictional tale. These are reification, dehumanisation and isolation.

**ORGANISATIONAL DECISION-MAKING FICTION?**

**Reification**

The cornerstone of decision-making theory is founded, on the one hand, on the idea that decisions exist and can be clearly identified; and on the other hand, on the idea that there is a clear moment of choice. These ideas, in turn, influence the way in which we conceive organisations – as rational, anthropomorphic, mechanistic and bureaucratic (Langley et al., 1995).

However, this is quite misleading. In fact, according to Mintzberg and Waters (1990) the idea that organisations make choices and decisions gets in the way of understanding the very phenomenon decision-making models want to explain, i.e., management and organisations. Why? Primarily because decisions are difficult to pin down, something that Barnard (1938/1968) pointed out in his book, but which was later dismissed by Simon and cohorts:

“… It is a perplexing fact that most executive decisions produce no direct evidence of themselves and that knowledge of them can only be derived from the cumulation of indirect evidence” (1938/1968:192-193).

Similarly, Nicolaides (1960)\(^\text{12}\) and Quinn (1980) showed that it is not possible to trace decisions back (as most models assume) because they do not ‘materialise’ as such.

“When and where a decision begins and ends is not always clear” (Nicolaides in Mintzberg and Waters, 1990:2).

\(^{12}\) In Mintzberg and Waters (1990).
“It is difficult to say who decided something and when – or even who originated a decision... I frequently don't know when a decision is made in General Motors” (Manager’s comments in Quinn, 1980:134).

This is in line with what Bachrach and Baratz (1963) described as the process of non-decisions, i.e., there are some decisions which are simply inaccessible.

Adding to the difficulties of pinpointing decisions is the fact that some studies have shown no relation between what models or theories describe and what decision-makers do. For instance, Weiss and Bucuvalas (1980) found that decision-making models do not reflect the participants’ perception of their decisions. Furthermore, the participants in their study deny decision-making *per se*, considering it as “simply doing their job” (Weiss and Bucuvalas, 1980:266).

Finally, even to define the process of decision-making can be a problematic issue for managers as shown in O’Connor’s (1995) study of organisational change.

> “Defining decision processes and boundaries can be very difficult. It has been unclear both to managers/supervisors and to teams how certain decisions should be made” (O’Connor, 1995:785).

These limitations, associated with whether decisions exist or not, have driven some organisational researchers (Brunsson, 1982; Weick, 1983; Starbuck, 1983; Mintzberg and Waters, 1990) to claim that it is the commitment to act and not decision-making that most writers represent in their studies. That is, it is actions and not decisions that can be traced back, studied or observed (e.g., buying a computer in a firm) while decisions themselves remain problematic and difficult to understand, to prove, to study and/or to describe.

Others though (e.g., Pettigrew, 1990, Butler, 1990), have countered that the usefulness of the concept outweighs its limitations. Laroche (1995), for instance, maintains that this change of heart by some does not take into consideration the fact that managers still see themselves as decision-makers; that they perceive many of their activities as decision-making.
making and that in their eyes decisions ‘exist’. Thus, decision-making still represents a significant part of the organisational process.

“The management staff tried a number of times to create a decision-making matrix to plan levels of involvement and degrees of freedom in decisions” (O’Connor, 1995:785).

One important point overlooked in this lively and ongoing discussion is that words, such as decision-making, power, or rationality only help us to understand and interpret organisations and management, but under no circumstances can they be treated as observable and real phenomena for the following reason.

“What is important to remember is that analytical concepts cannot be studied. One cannot study power (although one can study people's use of power), value systems, or ideologies in a direct way. One can study a way of life, or a way to act and use these concepts to interpret them (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992:188).

By missing this important point the approaches above work on the premise that what is being studied is ‘decision-making’, overlooking the fact that understanding management or organisations – what these models or theories try to do – is inseparable from the organisation of that understanding (Jeffcutt, 1994). In other words, what is described is as significant as how it is described.

