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Making sense of the war in Afghanistan

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ABSTRACT

What does a reading of Karl Weick's work add to our understanding of strategy? To address this question I first outline some of the principal ideas that inform the Weick-inspired sensemaking perspective – sensemaking, organizing and enactment. Second, drawing on Martin (2014) these concepts are applied in order to analyze the West's strategy failure in Afghanistan, focusing in particular on the activities of the British and Americans in Helmand province. American and British strategizing, I argue, was hamstrung by a failure to understand adequately the history, context, people, actions and events in which they were embroiled: that is, there was a failure of sensemaking. This exploration suggests the value of sensemaking theory not just to academics but also to corporate strategists and military commanders. Although the nature of this failure and its implications for the West's strategies are analyzed primarily with reference to Weick, I draw also on the broader sensemaking literature especially that which recognizes the linguistic, and in particular narrative character of sensemaking processes. Finally, some limitations of this analysis and the sensemaking perspective generally are briefly considered.

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Lauded both for his theorizing and pragmatic insights, Karl Weick is one of the most influential thinkers in strategic management (Ramos-Rodríguez and Ruíz-Navarro, 2004) and organization studies (Sutcliffe, Brown, & Putnam, 2006). Gioia (2006, p.1710) has argued that Weick, undoubtedly '... changed the conversation' of our field', and Czarniawska (2006, p.1672) has praised his works as '... a source of wisdom and consolation'. Drawing on a broad range of ideas, associated with scholars as diverse as Allport, Ashby, Bateson, Heidegger, Husserl, and Schultz, among others, Weick has helped to refocus a generation of academic social scientists on processes rather than structures and organizing rather than organizations. While he is associated principally with what is generally referred to as the 'sensemaking perspective' (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015), he has also contributed to diverse other literatures including those on loose coupling, organizations as interpretive systems, improvisation, organizing for high reliability, and requisite variety (Weick, 1969, 1979, 1995). Perhaps most resonant with contemporary strategy scholarship is his 'phenomenological emphasis on lived experience' (Sutcliffe et al., 2006, p.1574) and recognition of '... the centrality of language and interaction in the social construction of organizational realities' (Eisenberg, 2006, p.1693).

In this paper, I foreground some of the ideas of Karl Weick and discuss how they are relevant to our understanding of strategy, drawing principally on Martin's (2014) analysis of what went wrong with American and British strategizing in Afghanistan.¹ The key argument that Martin (2014) makes, and which I explore and elaborate further, is that American and

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¹ In February 2014 the British Ministry of Defence (MoD) asked for the book to be pulped, claiming it breached the Official Secrets Act and used classified material uncovered by Wikileaks founder Julian Assange. Dr Martin and his publisher denied this, but as a result, the 31-year-old author quit the military in disgust after serving for ten years.

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British strategy implementation was hamstrung by a failure to understand adequately the history, context, people, actions and events in which they were embroiled: that is, there was a failure of sensemaking. The nature of this failure and its implications for the West's strategies are analyzed primarily with reference to Weick, but I draw also, though to a more limited extent, on the broader sensemaking literature, in particular that which recognizes the linguistic, especially narrative character of sensemaking processes (Boje, 1991; Brown, 2000; Gephart, 1993). No single account, of course, can do full justice to the complexities inherent in a prolonged series of military interventions fought over many years across a large country, and nor is it feasible to survey meaningfully every concept relevant to strategy associated with Karl Weick's work, and my aims here are appropriately modest.²

I begin by outlining some of the key features of the Weick-inspired sensemaking movement and consider how they have been employed in the strategy literature. An account of my research design is then followed by several sections which provide an analysis of the West's strategic failure in Afghanistan from a sensemaking perspective. This exploration shows the value of Weick's work for academics, practising corporate strategists and military commanders. Finally, I consider weaknesses of the sensemaking literature and draw some brief conclusions.

1. Karl Weick, strategy and organizing

Karl Weick is most closely associated with the 'sensemaking perspective' which has its origins in late nineteenth and early twentieth century scholarship (Dewey, 1922; James, 1890; cf. Maitlis and Christianson, 2014). The use of the term 'perspective' is deliberate, and symptomizes that there is no single theory of sensemaking, merely '... a set of ideas with explanatory possibilities' (Weick, 1995, p.ix). Contemporary interest in sensemaking dates from the 1960s, especially with Weick (1969) together with others such as Garfinkel (1967) and Polanyi (1967), who sought to explain how people experience 'reality' and how meanings are socially constructed (Berger and Luckmann, 1967). Initially, Weick took a strong cognitivist position: '... organizations exist largely in the mind, and ... what ties an organization together is what ties thoughts together' (Weick and Bougon, 1986, p.102-3). More recently, though, Weick has embedded his perspective in social constructivist theorizing that highlights the role of language in meaning production (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015; Weick, 1995), a move that has been mirrored by the broader sensemaking community: '... in most current writing organizational sensemaking is ... understood as fundamentally concerned with language' (Maitlis and Christianson (2014, p.81). Much attention has been devoted to narratives as '... the primary form by which human experience is made meaningful' (Polkinghorne, 1988; p.1) leading to studies emphasizing the polyphonic nature of sensemaking in organizing (Abolafia, 2010; Brown, Stacey, & Nandhakumar, 2008; Currie and Brown, 2003).

There have been many attempts to capture adequately and tersely the kernel of Weick's perspective on sensemaking (e.g., Brown, Colville, & Pye, 2015; Holt and Cornelissen, 2014; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015). These tend to focus on three interlinked (and to some extent overlapping) notions *sensemaking*, *organizing*, and *enactment*. Sensemaking involves action (enactment) which is made sense of retrospectively by focusing on cues which are extracted, labelled and connected; this reduces equivocality, and through talk which sustains interaction accomplishes organizing. This rather dense rendering of Weick's position requires unpacking.

1.1. Sensemaking

Weick, and the broader sensemaking community, offer somewhat distinct characterizations of *sensemaking*. At its most general, sensemaking is a generic term that refers to diverse processes of interpretation, action and meaning production whereby people 'structure the unknown' (Waterman, 1990, p.41), reduce equivocality, and (re)produce their worlds. A more 'micro' perspective on these processes suggests that sensemaking involves a frame (such as an ideology or theory of action), a cue (that which is actively 'noticed' in present moments of experience) and a connection (a relationship between the frame and the cue which creates meaning) (Weick, 1995, p.111). This sensemaking depends crucially on identity, is retrospective, enactive of social environments, social ('sensemaking is never solitary' (Weick, 1995, p.40)), ongoing ('People are always in the middle of things' (Weick, 1995, p.43)), focused on and by extracted cues ('To establish a point of reference ... is a consequential act' (Weick, 1995, p.50)), and driven by plausibility rather than accuracy ('... what is necessary in sensemaking is a good story' (Weick, 1995, p.61)). Moreover, sensemaking is constitutive of organizing which emerges through sensemaking: sensemaking is a matter of authoring not just interpretation, it is a means of '... creation as well as discovery' (Weick, 1995, p.8).

1.2. Organizing

Rather than a single, simple definition of the temporary and dynamic nature of organizing, Weick provides several distinctive though overlapping characterizations of it which emphasize its behavioural, cognitive and linguistic/

² Three of the most obvious in-practice limitations, are that Martin's (2014) (and so my) analysis: (i) focuses not on Afghanistan in general but Helmand, the largest Afghan province, in particular; (ii) is less concerned with NATO/ISAF than the activities of the American and especially British military; and (iii) weaves together a somewhat curious mix of history, policy, incident and anecdote from which clarity (at least to this reader) does not always emerge.

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