

# The Ethics of Dissent: The Case of David Kelly

A. Kayes, D. Christopher Kayes

**Abstract**—In this paper, we rely on the story of the late British weapons inspector David Kelly to illustrate how sensemaking can inform the study of the ethics of suppression of dissent. Using archival data, we reconstruct Dr. Kelly's key responsibilities as a weapons inspector and government employee. We begin by clarifying the concept of dissent and how it is a useful organizational process. We identify the various ways that dissent has been discussed in the organizational literature and reconsider the process of sensemaking. We conclude that suppression of opinions that deviate from the majority is part of the identity maintenance of the sensemaking process. We illustrate the prevention of dissent in organizations consists of a set of unsatisfactory trade-offs.

**Keywords**—ethics, dissent, suppression, sensemaking

## I. INTRODUCTION

ORGANIZATIONS have an interest in suppression of dissent that threatens organizational interests and threatens organizational identity. The problem with the suppression of dissent is that the minority or low power voice in organizations is often overlooked [12].

Organizations cannot be effective in their learning processes, what is called *sensemaking*, if only the majority voice is dominant. In this paper, we explore the use of dissent in organizations with specific emphasis on the ethics of suppression of dissent. We begin by reviewing the literature on dissent and ethics and then provide an alternative, descriptive rather than prescriptive view of the value of dissent for organizational change, and describe the unintended consequences of suppression of dissent based on organizational sensemaking [36-37]; (Weick et al., 2005). We describe ethics as a retrospective process of creating meaning about what constitutes appropriate action and belief from ongoing events by taking cues from the environment. As such, the ethics of suppression of dissent is conceived not as an absolute, but rather as dynamic sensemaking. The events surrounding the work and death of Dr. David Kelly, a weapons inspector involved in the search for WMD, and a minority voice that criticized the intelligence gathering efforts, illustrate this approach.

## II. DISSENT CONSIDERED

Dissent is a useful mechanism for knowledge sharing and organizational change, but the suppression of dissent solidifies the majority's beliefs, attitudes and behaviors, often at the expense of innovation [22]. Social psychology research has shown that the majority influences the minority, for instance the high power person influence the low power person [2].

Due to differences in power, the majority perpetuates their beliefs, with little attention to the minority beliefs [7]. Dissent in organizations has a long history that many times results in punishment of the voice of dissent, termination of employment, marginalization, and other negative ramifications [31]. Dissent carries a negative label, such as not being a 'team player'. But, suppression of dissent is suppression of a diversity of beliefs, backgrounds, traditions and ways of viewing the world [12].

### A. Dissent and ethics

In considering the theoretical foundations of our inquiry into an ethics of the suppression of dissent, we draw on two ideas widely discussed in the ethics literature. First, we draw on the notion that ethics is an interdisciplinary study. The scope of what constitutes ethical studies in business ranges from the moral philosophical to the applied business approach to ethics. Second, we draw on the notion that ethics in general, and business ethics in particular, is a practical enterprise, closely tied to human actions engaged in practical but often competing duties (Nussbaum, 1986). Recently, Robin (2009) argued that current conceptualizations of ethics rely too heavily on philosophical arguments rather than applied approaches and challenged academics to produce a description of ethics that accommodates both the purpose of business and the purpose of ethics. He argued that business ethics must consider the purpose of business, which broadly speaking is to improve the economic welfare of stakeholders, alongside the purpose of ethics, which is to minimize the abuse of power and the "negative impact of chance" (Robin, 2009, p. 141). Taking a sensemaking approach to ethics, we show how multiple stakeholders make meaning out of power and chance in the suppression of dissent. We focus on how organizations make sense of patterns and react to dissent that deviates from the norms of the organization, even when it ultimately harms the organization.

### B. Sensemaking

We draw on this interdisciplinary and applied tradition to describe the process of ethical reasoning as a process of 'sensemaking'. Sensemaking describes the "sequence in which people concerned with identity in the social context of other actors engage ongoing circumstances from which they extract cues and make plausible sense retrospectively" (Weick et al., 2005, p. 409). To engage in sensemaking is to make meaning in the course of ongoing events. A sensemaking approach to ethics is primarily concerned with the process that actors in a social system draw on to label the images, the interactions, and the context of behavior and make sense of it. Sensemaking involves processes of editing, labeling, and categorizing ongoing experience. As such, the process is inductive and interpretative and closely tied to the use of language. There is some consensus around the factors that effect the sensemaking process. One statement put forth by sensemaking theorists is the counterintuitive notion that "believing is seeing" (Weick, 1995). This notion posits that belief that what one thinks to be true will act as a filter for what information enters a system and

A. Kayes is with Stevenson University, Baltimore, MD, 21117, USA. (e-mail: akayes@stevens.edu).

D. Christopher Kayes is with The George Washington University, Washington, D.C. 20052 USA. (e-mail: dckayes@gwu.edu).

how the system processes that information once absorbed. This is problematic when the majority voice in the organization determines the filter for the organization's identity, since sensemaking is embedded in identity. Sensemaking is a retrospective process that is of interest when events become troublesome or for which an incomplete explanation is generated.