Simon’s new decision-making science determined how to describe management and organisations, leading others to recreate, to reproduce and to disseminate a picture of organisations and management as decision-making. This, in turn, determined what was researched; what data was searched for; and how the data was operationalised and focalised by the researcher (Brunsson, 1982; Langley et al., 1995). In this respect, decision-making reflects an imposed interpretation (March, 1994, 1997; Weick, 1995); a socially constructed concept (O’Connor, 1997); artefact of late modernity (Chia, 1994; Gergen, 1994; Gergen and Tojo, 1996); a discourse of power and seduction (Humphreys, 1998; Hendry, 2000); a metaphor (Morgan, 1986; Alvesson, 1993); and a myth (Bowles,
1997). In other words, decision-making does not represent an organisational reality but constitutes or forms a reality through the language of the writers who write about organisations.

De-humanisation

The second criticism of organisational decision-making theory stems from the formal methodologies and the rigorous scientific language used by the main approaches to study it, i.e., decisions unfold in sequential patterns, oblivious of individual differences and devoid of human emotion and imagination (Langley et al., 1995).

As a whole, models of decision-making ignored the participants’ own accounts (either managers’ or subordinates’) in the generation of an organisational decision discourse. Participants are repressed by the researcher’s wishes. They have no voice, no agency, no culture and history; they are not actors or creators but passive figures [subjects] in the model representation of/for an organisational decision-making theory.

“The sample of this study consisted of a national sample of 204 middle level managers.... The subjects were participants of a management development program sponsored by their organization... Of the 204 participants, seven did not complete the decision packages, and were therefore not included in the analysis” (Satish et al., 1994:225).

“Overall we conducted 167 interviews with 113 managers consisting of a protocol of closed-choice items about the decision process and the factors that shaped it” (Sharfman & Dean Jr., 1997:202).

In these examples, the process has already been defined and described, the only part played by the participants is in the confirmation or rejection of the hypotheses proposed by the researchers. In other words, the ‘social’ and discursive aspect of decision-making is lost in the scientific [style] language and approach of the researcher(s).
“Hypothesis 2b. Global strategic decision units with high subsidiary managers’ ability to refute the strategic views of head office managers will achieve a higher level of global strategic renewal than those with low subsidiary managers’ ability to refute” (Kim & Mauborgne, 1995:50).

“Hypothesis 1: Competitive threat will be negatively related to flexibility in strategic decision-making” (Sharfman & Dean Jr., 1997:199).

“Proposition 7: The more political the strategic decision process, the more likely the managers will bring prior hypotheses to decisions” (Das & Bing-Sheng, 1999: 769).

The scientific language employed in the examples above shows the legacy of Simon’s scientific discourse in the representation of decision-making. The formulation of hypotheses and [mathematical] propositions illustrate the intentionality of the researcher(s). As a result, decision-making is perceived from within the researcher’s universal model and applied to those who are ‘observed’.

Recent research in organisation and management, by contrast, has tried to address this emphasis on ‘models’ of organisational decision processes by focusing more and more on the culture (Sapienza, 1985), gender (Iannello, 1992), and the natural [local] experience of organisational actors (Klein, 1998).

Sapienza (1985), for example, emphasises the influential role of organisational culture [shared beliefs] when managers in organisations talk about decisions. This point is also stressed by Donalson and Lorsch (1983) and more recently by Beach (1993), Pheysey (1993) and Bass (1996). For Sapienza the expression of decision-making reflects the intersubjective reality of organisational actors.

“Decision making entailed a response to the intersubjective reality created in part by managers’ shared beliefs and depicted in metaphoric imagery” (Sapienza, 1985: 82).

Decision-making, then, has more to do with a common language within the organisation than with the models or theories that intend to describe or prescribe it.
Culture is also of interest because it underlines the dominance of Western culture in the
generation of an organisational decision-making discourse. Most theories or models of
decision-making – as this review has shown – are characterised by a Western culture.

“…researchers and research subjects all from the distinctively
individualistic, most coolly impersonal cultures of what is loosely called ‘the
West’” (Miller et al., 1996: 308).

Although theorists acknowledge that cultural differences exist, it can still be argued that
the universal validity that the theories aspire to tends to unify the representation of the
process into a single culture. What this means is that most theories do not acknowledge
cultural differences, emphasising instead the neutral, objective language which is
insensible to unknown variables such as gender, ethnic background, local experience,
language, etc. In other words, they ignore the cultural background from which researchers
come and from which subjects are selected.

