Embodying Sensemaking: Learning from the Extreme Case of Vann Nath, Prisoner at S-21

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The sensemaking literature offered important critical insights to the understanding of organizing. These have been underpinned by two foundational assumptions. First, sensemaking is predominantly a higher order cognitive process. Second, it is a process desired and desirable. Considering the account of Vann Nath as prisoner of the S-21 extermination center during the Khmer Rouge regime, we challenge these assumptions and argue that, in some cases, sensemaking is fundamentally a bodily and emotional process, one that is undesired and blocked by the organization in which it takes place. The shift in perspective triggered by an extreme context has pertinent implications for the understanding of sensemaking in other, non-extreme organizational circumstances.

Keywords: S-21/Tuol Sleng; body; sensemaking; bodily sensemaking

Introduction

The rich body of literature on organizational sensemaking tends to build on two major assumptions. First, that sensemaking is not only necessary but also welcome by organizations and their members. Second, that sensemaking is fundamentally an exercise in cognition, ‘the process of social construction that occurs when discrepant cues interrupt individuals’ ongoing activity, and involves the retrospective development of plausible meanings that rationalize what people are doing’ (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010: 551). The core sensemaking perspective presumes that people are ‘thinking machines, driven purely by cognitions’ (Shiv and Fedorikhin, 2002: 367), an assumption that constitutes an inadequate grasp of reality in many, perhaps even most, circumstances in which sensemaking is necessary.

Research on sensemaking has made central contributions to organization theory that regards the nature of organizations as interpretive, meaning-making systems (Daft and Weick, 1984). Its foundational assumptions, however, are vulnerable to two blind spots, which we address in this paper. First, organizations do not always want their members’ sensemaking; they do not desire it and they sometimes deliberately practice organizational sensebreaking (Pratt, 2000), that is, they actively work to impede the making of sense process. Second, sensemaking involves more than cognition: sensemaking is an embodied as well as embrained phenomenon that involves interactions among different meaning making routes (cognitive, emotional, bodily). To explicate these neglected aspects of sensemaking, three research questions guide this study: (1) How can one make sense in organizational contexts designed to impede sensemaking from happening? (2) How do different sensemaking senses, namely mental cognition, felt emotion, and the conjoining body, participate in the attempt to make sense of one’s reality? We also aim to understand how these different senses dynamically interact; and (3) How do people make sense when they are blinded by extreme fear and under visceral influences?
To answer these questions, we first discuss two critical processes for the remainder of the argument: sensemaking occurring under conditions designed to break rather than make sense, and the interplay of cognitive, emotional, and bodily senses in organizational sensemaking. Next, we focus on our case, using the extreme experience of Vann Nath in the S-21 extermination center in Kampuchea during the Khmer Rouge years, and defend its theoretical importance for the study of sensemaking dynamics. The Khmer Rouge regime is a case of ‘extreme destructiveness’ (Staub, 1990), and, as Almqvist et al. (2011: 122) pointed out, ‘Extreme cases facilitate theory building because the dynamics being examined tend to be more visible than they might be in other contexts.’ Third, we present the methodological approach. Finally, we discuss the results of our analysis and present some implications and avenues for further research. With this paper, we contribute to the literature about sensemaking in organizations, but do so by understanding processes involved in genocide. We approach the topic mainly from the perspective of the victims (Volhardt and Bilewicz, 2013).

Organizational sensebreaking

The sensemaking literature has traditionally presented a ‘strong social- and language-based orientation’ (Whitman and Cooper, 2011: 889). As Weick et al. (2005: 409), propose, in important respects organizations are ‘talked into existence’. While sensemaking is the normal process through which organizations become real, sometimes organizations place sensebreaking limits on members: they deliberately counter independent sensemaking attempts and engage in the destruction of meaning-making efforts (Mantere et al., 2012). For example, Pratt (2000) discussed how Amway managed employees’ identification through both sensegiving (i.e., providing meaning) and sensebreaking practices (i.e., breaking down meaning; e.g., through dream building). Likewise, Drori and Ellis (2011), in a study conducted in an Israeli chemical firm, found that managers in the headquarters (US-based) and in the holding company embark in power games and struggles, which are supported by various sensegiving mechanisms and processes, directed at reinforcing organizational inertia and guarding against change.

Sensebreaking happens partly, although not necessarily, via the blocking of communication and social interaction, because sensemaking is ‘fundamentally a social process’ (Maitlis, 2005, p. 21). Sensebreaking aims to create a void of meaning in recipients (Mantere et al., 2012) and is often accompanied by stigmatization rituals (Goffman, 1963): the induction scenes early in the movie Full Metal Jacket (Kubrik, 1987) provide a good example of this type of sensebreaking. In military or paramilitary contexts, such as the one we address here, sensebreaking is commonplace: military action and intelligence often aims to impede outsiders/enemies from making sense (Brady, 2011; see also the military tactics reported in Drori and Ellis, 2011) just as much as they seek to ensure that insiders make sense only in terms of those that the organization provides, often entailing the forceful destruction of prior ways of being, identity and sensemaking. Sensebreaking efforts destabilize supporting routines, unlearn established ways, and create new ways of control (Almqvist et al., 2011).

Sensebreaking is not just a military concern: the process is also common in business life. Companies protect their strategies and business advantages from their competitors. And even inside organizations, secrecy and impediments to sensemaking may be favored. For example, in Sutton’s (1987) model of organizational death, leaders destabilize the existing organization by engaging in sensebreaking that promotes members’ understanding that organizational life is ending (see also Walsh and Glynn, 2008). Change agents may prefer to hide information from those whom they seek to change for some time, until the change process is fully delineated at and by the strategic apex. Those who are the subjects of change may prefer not to express their perspectives on the process, fearing the consequences of honesty, especially where organizational secrecy creates a void of fear in which rumor and gossip proliferate (Huy, 1999). For normal political reasons in organizations, some groups or individuals may hide information from rivals (Buchanan and Badham, 1999). In other cases, such as mergers or acquisitions, the nature of the deals being negotiated may make the protection of information necessary (Barney, 1997).

What is common to these and other organizational processes is the fact that some stakeholders face (consciously or not) deliberate obstacles to their sensemaking attempts, namely blockage of access to information, the deliberate construction of confusion, managed organizational silence, reduction of polyphony, and so on. While some research has been dedicated to what happens when sensemaking collapses (e.g., Weick, 1993), this collapse is mainly perceived as resulting from unintended exogenous causes. In this paper, we move in a different direction and consider the case when sensebreaking is actively introduced in an organizational context, namely, when it is intentional rather than systemic or accidental.

Sensemaking: cognition, emotion, the body

Our study of sensemaking draws on three areas of organization theory: the cognitive, the emotional, and
the embodied. These areas represent orienting guides to the discussion of the case. They frame our theoretical elaboration effort and are all potentially involved in sensemaking processes. They have received differential treatment from organization theorists.

