Sensemaking of Military Leaders in Combat and Its Aftermath: A Phenomenological Inquiry

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This paper describes the sensemaking processes engaged in by leaders during close combat and its aftermath. The data were collected by interviewing ten commanders who took part in two different combat events. The phenomenological method revealed cognitive, emotional, and social processes, which are the focus of sensemaking in close combat. We also found that sensemaking was performed both during and after combat. In combat, commanders' sensemaking was focused on understanding the tactical problem, the typical micro-social processes of combat, and the emotional needs of their subordinates. After combat, sensemaking continued with framing professional decisions and knowledge, preserving unit cohesion and prestige, and mentoring subordinates. High-ranking officers had a broader sensemaking frame, which included political issues, while junior officers were focused on their immediate unit. We suggest that a broader framework of sensemaking may serve the leadership development of military leaders.

Leadership and Sensemaking

This study articulates and tests a framework of how military leaders engage in sensemaking both during combat and in its aftermath. Leadership is embedded within organizations and is affected by their main tasks, delegation of work and authority, organizational structure, and organizational culture (Kark, Karazi-Presler, and Tubi 2016). Scholars emphasize that military leadership differs from other forms of leadership because of the context within which it is embedded. Thus a premise

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of this article is that context influences the enactment and interpretation of leadership (Hannah, Uhl-Bien, and Avolio 2009). The military's unique organizational context is affected by the environments in which it operates as well as by its primal function of operating and tackling organized violence (Ben-Ari, Sher, and Vainer 2014). Confronting violence requires that leaders possess certain emotional and cognitive prerequisites that are useful in times of physical peril (Alvinius, Boström, and Larsson 2015). While research often focuses on how high-ranking military leaders function (Grint 2005), less is known about the sensemaking of the lower levels in close combat operations. This article thus asks, What are the sensemaking processes of commanders engaged in close combat?

Sensemaking is the activity that enables turning the ongoing complexity of the world into a situation that is comprehended explicitly in words and serves as a springboard for action (Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld 2005, 409; Weick 1995). Maitlis and Christianson define sensemaking as follows:

> a process, prompted by violated expectations, that involves attending and bracketing cues in the environment, creating intersubjective meaning through cycles of interpretation and action and thereby enacting a more ordered environment from which further cues can be drawn. (2014, 67)

This definition underscores three main components involved in the process of sensemaking: it is a dynamic process, it is a social process, and it is triggered by cues (surprising or confusing events, situations, etc.) that can be termed "triggering events." First, sensemaking is dynamic and is required in situations where meanings are ambiguous and/or outcomes uncertain—that is, where there is no fixed and single decision that ought to be achieved. In such situations, formal decision-making models often fail to describe the dynamics of the decision being made. Second, sensemaking has a social dimension, since it occurs in a socio-material context where the individual's thoughts, feelings, and social behaviors are of great significance. The cognitive endeavor is centered not only on facts but also on understanding social processes, and therefore sensemaking is influenced by the actual, imagined, or implied presence of others (Rouleau and Balogun 2011). Third, such "triggering events" initiate cycles of interpretations and actions occurring in a reciprocal manner and resulting in an active authoring of frameworks and meaning resulting in structures for action that include the meaning of a certain problem along with a general idea of how it should be

tackled or prioritized. These cycles have been termed "enactment"—the process within which the reciprocal influence between action and the environment takes place through sensemaking and which, in turn, changes the environment. Interpretation is constituted from cues, as present moments of experience, and from frames, as past moments of socialization, which Weick also defines as "preconceptions." The relationship emerging between cues and frames constructs a basic unit of meaning that results in an enacted environment that serves as another baseline for interpretation and action (Maitlis and Christianson 2014; Padan 2017).

Sensemaking in Combat

Sensemaking is perceived as a core leadership capability (Ancona 2011) and has been shown to be a meaningful and practical leadership tool (Padan 2017). The assumption that leaders are important mediators between "reality" and the organization's members is also mentioned in regard to military leaders engaging in combat. For example, Gal and Jones argue that the commander, as a military leader, "plays a central role in creating the individual's appraisal of a situation by acting as a lens [that influences the] interpretation of a situation. Like in a telescope, this 'lens' works . . . to amplify the perceived threat or to reduce it" (1995, 143).

Moreover, the way commanders give meaning to "reality" has both cognitive and emotional aspects. Commanders are required to produce a clearer picture of the situation for their subordinates. In so doing, they affect the perception of the cognitive status of combatants toward their physical status and their abilities to deal with the situation. That is, through the meaning commanders give the situation they are able to affect their subordinates, both in terms of how they can cope with the situation and in terms of their performance during combat. The current article adds another aspect (or component) by which military leaders influence their subordinates' "appraisal of situations": they influence the sensemaking processes that their subordinates ascribe to situations during and after combat. This process of influence is defined in the literature as the process of "sensegiving," defined as an "attempt to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others toward a preferred redefinition of organization 'reality'" (Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991, 442).

Combat is often examined in reference to various psychological, cognitive, and environmental stressors experienced during life-threatening events. Focusing on stress does not include additional information of

combat experiences and the actual way such experiences are perceived by combatants and leaders. The sensemaking approach allows an additional view of the active operation in combat, perhaps also in its broader aspect. In addition, the stress-focused studies draw conclusions from diverse events and by dwelling upon a distinct fight, as experienced by several participants. We contend that a thicker understanding is possible if we focus on a few case studies by analyzing several participants of different ranks.

Our phenomenological approach will also serve to develop an understanding of sensemaking along a broader time axis. Moreover, it may prove impossible to judge behavior in combat according to a protocol of procedures or a formal doctrine that is required to be followed (Matthews 2013, 55). A prior study revealed that sensemaking in combat is often far from prescription, as sensemaking is needed when things are not going well or according to a pre-fight scenario (Ben-Shalom, Klar, and Benbenisty 2012). In addition to the sensemaking process offered and described by Weick (2005), two other sensemaking-related constructs that help us examine how organizational leaders strategically shape the sensemaking of organizational members are "sensegiving" (e.g., Smerek 2010) and "sensebreaking." *Sensebreaking* is defined as "the destruction or breaking down of meaning" (Pratt 2000, 464). While the current study focuses on sensemaking processes, we will also discuss sensegiving or sensebreaking when either of these phenomena plays a role in the broader sensemaking process. Our assumption is that sensemaking performed during a fight and its aftermath has qualities that have not yet been thoroughly discussed in the literature. We identify these qualities by using a phenomenological approach. We contend that sensemaking is not limited to the here and now of the combat phenomenon or of its necessary drills. Sensemaking includes an assessment of qualities as emotional responses, along with the minute social processes of peers and subordinates during a fight. These human qualities are fundamental in the developing process of combat. Thus our phenomenological approach uncovers these factors and expands the phenomenon of sensemaking from immediate actions to also include the aftermath of combat.

The Current Study

The current study focuses on the experiences of military leaders in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) infantry branch. It draws on lessons from

tactical operations, typical of the IDF's missions in recent decades, that can be situated along the continuum between border protection and high-intensity conflicts. These two kinds of operations share the possibility of lethal kinetic violence, and all of our data refer to such actual fighting. Our contention is that the description of the sensemaking process as indicated by military leaders in tactical operations entails an understanding of the people, the process of combat, and the organizational context within which the operation took place. It should be noted that since it is not possible to interview military leaders during fighting, understanding the actions of combat leadership is possible only in retrospect. Providing a retrospective account of the operations enables the military leaders' interviews that were conducted for this research to reflect the constructed story of the combat, as described by each of the commanders, and for the interviews to be perceived as constructed through the process of storytelling (Czarniawska 1999). Our data reveal that such stories of combat include a broader time perspective beyond the immediate skirmish.