Having said that, some attempts have been made to balance the bias toward studies in
traditional Western cultures. Research has been conducted in Japan (e.g., Heller & Misumi,
1987; Marsh, 1992), China (Zhong-Ming, 1996; Gamble & Gibson, 1999) and ex
Yugoslavia (e.g., Heller, Drenth, & Koopman, 1988; Pusic, 1996). However, it has been, in
most cases, more an attempt to compare decisions in these countries with traditional
Western models rather than providing a ‘local’ alternative interpretation of the very same
issue. I believe that this problem is extremely difficult to deal with since all researchers –
including myself – are unavoidably influenced by the scientific rhetoric of the West. In
other words, the way we conduct our research is always a product of the most dominant
Western cultures.

Equally important is the role of gender, which has been ignored in studies of organisational
decision-making. History informs us that, just as most researchers in the field have been
male (white Anglo-Saxon males), decision-makers in organisations are mostly (white) men. The result is a theory dominated by issues that marginalize and silence the voices of women (and other ethnic minorities too).

Recent advances in organisation and management studies though have highlighted the role played by women at work, the differences between them and male colleagues and the application of feminist perspectives\(^\text{13}\) in the analysis of organisations (e.g. Sheppard, 1992; Parkin, 1993; Alvesson & Billig, 1997).

In the case of management, for example, Bell and Nkomo’s (1992) idea that women differ in their managerial and leadership style in relation to their male colleagues may emphasise the inadequacy of the organisational decision-making theory when it comes to account for gender differences.

Do female managers make decisions just like male managers? How do the history, culture and opportunities of women in organisations affect their decision-making capacity? These are all-important issues neglected by traditional studies of decision-making and addressed by alternative perspectives such as Iannello’s (1992).

Iannello (1992) studied decision hierarchies (power) in organisations from a feminist perspective. She found that women tend to be more involved and anarchic in their decision relationships. Everyone seems to be involved, take more responsibilities and is less hierarchical in their conceptualisation of organisations (see Iannello, 1992). Thus, it may be that gender indeed plays a part and needs to be addressed by traditional studies of organisational decision-making.

\(^{13}\) These approaches examine from a historical, political and cultural perspective the role of women not only in organisations but in society as a whole.
A final relevant aspect of this critique is the point raised by Klein (1998), who argues that the attention placed on decision-makers’ constraints in relation to rationality and competency has jeopardised a more naturalistic approach (see also Beach, 1997; Conolly & Koput, 1997) to decision-making. Klein maintains that it is more relevant to look closer at organisational actors’ experiences and the way they go about their business in organisations rather than concentrating on models of organisational decision-making.

“We are interested in experienced decision makers since only those who know something about the domain would usually be making high-stakes choices... we see experience as a basis for the sources of power we want to understand” (Klein, 1998: 4).

In essence, Klein points out that it is more important to write about the world of the decision-maker; the world of decision-making as the manager actor experiences it.

**Isolation**

The third criticism of decision-making theory stems from the previous two: decision-making suffers from isolation. Decisions can be isolated from each other and from both the context [i.e., the organisation] and the actors for their study (Carroll, 1993; Langley et al., 1995). Decisions can be untangled, in order to follow a sequence of events as if there were a clear distinction between events and actions (Chia, 1994). Decisions, then, are assumed to be clearly identified. This is obviously false, since, as I have already discussed, decisions do not exist as such and therefore cannot be isolated for study or observation.

A ‘decision’ is not a physical entity but a word. Like many other words it possesses an intrinsic iterative ingredient, i.e., every time is used it acquires a new meaning. According to Chia (1994), the iterativity of the word makes decision-making indeterminate, unstable, ill-defined and prone to be re-produced in an entirely different way, depending on the
context and the actors, every time is used. Consequently, to reduce the word into discrete and static events, or even further into categories and typologies as some studies suggest (what is and what is not a decision) creates an irreducible gulf between what is experienced (at the organisational level) and what is articulated (by a researcher or researchers) in the form of scientific theories. Several examples of this come to mind such as Hickson et al. (1986) or more recently Levin and Hunke (2000).

Certainly organisational actors experience and shape their organisational LIVES.

"LIVES are lived in organizations. Few of us have the right to make decisions about how other people's organizational lives will be conducted... People's experiences are shaped by where they happen to be..." (Kanter & Stein, 1979: XIII).