Cognition

Weick’s early work (1969) on sensemaking has been criticized because it seemed to depict a situation where people did little actual work, rather merely sat around and processed information (Clegg and Dunkerley, 1980). Not surprisingly, most studies of sensemaking recognize the role of cognition. Most of them focus on ‘higher order’ cognitive routes (Shiv and Fedorikhin, 2002), where choices are made via controlled affective or cognitive processes. Sensemaking has been fundamentally studied as a cognitive process that aims to develop an understanding of non-routine, non-trivial, unfolding processes. The cognitivist view is well reflected in the set of sub-processes arguably at play in sensemaking: (1) noticing and bracketing segments of the hitherto undifferentiated flux of experience; (2) engaging in cognitive labeling aimed at connecting meaning between punctuated moments, in order to develop a plausible narrative, and (3) retaining this narrative for possible uses in further enactments (Weick, 1995).

In this perspective, to make sense means producing a narrative account through interpretive abilities. Such a cognitive-narrative focus is expressed in the attention dedicated by sensemaking authors to processes such as frames, narratives, institutionalized codes, and conventions (Cornelissen, 2012). Hence the presentation of sensegiving and sensemaking as socio-cognitive, narrative processes (Quinn and Worline, 2008; Robichaud et al., 2004). The cognitive bias has been recognized by Weick in his retrospective analysis of the 1988 paper on Bhopal, which he described as ‘cool and cognitive’ (Weick, 2010: 537), and claimed the need for more attention to the emotions of sensemaking, a suggestion also articulated by Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010: 566) for whom ‘only a few studies have explicitly addressed the role of emotion in sensemaking.’

Emotion

A second and less explored theoretical foundation emphasizes the role of emotions. The emphasis on the cognitive and discursive properties of sensemaking is understandable, but the neglect of the emotional component is perplexing, at least if one takes into account that cognitions and emotions interact in a recursive way, it being impossible to know whether cognition or emotion comes first (Fox, 2012). Certainly, in some circumstances emotions can override rational thinking (Vohs et al., 2007). Because sensemaking can be triggered by something that is confusing, dangerous, unfamiliar or unexpected, many sensemaking efforts are influenced by emotionality, especially in change processes or during crises, when the levels of emotionality may be intense (Poole, 2004).

One of the reasons changes trigger the making of sense is because they involve a component of uncertainty, which specifies an inability to predict expected outcomes (Rindova et al., 2010). Change disrupts habits and routines (Cooper et al., 1996), destabilizes political equilibrium (Pfeffer, 1992), and releases intense emotionality (Huy, 2002). The more acute the sense of crisis triggered by a change effort and the more threatening the situation is perceived to be (Fox, 2012), the more emotions may intervene in sensemaking efforts (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010). In contexts constituted as posing great danger, the cognitive resources of individuals may be deployed to help them deal with their emotional disarray, and emotions may nourish or influence cognitive processes involved in sensemaking. In cases of extreme uncertainty and risk, sensemaking may thus be a highly emotional process, with cognition directed towards emotional coping, and emotions oriented towards making sense of the environment.

Considering the above, emotions play important adaptive roles in sensemaking. Emotion is not an obstacle to sensemaking. It is an integral part of it. As Slovic (2007) pointed out, affect and emotion can be preferential ways to navigate complex, uncertain and dangerous environments, where sensemaking efforts may be particularly critical. The emotions-based literature on sensemaking explores several relevant directions. First, emotions interfere with cognitive attempts to make sense, because emotion is part of the decision process (Damásio, 1994). Second, at sufficient levels of intensity, visceral factors such as hunger, pain, moods and emotions cause people to experience the feeling of being ‘out of control’ (Loewenstein, 1996). These factors also narrow attention (contrary to positive emotions that broaden and build cognitive resources; Fredrickson, 2001). Nonetheless, their interference in sensemaking has not been subject to much research scrutiny. Third, extreme emotional responses, such as panic, may actually reduce the response repertoire, making it harder for people to cope with environmental pressures. Putting these elements together, critical situations pose formidable sensemaking challenges that transcend the cognitive capacity of individuals, trigger intense emotions, and raise unsolved theoretical issues for sensemaking researchers.

Body

A third theoretical pillar for our study relates to the role of the body. The physicality of sensemaking is critical,
but has been rarely addressed in the organizational literature as most theories of organization assume that workers are ‘bodiless’ (Heaphy and Dutton, 2008: 138). Even in studies of combat contexts, the focus on the role of cognition prevails, to the detriment of the role played by the body. Ben-Shalon et al. (2012: 220) argue that the common depiction of sensemaking in combat contexts is cognitive in its emphasis ‘and therefore does not encompass the full spectrum of qualities that characterize the experience of combat, such as surprise, confusion, and bewilderment; nor related emotions such as fear, joy, or numbness’. In their view, ‘sensemaking in combat is influenced by the smells, sights, and sounds aroused by the proximity to danger and the physical characteristics of the combat environment. The heat of battle evokes emotional, physical, and cognitive human responses, in contrast to the organized and detached qualities aroused by the high-tech digital human-machine interface’ (Ben-Shalon et al., 2012: 219).

Sensemaking is not just a matter of reasoning: it occupies the five senses of smell, taste, touch, sight and sound, and these are not just assembled and rationally processed cognitively. These senses are needed to make sense (Cunliffe and Coupland, 2012), and not one of them is necessarily privileged in acute situations, where the senses may be strained, heightened and confusing. Senses influence emotions (e.g., skin-to-skin contact is known to calm individuals; see Grinde, 2012) while the emotional impact of sound on audiences is well understood in a medium such as cinema (Sergi, 1998). As pointed out by Fox (2012: 78), emotions may come from bodily experiences: ‘If our feelings really do come from our bodily sensations, then the stronger the reaction of our body – and the more aware we are of these sensations – the stronger our experience of fear should be,’ something film directors such as Hitchcock understood only too well (see Critchley et al., 2004).

Sensemaking is an embodied process in a double sense: the body is a milieu of cognitive mechanisms as well as a lived and experiential structure (Varela et al., 1991). There is knowledge in the body not only in the brain (Fox, 2012), as elite athletes, dancers and acrobats make clear. People make sense by considering, among other possibilities, information coming from the bodies of those around them (Hindmarsh and Pilnick, 2007). Body language, after all, is a form of communication – albeit less conscious, less volitional, and less intentional than verbal language (Kikosky and Kikosky, 2004).

The articulation of these three research streams suggests that sensemaking involves conscious and unconscious cognitive and emotional mechanisms, activated by biological processes (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014). As Gigerenzer (2007: 3) put it, ‘much of our mental life is unconscious, based on processes alien to logic.’ Physiological processes are critical to make sense of multiple occasions. These include some situations critical for our case, such as fear, which activate physiological processes, involving the small almond-shaped brain structure called the amygdala (Phelps, 2006), which helps people process social and emotional information in automatic ways (Fox, 2012).

In what follows, we provide some context for a case where the dynamics of sensemaking occurred under a very extreme circumstance, one where restrictions to social interaction were insurmountable, emotions ran deep, bodily experiences were painful, physical and psychological suffering became the norm (Molinsky and Margolis, 2005; Baron-Cohen, 2011), and politics featured highly as an explosive mix of power, subjugation, ideology, and propaganda. The extremity of the case is so significant that it will possibly shed light on the process of organizational sensemaking in a heightened fashion (Eisenhardt, 1989; Huy, 2002), highlighting sharp variations that may expose nuances facilitative of theory elaboration.

