Making of A Good Soldier: Sensemaking Efforts in Armed Conflict

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to capture the sensemaking processes employed by soldiers to cope with the challenges they encounter in armed conflict postings. Accordingly, this research identifies the various individual and situational variables that impact the sensemaking processes of soldiers. The researcher has used a grounded theory approach to capture and analyse the narratives of security forces. The study reveals that soldiers' sensemaking processes are organized around the following themes: *enactment of identity*, *understanding of role, understanding of task significance*, *managing feelings*, *and coping with stress*.

This study also explores the hitherto under-examined relationship between sensemaking and institutionalization. It uncovers the mediating and moderating ways by which organizational strategies and practices affect individual sensemaking. The results demonstrate that institutionalized socialization and indoctrination practices mediate the process between environmental and organizational factors and soldiers' meaning-making and guide and shape soldiers' sensemaking processes. Further, leader interventions moderate the relationship between sensemaking processes and soldiers' responses.

Thus, the study tests and refines existing, but empirically under-examined, theoretical concepts in sensemaking and institutionalization literature with the help of rigorous empirical research and thereby addresses an important gap in sensemaking and institutionalization field.

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 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. 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).

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. There are also rumours about rapes, disappearances, staged

killings, 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 many contexts (Zimbardo, 2008). This is especially true in armed conflict which places enormous adjustive demands on defence personnel. For instance, 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. '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.

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 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 (Dubnick, 2002).

Literature review

Pratt, Rock & Kauffman (2001) discovered 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 the pressures associated with their role in armed conflict context.

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, 'sensable' events (Huber & Daft, 1987) in their efforts 'to comprehend, understand, explain, attribute, extrapolate, and predict' (Starbuck & Milliken, 1988).

Extraordinary and exceptional events test peoples' ability to make sense in an intense manner (Brown & Humphreys, 2003). 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.

Sensemaking and Institutionalization

Critical reviews of sensemaking perspective have highlighted that studies on sensemaking ignore social and institutional factors while examining human cognition and action (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weber & Glynn, 2006; Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005).

Some theorists believe that sensemaking serves as 'feedstock for institutionalization' (Weick, 1995:36), while other researchers state that 'institutionalization is a post-factum description of the resultant of individual actions combined with the random events that

accompanied them' (Czarniawska, 2003: 134) or a 'product of collective sensemaking, constructed by sets of stakeholders' (Danneels, 2003; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014: 104; Nigam & Ocasio, 2010). Some contend that institutions appear to act as 'internalized cognitive constraints on sensemaking' (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Zucker, 1991), while others propose that 'institutionalization simply constructs things as they are' with no scope for alternate interpretations (Zucker, 1983: 5). Yet other researchers propose that organizational members are socialized (indoctrinated) into expected sensemaking activities (Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001). Weber and Glynn (2006) integrated many of these perspectives and proposed that besides providing 'building blocks for sensemaking', institutions 'prime, edit and trigger action formation'.

Further, some researchers assert that the environment plays a very critical role in meaning-making, and institutional sensemaking is shaped by 'broad cognitive, normative, and regulatory forces that derive from and are enforced by powerful actors such as mass media, governmental agencies, professions and interest groups' (Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001: 556), and that 'no organization can properly be understood apart from its wider social and cultural context' (Scott, 1995: 151).

While these theoretical perspectives conceptualize what could be the relationship between sensemaking and institutionalization, there are very few studies that explore this relationship in field. Most of the research is theoretical and anecdotal in nature and is not supported by robust empirical work (see Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). The current study addresses this research gap; with the help of rigorous empirical work, it attempts to understand the sensemaking processes of soldiers in armed conflict and how sensemaking and institutionalization are linked with each other.

Research objectives

The aim of this paper was to capture the sensemaking process employed by soldiers to understand the challenges they encounter in armed conflict postings. The research identified the various individual, situational and organizational variables that impacted the sensemaking process of soldiers, and the ways in which they mediated and moderated soldiers' meaning-making. The research also drew leads from the sensemaking-institutionalization research to understand how organizational strategies and practices affected sensemaking and the subsequent responses of soldiers.