Organisational actors lives are part of a cultural milieu, a history and a language. Their lives are part of dialogues (which are always going on) sustained inside and outside their organisations. Decision-making is part of these dialogues. Decision-making is part of the organisational folklore; part of the history and the communications that take place among these actors. Consequently, decision-making is never fixed but in flux, emerging each time in different ways and acquiring different meaning when used in these dialogues.

Equally, decision-making is part of the dialogues that the researcher(s) construct – in their own organisations. That is, it is an integral part of the myriad of stories constructed by the researchers in their dialogues with organisational actors or whoever else who happen to show an interest in these dialogues (such as in journals or books or conferences). Therefore, decision-making cannot be isolated, but seen as part of a continuous fabrication of organisational life as it is lived and experienced by any of the participants in the dialogue.

"Decisions are a human construct. They are not natural phenomena in the world that we discover. They are made (and so designated) by theorists, observers, and participants" (O'Connor, 1997: 318).
In sum, there is no doubt that decision-making theory is a hot topic in organisation studies. There is no doubt too that the reasons for its strength and popularity lie on its use of scientific discourses and its appeal as a dominant management ideology. Consequently, there is no question by people who work under this paradigm that first, organisations are decision-making processes (because managers are said to be dedicated to making decisions). Second, if organisations are decision-making processes, it is true to say that decisions exist and can be scientifically discovered and described. Third and finally, by knowing how decisions are made contributes to the generation of universal laws that can explain the work of organisations. The future of decision-making theory, then, is assured by all these researchers, who religiously believe and support its postulates.

Of course, this is all nonsense. Decisions do not exist in the way they are expressed by formal model representations and certainly, organisations are not decision-making processes for the many reasons expressed here. Therefore, decision-making theory in its reductionist attempt to formulate how life is lived in organisations renders itself with, what Macdonald and Hellgren (1998) declare populates the discipline of organisation: a ‘spurious respectability to the interpretation of reality’ and the data that supports it merely decorates its theoretical exposition. Decision-making theory adds little to our understanding of organisation; it does not accumulate knowledge but only a large quantity of mindless research (Bedeian, 1989).

Formal decision-making models constitute an organisational world, dictating what to see and how to see it. More than anything, they epitomise a utopian world\textsuperscript{14}, an ideal world where the hero is the ‘decision-making concept’ and where all the organisational arrangements and social structures have been conceived and defined under the ‘concept’. It

\begin{footnote}{\textsuperscript{14} The utopian world refers to the alternative world imagined by the author; it represents the dialogue of the world as we know it and as it is constructed and presented to us by the author (Moylan, 1986/1997).}
\end{footnote}
is in this sense that decision-making has more to do with a style of writing; with a narrative; with creating and imagining an organisational world, hitherto, with fiction than with reality itself. In other words, it has to do with storytelling.

As a consequence, it is more significant to think of decision-making as a diverse collection of literary creations (i.e., stories) grouped under a literary genre: the **decision-making genre of management and organisations**.

### THE DECISION-MAKING GENRE OF ORGANISATION

Organisational decisions are stories. They are not any types of story; they refer to the representation and interpretation of life in organisation as configured within an organisational decision-making genre. In this genre, authors traditionally write with reference to the existing generic system (this does not mean in agreement with); within the ‘model’ of writing proposed by Simon and cohorts (see Simon, 1947; 1960). For instance, the traditional plot (i.e., a linear plot) of a decision story goes like this. A social scientist or a group of social scientists set out to ‘discover’ how decisions are made in organisations, because decisions are said to be very important and significant. These stories usually begin by exposing the faults of traditional assumptions of how decisions are made in organisations, i.e., decisions are not as rational as it was previously thought or they do not conform to a pre-established model or theory or set of laws. For example,

> “The processes and heuristics observed are not consistent with the compensatory decision rules presumed by strict liability laws” (Meszaros, 1999: Abstract).
Once the author/narrators establish that this is not the case, he/she or they discover how decisions are really made, setting her/his/their own set of laws or model or theory of how this happens.

“They [decisions] are consistent with satisficing, ambiguity management, and some aspects of threat-rigidity behaviours observed in other arenas of organization studies” (Meszaros, 1999: Abstract).

Other common plots begin by the author/narrators asking a question or hypothesis, to which he/she/they provide(s) the answer before revealing the reader the story itself. The story, then, becomes a confirmation of what the narrator is proposing as a valid and general principle of decision-making (killing the plot; killing the story).