**Articulating sensemaking theory and one extreme case**

Extreme cases offer penetrating opportunities to understand processes that typically take subtler forms in other organizational contexts. The case of Vann Nath is considered here as offering an account of sensemaking attempts in a sensebreaking context. When people are impeded to use their normal approaches to everyday life and even when suffering imposed by an organization is atrocious, they will possibly try to understand the world around them. The attempt to make sense of the world, to find meaning in a meaningless world, and to build some sense of hope, have all been studied as responses to organized evil (Jurkiewicz, 2012). In this case, we are not dealing with the wider topic of human individual responses to unimaginable suffering, but to how people attempt to keep their ability to understand the world around them.

**Context**

We contribute to the understanding of how cognitive, emotional, and bodily senses interact in the unfolding of sensemaking when the need to make sense extends over a significant period of time. We approach the topic empirically. We have a sample of one, consistent with the notion that an individual-level perspective constitutes the critical level of analysis of the sensemaking process (Kuntz and Gomes, 2012). We consider the case of Vann Nath (1946–2011), a central witness to the secret history of the S-21 extermination camp at Tuol Sleng in the Khmer Rouge in Democratic Kampuchea (DK). He was one of the seven survivors of the camp, in which some 17,000 Cambodians were executed. In 2009, he testified against the Khmer Rouge to the
UN-backed tribunal established in Phnom Penh and wrote a book about Tuol Sleng, *A Cambodian prison portrait: One year in the Khmer Rouge’s S-21*, which we use as our main source of data. As one of the only survivors, Vann Nath was one of the few who could describe life in Tuol Sleng from the firsthand perspective of the victims. We theoretically sampled the case because, due to its extremity, it renders some sensemaking processes under an extreme test. If ‘fear can blind us’ (Schoemaker and Tetlock, 2012: 7), how do people make sense when they are blinded by extreme fear and under visceral influences?

**Method**

We use a qualitative methodology to address our research questions concerning how can one make sense when organizations impede sensemaking from happening and how different sensemaking senses help make sense of reality. Our aim is theoretical elaboration of a nascent stream within an established domain (Edmondson and McManus, 2007). We draw on and extend important ideas from the organizational sensemaking literature, particularly the typology developed by Maitlis (2005), who distinguishes four sensemaking types, of which we explore three, based on the notions of control (i.e., degree to which sensemaking processes are controlled and supervised by both leaders and stakeholders, by means of e.g., ‘scheduled meetings, formal committees, and planned events with restricted attendance’, Maitlis, 2005: 30) and animation (i.e., degree to which sensemaking processes are based on intense and continuous flows of information and liaison among the various stakeholder groups; Maitlis, 2005): (1) guided (processes that are both highly controlled and highly animate); (2) restricted (processes that are highly controlled but not very animated); and (3) minimal (processes that are neither animated nor controlled) forms of sensemaking. Given the nature of our case, the fourth type, fragmented (processes are animated but not controlled), is not considered, as the case does not present evidence of this.

Theory elaboration studies are recommended when existing theory offers foundational ground for inductive explorations of a given phenomenon (Lee *et al.*, 1999). We aim to understand the process of making sense in/of a very threatening world, where sensemaking occurs under extreme circumstances in a physically harsh context, a methodological choice that is in line with previous sensemaking research (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010). Extreme circumstances pose limits to generalizability but offer privileged opportunities to render processes of focal interest salient (Eisenhardt, 1989; Michel, 2011). We are particularly interested in developing a perspective that is contextually as rich as possible as well as being sensitive to the importance of emotional processes. We approach the case of Vann Nath inductively, using his book as our primary data source, that is, written discourse as a way to gain access to psychological processes (Tsoukas, 2009a). As a source of ‘mute evidence’ (Hodder, 1998: 110), this book seemed appropriate given the nature of the case and the firsthand and singular experience of Vann Nath, ‘Pol Pot’s portrait painter who captured the pain of a nation’ (Johnston, 2011: 5).

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1A sociomaterial perspective is one that considers that people’s actions are necessarily embedded within material as well as social processes and structures.

2The case enrolled us as much as the other way around (Bailey, 1994).
Studies with small-N, particularly with N = 1, are not uncommon (Dukes, 1965; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014). Single-subject studies ‘simply reflect a limited opportunity to observe’ (Dukes, 1965: 77). They open space for developing thick descriptions of selected phenomena, and reveal ‘generic processes operating in a microcosm. Although they are not representative samples of broader populations, they nonetheless are reflections of larger phenomena’ (Tsoukas, 2009b: 294). These studies can then be seen as opportunities to explore epistemologies of the particular (Buchanan, 1999) that may be especially valuable when the process of interest is not ripe for approaches aimed towards generalization. This is the case of our study, which focuses on a theoretical blind spot (Sanchez-Burks and Huy, 2009), the interplay of three sensemaking processes. In this section, we describe the steps we followed methodologically.

Step 1: Making sense of the case

It is not appropriate, for this study, to speak about the selection of the case. In fact, the case revealed itself to the authors. Years ago, two of us visited the Tuol Sleng memorial museum (formerly S-21, the secret prison) in Phnom Penh. After the visit, we initiated our study of the case and the political circumstances that made it possible, a research process that has lasted for several years now and that has included subsequent visits to Cambodia (including to Choeung Ek, a killing field associated to S-21) by members of the research team.

The secret prison of the Pol Pot regime, S-21, attracted our scholarly attention as organization theorists as an extreme total institution (see ‘the security of regulation’ in Figure 1). The site constitutes an example of the brutal inhumanity of genocide. Moreover, the portrait photos there confronted us with the faces of the real people behind the numbers (1.7 million people, or 21% of the country’s population died, UN figure, see Figure 2), a powerful stimulus for action (Slovic, 2007), in this case for study and research. Not long before our visit to the site, Clegg (2006) alerted the organization studies community to the need to study genocide as organizing, a possibility that has been fundamentally ignored by our community with a few remarkable exceptions (e.g., Stokes and Gabriel, 2010). In the process of researching the organization of genocide, one of the authors read Vann Nath’s book about his experiences as a Khmer Rouge prisoner, including his year in prison (see timeline of events in Appendix 1). This is a core reading for students of Kampuchea and should be of interest to organization theorists concerned with the analysis of total institutions, given the fact that only seven people survived S-21.

The case we address here offers several possibilities worthy of investigation from a sensemaking perspective. First, sensemaking was actively blocked by Ángkar, ‘The Organization’, the socio-political-military apparatus of the DK regime. In the regime of Democratic Kampuchea (1975–1979), secrecy was the rule. The massive purges against the stigmatized ‘new people,’ the class enemies of the workers and peasants, justified such secrecy. Among the most secret parts of this reclusive regime were S-21 in the Tuol Sleng neighborhood of the

Figure 1 ‘The security of regulation’, courtyard of the Tuol Sleng genocide museum, Phnom Penh, Cambodia
Source: Authors

Figure 2 Tuol Sleng Prisoners
Source: http://www.tuolsleng.com/

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capital city, Phnom Penh, and the associated Choeung Ek killing field (see Figure 3), where many who were purged would end their days. S-21 was the central prison of the regime and its extermination center. Those who entered it found themselves in a ‘state of exception’ (Cunha et al., 2012) and were condemned to be executed. Chandler (2000) describes the nature of the site in detail.