Our study is based on empirical evidence gathered from two case studies among infantry battalions in the IDF (see Table 1). Both combat events took place within a subsidiary unit of the battalion but were significant for the entire battalion. The individuals involved in each of the events include soldiers, junior commanders, battalion commanders, and brigade commanders. In the first event (hereinafter referred to as "L"), which took place in 2006 during the Second Lebanon War, a significant part of the battalion's command was injured in the course of a battle, which ended with eight soldiers and commanders being killed in action and dozens wounded. In the second event ("K"), which took place in 2010 along the Israel–Gaza border during a routine security operation, a squad of battalion forces pursued two terrorists who

Table 1. Case studies outline.

Event	Case	Year	Interviewee
"L"	A significant part of the battalion's chain of command was killed in action in a battle during wartime	2006	Brigade commander, battalion commander, operation office, company commander A, company commander C
"K"	Routine security measures end with two casualties: a deputy battalion commander and a medic soldier killed in action	2010	Brigade commander, battalion commander, company commander, deputy company commander, platoon commander

had placed explosive devices near a border fence; the deputy battalion commander and a company medic were killed in action during the firefight between the parties, which also included the detonation of an improvised explosive device.

Methodology

This examination of sensemaking was derived from interpreting the experiences of military leaders from the different positions and roles they occupied in the fighting. In order to collect data, we conducted ten semi-structured interviews with commanders who participated in each of the two events. The interviews were conducted with three different commanding ranks: the brigade commander, the battalion commander, and two or three junior commanders who fought in each of the events. Each participant was asked the same set of questions, which were very general and began with the question, "Tell me about the fight," followed by minimal direction on the part of the interviewer. For example, we asked, "What did you ask yourself during the fight?" and "How did the fight affect your unit?" Each interview lasted about ninety minutes, and the bulk of them were conducted by the first author. All of the interviews were conducted after the events had occurred: seven years after combat "L" and three years after combat "K." As mentioned above, the interviews reflect the constructed story of the combat as told and described by the interviewee. The interviews were used to investigate the ways in which commanders constructed (from their own experience and point of view) the story of events in which they participated (Tellis 1997). Hence this research presents a phenomenological perspective of the tactical operations, as well as their consequences, as described by commanders, both during the fight and in its ensuing construction.

We have chosen a relatively small number of cases in order to focus on the practical details of each event. In order to do so we studied the formal after-action reports about each event. We performed two types of comparisons in our analysis: between the two events as well as between different command positions and ranks across the events. The comparisons between the two events enabled us to examine how the different commanders we interviewed understood what was written in the formal inquiries (often revealing that the inquiries and the commanders' stories of the events did not necessarily coalesce). We found that a tendency exists in the formal inquiries to estimate the consequences of events vis-à-vis the formal fighting doctrine and expectations of the military

organization, whereas interviewees (including commanders) report on their experience—their feelings, their strengths, and their weaknesses and the meanings they ascribe to these, as well as to the event as a whole. The second comparison allowed us to understand the differences in the views of senior versus junior officers. It also allowed us to understand the meaning attached to combat as part of senior officers' careers (Padan and Ben-Ari 2019).

Analysis

All of the interviews were analyzed and coded using thematic analysis in order to discover recurring themes in the commanders' constructed stories concerning the two operations. This led us to formulate general themes that were derived from the data (e.g., understanding of the tactical problem). Next, we clustered and sorted the themes according to two fundamental dimensions that were found in the analysis: content and time axis. The content dimension included cognitive appraisals (making sense during the fight itself and drawing professional lessons from the experience), sociocultural processes (making sense of the micro-social processes of the fight and leveraging them against the culture of the IDF), and decoding and managing emotions (of subordinates and of oneself). A further examination of the themes vis-à-vis the three dimensions led us to divide the commanders' sensemaking in the operations into two points in time (time axis): during the fight and after the fight. This distinction is the result of the fact that the interviews reflected on immediate actions and developments in the fight as well as on actions and developments that occurred after the fight. The dimensions of sensemaking (content and time axis) are presented in Table 2

Table 2. A framework of military leaders' sensemaking.

