

# **Paranoid Sensemaking**

*On psychological pressures in dynamically complex environments*

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## **Objectives**

In psychological literature, paranoia is portrayed as a kind of sensemaking in which a delusion of persecution is central. While paranoia is often used to refer to a pathological disorder, clinical literature also underlines that most people are vulnerable to paranoid thinking if they are under certain pressures. These pressures exist particularly in dynamically complex environments, that is to say, in environments that consist of (possible) threats and dangers, uncertainties, ambiguities and of intelligent opponents that actively try to undermine the organization. This paper seems therefore relevant for organizations that are confronted with these kinds of environments. Military organizations involved in crisis operations are an example of this kind of organization. This article aims to explore the relevance of the concept of paranoia to comprehend the challenges organizations are confronted with in dynamically complex environments.

## **Methods**

This paper aims at a conceptual contribution. Central in this conceptual contribution is the sensemaking perspective in organization studies. It is claimed that the sensemaking perspective, combined with insights from theory on psychopathology can provide insights into an important problem for organizations that are confronted with dynamic complexity. This paper does not present any systematic empirical research is undertaking using this perspective. Instead, working out the perspective on “paranoid sensemaking” is considered to be the starting point for systematic empirical research. The conceptual points are developed using different illustration from existing literature and from the experiences of the Dutch Armed Forces in crisis operations.

## **Conclusion**

Kets de Vries' characterizes the paranoid organization (1984, p.24) as follows: “Suspiciousness and mistrust of others; hypersensitivity; hyperalertness; readiness to

encounter perceived threats; overconcern with hidden motives and special meanings; intense attention span; cold, rational, unemotional.” In a way, every one of these characteristics is important for crisis organizations, i.e. organizations that are confronted with dynamic complexity in an extreme way. In environments with intelligent and dangerous opponents that aim to undermine operations it is valuable to be suspicious of motives and underlying meanings, to be hyperalert, to stay calm and coherent, cold, rational, et cetera. On the other hand, one certainly wouldn’t want to advise organizations in these circumstances to become “paranoid”, as by definition “paranoia” refers to a process of sensemaking that has gone awry. Healthy suspicion could be considered adaptive under certain conditions and possibly essential to survival. On the other hand, too much suspicion, however, could lead to a pathological style of thinking (i.e. paranoia) and therefore to losing grip on reality.

The fundamental problem for organizations that are confronted with dynamically complex environments is that it is difficult to distinguish between sensemaking constructions that are “valid” and constructions that are “erroneous”. That implies that it is difficult to distinguish between “healthy suspicion” and “paranoia”. This line of thinking therefore points to an important psychological pressure on operators in dynamically complex environment: they lack a “rockbottom of knowledge” that help them to distinguish between “reality” and “illusion”.

This paper explores the relevance of the concept “paranoid sensemaking” for crisis-organizations. Apart from conceptual development, more thorough empirical research into the relation between paranoia and dynamically complex circumstances seems particularly relevant. Existing accounts on experiences with these environments could be analyzed for paranoid traces. In depth interviews could be used in order to find out if the proposed “psychological pressures” are experienced in this way by operators. Furthermore, insight into the exotic ways “paranoid sensemaking” can develop in everyday crisis operations seems to be of value.

## **Reference**

Kets de Vries, M. (1984). *The Neurotic Organization*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass