

## SENSEMAKING AND INSTITUTIONALIZATION IN ARMED CONFLICT: APPLYING CONCEPTS TO PRACTICE

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**SENSEMAKING AND INSTITUTIONALIZATION IN ARMED CONFLICT:  
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**ABSTRACT**

The aim of this paper was to capture the sensemaking process employed by soldiers to cope with the challenges presented to them by the environment in which they are operating. The research identified the various individual and situational variables that impacted the sensemaking process and how they moderated the intensity of work and non-work pressures experienced by soldiers. A combination of exploratory and descriptive research design was used to investigate the research objectives. The researcher used a grounded theory approach to capture and analyse the narratives of security forces. This study revealed that soldiers' sensemaking processes were organized around the following themes: *identity, work, significance, feelings, dealing with stress, and dealing with excesses and aberrations*. Further, the role of institutional practices in sensemaking processes remains underexamined, and most of the available research uses anecdotal or atheoretical approach, the current study addresses both a theoretical and an important empirical gap. It demonstrates that institutions provide building blocks and actively direct action formation, as well as moderate the sensemaking process to help employees cope with attendant pressures in a better manner and guide their behaviour in exceptional situations.

## SENSEMAKING AND INSTITUTIONALIZATION IN ARMED CONFLICT: APPLYING CONCEPTS TO PRACTICE

### INTRODUCTION

*More than 90 days of continuous combat would turn any soldier into a psychiatric casualty*

World War II Military Doctors, *When Soldiers Snap*

Armed conflicts<sup>1</sup> are among the most neglected types of human social sicknesses. Over the past decades, millions have lost their lives to armed conflict related injuries in geographies spanning across the world from Middle East to Africa to South Asia. An armed conflict affects the lives of involved people in significant ways and the costs incurred by the affected nations are enormous.

There are frequent reports of suicides, fratricides, drug and alcohol abuse, psychological breakdowns and post-traumatic stress disorders suffered by soldiers. We also read about rapes, staged killings, disappearances, custodial deaths and use of excessive force by security forces in armed conflict regions (Deibert, 2007). In fact, research in social psychology supports the proposition that situational aspects hold greater power than individual variables in certain contexts (Zimbardo, 2008). This is especially true in armed conflict which places enormous adjustive demands on defence personnel. Notwithstanding their harsh work conditions, armed forces are required to be constantly alert and vigilant, maintain high moral integrity, face tremendous physiological and psychological stressors, and have to deal with the consequences of decisions taken in the line of duty under highly threatening conditions. At the same time, fear of death, sight and smell of blood, loss of close friends in combat, shortened time perspectives, uncertainty about future, period of active exchanges interspersed with long lull periods, no control over duration of combat engagements, and living in highly constrained conditions – all combine to create an environment which is defined by high degree of stress, frustration and restlessness (Zimbardo, 2008). It is apparent that security forces in armed conflict are trapped in extremely unenviable situations, which place extraordinary demands on ordinary soldiers.

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<sup>1</sup> According to the widely accepted definition presented by ICTY (The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia) - “an armed conflict exists when there is resort to armed force between states or protracted armed violence between governmental authorities and organized armed groups within a state” (Lehto, 2010).

Since armed conflict situations place enormous adjustive demands on defense personnel, they are required to engage in continuous sensemaking. Soldiers often rely on a coherent narrative to orient them through their challenging contexts (Dubnick, 2002). Sensemaking efforts are also critical because the decisions and responses of armed forces determine the subsequent expectations and actions of military, civilian, government agencies and political parties as well (Dubnick, 2002).

### **AIMS OF THE RESEARCH**

The aim of this paper was to capture the sensemaking process employed by soldiers to cope with the challenges presented to them by the environment in which they are operating. The research identified the various individual and situational variables that impacted the sensemaking process, how they moderated the intensity of work and non-work pressures experienced by soldiers, and their effect on subsequent coping outcomes

A combination of exploratory and descriptive research design was used to investigate the research objectives. Exploratory research helped in formulating appropriate research questions and also helped to uncover important variables in order to prepare the ground for more rigorous research (Kerlinger, 1973); while descriptive research was helpful in understanding the concepts discovered during the literature review and examining the relationship between them. Together they served as “essential primaries” (Kerlinger, 1973) for uncovering critical variables and their possible inter-relationships.

### **METHOD**

The researcher used a grounded theory approach to capture and analyse the narratives of security forces, as it enables an in-depth exploration of multiple issues by allowing respondents to share their experiences, presumably unbiased by the researcher’s expectations (Rothausen, et al., 2015; Creswell, 2007). In line with prior sensemaking studies (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1993), this research took an inductive approach to examine the armed conflict environment and the sensemaking efforts of the respondents.