	Time Axis	
	During the Fight	**After the Fight**
Cognitive appraisal	◦ Understanding the immediate problem	◦ Framing professional decisions and knowledge
Sociocultural processes	◦ Self-selection for participation in combat	◦ Preserving the unit's cohesion after the fight
Decoding and managing emotions	◦ Managing subordinates' feelings during a fight	◦ Mentoring subordinates after the fight

and explained by using significant themes. In order to achieve consensus between coders, we compared our coding and used only the material about which we agreed.

Results

Cognitive Appraisal

As noted earlier, most current accounts of sensemaking describe sense as constructed by language and shared through narrative. Hence, sensemaking incorporates a largely cognitive and discursive process (Stigliani and Ravasi 2012). As Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld (2005, 409) have noted, "Sensemaking involves turning circumstances into a situation that is comprehended explicitly in words and that serves as a springboard for action." The cognitive appraisal of sensemaking during combat is revealed as commanders attempt to make sense of a problem while in combat situations. Such a problem is not prescribed by any technical solution.

Understanding the immediate problem. The following quotation is taken from an interview we conducted with a company commander in combat "L." It describes various cycles of meaning and action during the fight that result in two main sensemaking processes. These processes exemplify the way in which the company commander understood the situation he was in, producing actions based on the cues he received from the immediate environment and the interpretation he gave to these cues.

> The platoon commander tells me he cannot open the door. . . . [W]hen I realized that this was the situation . . . I went downstairs to help open the door . . . and I reached them. [In the meantime,] I received a report on the two-way radio that another platoon is also unable to open the door and enter the building. . . . [W]e try all sorts of methods … but the door won't open. . . . [T]he deputy company commander who accompanied the second platoon reaches me in order to get some means of opening their door. . . . [T]he deputy company commander starts walking back towards his platoon, I hear someone on the two-way radio . . . "Figures identified." The first thing I think of is that someone from that company has identified the deputy company commander and the signal operator on their way back. . . . [T]hat's why I tell them, "Pay attention; it's the deputy company commander who has just left me on the way back to you, make sure that you don't open fire on him.". . . [A]nd then another quick report on the radio . . . saying, "The figures do not wear helmets." And then I say there is no chance that the deputy company commander and the signal operator have removed their helmets. No chance. I hear: "They wear speckled uniforms;" I hear: "Kalashnikov." . . . [I]t is unclear from these reports who

> exactly is seeing this, how exactly they are seeing it. This is still unclear to me at that time. And then we hear bursts of gunfire, and fire exchanges commence. If you are asking me what could have been done better at this stage, it's the drill: "Everyone stop! I identify" . . . rather than simply rolling into the situation.

In this interview it is clear that the first sensemaking process relates to the fact that two platoons reported that each of them encountered a situation where they could not open a building door. The platoons' difficulty in opening the door served as a triggering event for interpretation and action for the company commander. In the first instance the company commander decided to check the door by himself. In the second instance the company commander decided to order his subordinates to wait so the shooting on both doors could be done simultaneously. However, this action did not produce results. Thus, the situation proceeded as the deputy company commander came to get another explosive to open the door.

In addition to the above, another example of a sensemaking process was the deputy company commander's return to the platoon he was accompanying. The triggering event began with the report of one of the platoon soldiers on the radio indicating he had "identified" the figures. For the company commander, this report was very unclear and ambiguous. The cues continued to accumulate ("the figures do not wear helmets;" "they wear speckled uniforms;" "Kalashnikov"), but the company commander continued to discount the discrepant cues. He believed that the "figures" belonged to the deputy company commander and his signal operator who had "just left me on the way back to you" and held a preconception that these blurring situations had the potential to lead to friendly fire. This discounting of cues resulted in no action being ordered or taken by the company commander, which produced confusion that manifested in surprise once he heard the "burst of fire and the firefighting." However, as he heard the fire he understood that both platoons were in a completely different situation. The end of the quotation relates to the personal and operational lessons ("'Everyone stop! I identify' [figures] . . . rather than simply rolling into the situation") that the company commander reached. This indicates that a sensemaking process can be either disrupted into a kind of "sensebreaking" or that it can persist so long as the operational situation continues.