Method

Research Design
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.

The researcher used a grounded theory approach to capture and analyse the narratives of security forces, as it enabled 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, this research took an inductive approach (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1993) 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 30 officers of the Indian armed forces. The researcher used a theoretical sampling technique wherein she approached theoretically relevant respondents and requested them to participate in the study. Such a 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 22 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 22 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 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 (see Brown et al., 2008). The researcher tried to be receptive while listening and tried to keep her biases at bay. She 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?', 'Who is a good soldier?' and similar others. The researcher also encouraged interviewees to share critical incidents (Flanagan, 1954) to clarify understanding of their experiences. In order to minimize ambiguity in data interpretation, the researcher shared with 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 that emerged from the focus group and 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 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 Corbin and Strauss (2008) and 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 these 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 behaviours and the reality of the participants being studied' (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 underlying 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 axial or second-order coding was undertaken once all interviews were completed. After the axial coding was completed, the researcher once again referred to extant literature in armed conflict, sensemaking and institutionalization to better understand the themes and their interrelationships. Such theoretical comparisons are needed to enhance the reliability and validity of results derived through qualitative research 'by examining emerging ideas derived from data with existing research and vice-versa in such a way that each can inform interpretation of the other' (Kreiner, Hollensbe & Sheep, 2006:1036; Rothausen et al., 2015).
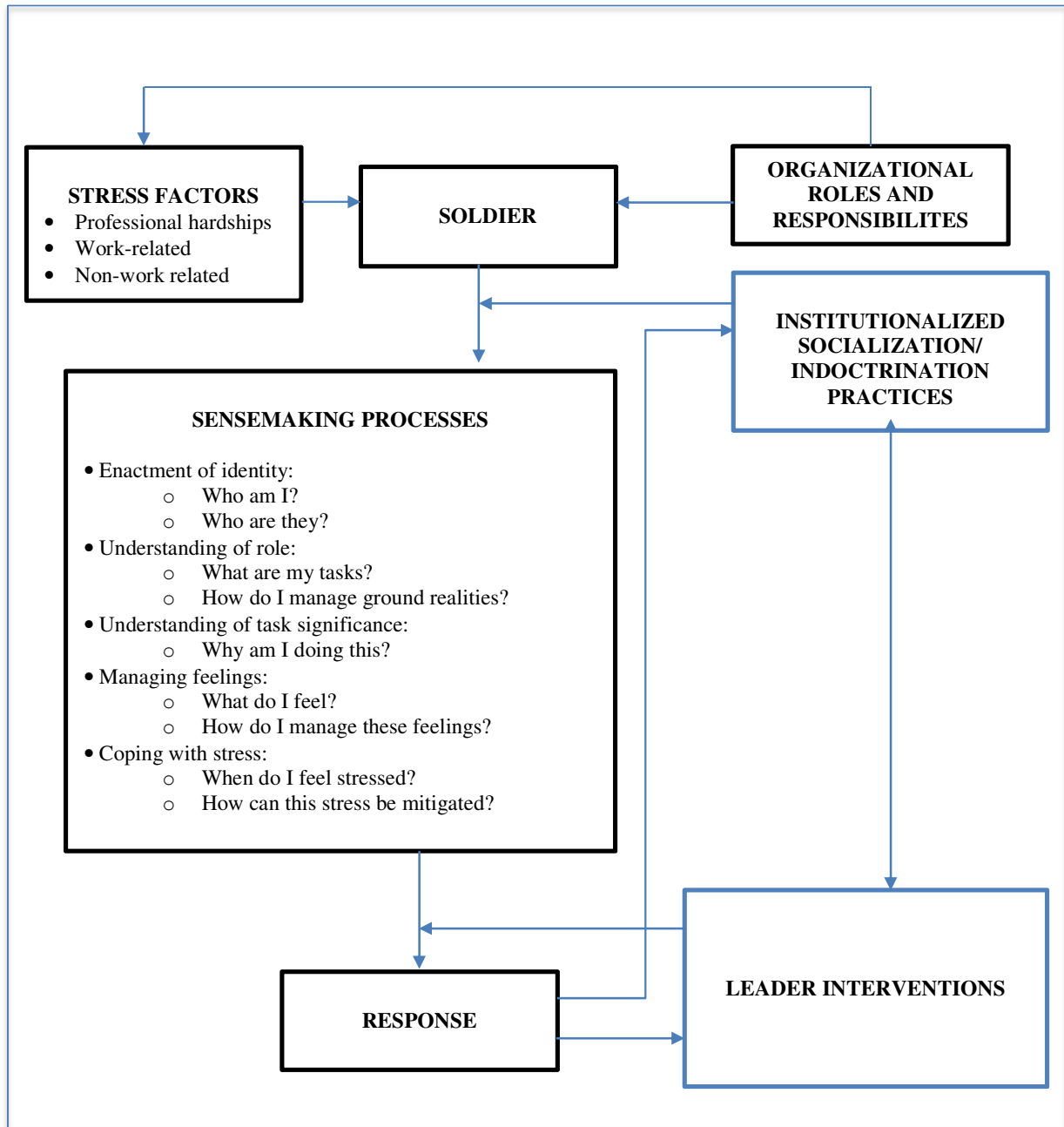
Results