Step 2: Gaining familiarity with our data source

After an initial careful reading of the text to acquire a fine-grained familiarity with the case (the practice that Strauss and Corbin, 1990, label microanalysis), we coded the text on the basis of sensemaking theories. All the contents of the 118 pages of the book were coded looking for clues on the sensemaking process. For example, considering that sensemaking is the search for answers to the question ‘What’s the story?’, we looked at passages where words such as ‘What?’ and ‘Why?’ appeared, as well as to passages that represented depictions of confusion or attempts to gain clarity. The abundance of these ‘sensemaking markers’ was actually the reason why we decided in the first place to explore this narrative as a retrospective report of sensemaking.

Step 3: Identifying touchstones

We next reorganized the original narrative around key touchstones that served as critical sensemaking events (Table 1). Following Dutton et al. (2006), we define touchstones as the story events that critically contribute to the explanation of the process under analysis. These touchstones represent vivid episodes that explain Vann Nath’s experience in S-21. They are mostly deviations from routine that required an interpretive effort. The process of analysis was conducted in a sequence of steps. First, the text was read openly, without any coding. Second, a new reading was conducted with two main concerns: first, a chronology of the events was drawn in order to articulate the case with the surrounding historical events; and second, every passage with a sensemaking component was marked. We established that potential sensemaking passages were those that involved some degree of self-focus, self-reflection and self-awareness, rather than a more narrative description of external events. This led to the categorization of sensemaking touchstones, which were then used to reconstruct the case from a sensemaking perspective, as we describe in the next step.

Some touchstones are eminently visceral (e.g., hunger), others emotional (e.g., fear), while others are cognitive (e.g., information search and processing). Such distinctions (body vs. affect vs. cognition) introduce artificial boundaries between mutually related dimensions of complex, intertwined processes. In fact, ‘emotions trigger changes in cognition, physiology, and action’ (Lerner and Keltner, 2001: 146). Feelings and attitudes are based on concrete bodily and material experience (Bohner and Dickel, 2011; Cunha et al., 2014). Emotions initiate changes in bodily processes (Fineman, 1996), and a neurocircuitry of fear connects the bodily, emotional and cognitive routes (Kirsch et al., 2005).

Conventionally, cognitive sensemaking refers to mental processes activated to interpret an event; emotional sensemaking refers to the feelings resulting from reactions to events, objects or circumstances; bodily sensemaking refers to physiological processes involved and participating in sensemaking, although these are all interdependent rather than conceptually pristine and separate. In the case narrative presented below, we describe how the consideration of touchstones and their relationships contribute to theory elaboration with the involvement of the different processes participating in sensemaking.

Step 4: Using touchstones to reconstruct the narrative

Next we used the touchstones to reconstruct the narrative in such a way as to reanalyze the sensemaking experience without considering the narrative parts not directly articulated with our focal topic. We concentrated on the raw materials of the sensemaking process that, in turn, permitted the exploration of the experience of sensemaking.
## Table 1: Critical Touchstone Events and Their Theoretical Significance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Touchstone #</th>
<th>Key event</th>
<th>Evidence and theoretical significance</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Cosmological process</td>
<td>'Why do they kill people like animals?' (p. 6) 'I don’t quite understand' (p. 7) 'Killing doctors? This made no sense' (p. 8) → Theoretical significance: Confronted with a cosmological process, Vann Nath refuses interpretation. Sensemaking is impossible.</td>
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<td>2 Denial</td>
<td>'Don’t believe such no sense' (p. 11) → Theoretical significance: The impossibility of interpretation leads to denial. No sense can be made.</td>
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<td>3 Acceptance</td>
<td>'I realized that the chaos had come' (p. 13) 'The streets were full of chaos and anarchy' (p. 13) → Theoretical significance: Chaos persists. Denial is meaningless. Sensemaking is necessary.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4 Emptiness</td>
<td>'I had no energy left in my body' (p. 14) 'A soulless man' (p. 15) 'Finally I could not think what else to do so I pushed ahead, following the crowds of people to the west. The black-uniformed soldiers continued firing into the air to threaten everyone to move along' (p. 14) → Theoretical significance: Lack of viable interpretations depletes volition and de-animate. The body as participant in sensemaking processes.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5 Hope</td>
<td>'Luckily, I met a former neighbor who said he had seen my wife at the provincial hospital on the day Battambang was evacuated. My wife had also asked about me but no one knew where I was then, he said. That was all he knew. After hearing this news, I felt re-energized, more hopeful than I had in days' (p. 16) → Theoretical significance: Hope reenergizes.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6 Vanishing bodies</td>
<td>'About 300 families with 1,500 to 2,000 people, including children and adults, lived in Cooperative Number Five. The year before there had hardly been any places to sit during the meetings because so many people were there. Since then, people have been disappearing secretly and steadily' (p. 23) → Theoretical significance: Disappearing bodies as evidence of danger.</td>
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<td>7 Detention</td>
<td>'What’s happening to me?' (p. 26) 'The day that I’d imagined and feared had finally come. Thousands of questions were spinning in my head' (p. 27) 'I stood like a statue. My body was as light as cotton' (p. 26) '(. . .) I lay down, resting my arm across my forehead feeling no hope at all. I thought about the day that they would take me away to kill me'. He feels animalized: 'I allowed them to tie me like a pig' (p. 26). → Theoretical significance: Detention produces effects over the mind (thousands of questions spinning in the head) and the body (light as cotton).</td>
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<tr>
<td>8 Hopelessness</td>
<td>'(. . .) I lay down, resting my arm across my forehead feeling no hope at all. I thought about the day that they would take me away to kill me' (p. 29) → Theoretical significance: Hopelessness and prospective sensemaking coexist.</td>
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<tr>
<td>9 Confusion</td>
<td>'What was the problem that caused them to arrest you?', the interrogator asked. I said I didn’t know’ (p. 32) → Theoretical significance: Vann Nath is confronted with active sensebreaking.</td>
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<tr>
<td>10 Fear and terror as chronic states</td>
<td>'If they took me out to kill me I would be afraid only once. But now I was afraid all the time’ (p. 34) 'I was very frightened to hear their voices as well as the sounds of them beating someone at the back of the line' (p. 39) → Theoretical significance: Terror and deep emotionality dominate. Incomprehension and the impossibility of sensemaking feed panic.</td>
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<td>11 Sensemaking meets sensebreaking</td>
<td>'I was walking like a toddler because it was so dark, listening carefully to all the sounds around me’ (p. 39) 'What were they going to do? ’ (p. 40) 'Everything depends on God (. . .) This is our last hope’ (p. 40) 'It was very difficult for me to stand and to walk – weak and blindfolded’ (p. 41) → Theoretical significance: Prisoners were blindfolded, their senses limited. Attention to every sound aimed to feed sensemaking.</td>
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<td>12 Confusion and helplessness</td>
<td>'Until right now, I don’t know what happened’ (p. 42) 'I fell asleep without knowing anything’ (p. 42) 'What will happen to me in the future’ (p. 43) → Theoretical significance: In a sensebreaking world, confusion and fear prevail.</td>
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<td>13 Humiliation and animalization</td>
<td>'Twenty of the 32 prisoners were also naked’ (p. 42) 'The gecko was luckier than me’ (p. 44) → Theoretical significance: Prisoners were humiliated as part of the creation of a no-sense world.</td>
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<td>14 Hunger</td>
<td>'I only knew one thing clear: hunger’ (p. 46) → Theoretical significance:</td>
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<tr>
<th>Touchstone #</th>
<th>Key event</th>
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</table>
| 15 | Despair | • ‘We have no hope now’ (p. 47)  
• ‘I couldn’t feel anything at all because I was 80 percent dead’ (p. 48)  
→ Theoretical significance: Emotional and bodily features feature high on Vann Nath’s narrative. Emotional insensitivity is blocked by the lack of hope. Hopelessness neutralizes both cognitive and emotional sensemaking attempts. |
| 16 | Sensegiving | • ‘Put yourself lower than the masses. The important thing is to be gently humble. Can you do that?’ (p. 50)  
→ Theoretical significance: The question, from Duch, indicates that there is one correct approach. Sensegiving is used in combination with sensebreaking. |
| 17 | Extreme deprivation and no-sensemaking | • ‘I’d stopped thinking about anything. Maybe they were going to kill me, maybe not. It didn’t matter. Wisdom and spirit had flown away from me. All I thought was about my stomach. If they gave me food, that was enough. Food was the priority’ (p. 55)  
• ‘Don’t think too much about the future, just think of what is in front of you, I told myself’ (p. 52)  
→ Theoretical significance: Systematic deprivation and extreme contexts may neutralize the cognitive paths of sensemaking. When it happens, sensemaking assumes an alternative, less cerebral circuitry. |
| 18 | Sensegiving | • ‘This is the opportunity for you to show your faithfulness and make the Party trust you. Remove the unnecessary feeling. Sharpen your thoughts and focus on the core duty that the party has entrusted you to do’ (p. 54)  
• Theoretical significance: Sensebreaking efforts from the Ângkar’s representatives were occasionally punctuated by sensegiving messages. |
| 19 | Panic | • ‘I waited for their reaction, feeling shaky and chaotic’ (p. 64)  
• Theoretical significance: The mixed efforts of sensebreaking and sensegiving did not offer the comfort of plausibility associated with sensemaking. |
| 20 | Missing friend | • ‘I was not sure what to think’ (p. 67)  
• Theoretical significance: In the strange world of S-21, events were difficult to interpret. The disappearance of a friend was a threatening event, but no final conclusions could be made. |
| 21 | Change | • ‘That’s the end now!’  
• ‘The situation outside must have changed’ (p. 77)  
• ‘I felt very confused’ (p. 79)  
→ Theoretical significance: Changes were sources of major confusion, given very restrictive access to information. |
| 22 | Sensemaking | • ‘Brother, you must be very tired these days. I see you all day working so hard, both day and night?’ (p. 79)  
• ‘Why are they detaining so many people?’ (p. 79)  
→ Theoretical significance: making sense is a social process. Vann Nath tries to make contact to find interpretive clues. Social contact, even minimal, helps sensemaking to take place. |
| 23 | Sensemaking | • ‘All of us felt uneasy, not understanding what was going on.’ (p. 80)  
• ‘Nephew, don’t think too much’ (p. 80)  
• ‘Oh God! What are they doing this for?’ (p. 84)  
→ Theoretical significance: When sensemaking is difficult it is blocked cognitively and corporeal forms predominate. |
| 24 | Sensemaking | • ‘If the prison was shut down, what would become of us?’ (p. 84)  
→ Theoretical significance: The closure of the prison poses new needs in terms of sensemaking. |
| 25 | Panic | • ‘I tried to hold in my feelings so as not to have too much panic’ (p. 89)  
• ‘I followed them slowly but suddenly there was a stampede’ (p. 91)  
→ Theoretical significance: The regime falls and the prisoners escape. But panic is still present. |
| 26 | Fear and hunger | • ‘Frightened and exhausted from having nothing in my stomach, I laid down by Tuon and fell asleep’ (p. 90)  
→ Theoretical significance: In confusing times, emotions play a major role. |
| 27 | Reconnecting | • ‘We now formed a group of four’ (p. 93)  
→ Theoretical significance: Sensemaking as a social process, mainly (Maitlis, 2005). To make sense, work as a team and collectively try to understand what is going on. |
| 28 | Action | • ‘As soon as I started walking on the highway we felt hopeful that we would survive and might be able to enjoy freedom again’ (p. 94)  
→ Theoretical significance: Action and a sense of control are critical to liberate the cognitive dimension of sensemaking. |