Framing professional decisions. The understanding of a fight continues after it is concluded. This understanding is concentrated on framing the professional decisions that were made and on their ensuing results. In case of mistakes or casualties, this understanding focuses on the need to

find an explanation for what occurred, sometimes with the possibility of facing unit criticism or external inquiries. Junior commanders make comments about their own unit, while their seniors have a broader framework. A platoon commander in combat "K" noted, for example, that "I look at the platoon and the company. . . . [I]t's the first time under fire, the first time they lost a friend. . . . I had many conversations in order to explain to the company why what we are doing is important."

By contrast, more senior commanders usually reflected on combat in a broader manner. A brigade commander in combat "L" said this:

> There are lessons here on the micro-tactical level. . . . [E]ven a very talented colonel has failed in this. . . . [T]here are certain natural tendencies of a force that is under distress or that you realize is under distress . . . so you are reportedly pulled into the event. We are not always successful in maintaining this instinct—to look from the outside for a moment, to try and understand the picture and then go in. When you look at it [the battle] from the outside and you don't know the details, then there seems to be some sort of defeat. But I don't think it was a defeat. And I believe that the Israeli people would agree to always having a one to five ratio in terms of the balance of power—for every five fatalities [on their side] we have one. But in the public atmosphere prevalent around that war and the expectations at the time, there are those who could have seen it as a sort of breaking point. I never felt it was a breaking point—not before, not during, and not after the event.

The brigade commander's frame of meaning appears as a coherent and single frame relating to the lessons that ought to be learned from the failure of the fight—that is, the brigade commander analyzes the fight from a professional-tactical perspective. He is focused on the fight itself, leaning on a fighting doctrine that is based on personal fighting experiences and regimental traditions and not on a formal military doctrine or philosophy. Moreover, the quotation indicates that the brigade commander is well aware of the political manner in which the war was perceived by the Israeli public.

Sociocultural Processes

When groups as well as individuals engage in "the making of sense" (Weick 1995: 4), they are embedded in a socio-material context. As mentioned earlier, in this context, their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are influenced by the actual, imagined, or implied presence of others. Hence, sensemaking is regarded as a social process. By defining the social dimension of sensemaking as "sociocultural," we refer to the need of commanders to understand the sociocultural context in order

for them to know how to build networks of relevant actors, how to bring people together for particular practices and occasions, and what language to use in connecting subordinates and forces together (Rouleau and Balogun 2011). In this way they are "setting the scene" and sustaining a shared sense of meaning to cues and events in ways that create the appropriate context for coordinated action (Maitlis and Christianson 2014). The following quotations give examples of such practices, referring to the two points in time that were defined for this research.

Self-selection for participation in combat during a fight. The following quotation is taken from an interview we conducted with a platoon commander in combat "K." The quotation exemplifies two cycles of interpretation and action during the fight.

> During the event, when we positioned one of the squads in covering fire positions, the company commander said to me: "This squad is coming to the attack. You will stay here as cover." And I remember looking at him and saying: "I am not staying here as cover. I am coming with you to attack." He looked at me, smiled, and said: "All right, let your sergeant stay here." . . . I remember actually circumventing the company commander and the deputy battalion commander. . . . [I]t's something I feel is a duty. How is it possible that the platoon goes to attack and the platoon commander stays back in cover? Where does such a situation exist?