“How centralized is decision-making authority in Japanese organizations?... A good way to get at these questions is the Aston Centralization of Authority Scale” (Marsh, 1992: 261).

This narration is always done as a third-person narration (God-like perspective), i.e., an external voice always tells (‘shows’ to be more precise) us what is really going on in the ‘mind’ of the organisation.

The main character of these stories is par excellence the manager. In fact, it can be said that the success of the genre is associated with managers’ representations as the new heroes of contemporary society – especially in the United States.

“The manager is the folk hero of contemporary American society” (Mintzberg, 1973:2).

Paradoxically, in spite of the increasing desire by organisational writers to represent his qualities, virtues and achievements, he has suffered badly at the hands of decision-making writers. Original characterisations within the genre that still predominate today (see above) robbed managers of any humane trait; robbed them of dialogue; robbed them of emotion; robbed them of history; robbed them of culture; and robbed them of agency. The manager
became represented as part of a ‘machine’ similar to the main character in James Cameron’s film *Terminator* (1984).

*Terminator* presents a ‘purposeful’ efficient machine (that looks like a human), which is guided by one goal: to kill the heroine Sarah Connor. This machine did not have feelings, expressions or other attributes; it was only concerned with achieving its goal. This machine is analogous to one of the earlier models of decision-making, Taylor’s de-humanised ‘rational decision-making’ description of workers and managers alike. John Dos Pasos (1938) illustrates this beautifully in describing the Ford production line driven by the “Taylorised speed-up” model (Banta, 1993:4)

> “Reachunder, adjustwasher, screwdown bolt, shove in coffeepin, reachunder, adjustwasher, screwdown bolt, reachunderadjustscrewdownreachunderadjust, until every ounce of life was sucked off into production and at night the workmen went home gray shaking husks (John Dos Pasos in Banta, 1993:4-5)

Subsequently, in the hands of the main author of the genre Herbert Simon, this ‘*Terminator*-manager’ suffered minor transformations and human improvements. Simon conceived the manager actor not as a perfectly efficient (rational) machine like the *Terminator* but instead as a *Cyborg*.

The *Cyborg*, described by Haraway (1991) as a hybrid creature composed of organism and machine, did not display the perfect rationality of the *Terminator*. The *Cyborg* manager is a data-processor (computing information) or a general problem solver, ready to tackle any problem in the ‘system’ (the organisation and its environment).

> “… since the thinking human being is also an information processor, it should be possible to study his processes and their organization independently of the details of the biological mechanisms –the ‘hardware’ – that implement them” (Simon, 1964/1992: 76-77).

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15 Simon’s characterisation still predominate in most journals and books on the subject.
16 See Wood (1998) and Srinivas (1999) for more on this interesting subject.
The *Cyborg* manager acts as the most advanced (computer) programme and in turn programmes those who work under him/her. But unlike the *Terminator*, the *Cyborg* cannot ‘maximise’, only ‘satisfy’, his choices and the choices of the ‘system’ – perhaps a more human trait?

Simon’s *Cyborg* has characteristics more in common with science-fiction characters such as Mr. Spock or Commander Data (from *Star Trek* and *Star Trek Next Generation* respectively) than with human figures. Equally, in Simon’s tales, the organisation is a *Cyborg*, taking an organic form that resembles the spaceship *Andromeda* (2002) from the science-fiction TV series of the same name. *Andromeda* is a space vessel that takes independent actions; it projects a human image (of a beautiful woman) and constantly communicates with the captain of the vessel, guiding him in the decisions he takes. Thus, the scientific aspirations of the main exponent of the genre turned our hero into a robotic-humanoid figure.

Later versions of the manager, in contrast, have tried to ‘humanise’ his/her characterisation. These versions represent managers interacting, co-operating and communicating with each other and other organisational members (see e.g., Hill, 1984; Dawson, 1996); they are seen struggling for power and control (see e.g., Pfeffer, 1992; Salancik & Cooper, 1997); and they are seen as part of a cultural setting (e.g., Donaldson & Lorsch, 1983). However, these representations remain within a science-fiction model of writing that does not threaten the *status quo*, i.e., the author/narrator continues to manipulate the manager character as a ‘subject’, as an object in a mathematical equation, or more dramatically as a ‘thing’.