*Note: All page numbers refer to Nath (1998).*
Step 5: Integrating the findings with sensemaking theory

In parallel with the above phases, we drew on the relevant literatures to articulate the variations highlighted by comparing the case with extant organizational sensemaking research (Huy, 2002; Whiteman and Cooper, 2011). The wider literature search helped refine theorizing, challenge interpretations in light of existing evidence, and clarified the lines of divergence introduced by our new data and interpretations. We followed Glaser and Strauss’s (1990, p.44) advice to step back periodically and ask ourselves ‘What is going on here?’ Such a reflective process is much needed in order for an emerging theory to materialize, namely, to be built from the ground.

The constant comparison between our case and the literature progressed iteratively. We started our exploration with a special interest in the interplay of cognition and emotion (e.g. Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010). In the process we realized that it would be necessary to explore the role of deep unconscious emotions, which led us to explore the literature on gut feelings (Gigerenzer, 2007). This literature led to the consideration of the role of the body as an important participant in sensemaking. The result, as we discuss, is that sometimes the body assumes the lead role in the process. In the next section, we present the results from the application of the previous process. We start with a re-composition of Vann Nath’s narrative at S-21.

Results

Recomposing Vann Nath’s narrative

Vann Nath’s narrative can be divided into three major parts. In the first part, as the war breaks out, cognitive sensemaking predominates, but with a significant emotional component. The initial stage marks the beginning of the new regime, with abundant sensemaking. The initial stage marks the beginning of the new regime, with abundant sensemaking predominates. Vann Nath’s experience during the regime as a prisoner at S-21 needs to be contextualized in the civil war that led the Khmer Rouge, initially an extremist communist guerrilla force, to power in Cambodia. Vann Nath was a commercial painter of cinema placards, private portraits and billboards depicting the King in the city of Battambang, when the war erupted in this part of the country. It was in this extremely violent context that he first realized that war brought a vu jade process (Weick, 1993), a cosmological explosion that destroyed the normal ways of understanding. He realized, as many other Cambodians did, that the new regime was imposing a social and political order never seen before – a new order based upon the massive purging of class enemies, including educated people. Consider the two questions he asks himself (touchstone # 1): ‘Why do they kill people like animals?’ and ‘Killing doctors? This made no sense’.

These questions elicited as an answer that ‘I don’t quite understand.’ From the very beginning, the revolution presented itself as a mysterious and lethal event. As the revolutionary process unfolded, denial was replaced by acceptance: the chaos has come, one has to live with it. Chaos meant, among other things, massive migrations from the cities to the rural areas as urban space was emptied by the new regime. With the cities viewed as places of bourgeois decadence and vice, emptying them was part of an ideological agenda to eradicate bourgeois influences. The Khmer Rouge revolution envisioned the creation of a new state, pure and pastoral, with no traces of the previous bourgeoisie’s corrupted habits (Kiernan, 2008). What for the leadership was ideological work, was for the urban folk disestablished and displaced, a nightmarish journey to Hell (Affonço, 2007). Here is how Vann Nath describes his participation in these forced marches (touchstone # 4):

Finally I could not think what else to do so I pushed ahead, following the crowds of people to the west. The black-uniformed soldiers continued firing into the air to threaten everyone to move along.