### **Data Collection**

Primary data was collected with the help of formal, semi-structured interviews with 31 armed forces officers. The researcher used a theoretical sampling technique wherein she approached theoretically relevant respondents and requested them to participate in the study. The sample group facilitated a deeper exploration of relevant aspects, which was required for theory building and extension (Creswell, 2007). The initial 8 interviews were conducted in the form of a focus group, and the aim was to understand the nature of armed conflict and critical issues around it. The duration of the focus group discussion was more than 180 minutes. In the subsequent 23 interviews, a semi-structured interview-schedule was used. Respondents were requested to share their experiences and understanding with reference to a series of open-ended questions around challenges and actions in armed conflict. The 23 interviews were between 90 and 135 minutes duration, averaging 113 minutes. Honouring the apprehensions shared by the initial respondents, in the first 9 interviews a recording device was not used, and responses were recorded through detailed written notes. For the next 13 interviews, the participants agreed that the interviews could be digitally recorded, which were subsequently transcribed. The respondents consisted of 27 men and 3 women. The average age of the participants was 35 years and their average work experience was approximately 19 years.

While setting the tone for the focus group discussion and interviews, the researcher attempted to create a climate of psychological safety so that respondents would feel comfortable in sharing in their experiences. Given the apprehensions expressed by initial interviewees and the sensitive nature of sought data, the researcher at the very beginning of the interview process, assured the respondents that their confidentiality and anonymity concerns would be honoured. The sensemaking narratives were captured with the help of extensive, semi-structured probing (e.g. Brown et al., 2008). She tried to be receptive (and tried to keep her biases at bay) while listening and probed the respondents to understand different aspects of their stories. Example interview questions included 'What were your primary roles and responsibilities?' and 'How did you deal with the pressures and stress of your work?', 'How did you deal with exceptional situations?' and 'Who is a good soldier?' The researcher also encouraged interviewees to share critical incidents (see Flanagan, 1954) to clarify understanding of their experiences. In order to minimize ambiguity in data

interpretation, the researcher shared with the respondents her understanding of they had said. This helped to reduce interviewer-induced bias and improved the robustness of data collection process (see Rothausen et al., 2015.)

The researcher examined the themes emerging from the first set of interviews, and identified key issues which directed the framing of subsequent questions (Rothausen et al., 2015). In the final interviews, a repetition of issues and observations was experienced, which signalled that theoretical saturation could have been reached, and hence data collection was stopped (Creswell, 2007; Rothausen et al., 2015).

Other data sources included newspaper and magazine articles published between 2009 and 2015 which were selected based on relevance to the study. Several documentaries and books published on the conflict in the region of Jammu and Kashmir in India were referred to in order to acquire an in-depth understanding of the complexities of armed conflicts. The researcher attended a seminar on 'Military Leadership' by a senior officer in the Indian Army and recorded notes on human resource management issues highlighted by the speaker. The researcher also visited the state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) in India to get a first-hand experience of the context of armed conflict. During this visit, she spoke informally with 7 residents of J&K to understand how the local populace experienced the armed conflict and their perceptions of the role of various actors in the situation.

### ***Data Analysis***

The collected narratives were examined using a grounded theory approach. As suggested by Rothausen et al. (2015), the transcripts were reviewed to identify emerging themes and coding of data was done in an iterative manner. To begin with, the key issues that were derived from the focused group discussion were analysed. Based on the emergent issues, the next set of 9 interviews were conducted. The themes that emerged from the 9 interviews were analysed at this stage, following which the next 13 interviews were conducted. During each step, the researcher coded the emergent themes and dimensions.

Researchers assert that a 'grounded theorist's task is to gain knowledge about the socially-shared meaning that forms the behaviors and the reality of the participants being studied'

(Aldiabat & Navenec, 2011, Milliken & Schreiber, 2001). Following Rothausen et al. (2015), the collected data was first analysed using open coding and in-vivo codes were identified (i.e. based on the language used by interviewees). Next, higher level concepts were derived from the in-vivo codes by examining the attendant similarities and first-order categories were selected. Following this, axial coding was undertaken, i.e. second-order themes were zeroed in based on the patterns and interconnections among first-order categories (Rothausen et al., 2015). The in-vivo and first-order coding process was simultaneous with the data collection process, i.e. the researcher proceeded with data-collection and review of themes emerging from the in-vivo and first order categories together. The axial or second-order coding was undertaken once all interviews were completed. The major themes that emerged from axial or second-order coding are explained in the Findings section below.