The above quotation indicates that the triggering event that sets up a sensemaking process during combat began when the platoon commander received an order from his company commander to stay "in cover." According to the end of the quotation, the frame of meaning the platoon commander gave to the situation was one of an attack. Given this cultural "reality" framework, the platoon commander enacted a social process. He stood up to his company commander and refused to stay "in cover." With his company commander's consent, the platoon commander then joined the attack, and he described the way he bypassed his company commander and his deputy battalion commander, interpolating that there is no such thing as a squad going on an attack while its "platoon commander stays back in cover." His action sets up another cycle of interpretation, action, and meaning.

Preserving the unit's cohesion after the fight. In the following quotation, taken from an interview we conducted with a platoon commander in combat "K," the interviewee describes a sensemaking process that occurs after the event. Specifically, the triggering event that sets up the sensemaking process begins with the battalion's gathering to celebrate the Passover holiday—a well-established custom in the IDF (as well as in other organizations across Israel).

> When we returned from the Passover Seder night, we had a toast for the Passover at the battalion. The entire battalion was standing there, and the battalion commander came to be with the battalion. And there were soldiers from my company who didn't want to drink . . . didn't want to pour themselves a drink. I remember the battalion commander approaching them and saying: "Come on, Z, come, have a drink." . . . [H]e smiled at them . . . passed one by one and made sure that the soldiers will drink; he was there for them . . . him and also the company commander.

According to the above description of the Passover toast, the platoon commander saw that the battalion commander approached his company. He interprets the battalion commander's action as supportive of the company. The platoon commander continued to relate that there were soldiers from his platoon who did not want to drink from the sacramental wine, meaning they did not want to join the festive event—probably because they were mourning the loss of a brother in arms (which serves as another triggering event for sensemaking). However, the battalion commander, who works to ensure unit cohesion in the aftermath of combat, does not come to terms with the soldiers' refusal to drink from the sacramental wine, as such a refusal means the soldiers are not part of the battalion. However, the platoon commander says that the battalion commander approached them, smiled at them, and encouraged them to drink. The platoon commander interpreted the battalion commander's actions as caring for the soldiers, desiring to be there for them and wanting them to be part of the battalion's activity. This means that the battalion commander supports the soldiers in their sorrow but wants them to be a part of the battalion's activity, thus preserving the battalion's cohesiveness.

Thus, in this analysis we have divided sensemaking along two points in time: during the actual fight and after the fight. It appears that senior commanders have a broader time framework of a fight, which is based on combat experience accumulated throughout their careers. At the same time, however, while brigade commanders are concerned with the political aspects of constructing the fight in its aftermath, company and platoon commanders are more concerned about the internal issues of their unit.

Decoding and Managing Emotions

In the current study we have adopted Robinson's definition of emotions, according to which emotion is "a temporary feeling evoked by symbolic processing of events that involve corporeal manifestation"

(Robinson 2014, 189). In contrast to much of the existing literature investigating emotions at both individual and collective levels, which study the way emotions influence whether sensemaking occurs, the form it takes, when it concludes, and what it accomplishes (Walsh and Bartunek 2011), in the current study we refer to the emotional dimension of sensemaking as the need of commanders to gain control through managing their own and their subordinates' own emotions in order to achieve coordinated action and hence to operate automatically and therefore professionally in battle (Ben-Ari 1998). This is especially true of life-threatening situations in which the need for action is compelling and urgent. The following quotations illustrate the emotional dimension incorporated in the sensemaking process, referring to the need to decode emotion in order for commanders to gain control over subordinates and their entire unit and hence to enact a coordinated action.

Managing subordinates' feelings during a fight. The following quotation is taken from an interview conducted with a company commander in combat "L." The quotation incorporates a cycle of interpretation and action during the fight and gives an example of a commander who behaves in a loving manner toward his subordinates. This type of behavior is one that commanders, for the most part, learn to demonstrate toward their subordinates during their military service.