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17 Similar issue is raised by Czarniawska (1996) who discusses ‘organisation’ as character represented through autobiographical events. An example of this, it might be Robert Heller’s (1994) *The Fate of IBM*, in which the author investigates who kill the organisation as if the organisation had an individual identity.
This latter point is very significant. Primarily, it points out that the classic view of the main character is only secondary to the ‘idea’ or ‘concept’ of decision-making. In other words, the ‘idea’ itself is the real hero in these classical decision stories. The manager, as secondary character, is only the thing on which the idea is successfully tested. This, in turn, reveals a hidden discourse in the decision-making plot, which is charged with ideological (and political) significance for the reader.

The decision-making plot acts as an ideological force whereby hidden in the structure of the story lies a donor figure (Jameson, 1972), i.e., the human figure of a mediator who communicates through the hero (i.e., the decision-making idea) his/her particular ideological view of the world. This figure, of course, is the author, who acts as the God-like narrator and who represents the dominant ideology (Althusser, 1969/1996) through which we come to know the world of management and organisations: social science.

The institution of social science operates as the official and hegemonic discourse (Bourdieu, 1995; Burkitt, 1998) that controls how the world is represented, with what legitimacy and by whom. Therefore, under these official discourses, it is only the social scientist who can reveal what the organisational decision world is truly like and how managers act (make decisions) through the power of experimentation and observation, enhancing (accumulating) our knowledge of organisations.

“They [students] need to be exposed also to the tools of laboratory experimentation and the tools for carrying out field investigations of decision-making. With such tools in hand, rapid progress can be sustained in understanding how we human beings used our bounded rationality to make decisions, and in applying our understanding to revising and rebuilding our theories of economics – bringing them into firmer contact with the realities of the world” (Simon, 1992: 7).

18 ‘She’ as writers became more aware of the presence of women managers.
Characterising or bringing the idea alive is what renders this classic approach to writing in the genre as science-fiction\textsuperscript{19}. There seems to be no connection between the social and experiential world of the manager-actors and the writing. The attempt to construct the decision narrative into a scientific narrative imposing discourses and opposite language for its representation is what kills the story; kills the significance of it for the wider audience. Paraphrasing D. H. Lawrence (in Lodge, 2002: 99):

‘... all this pseudo-scientific classifying and analysing of organisational text in imitation-botanical fashion, is mere impertinence and usually dull jargon’.

It is this scientific and prescriptive style in which the genre has been conceived (under Simon’s model of writing) that does not represent an attractive option of organisational character representation (unless you want to create another Mr. Spock or Terminator or Cyborg or subject or thing). Furthermore, the linear plot, the unifying discourse, ‘the idea’ as main character, and the one voice narrative (omniscient narrator) used in these classical decision tales appears as obstacles and a perpetuation of Simon’s and cohorts’ views on decision-making (i.e., object of observation and manipulation). It is, therefore, best to drop them and to seek new more meaningful literary styles of writing, and, in this way, creating more diverse and representative organisational decision tales.

This process has begun, partly, with a new group of writers who call themselves the naturalistic decision-making group (e.g., Beach, 1997; Lipshitz, Klein, Orasanu & Salas, 2001), and partly, by postmodern writers such as Chia (1994) and by writers who have began to blend the genre with literary ones such as Sorge (1992) and O’ Connor (1997).

\textsuperscript{19} May I take the liberty to say, a less entertaining version of science-fiction writing.
Naturalistic storytellers, for instance, centre their stories on how people make decisions in real world contexts that are meaningful and familiar to them (Whyte, 2001). For example, in Klein’s (1998) story.

“Lieutenant M decides that the man’s strength is important for quick movement and thinks the crew member has enough training that he will not drop the stretcher as it is manoeuvred in through the back of the rescue truck” (Klein, 1998: 3).

The result is a more realistic narrative that, according to Klein, can have a more significant impact on the practice of management and organisations.

Yet this style of narrative, that echoes New Journalism, remains faithful to the existing linear and ideological notion of decision-making, but toys with the idea of establishing a fixed, unified and official model of writing, or simply a place alongside the classic model (see e.g., Cooksey, 2001; Clemen, 2001; Todd & Gigerenzer, 2001).