## **RESULTS AND MAJOR FINDINGS**

As mentioned earlier, the sensemaking narratives of soldiers were coded and analysed with the help of a grounded theory approach. Coding of data was done in an iterative manner, as suggested by Corbin and Strauss (2008) and Rothausen, et al. (2015). To begin with, the key issues that emerged from the focused group discussion were analysed. Based on the emergent themes, the next set of interviews were conducted.

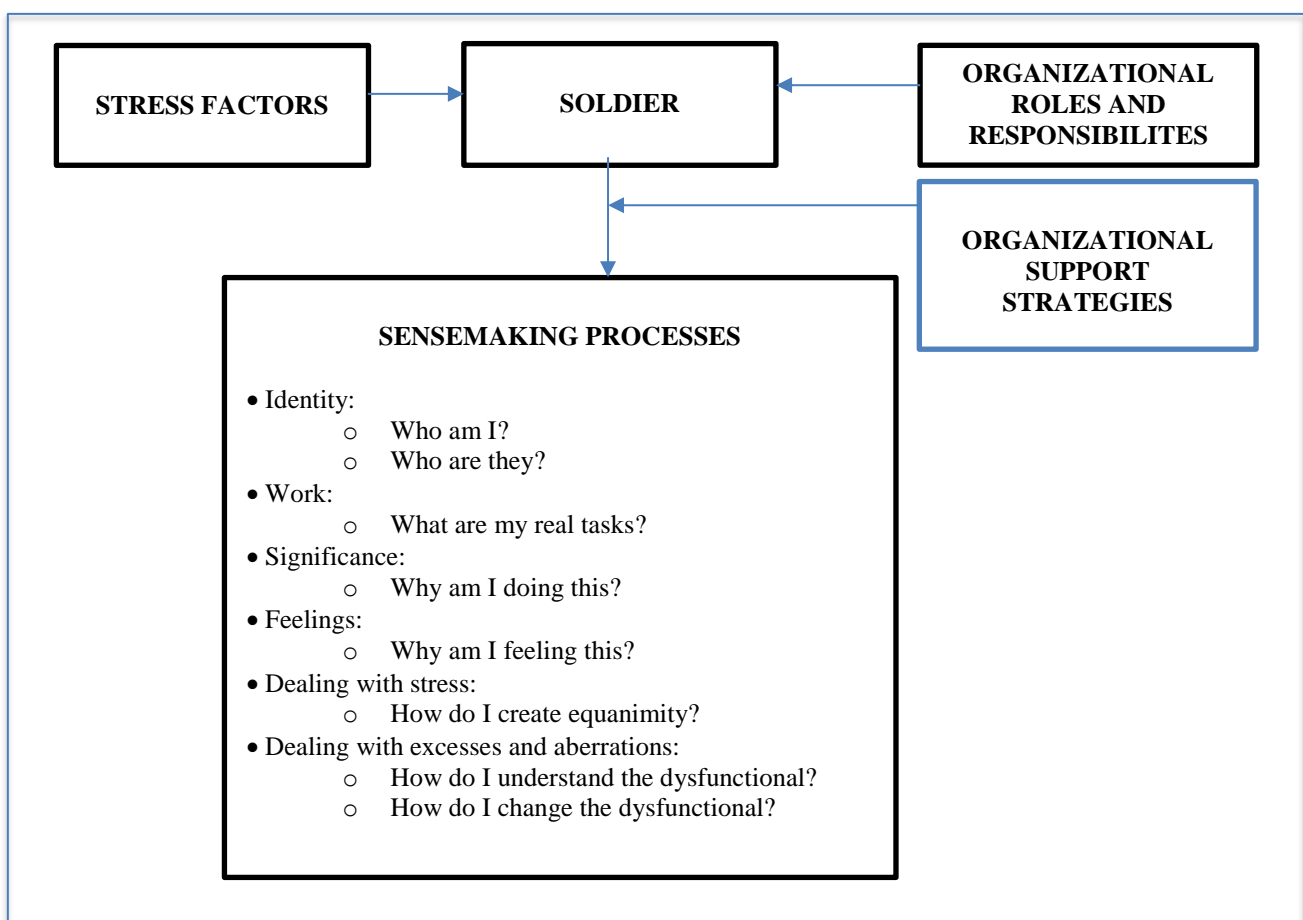
Following Rothausen et al.'s lead (2015), the collected data was first analysed using open coding and in-vivo codes were identified (i.e. based on the language used by interviewees). Next, higher level concepts were derived from the in-vivo codes by examining the attendant similarities and first-order categories were selected. Following this, axial coding was undertaken, i.e. second-order themes were zeroed in based on the patterns and interconnections among first-order categories. The major themes which emerged at the end of axial coding were organized as follows:

1. Stress factors experienced by soldiers
2. Organizational roles and responsibilities
3. Organizational support strategies
4. Sensemaking processes:
  - a. Identity
  - b. Work

- c. Significance
- d. Feelings
- e. Dealing with stress
- f. Dealing with excesses and aberrations

These were organized to arrive at the following conceptual framework:

**FIGURE 1: Conceptual Framework**





## BRIEF DISCUSSION

Pratt, Rock & Kauffman (2001) found out that people are motivated to make sense of the tasks they are assigned at work. Accordingly, this study used the sensemaking approach to examine how soldiers coped with tasks and the pressures associated with their role in armed conflict situations.