The major themes which emerged from data analysis are as follows:
- Organizational roles and responsibilities
- Stress factors experienced by soldiers
- Institutionalized socialization and indoctrination practices
- Sensemaking processes:
    - Enactment of identity: Who am I? Who are they?
    - Understanding of role: What are my real tasks? How do I manage ground realities?
    - Understanding of task significance: Why am I doing this?
    - Managing feelings: What do I feel? How do I manage these feelings?
    - Coping with stress: When do I feel stressed? How can this stress be mitigated?
- Leader Interventions
- Response

These themes were organized to arrive at the framework presented in Figure 1: "Relating sensemaking and institutional processes''. The primary themes and their interrelationships are explained in detail following this.

Figure 1: Relating Sensemaking and Institutional Processes

STRESS FACTORS
- Professional hardships
- Work-related
- Non-work related

SOLDIER

ORGANIZATIONAL ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITES

INSTITUTIONALIZED SOCIALIZATION/ INDOCTRINATION PRACTICES

SENSEMAKING PROCESSES

- Enactment of identity:
  - Who am I?
  - Who are they?
- Understanding of role:
  - What are my tasks?
  - How do I manage ground realities?
- Understanding of task significance:
  - Why am I doing this?
- Managing feelings:
  - What do I feel?
  - How do I manage these feelings?
- Coping with stress:
  - When do I feel stressed?
  - How can this stress be mitigated?

LEADER INTERVENTIONS

RESPONSE

As depicted in Figure 1, a soldier's world is highly impacted by his official role, his non-role responsibilities and work and non-work stress factors. The role of each of these variables has been highlighted in the following discussion:

Organizational roles and responsibilities refer to official duties of soldiers in armed conflict. These duties differ based on where soldiers are posted, for example, in counter-insurgency operations, guarding the International Border, guarding the Line of Control, peace-time postings and likewise. Each posting brings its own responsibilities with regard to

resource management, logistics, support services and similar other responsibilites. Of these border protection responsibilities and counter-insurgency operations (in armed conflict situations) take the highest toll on soldiers in terms of sensemaking, while peace-time activities do not require as much sensemaking because of their predictability.

The official roles and responsibilities are accompanied by many **professional hardships** such as lack of basic amenities, unpredictable and inhospitable environment, claustrophobia (due to living in small spaces), isolation, and long periods without sleep which can lead to depression, reduced thinking capacity, memory loss, loss of appetite, and overall deterioration of health.

There are other **work-related factors** which also impact soldiers' motivation and morale. Most grievances are centered around lack of leave and hostility of local population. Leave availability is a matter of immense importance for soldiers as it helps them take care of family and personal matters. Many of the **non-work stressors** emanate from family issues such as land-grabbing by relatives, molestation or rape of spouses, adultery by spouses, and family feuds.