More radically, postmodern writers suggest abandoning the imaginary ‘illusion’ produced by traditional writers of the genre. According to these writers, such as Chia (1994), the claim of traditional decision storytellers (hitherto, uncovering facts and the real) is misplaced and need to be re-addressed in a more humble way. These writers, instead, propose that our stories should reflect the chaos, the multiple interactions, dialogues and local orchestrations that are alive and going on within organisations. Moreover, our decision stories should reflect the heteroglotic character of organisational life; the carnivalesque nature of organisations whereby we account for the everyday languages and practices people have; for people’s own form of culture; their own ways of expressing themselves; and where discourses are free from the established repressions (i.e., the state apparatuses) or ideologies. This view suggests a more radical break with the traditional decision-making plot and its bourgeois ideology.
An example of a more humble approach to writing these stories may be found in Sorge (1992). Sorge’s story combines decision-making and autobiography; blending a new autobiographical-decision narrative (in the form of an article). Sorge’s refers to his experience within Commission 40 of the French CNRS (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique), a very large public research organisation covering all the scientific disciplines in France. He revealed in his story how his preconceived ideas on voting (i.e., deciding) were smashed within this organisation. The story also reveals a clash of cultures (he is Dutch), a clash of “how we do thing here”. Finally and most importantly, the story has one main protagonist, who is the author himself.

“However, my delusion that I had a feel for the French way of doing things was short-lived. At one point, the committee was, in my view, lining up a majority of opinion which was inconsistent with an earlier vote” (Sorge, 1992: 457).

O’Connor (1997) equally emphasises a break with the traditional and modernist way of writing in the genre. For O’Connor organisational decisions and decision theorising is the interweaving of multiple, ongoing and an unending narratives, i.e., the narrativisation in the telling of decision and decision theory.

“... when March (1994) says that choice opportunities collect decision makers, problems, and solutions, I say that, more precisely, the narratives that define choice opportunities, problems, and solutions as such converge with the always occurring narratives of decision makers. And decision theory (i.e. narrative about these narratives) converges with the always already occurring narratives of decision theorists.

.... To understand a decision, we take decision narratives as a point of departure in new meaning-making activity...” (O’Connor, 1997: 318).

She illustrates this point by studying how narratives represent and generate decisions about change. Yet, her narratives appear as dried descriptions and over-interpretations, lacking in plot and literary creativity (see O’Connor, 1997). Nevertheless, her work still represents a break of the traditional model of writing in the genre.

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20 New journalism is a sub-genre of the novel that uses the genre of the novel to re-work incidents
All these new writing styles present new possibilities and challenges to us in terms of creating our own decision stories. They constitute new ways of thinking and new forms of enquiry that require decision authors to continue exploring the writing of this genre in similar fashion with novelists.

Hence, the established conventions of writing organisational decision-making are being dropped and replaced with new ones that do not conform to the traditional structures and discourse of authority that have governed the production of these stories for most of the twentieth-century. From this break with tradition, a new boundary-less space is opened for writers to fill with unexplored meanings, inevitably affecting the way we think about authoring these decision stories.

CONCLUSION

The main claim I have raised in this thesis is that organisational decision-making processes do not exist (as formal representations). They are only literary creations (i.e., stories) configured within what I have proposed to be a decision-making genre. The genre emerged with the writings of Herbert Simon, an acclaimed scientist, who persuaded people to describe organisations and management as decision-making. His stature as a renowned scientist gave legitimacy to this story and others, subsequently, followed his steps. Decision-making then, became an institution and a religion (according to March, 1988); a model of writing for all organisational authors who were trying to explain and represent the twentieth-century phenomenon of organisation. Today, this tale, of mythical proportions, is being perpetuated by journals such as Management Science, Decision Theory, Journal of Behavioral Decision-making and Management Decisions among others.

based on real events (Klarer, 1999).
However, the traditionalist and ‘modernist’ model of writing in the genre is being challenged with more meaningful literary styles that have more significance for the writing and understanding of organisation and management practices. This, it is hoped, will have an impact on wider organisational audiences who may seek more locally, historically and culturally grounded interpretations that can help them to make sense of what they do and who they are. Re-writing and re-interpreting the theory of organisational decision-making as literary genre is a step forward in this direction.
REFERENCES