Sensemaking has been defined as 'the ongoing retrospective development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing' (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005). It refers to sets of socio-cognitive processes by which people 'structure the unknown' (Waterman, 1990) into sensible, 'sensible' events (Huber & Daft, 1987) in their efforts 'to comprehend, understand, explain, attribute, extrapolate, and predict' (Starbuck & Milliken, 1988; Brown & Humphreys, 2003).

In fact, extraordinary and exceptional events test peoples' ability to make sense in an intense manner (Brown & Humphreys, 2003; Brown, 2000). According to Weick (1995), 'we live in a perpetual state of transition, and our sensemaking is a constant effort to cope with experiences that are unique and transient' (see Brown & Humphreys, 2003). The uniqueness of individual sensemaking processes can lead to highly differing outcomes even in the same situation. Given the extraordinary nature of an armed conflict, sensemaking is likely to play a significant role in the interpretation of experiences, pressures, actions and decisions taken during such situations. This research revealed that soldiers sensemaking processes were organized around the following themes: *identity* (Who am I? Who are they?), *work* (What are my real tasks?), *significance* (Why am I doing this?), *feelings* (Why am I feeling this?), *dealing with stress* (How do I create equanimity?), *dealing with excesses and aberrations* (How do I understand the dysfunctional? How do I change the dysfunctional?)

One persistent criticism of the sensemaking perspective proposed by Karl Weick (1969; 1995) has been that typically social and institutional factors are ignored while examining human cognition and action (Weber & Glynn, 2006). To address this criticism, lately some sensemaking theorists have conceptualized sensemaking as 'feedstock for institutionalization' (Jennings & Greenwood, 2003; Scott, 2001; Weick, 1995), while others have proposed that institutions appear to act as 'internalized cognitive constraints on

sensemaking' (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Zucker, 1991). Weber and Glynn's (2006) conceptual work integrated these perspectives and proposed that institutions colour sensemaking efforts through myriad ways. For example, besides providing 'building blocks for sensemaking', institutions 'guide and edit action formation' as well (Weber and Glynn, 2006).

The current research supports and extends Weber and Glynn's (2006) conceptualization through robust empirical work. It demonstrates that institutions do provide building blocks and actively direct action formation. Research findings also indicate that institutional practices moderate the sensemaking process too. Institutional practices can serve as support mechanisms during the process of sensemaking which could help employees cope with attendant pressures in a better manner and guide their behaviour in exceptional situations. This research also shows that when the sensemaking processes of employees and the support strategies of organizations are aligned with each other, they can lead to mitigation of high stress and better adjustment.

The link between sensemaking and institutional practices becomes extremely crucial when the changing profile of employees is taken into account. This research shows that the profile of an average soldier and officer is changing with more educated and uninstitutionalized youth joining the workforce. The demands and expectations of young soldiers and officers is threatening the unquestioned acceptance of discipline imposed by superiors in the army. Coupled with this, the availability of modern communication technology and the penetration of social media into the daily lives of soldiers is adversely impacting the internal cohesiveness and bonds that existed within any battalion. This raises important concerns for top management in armed forces who might need to review and re-engineer their organizational support strategies to align them with the expectations of a millennial workforce. Since the impact of institutional practices on sensemaking process remains under-examined, and most of the available research uses anecdotal or atheoretical approach, the current study addresses both a theoretical and an important empirical gap as well.

## CONCLUSION

This research project aimed to contribute to the realm of both academic and applied research. While rich theoretical data exists in the areas of sensemaking and institutionalization, very few robust empirical studies have linked these concepts. This project sought to extend the existing theoretical frameworks and examined the interrelationship between sensemaking processes and institutional practices in the field, that is, in the context of armed conflict.

Research has shown that in order to stem undesirable behaviour of individuals or groups, we need to understand the situational and systemic forces that operate in given behavioural settings. Providing guidelines for working functionally and support for adaptation while being weighed down by overwhelming contextual forces, can have a greater impact on preventing and modifying undesirable individual reactions, than remedial actions which are solely directed at replacing the bad apples in high-pressure situations (Zimbardo, 2008). Thus, the results of this research project could also be used as a basis for designing useful intervention programmes in order to preempt self and other-directed violence in armed conflict.

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