# Making sense through false syntheses: Working with paradoxes in the reorganization of the Swedish police

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### ARTICLE INFO

### ABSTRACT

This article analyses how a working group in the Swedish police made sense of their task in the wake of re-organization. It aims to describe how inputs from top management prompted processes of sensemaking within the group, and their subsequent results in responding to latent paradoxes. The police group's work was studied through participant observation, interviews and documents. The findings illustrate how the group made latent paradoxes salient and how they worked with these paradoxes to ultimately make them latent again by what we call "false syntheses". Through this process, the group achieved its task, but the paradoxes were reproduced, made latent and pushed away to another part of the organization. Thus, sensemaking transforms paradoxes from latent to salient, from macro to micro levels of the organization.

## 1. Introduction

In any organization, solutions are counteracted by others that are equally legitimate. This gives rise to uncertainty about goals and affects the efficiency of the organization. It is therefore critical to understand how such paradoxes are made sense of in daily work. Reorganizations are initiated to resolve paradoxes, but they may also bring about new tensions that make paradoxes salient (Smith & Lewis, 2011). In this article, we investigate sensemaking of paradoxes in the context of organizational change.

A paradox is broadly defined as "anything inconsistent, or narrowly defined as absurd interrelationships that defy logic" (Fairhurst et al., 2016 p.2). Paradoxes and contradictions display a "pervasive nature" in organizational life (Briscoe, 2016 p.1), and research on paradoxes spans an array of organizational phenomena and analytical levels. One strand of paradox research concerns the observation that paradoxes can be *latent* in organizations, before surfacing and becoming *salient* in instances of plurality, scarcity and change (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Following Knight and Paroutis (2016), our study contributes to research on early stages of what the authors call 'paradox recognition' in organizational contexts, by analysing how paradoxes are made sense of by organizational practitioners. Adding to, and extending, the perspective of paradox recognition, we specifically analyse how paradoxes can be talked into existence and thereby become salient, but also how sensemaking can contribute to making paradoxes hidden and latent again in

a process that result in what we call a "false synthesis". By this, our study adds to research that engages with how paradoxes are constructed and dealt with in everyday organizational practice as individuals in an ongoing manner engage with tensions in everyday work (Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017).

A sensemaking lens specifically focuses how people untangle what seems ambiguous (a central feature of a paradox) into manageable realities where further action is possible (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1995). Existing literature that have merged sensemaking and paradoxes have historically emphasised how sensemaking is an interactional process by which actors engage with organizational contradictions (Putnam, Fairhurst, & Banghart, 2016) and transform latent paradox into salient paradox (Jay, 2013; Lüscher & Lewis, 2008). Adding to previous conceptualisations of paradox and sensemaking linkages, our study aims to unbox the various ways in which sensemaking is linked to paradox in organizational contexts. More specifically, we suggest that the sensemaking of a paradox does not always make paradox salient in an unidirectional manner, rather − following the discussion by Lüscher and Lewis (2008) − we explore the possibility that sensemaking might also transform and hide paradoxical tensions. To develop this perspective, our analysis is based on processes that we term "salience-making"; "tension-making"; and "latent-making" of paradox. Furthermore, we will show how practitioners who are faced with paradoxes through the aforementioned sensemaking processes can end up with a form of quasi-resolution where a paradox at

face value is made sense of as resolved, but where this solution entails a "false synthesis" − a paradox that is made latent. Knight and Paroutis (2016) convincingly showed how leaders make latent paradoxical tensions salient for others in the organizational context. Our study of false synthesis evidences how the opposite is also possible: how organizational actors, through sensemaking can transform salient contradictions into latent states for others within the organization.

The purpose of our study is to describe and analyse how paradoxes are transformed through sensemaking processes in practitioners' daily interactions. In this way, we aim to complement previous studies, which are mostly conceptual, with further empirical basis for the theorization of paradoxes and sensemaking. To meet this objective, we did an in-depth exploration of the efforts of a working group of police employees as they attempted to make sense of their assignment during a reorganization of the Swedish police force. Similar to other reorganizations, this change initiative meant that established practices were being replaced and the responsibilities of personnel were shifting. The ongoing change thus entailed a suitable case to study how paradoxes are dealt with through sensemaking, and how sensemaking transform paradoxes.