The responsibilities, professional hardships and work and non-work stressors place enormous stress on soldiers. These are especially accentuated by the context of armed conflict in which soldiers face immense hostility from certain sections of local population, distrust, animosity, alienation, and grave danger to their life from militants and terrorists. They are required to make sense of this very extraordinary context and its associated pressures on frequent basis.

The sensemaking process of soldiers is mediated and guided by **institutionalized socialization and indoctrination practices**. The armed forces instil a deep sense of duty in soldiers through intense training. Training and continuous rigorous physical activity ensures that soldiers keep physically and mentally fit. A culture of discipline, unquestioning obedience and daily briefings all add to the indoctrination process. The buddy system and close monitoring ascertains that unit members look out for each other and support each through difficult times, and thereby guide each others' sensemaking too. The Chetwode Credo inscribed in the Indian Military Academy's Chetwode Hall, which states that the country comes first, men (battalion) second, and self-interest last, plays a very important role in the sensemaking undertaken by soldiers during tough times.

Sensemaking processes can be understood using the basic questions of who, what, why, how and when? The data showed that soldiers sensemaking processes were guided the following themes: *enactment of identity* (Who am I? Who are they?), *understanding of role* (What are my tasks? How do I manage ground realities?), *understanding of significance* (Why am I doing this?), *managing feelings* (What am I feeling? How do I manage these feelings?), *coping with stress* (When do I feel stressed? How can this stress be mitigated?). These themes are explained below:

Enactment of identity: A soldier's identity is created by the organization through concerted efforts which include donning of the uniform, unit rituals, customs, and other military traditions. The identity is proactively tied to his[1] unit's honour and the country's honour. A soldier's identity is also driven by the bond he shares with his unit colleagues. The intense training, continuous physical work, and physical pain also helps in building a shared identity.

In an armed conflict context, a soldier's identity is not only determined by understanding who he or she is, but also by understanding the 'self' in the light of the 'other'.

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[1] 'He' and related pronouns have been used for the sake of convenience and to ease readability. They should be viewed from a gender-neutral perspective.

However, the 'other' is a complex entity in this context. The other could be the local population, insurgents, foreign militants, terrorists, politicians or civil administrators. The armed forces invest a lot in humanizing the 'other' and making sure soldiers relate to the local population with a compassionate and helpful attitude. When some locals create disturbances or support anti-national elements, soldiers find it very difficult to remain compassionate towards the larger population. Their identity as a soldier of Indian Armed Forces becomes more concretized and the 'other' is seen as the 'enemy' in an indiscriminate manner. Consequently, the level of distrust and degree of vigilance is heightened in all interactions.

Understanding of role: The soldiers' understanding of their role includes an understanding of what their real tasks are and what are the ground realities. As a part of their role, soldiers are required to follow decisions and commands of superiors without any questioning and with complete obedience. They are expected to risk their lives and walk into a line of fire if the situation demands it. Officers are required to be a role model for foot soldiers and lead them through personal example while keeping the morale and motivation of unit members high, in the face of extremely tough conditions and challenges. A comprehensive understanding of role and ground realities is important as the latter create high degree of stress for soldiers and add to their work-load.

Understanding of task significance: Different soldiers have different understanding of the significance of their tasks, which impacts their responses too. This understanding ranges from treating their job as a livelihood (just like any other job), to being invested in upholding the pride of their unit, to high levels of patriotic zeal in protecting the nation and likewise.

Managing feelings: Soldiers go through a gamut of difficult feelings during an armed conflict posting. These include resentment, fear, anger, sorrow, and frustration. There is controlled fear which can turn into anger as well and turn against locals. Long term separation from family and not getting enough leave from service are also significant stress factors. The organization's attempt is to neutralize these feelings and resultant dysfunctional behaviour through various mechanisms like continuous engagement in training.

Coping with stress: The organization uses training and continuous physical work as a deliberate mechanism to tire soldiers out and reduce the intensity of their emotions and other stressors. Individual soldiers use a variety of coping mechanism like reframing the isolation and loneliness as an opportunity for self-reflection or they try to focus on the adventurous aspects of their role to keep their spirits high. The relations within battalion and unit level cohesiveness plays a very important role in keeping soldiers centered and mitigating high degrees of stress. Unit level team spirit builds resilience and is a critical coping mechanism while dealing with personnel losses in the battlefield.