In the midst of chaos and personal feelings of emptiness, some events contained the potential to conserve hope. As the crowds moved, information about family members was precious. Equally critical for survival was the sharing of food. In the case of Vann Nath, the family reunited in a rural village and life regained a sense of normality. But such village life normality proved itself short-lived and illusory. People started to disappear without reason, ‘secretly and steadily’ (touchstone #7). In this first part of the narrative, there are very intense levels of cognitive, emotional and bodily sensemaking. In the aftermath of Khmer Rouge victory, guided
sensemaking prevails and with it the unrest of revolutionary periods. But this sensemaking pattern was about to change for Vann Nath.

Part 2: Imprisonment and the predominance of restricted sensemaking. In Vann Nath’s narrative, bodies disappearing from the village (touchstone # 7) become a sign of a predictable future. In a moment of peripety, Vann Nath is arrested. The episode triggers a number of reactions highlighted in touchstone #7: cognitive attempts at sensemaking (‘What’s happening to me? . . . Thousands of questions were spinning in my head’), combined with bodily reactions (‘I stood like a statue. My body was as light as cotton’). This reflection reveals the interplay of the bodily (a body as light as cotton), the cognitive (what is happening), and the emotional (a state of confusion). The situation then leads to hopelessness, a recurring theme in Vann Nath’s experience (touchstone # 7):

I lay down, resting my arm across my forehead feeling no hope at all. I thought about the day that they would take me away to kill me. He feels animalized: I allowed them to tie me like a pig (Nath, 1998: 26).

Being made to feel similar to an animal is consistent with the dehumanization tactics of the victors who represented the opposition (‘new people’, in their revolutionary jargon) as vermin (Hinton, 2005). Hopelessness was reinforced by the Ângkar management of sensebreaking. One was never sure what it was one was specifically guilty of, although all the institutional sensemaking led one to the inescapable conclusion that one was guilty of something terrible. Otherwise, why would one be there in such appalling straits? The opacity of the rules precluded any possibility of rational understanding. People were suspect because they were imprisoned because they were suspect. ‘ “What was the problem that caused them to arrest you?” the interrogator asked. I said I didn’t know’ (touchstone # 9).

From then on, Vann Nath’s world is full of terror: ‘If they took me out to kill me I would be afraid only once. But now I was afraid all the time’ (touchstone # 10). The sounds of suffering were constantly present, reminding him of his fate as a ‘microbe’ in the total institutional space of S-21. Incomprehensible situations, as discussed by sensemaking scholars (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010; Weick, 1993), lead to feelings of panic: ‘I was very frightened to hear their voices as well as the sounds of them beating someone at the back of the line’ (touchstone # 10). When entering S-21, Vann Nath became embedded in a space of silence and terror, a place in which communication was forbidden and sensemaking was a dangerous activity – even for guards. As a former guard observed in another source (Meng-Try and Sorya, 2001: 23):

I was very afraid of everyone, especially Sok [his chief]. I did not trust anyone. Everyone tried their best to search for one another’s faults. I was working and living in fear and horror. I kept trying to work harder and harder, and kept my mouth shut all the time.

Prisoners were blindfolded, movement required permission, and communication was forbidden. In this scenario, cognitive functions lost potency as sensemaking devices and the physiological processes of life itself gained relevance. Vann Nath reminds himself repeatedly that, to survive, he must stop thinking (touchstones # 17 and 23, for example). In the extremely restrictive environment of S-21, biological needs predominated and sensemaking was directed to the maintenance of hope: ‘Everything depends on God . . . This is our last hope’ (touchstone # 10). Inside S-21, after being given the task of portrait painting, Vann Nath became the target of some sensegiving efforts (touchstones #16 and #18) and tried to obtain information for sensemaking purposes in a very oblique way, by asking questions of the guards (touchstone # 22).

Most references, however, are to emotional, and especially bodily, sensemaking. Sensemaking at this stage has become mainly non-cognitive. Throughout this part, sensemaking becomes fundamentally restricted in type (Maitlis, 2005), high in control, low in animation, aided by the darkness of S-21, implying a fundamental change in sensemaking patterns. In this environment, critical processes for sensemaking (social interaction, sense of control, open information and communication) were obliterated and the dynamics of sensemaking transformed. The body became perversely present as a sign of life despite indignities and abuse: S-21 ‘processed’ bodies, turning the living into the dead but, before dispatching them, treating them as humiliated and animalized humans, transforming them into lowly creatures – or as ‘wood’, as Duch, the chief, described them (Panh and Bataille, 2013).

Part 3: Escape and the predominance of minimal sensemaking. When the political and military situation changed, the daily life of the prison was altered. With the Vietnamese invasion, a new pattern emerged and unfolded with special clarity once S-21 was abandoned. Prisoners realized that something was happening, but they did not know what. The restricted sensemaking of the previous phase gave way to minimal sensemaking with low control and low animation as the harshness of life in the camp became partly loosened. When this happened, cognitive sensemaking reacquired importance. At this stage, social interactions became possible, albeit minimal and careful, and the ways of making sense changed significantly. A mix of emotion and cognition prevails as the survivors struggled to make sense of a situation whose particulars they did not know:
'Brother, why is the gunfire so loud' (Nath, 1998: 88); 'I tried to hold my feelings so as not to have too much panic' (Nath, 1998: 89).

At this stage, physiology still mattered ('frightened and exhausted from having nothing in my stomach;' touchstone # 26), but the narrative changed. After Vann Nath escaped, a new and supportive social context was created where interaction was possible: 'we’d now formed a group of four' (touchstone # 27). Action and movement were also possible, even in chaotic times ('I followed them slowly but suddenly there was a stampede;' touchstone # 25). Finally, hope returned: 'As soon as we started walking on the highway, we felt hopeful that we would survive and might be able to enjoy freedom again' (touchstone # 28). At this stage, life regained a sense of relative normality and sensemaking became less evidently a bodily process. Minimal sensemaking appeared to dominate at this stage: low animation, low control (Maitlis, 2005). Cognitive sensemaking resurfaced and bodily sensemaking progressively returned to the background.

Discussion

The study uncovers three major possibilities amenable to further testing. First, under conditions of extreme uncertainty and physical danger, sensemaking may be more of a bodily and emotional process than higher order cognitive work. When the search for plausibility results in a proliferation of misunderstandings, sensemaking may become less an exercise in cognition and more a bodily experience (Munro and Huber, 2012). Second, when organizational contexts involve extreme physical danger, people may combine two coping strategies. On the one hand, they switch off cognitive senses, that is, they stop trying to make sense intellectually by focusing on the most basic instincts, much as Maslow (1943) would have predicted. On the other hand, they scan their environment in search of minimal clues to keep hope alive. Bodily information plays a major role in this process. Sensemaking contributes to conserving hope (Maitlis, 2005). Third, people try to maintain social ties, even if minimal, as these are critical for sensemaking. What we have found is that the composition of sensemaking types and the functions performed by sensemaking type change over time, as we explain next.

