

Stories in silence – Politicized sensemaking during a major reorganization in an Amsterdam police corps

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Sensemaking research which departs from a psychological standpoint tends to place human beings in situations in which they experience a disorderly world and attempt to cognitively map disparate elements, turning a confusing experience into mental order. Instead, power sensitive studies re-direct the theoretical focus of sensemaking research by placing social actors within a political arena and viewing ‘sensemaking’ as part of a discursive struggle. Often, however, the underlying idea informing such politically sensitive research still envisions meaning-making as a matter of symbolic ordering of, and for, a social world. In this paper, we investigate the more radical implications of a political perspective on sensemaking by exploring instances of sensemaking’s opposites: meaninglessness, chaos, nonsense, and silence.

The argument set out in this paper is inspired by an ethnographic case study of a police station in the city center of Amsterdam. The research was conducted during the months prior to the start of a major reorganization of the complete Dutch police system, called the National Police. The 26 individually operating corps of the Dutch police need to be turned into one single national corps, with a uniform and standardized way of policing. Using the fieldwork methods of interviewing, participant observation, and document analysis, we explored how police officers narratively made sense of the reorganization.

In official documentations, the management responsible for instigating the National Police emphasized the enormous scale and massive impact of the reorganization. By contrast, police officers, if they talked about the upcoming reorganization at all, consistently denied or downplayed its implications. By “actively” constructing a silence around the National Police, police officers were not so much out to create meaning but rather to break the established meaning of the upcoming events as a large-scale, high-impact reorganization.

Police officers engaged in a variety of meaning-breaking strategies. First, they hardly ever talked about the National Police and, when explicitly asked to talk about it, framed the reorganization as relatively meaningless. They would, for instance, depersonalize the reorganization and its consequences by talking about it as the ‘moving around of puppets and bricks’, thereby annulling the scope and impact of the National Police. Or police officers would frame it as an event that might happen in a far-away future, thereby distancing it in time and reducing its impact on today’s reality.

In a second narrative strategy, police officers would typically ridicule the reorganization, framing the National Police as nonsense. They would, for instance, remind listeners that several reorganizations preceded the National Police and, just like before, “it wouldn’t get that bad”. The change envisioned by management was reframed as a managerial ‘invention’ that was in fact incapable to actually make a change. They would also spatially distance the reorganization by presenting it as a bureaucratic battle between managers only. Invoking the popular frame ‘management cops versus street cops’, they claimed the National Police only pertained to the managerial layers of the organization and would not affect operational police forces.

Viewing this reorganization as a discursive struggle in which participants engage in meaning-making, meaning-breaking and meaning-hiding efforts allows us to show that sensemaking is not solely about turning chaos into order. Quite the contrary, we would say. Organizational actors are explicitly engaging in the opposite of meaning-making: passively or

actively turning established meanings into chaos, nonsense or meaninglessness by breaking the 'sense' others try to impose on them. Our analysis opens up sensemaking research to new ways of theorizing discursive struggles in organizational settings. Exploring the 'other side' of meaning-making and explicating how actors try to 'break' meaning allows us to develop the under-theorized concept of meaning-breaking, exploring the role of meaninglessness, silence, nonsense, etc. When discussing the implications, we also address the methodological challenges of such a perspective, for how can we capture silence or meaninglessness in meaning-searching research?