Leader interventions

The presence and actions of the leader plays a very important role in the sensemaking process and subsequent actions. The team leader has to channelize energy to achieve goals while keeping morale high. The leader's role in addressing apprehensions of the soldiers and facilitating their sensemaking process is critical and has a multiplier effect on the morale of the group.

As commanders, leaders intervene at multiple levels to enhance the effectiveness of their unit. This can include intervention in non-work family related issues or active coordination with civil administrators in a soldiers' home town or village to take care of their emergencies and problems. However, such interventions vary depending on individual leaders and their respective concern for unit members. Institutionalization of such efforts can have a beneficial impact on troop stress levels and effectiveness.

Many commanders also play a critical role in getting soldiers back to a 'neutral' emotional state after intense experiences. They aid and guide the soldiers' sensemaking process to align them with the organization's values. A space of psychological safety is created where soldiers can share their perspectives without violating organizational discipline and obedience to hierarchy. The armed forces are now sensitizing their leaders to acquire stress management and sensitivity skills as officers' compassion, their learning orientation, their understanding of subordinates' psyche, and their ability to manage the motivation and morale of their subordinates plays a very important role in the sensemaking process.

Response

Soldiers' sensemaking efforts in the light of role, stressors and indoctrination practices, lead to responses which can be either functional or dysfunctional. From the data, it appears that sensemaking efforts which are aligned with the indoctrination and socialization practices of the organization lead to more functional outcomes for both individual soldiers and the organization. This relationship is further moderated by the support provided by commanding officers. All these elements are expected to come together to create a "good soldier". Failure of alignment of the sensemaking process with organizational elements appears to lead to dysfunctional responses from those soldiers who are experiencing high levels of stress. Such dysfunctional responses are usually of a violent nature ranging from inflicting violence on others to committing suicide. In extreme cases, where there is a complete misalignment of the sensemaking process, there is a danger of a soldier losing sanity and committing fratricide as well.

Discussion

Understanding the sensemaking process in armed conflict

Sensemaking refers to a dynamic process of 'meaning construction whereby people interpret events and issues within and outside of their organizations that are somehow surprising, complex, or confusing to them' (Cornelissen 2012, p. 118). It involves putting stimuli into frameworks, schemata and mental models that help to make sense of the stimuli (Louis 1980; Starbuck and Milliken, 1988). Such meaning-making often threatens defined roles, structures and processes, and makes people question their assumptions about the situation, the actors and their own behaviour. However, sensemaking is important as it allows people to 'deal with uncertainty and ambiguity by creating rational accounts of the world that enable action' (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014).

According to Mailtis and Christianson (2014), sensemaking encompasses four primary features. The first is related to it being a *dynamic* process. The second important dimension relates to cues. Since sensemaking is a process in which individuals 'interpret and explain set of cues from their environments' (Maitlis, 2005, p. 21), cues shape sensemaking as it unfolds. *In the current research context, the cue is provided by the armed conflict environment which triggers sensemaking for soldiers due to its inherent exceptionality and uniqueness.*

Third aspect is related to the 'social' nature of sensemaking. As Weick states (1995: 39), 'even when individuals make sense on their own, they are embedded in a sociomaterial context where their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are influenced by the actual, imagined, or implied presence of others'. *Here the social context is provided primarily by the close bonding and cohesive ties within the battalion and the hostile relationship with locals. These two relationships and their attendant interactions influence soldier behaviour to a large extent.*

Lastly, sensemaking is 'a continuous effort to understand connections (which can be

among people, places, and events) in order to anticipate their trajectories and act effectively' (Klein et al., 2006). The action-meaning cycles occur repeatedly as people construct provisional understandings that they continuously enact and modify (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). *Here the provisional understandings are centered around the sensemaking themes of enactment of identity, understanding of role, understanding of task significance, managing feelings and coping with stress.*