The composition of sensemaking processes

We found that the combination of cognitive, emotional and bodily sensemaking activity differs between varieties of sensemaking. In the first part of the narrative, the role of embodied sensemaking is quite prevalent, whereas that of cognitive sensemaking recedes. In minimal sensemaking, cognition gains relevance and embodied sensemaking becomes less prevalent. Emotions play a pivotal role in all types, featuring significantly, albeit in a less intense manner.

One important finding resulting from our analysis refers to the fact that different sensemaking processes, involving cognition, emotion and bodily aspects, perform different functions and lead to distinct outcomes. Sensemaking is both retrospective and prospective (Humphreys et al., 2012: 43). From the case of Vann Nath, we conclude that: (1) guided sensemaking was important in the first part of the narrative where ideological work was significant and actively managed in the aftermath of victory; (2) restricted sensemaking was used to keep hope alive in the extreme environment of S-21; and (3) minimal sensemaking served to counter paralysis (Maitlis, 2005; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014) after the confusion created by the fall of the regime.

As Maitlis found, different processes served different functions. For example, restricted and minimal sensemaking provided weak foundations for action but performed relevant functions and lead to different outcomes (e.g., minimal sensemaking frees individuals 'from their paralysis by allowing single compromise actions that [provide] temporary relief'; Maitlis, 2005: 43). Here, we confirmed this interpretation in a setting markedly different from the symphony orchestras of her study. Restricted and minimal forms of sensemaking provide temporary relief (Maitlis, 2005). Even brief and fleeting sensemaking opportunities may play critical roles in gaining a favorable comprehension of the situation, which in turn may help to counter growing panic and to help coping with generalized fear (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010). Our interpretation suggests that when cognitive capacities are restricted or not operational, the body intervenes, with bodily processes regulating behavior, sustaining hope, and conserving a disposition to act. The different sensemaking types thus complement each other: bodily processes arise more promptly because of the extreme conditions but that does not mean that bodily processes are not activated in non-extreme conditions. It is simply that, in a civilized society, cognitive sensemaking processes are considered to be culturally and socially desirable (Elias, 1994).

S-21 has been described as an anteroom for death (Chandler, 2000). Those entering the place were condemned. Vicarious learning was used by Vann Nath to try to understand his probable future. The lack of hope was mentioned regularly as anticipated destiny: 'That’s the end now!' (touchstone # 21), or 'We have no hope now' (touchstone # 15). Restricted sensemaking, bodily led, offered this temporary relief to the state of fear, a critical element in extreme environments (Frankl, 2004).

The above suggests that sensemaking is a complex process involving cognition, emotion, and the body.
Ben-Shalon et al. (2012: 220) also argued that sensemaking during combat ‘is not restricted to seeking information, analyzing it, and deciding on a suitable course of action. The cognitive process is part of a more complex experience involving intense emotions (often fear but also joy), a physical dimension (fatigue, stress, and even empowerment) and a spiritual dimension (fear of annihilation and despair but also a sense of purpose and revelation)’. In extreme circumstances, people may make sense by curtailing higher order cognitive work and assume sensemaking as a bodily (and emotional) process. Low order cognitions, gut feelings and emotional information processing become preferential sources of sensemaking. This means that sensemakers may give differential attention to the information coming from different sources.

Sensemaking sequences

The fact that researchers are now unbundling the heterogeneity of sensemaking forms (Maitlis, 2005) offers significant research opportunities for studying sequences of sensemaking as this process unfolds over time, with its process complexity. Sequences have been under-researched as organizational topics, but they probably deserve more attention than they have attracted (Bingham and Davis, 2012). For example, we observed in the case of Vann Nath that sensemaking patterns qualitatively changed in response to alterations in contextual possibilities (see Table 2 for a graphical depiction). Therefore, it seems important to consider not only the types of processes engaged in sensemaking but also the ways they relate in space and time. Guided, restricted and minimal sensemaking occurred sequentially in response to different conditions and triggered the use of different sensemaking routes (cognitive, bodily, emotional). The study of sensemaking dynamics offers major opportunities to theory elaboration. As Shiv and Fodorikhin (2002: 346) explained, ‘lower order’ automatic responses can be expected in contexts that pose threats to individuals, overwhelming them: ‘it is only when processing resources become available that higher order processes are likely to ensue’. We grasped the role of sequences with our case.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
<th>Examples of sensemaking types in Vann Nath’s life during DK regime</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Part 1:</strong> The war breaks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of sensemaking</td>
<td>Guided</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>· Sensegiving by the Revolutionary Organization that seized power, abounded.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>· Sensemaking attempts by Vann Nath are of two main types: (1) attempts to understand chaos and (2) processing revolutionary messages from the organization.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illustrations (animation)</td>
<td>High animation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘We have heard only ‘kill! kill!’ so far’ (p. 10). The revolutionary message was actively implemented by purging class enemies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illustrations (control)</td>
<td>High control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘Stayed quietly at home trying to get some news on the radio. But the programs were nothing but revolutionary music and announcements for government soldiers to lay down their weapons and surrender’ (p. 11)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note: All page numbers refer to Nath (1998).
language, attempts to turn the world into a ‘situation that is comprehended explicitly in words and that serves as a springboard into action’ (Weick et al., 2005: 409). Through the analysis of the epistemology of a particular case, that of S-21 inmate Vann Nath, we highlighted the importance of emotions and bodily information as fundamental contributors to sensemaking as a dynamic process.

Whereas Weick (1993) postulated that, in the absence of social roles and relationships, sensemaking might be impossible, we suggest that it is still possible but occurs in different ways. In line with recent work (e.g., Michel, 2011; Cunliffe and Coupland, 2012) we departed from sensemaking as disembodied and disembodied to arrive at a representation of the process as embedded and embodied. In other words, we accept that researchers have tended to ‘underappreciate the influence of visceral factors and to exaggerate the importance of higher-level cognitive processes’ (Loewenstein, 2000: 427) in sensemaking efforts, and problematized the privileged role assigned to cognitive sensemaking by investigating a context of organizational sensebreaking. We thus respond to Maitlis and Sonenshein’s (2010: 574) call for the ‘explicit integration of the main bodies of sensemaking research, which heretofore have developed largely independently of each other.’

One needs to explore how bodily (and emotional) processes actually facilitate sensemaking. Sensemaking involves the whole person, not only their brain. When one finds oneself a stranger in a strange, desperate and dangerous place, cognition is threatened and the body may take the lead and substitute for the confused mind, leading one to focus on survival and the protection of hope. In extreme life-threatening situations, one’s being seems to turn to basic processes that will speed up and maximize life-protecting mechanisms. One cannot think too much about options, when confronted by clear and present, immediate and unambiguous danger.

As Michel (2011: 331) observes, ‘organizational research on the body is rare.’ We concur: more research is necessary to explore processes that have hitherto predominantly been seen as cognitive. It has long been understood in anthropology that the body is shaped culturally and socially (Turner, 1991); likewise, going back at least to Taylor (1911), there is recognition that organization members’ bodies can be made an object of political economy (Clegg et al., 2006). One would expect that organizational effects registered on the body would inform sensemaking processes in a dialectic that is far from being fully explored. In particular, we join the literature signaling the importance of embodied sensemaking and of tempering the ‘excessive intellectualism’ (Weick, 2012: 146) of the literature that represents sensemaking as only cerebral. Sensemaking is certainly cerebral and cool, but it can also be embodied and hot. Understanding how sensemaking processes contribute to the management of bodily employees offers a promising research prospectus: every employee is a bodily creature and the effects of organizations on bodies are significant (Michel, 2011), ranging from occupational health and safety issues to questions of bio-survival (see, for example, Lucas et al., 2013, on how bodies, minds and emotions are controlled in a ‘total institutional’ structure).