> A soldier came to us on a stretcher, as if wounded. The doctor examined him and said that he is unharmed. He is not wounded. I realized it's a shell-shock situation. [Question: "What do you say in this sort of situation?"] First of all, it's a matter of tender loving care. During these moments you need to direct the person to other people. . . . I went and spoke with him: "Try to look to the right, look left, look at the stars . . . what do you see?" I really tried to get him out of the locked world he was in. He was locked, just like that. Immovable. And slowly he started to move and talk.

In this situation, the triggering event that sets up the sensemaking process begins when the soldier is brought near the company commander on a stretcher. The battalion doctor checks him and concludes that he has no physical injury. The company commander interprets the doctor's observation and conceptualizes that the situation of his subordinate is one of shell shock. He uses the term "locked" to indicate that soldiers in this mental situation cannot communicate with their surroundings. Upon this observation and based on past experiences, the company commander acts: He approaches his subordinate, speaks to him, asks him questions, and, by so doing, helps him return to "reality." He continues these actions until he sees that his subordinate is "out of

it," which is a cue for him that his subordinate has exited the mental situation in which he was "locked." In this case, it is worth noting that the company commander succeeds in getting his subordinate out of the situation through contact and interaction (not by shouting at him), thereby exemplifying the way in which commanders learn to develop care and concern toward their subordinates during their military service.

Mentoring subordinates after the fight. The following quotation is from an interview conducted with a company commander in combat "K." It describes two sensemaking processes composed of two cycles of meaning enacted after the fight. It also demonstrates that the commander's conduct serves as a tutorial for his junior commander, hence exemplifying sensemaking as it is expressed in the chain of command.

> I had been angry because soldiers wept at A's funeral [the battalion medic who was killed]. The battalion commander told me that I can no longer protest about soldiers crying at funerals. That it's natural. . . . [T]he battalion commander accompanied me to the conversation that I wanted to hold with the soldiers after the funeral and instructed me not to use the verb "disappointed" when talking to the soldiers. He helped me choose my words so that I didn't respond from my gut, without thinking. . . . I learned from it how to accompany the platoon commander. I noted that he often visited A's family, so I talked with him to see how he responds. I told him to give the family time to be alone. And I accompanied him to see where else I could help him as his commander. He put on a brave face, but I didn't buy that . . . so I accompanied him just like the battalion commander did for me throughout the entire process.

The triggering event that set up the sensemaking process above began when the battalion commander saw that the company commander was angry at his soldiers for weeping at the funeral. The battalion commander interpreted the company commander's anger and took action, telling him that his subordinates' reaction is natural and instructing him not to use the word "disappointed" when speaking to his soldiers. The battalion commander's enactment of the situation helped the company commander understand the meaning of the situation, thereby acting as the company commander's emotional mentor. The company commander appreciated the battalion commander's input and rationalized his commander's orders. The second triggering event is manifested in the quotation when the company commander describes that, in his opinion, his platoon commander visits the battalion medic's parents' house too often. He takes action by talking (gently) with his subordinate, ordering the platoon commander to give the family time to grieve. Again, the company commander acts as the platoon commander's emotional mentor through the process of mourning for his fallen soldier and

guides him on how to act in such situations. The company commander concludes that his actions were a direct consequence of his battalion commander's input, hence exemplifying the way in which sensemaking is enacted through the chain of command.

Discussion

This article has explored sensemaking in a military context from a phenomenological perspective. It is our contention that the process of sensemaking enacted by military leaders in combat is broader than the immediate experience of battle and includes its aftermath. The themes derived from our interviews reflect a typical micro-social process of the combat experience as the decision to actually take part in the fight or the managing of unit cohesion following the losses inflicted on the unit. Our method of using a larger number of interviewees for a few events also contributes to a different perspective of the event by offering a diversity of age, experience, and rank. We broadly divided these processes into three dimensions: cognitive, sociocultural, and decoding and managing of emotions. The cognitive dimension includes both the tactical meaning during the fight and the broader meaning commanders derive from it that is needed for both mentoring processes and organizational positioning. The sociocultural dimension is manifested in the will of commanders to take an actual role in fighting and is demonstrated in the endeavor to preserve the ongoing function of the unit against the result of the fight. The emotional dimension includes commanders' need to manage their own and their subordinates' emotions in order to channel those emotions into action so that combatants and the unit will be able to operate in a coordinated and organized manner during future battle. Hence it is our contention that sensemaking is a multidimensional process that aims to gain a coordinated system of action (Maitlis and Christianson 2014). Thus, while facing violence, leaders assert a unique and meaningful influence on their subordinates and on the way the latter perceive different situations in which they operate (Alvinius, Boström, and Larsson 2015).