### 1.1. Sensemaking and paradox

As mentioned, a common denominator in the sensemaking and paradox literature is that sensemaking entails a process by which paradoxes are 'recognized'. Through recognition, a paradox is transformed from a latent state to a salient state. Knight and Paroutis (2016) exemplifies this role of sensemaking in their study of how top-management leaders enabled latent paradoxical tensions to become salient for lower-level managers by providing cues and 'interpretative contexts' that shape the recipient managers sensemaking and acknowledgment of paradox. Empirically, the study has similarities with Berglund, Strannegård, and Tillberg's (2004) study of how paradox was used for sensegiving purposes in a bank merger. In this study it was shown how dominant narratives of "high-tech" and "high-touch" simultaneously were drawn upon by managers who integrated the paradox as a part of their communicative strategy, thus employing paradox to construct and influence future actions. In addition, Jay's (2013) study of a hybrid organization governed by competing institutional logics discusses latent and salient states of paradox and positions sensemaking as process by which practitioners deal with ambiguity and emergent paradoxical situations. In detail, Jay (2013 p. 153) discuss how incompatible logics of client and public service did not comprise an overt paradox but a latent paradox that "surface" from time to time as ambiguous situations arise. Sensemaking of paradox was triggered in order to resolve tensions through strategies such as oscillating and shifting of logics, reframing, and iteratively creating synthesis. Similar functions of sensemaking was described by Lüscher and Lewis, (2008) in their study of middle managers in which paradoxes identified by organizational actors spurred sensemaking and how middle manager through altering of cognitive frames (i.e. reframing) reached workable perspectives to problems pertaining to change.

These studies posit that paradox both has socially constructed components as well as stemming from external organizational systems and practices. They also identify sensemaking as a mediating process by which actors engage in paradox recognition. In their often-cited "dynamic equilibrium" model of organizing, Smith and Lewis (2011) propose that the difference between latent and salient conditions of a paradox can be found in their ontological status. Either paradoxes are exogenous to practitioners as materially embedded contradictions in organizational systems (i.e. latent paradox) or cognitively and socially constructed and rooted in the experience of involved actors (i.e. salient paradox). This view thus propose that paradoxes are "partially socially constructed" (Abdallah, Denis, & Langley, 2011, p. 335) as it is through simultaneous recognition of paradoxical poles that paradoxes are made salient (Lewis, 2000). While this ontological view allows for

sensemaking to be theorized as a mediating process that transforms latent paradoxes into salient paradoxes (as practitioners notice and pick up cues of latent paradoxes) it nonetheless entails an (unsatisfactorily) eclectic ontological perspective.

Therefore, the scholarly discussion on paradox and sensemaking has mainly focused on paradoxes as an exogenous antecedent of sensemaking while sensemaking has been described as the primary process by which paradoxes are unidirectionally transformed from latent to salient. Furthermore, sensemaking is also often discussed as a process by which paradoxes reactively are coped with and/or worked "through" (Jarzabkowski, Lê, & Van de Ven, 2013; Lüscher & Lewis, 2008).

While current research has provided valuable insights into how sensemaking and paradox ontologically can be understood in juxtaposition, a currently underexplored question pertaining to sensemaking of paradox is how sensemaking may produce paradox or transform paradox in other directions than from latent to salient states. Regarding how sensemaking may produce paradox, Lewis, (2000 p. 761), for instance, notes that paradoxes can be "constructed" through sensemaking. "As actors attempt to make sense of an increasingly intricate, ambiguous, and ever-changing world, they frequently simplify reality into polarized either/or distinctions that conceal complex interrelationships". Similarly, Allard-Poesi, (2005 p. 184–185) highlights this property of sensemaking in terms of an "undecidability of sensemaking" wherein every determination of meaning also implies its self-negation. Essentially, "to write or say something implies placing in the margins or excluding a supplementary meaning that will always contaminate and corrupt the privileged one". As such, attempts to stabilize an over-determined situation through sensemaking inevitably involves simplifications that might obscure underlying contradictions (see also Weick, 1995). Based on Lewis (2000) work, Luscher, Lewis, and Ingram (2006) as well as Fairhurst et al. (2016) discuss this in terms of how sensemaking might contribute to "vicious cycles" which are produced when individuals react to paradox by defensive responses such as downplaying alternatives, and keeping paradoxical poles separate in time or space. Through such processes, paradox can be made sense of in a short term through the construction of internally consistent (but biased) outlooks on issues, while fundamental issues are effectively hidden or ignored as individuals strive for one-sided but plausible working solutions. Using a dialectical vocabulary, the example presented above posits that sensemaking does not contribute to "synthesis" or transcendence of paradoxical tensions through mindful provision of a third option that resolves tensions between paradoxical poles, but rather to separation of the poles that constitute paradox as contradictions are kept separate and displaced (see Abdallah et al., 2011).

## 2. Methods

To investigate how practitioners work with paradoxes, we have chosen a single case study in an organization characterized by a major reorganization because periods of reorganization are especially prone to experiencing paradoxes (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008; Lewis, 2000). The explicit aims of the chosen organization virtually entail a rephrasing of the "organizing paradox" (Lawrence & Lorch, 1967); the Swedish police are expected to change in two opposing directions, increasing *both* the level of standardization and uniformity throughout the whole country, as well as flexibility and "closeness"/proximity to citizens (SOU, 2012:13). The new organization thus plans for national standards at the same time as it propagates more flexibility and local sovereignty.

### 2.1. Case description

As a case of working with paradoxes, we expected that the implementation process of said reorganization would mean considerable engagement with conflicting courses of action. The working group studied was given the task of investigating and providing suggestions