Limitations and boundary conditions

The individual experience of Vann Nath is so radical and extreme that it limits the transferability of the findings. Statistical generalization is potentially an issue when a small-N is used (Tsoukas, 2009b), especially so in an extreme context but, as we discussed before, the aim of the study was to articulate an epistemology of the particular (Buchanan, 1999), that is, to extrapolate from exceptional circumstances to normal organizations (Barboza, 2010; The Economist, 2012; Lucas et al., 2013).

The natural way of approaching Vann Nath was via his book, a methodological source that has obvious advantages and disadvantages. The book portrays a retrospective account of an extremely painful experience. It is a reconstitution of the past and thus is not immune to the problems of retrospective accounts of self-report introspective data (Huy, 1999; Loewenstein, 1996), namely embellishments, reconstitutions, or ex post rationalizations built from memory of facts that may be difficult to retrieve, for comprehensible reasons. Some passages of the book appear to aim to situate the reader in context than to reflect a real situation. They combine narrations of personal experiences with implausible dialogues that aim to situate the reader in the regime’s ideological practice. The latter seem to have been ‘planted’ with the goal of informing the reader about the regime rather than to reflect an actual interaction. Consequently, the book as a source of data has limitations, but it should be noted that the information it offers is consistent with other sources on both S-21 and the Kampuchean regime (e.g., Chandler, 2000; Kiernan, 2008).

Implications for research and practice

Several authors in different domains, including organizational behavior and organization studies, are calling for more research on the effects of how bodily states influence attitudes and cognition (Bohmer and Dickel, 2011; Cunliffe, 2012) and how organizations influence bodily states (Ball, 2005). We suggested that there are advantages in extending research to fields that have traditionally been viewed as cognitive. Sensemaking is not only a cognitive but also an emotional and a bodily process, and in extreme cases, the
body leaves the background to which it is normally consigned in organizational studies to gain a surprising prominence in supposedly cold and cognitive processes of sensemaking.

Given the fact that the phenomenon of interest is ‘transparently observable’ (Zott and Huy, 2007: 76), in this case we invite researchers to look for its manifestations in settings where it is less transparent. We offer, in any event, an illustration of the involvement of bodily and emotional processes in sensemaking. It is hard to imagine that humans behave as cold processors of information in high pressure situations such as: (1) crises and organizational turmoil (Osterman, 2000); (2) situations marked by risk and intense competition; and (3) ‘normal’ although ‘total’ organizations where employees’ movements are restricted, ‘body searches are not uncommon,’ and ‘all employees, whether they are going to the bathroom or going to eat, must go through a tight security screening, including swiping electronic staff cards or scanning fingerprints on recognition scanners’ (Lucas et al., 2013: 100). Other organizational contexts may trigger subtler sensemaking processes but it may be relevant further to explore the role of gut feelings, embodied and encoded cognitions, and other bodily-informed concepts in these processes in less extreme settings.

Our work also offers relevant implications for practice. We showed that sensemaking is critically downgraded by barriers to information flows, lack of social interaction, and a sense of alienation in one’s organization. Fortunately, members of even the most toxic organizations have sensemaking possibilities that were impossible in S-21; in such organizations, hostile environments for sensemaking constitute a limit on the purely intellectual processing of a toxic environment. Studying the way different sensemaking processes are activated by different leadership actions offers interesting opportunities to articulate sensemaking processes with relevant organizational events (e.g., leadership silence during change processes, anxiety management during restructuring, leaders as authoritarian sensegivers, cultures of fear as sociomaterial guides for thinking and action). Research shows that induced silence (Henriksen and Dayton, 2006), feelings of powerlessness and lack of control (Morrison and Milliken, 2000; Drori and Ellis, 2011), and violence in diverse forms and shapes (Schat et al., 2006; Kerr and Robinson, 2012) are not uncommon facts of organizational life. In fact, as Kelloway et al. (2006: 3) propose, ‘for many employees, work is fundamentally about violence,’ the imposition of alien regimes of discipline, time, deportment and sentiment on ostensibly free spirits and bodies.

Organizations, in summary, often confront their members, purposefully or accidentally, with experiences of sensebreaking. These experiences constrain ‘higher order’ cognitions and in turn may trigger ‘lower order’ cognitions (Shiv and Fedorikhin, 2002) and other forms of physiological knowledge that may be independent of slower language-based appraisals (Lang et al., 2000). To know more about sensemaking and its dynamics, we need to explore how people respond to those processes that destroy their sense of what is going on around them. We know less than we probably should about this other side of sensemaking.

Acknowledgements

We write this paper with respect for the memory of Vann Nath and reproduce his words in his book: ‘In memory of all the people who suffered and died as a result of the Khmer Rouge regime. May they be reborn into a more peaceful word’ (Nath, 1998: iv). We are also grateful to Teresa Garcia-Marques for her recommendations. Miguel Cunha gratefully acknowledges support from Nova Forum.

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Tsoukas, H., 2009b, “Craving for generality and small-N studies: A Wittgensteinian approach towards the epistemology of the particular in organization and management studies”. In D. Buchanan and A. Bryman (Eds.), The Sage handbook of


Appendix 1

Table A1 One Year at S-21: Timeline of Critical Events (January 7, 1978–January 7, 1979)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cambodia events</th>
<th>Vann Nath’s biography</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1975, April 17: Khmer Rouge forces occupy Phnom Penh and Battambang.</td>
<td>1946: born in Battambang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Revolutionary Organization’ (Ângkar) assumes power.</td>
<td>1969: opens a small business, with partners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forced marches, initial purges against enemies of the regime.</td>
<td>1975, April 13, Khmer New Year: Battambang streets crowded with refugees from rural areas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976: ‘Rubber plantation worker’ Pol Pot announced as prime-minister</td>
<td>April 18: shops closed in downtown Battambang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security police opens security office S-21 in Tuol Sleng suburb of Phnom Penh</td>
<td>April 20: separation from his family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978: Major purges against class enemies</td>
<td>‘Two years since the Khmer Rouge took power’ (p. 21). Lives in the village of O Mony with his family.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978, December: Vietnamese launch major offensive against DK</td>
<td>1977, December 29: arrested</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979, January 7: Fall of Phnom Penh</td>
<td>1978, January 7: enters S-21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1978, ‘Month 1’: shackled and immobilized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1978, February 2 or 3: after a contact with Duch, is released from shackles and becomes a painter at the prison</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1978: ‘Days and months after’ (p. 66): a fellow prisoner working at the same site disappears</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1978, July 15: workmen allowed to rest for three days</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>1978, August to September: The prison quiets down (p. 83)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1978, September 30: Celebration of the Ângkar festival</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>December: only 10 or 20 prisoners shackled in the rooms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1979, January 7: gunfire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1979, January 7: escape from S-21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1979, February 3: joins Division 1 of the new Cambodian Army</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2011: dies in Phnom Penh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: All page numbers refer to Nath (1998).