Extant research proposes that leaders can be very directive to very permissive while shaping sensemaking processes. 'Guided' sensemaking occurs when leaders are very energetic in constructing and promoting understandings and explanations of events, and stakeholders are also actively engaged in attempting to shape beliefs about certain elements of the issues (Maitlis, 2005; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007). *In armed conflict, leaders and organization appear to use a 'guided approach' to sensemaking. In other words, the indoctrination and socialization practices as well as leader interventions jointly guide and shape the sensemaking processes of soldiers.*

Further, action is an integral part of sensemaking. Action serves as fodder for new sensemaking, while simultaneously providing feedback about the sense that has already been made (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). The reciprocal relationship between action and the environment during sensemaking is known as enactment. Enactment is premised on the idea that people play a key role in creating the environment in which they find themselves (Weick et al., 2005). Novel, ambiguous and crisis situations serve as powerful triggers for sensemaking which force people to acquire new perspectives and construct meaning out of their experiences. Research also shows that people are less likely to engage in sensemaking when individual or collective identity is strong and positive (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). However, the current work contradicts these findings. It shows that in extraordinary contexts such as armed conflict, the impact of socio-cultural factors can be so powerful, that actors (here, soldiers) are compelled to engage in sensemaking despite strong individual and collective identity. What is interesting is that while soldiers make sense of their context, they simultaneously enact their environment because of the sensemaking schematas and mental frameworks that they hold.

Sensemaking and institutionalization: Very little research has focused on understanding the link between sensemaking and institutionalization through rigorous empirical work. The current research has taken a step in this direction and has attempted to test relevant theory and to extend it.

To begin with, this study provides empirical evidence to support Weber and Glynn's (2006) propositions that institutions prime, edit and trigger sensemaking. However, the findings contradict assertions that claim institutionalization only 'constructs things as they are' (Zucker, 1983) or that they 'restrict the substance of sensemaking' (Barley & Tolbert, 1997; Weber & Glynn, 2006; Zucker, 1991) Rather, the findings demonstrate that institutions are the 'gestaltic' outcomes of individual sensemaking processes and responses, not solely driven by institutionalizing mechanisms.

The study also refines assertions which claim that while institutions trigger sensemaking, they have little influence over what unfolds post-triggering (Weber, 2003). This research demonstrates that institutions continue to shape sensemaking processes throughout service either through socialization and indoctrination mechanisms or through leader interventions. Simultaneously, social and cultural factors, media narratives and public discourse also continue to play a critical role in sensemaking post-triggering and shape responses of soldiers, armed forces and governments.

Extant studies highlight how 'organizational stakeholders' ongoing reinterpretations of their institutions and the institutional practices in which they engage produce shifts in the very institutions they reproduce' (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). This contention assumes greater significance when we take into account the changing profile of new generation soldiers and the impact of the same on organizational policies and norms. This research discovered that the profile of an average soldier and officer is changing with more educated youth joining the workforce. Unlike in the past, many new recruits have no prior connection with armed forces, and hence have not been exposed to institutionalized practices in any formal or informal manner. The demands and expectations of under-exposed soldiers and officers are expected to threaten the unquestioned acceptance of discipline imposed by the senior generations in the armed forces.

To add to this, the availability of modern communication technology and the penetration of social media into the daily lives of soldiers are already adversely impacting the internal cohesiveness and bonds that existed within a battalion and even creating security risks on certain occasions. This raises important concerns for top management in armed forces who might need to review and re-engineer their organizational strategies to align them with the reality and expectations of a millennial workforce.

Conclusions and Implications

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 research 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 encourage desirable behaviour or to stem dysfunctional behaviour of individuals or groups, we need to understand the situational and systemic forces that operate in given behavioural settings. If leaders and institutions can provide guidelines for working functionally and support for adaptation while subordinates are being weighed down by overwhelming contextual forces, they can have a greater impact on preventing and modifying undesirable individual reactions, compared with remedial actions which are solely directed at replacing the bad apples in high-pressure situations (Zimbardo, 2008). The results of this research could also be used as a basis for designing useful intervention programmes in order to preempt self and other-directed violence not only in armed conflict, but in other organizational contexts as well.

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