This analysis has also shown that sensemaking processes are influenced by the context and time within which they are implemented. This was exemplified by the fact that each dimension of the sensemaking process was expressed differently depending on whether it occurred during or after the fight. The sensemaking process during a fight incorporates two triggering events. The first is situation-related and derives from the

nature of each fight (which is often vague and volatile but can also be simple and "clean"). The second is situation-specific and derives from the evolving situation during each fight and its consequences for leaders, their subordinates, and the unit as a whole. The analysis also showed that sensemaking by military leaders is influenced by leaders' organizational positions. The framing of every fight is reflective of different positions and roles. While junior commanders understand and relate to the fight "from within," referencing the small unit, senior commanders frame the fight according to a larger organizational framework. This conclusion is strengthened by the argument that different intensities of organizational embeddedness shape commanders' constructed definition in relation to a given operational event (Padan 2017; Feldman and Ng 2007).

In the process of this analysis, we divided commanders' sensemaking of the operations examined into two points in time: during the actual fight and after the fight. In doing so we uncovered a third, "political" dimension occurring in the higher-ranking commanders' sensemaking after the fight. This analysis showed that whereas, in the aftermath of the fight, company and platoon commanders are more concerned with the internal issues of the unit, battalion and brigade commanders are more concerned with the political aspects of constructing the fight. In our view, the political dimension incorporates the way in which military leaders use sensemaking processes to manage their careers (Padan and Ben-Ari 2019) and build their command identity and their operational repertoire. This implies that organizational sensemaking is an ongoing process that also incorporates political aspects. This type of understanding is also relevant to other high-risk and high-reliability organizations (HROs) (Hannah, Uhl-Bien, and Avolio 2009), since the professional development of leaders in these organizations relies on their demonstrated leadership in extreme situations. Moreover, based on the way in which commanders constructed their narrative of the operations in which they participated, they actually signify what is or is not incorporated in a specific fight and therefore whether it is possible or not to talk about it.

Implications and Limitations

The practical implications of this study can be found in the development of sensemaking in an adaptive manner according to the different challenges that every operation conveys to military leaders. Military leaders

act as mediators between "reality" and organization members (Padan 2017). Such a process occurs in routine as well as in combat situations, and it is especially expected when a fight is "going wrong." Sadly, this is often the case, especially when the enemy has an advantage. The material superiority of a modern military fighting against non-state rivals often conceals the importance of social and human factors when small groups are in close combat.

We are aware that the study was conducted in a typical IDF scenario, and we expect that cross-military comparisons will further develop and validate the sensemaking framework. This preliminary study calls for further research on the experience of combat with a greater number of events. Such a future development should use authentic expressions of the combat experience by commanders: the intimate communications, sounds, sights, and smells of the "world within war" in which commanders are embedded. Such materials are often neglected in the military's formal after-action reviews, and awareness of such experiences could foster cooperation between leaders and leadership development experts since, in our estimation, military leadership development experts sometimes rely on non (?) military content in their work. Leadership development can benefit by explaining how sensemaking assists commanders in their role as mediators between operational reality and organizational members. It may also serve as an analytical tool for organizational diagnosis, especially in after-action evaluation. Indeed, this study's framework has already been useful as an educational program in military leadership courses in the IDF. Surely this broad framework could be of value for leadership development in relevant organizations—"civilian" or military—especially in those classified as HROs.

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