Sensemaking is reminiscent of the way that Frankena (1973) described ethics as a process that begins when current explanations of correct conduct no longer prevail. Both sensemaking and ethics become interesting when prevailing explanations no longer prove adequate. It should be made clear here that this view of ethics is not concerned simply with normative principles of ethics, where we label behavior as 'corrupt' or 'unethical', but rather constitutes a descriptive endeavor. In this way, a sensemaking approach is more concerned with under what conditions the concept of ethics might come into play in organizations, and how organizations might go about resolving conflicting viewpoints of what constitutes ethical behavior. Another connection between sensemaking and ethics is in the area of identity, because both identity maintenance and ethical decision-making must account for social roles, past experiences, and culture in how actions are labeled. A related aspect of sensemaking is that it is a social process of interacting, which implies that ethical reasoning is an emergent process. Thus, rather than seeing labels such as 'ethical', 'unethical', 'corruption', or 'deception' as fixed principles, it is more accurate to understand such terms as contextually based. One of the most salient consequences to conceptualizing ethical reasoning as a process of sensemaking is to move the focus of conversation from choices to interpretation. In what follows, we offer an interpretation from the sensemaking perspective by looking at a single case and an organization's response to dissent.

### III. METHODS

As an effort in sensemaking, we relied on multiple qualitative methods to identify how meaning around dissent is constructed in organizations (i.e., Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007; Weick, 2007). We chose qualitative methods that helped us "effectively address questions such as 'What is occurring?' and 'How is it occurring?'" (Lee et al., 1999, p. 164), with specific emphasis on the human dynamics in organizations (Yin, 2003, pp. 40–41).

*Data collection.* The primary source of data for the case came from the Hutton Inquiry into the death of Dr. David Kelly [13]. The report stands as the most comprehensive source of data on the events that led to the death of Dr. Kelly and included testimony from government officials, family members, and members of the press. Of particular importance to this study was the disclosure of notes and recordings of conversations Dr. Kelly had with the press in the months leading up to the invasion of Iraq. These documents and testimony are important because they reveal some of the conversations Dr. Kelly had that can be understood as acts of dissent because they were often held 'off the record', revealed an unofficial position or belief he held, and shed light on how Dr. Kelly may have made sense of a set of conflicting values

or beliefs. The Hutton Report has not been without criticism. Some have argued that the testimony was not given under oath and thus is unreliable. Others suggested that the investigation was not comprehensive. However, these criticisms are largely focused on the cause of Dr. Kelly's death, not the issues that this paper addresses. Other documents include the unclassified official government intelligence reports and popular press accounts (e.g., Commission on the Intelligence Capabilities of the United States Regarding Weapons of Mass Destruction, 2005; Committee of Privy Counsellors, 2004; Director of National Intelligence, CIA, 2002; Kerr et al., 2004).

*Data analysis.* To analyze the data we first created a timeline of events. We then created a narrative that extended for over 10,000 words guided by Pentland (1999), and of which excerpts are offered below. We constructed two additional narratives regarding the events surrounding the Iraq war to identify and compare other examples of dissent. We also held several informal conversations with those close to the events to identify details, confirm facts, and understand the context under which Dr. Kelly was working.

There are several reasons why this case is a good source of data on the ethics of dissent. The very purpose of intelligence organizations is to deceive (Noah, 2005) and to suppress any alternative viewpoint that challenges organizational identity. Intelligence organizations, organizations that are transparent in their efforts to wield deceit, are an interesting context from which to view the dynamics of sensemaking (Orton, 2000) for at least four reasons.

First, intelligence organizations represent polyarchy, an emerging form of organizing. In knowledge-intensive organizations, an important consideration of organizing lies in understanding the process by which knowledge becomes legitimate and leads to forming organizational identity (Clegg et al., 2006). In the book *The Official CIA Manual of Trickery and Deception* (Melton and Wallace, 2009), the identity of the organization is codified by the practices that it encourages.

Second, the events of intelligence organizations discussed in this article meet at least three criteria outlined by March et al. (1991) for an event worthy of study. First, the events served as a branching point for a historic change. The events provoked the most complete reworking of the US intelligence service in nearly 30 years. Second, the events contradicted a commonly held belief among those in the intelligence community that Iraq held active WMD programs. Third, the events evoked strong metaphorical power, as they precipitated and foretold the first major military conflict led by US/British forces in more than a generation.

Third, the events fit Goffman's (1961) description of a social situation that seems to fit "outside" the realm of traditional reason. The events allow us to understand more clearly Goffman's notion that legitimacy of knowledge is not something that is given but is an effect of someone's construction of the knowledge and the situation (Clegg et al., 2006, p. 119). In other words, one criterion by which to judge the importance of a situation is when it prompts the question, 'How could we have been so unreasonable about what we thought we saw, now that we see a different outcome?' Thus, the events provide a fitting example of how retrospective

analysis can lead to a very different interpretation of the events themselves.

Fourth, the events represent sensemaking in the face of an organizational crisis, defined as a series of events that exceed an organization's ability to cope and create an unforeseen source of vulnerability (Smith and Elliot, 2006). As one former CIA official stated, the belief that Iraq had an active program to develop and deliver WMD represented a system that broke down and failed (McLaughlin, 2008).

#### IV. THE CASE OF WEAPONS INSPECTOR DAVID KELLY

##### A. *The British Dossier*

As early as March 5, 2002, officials within the British government began compiling a record of Saddam Hussein's WMD. The officials limited their documents to those items already in the public domain. In other words, they included no secret or classified information in their search. Much of the information they compiled came from preexisting sources that could be downloaded on the Internet.

Michael Williams, working for the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, headed the first of these efforts. The result came in the form of a document called *The Iraq Brief*. By late March, British Prime Minister Tony Blair commissioned a full dossier on Saddam's activity on WMD. Dr. David Kelly, as the chief advisor to the Ministry of Defense on issues related to chemical and biological weapons, reviewed the document in April and May of 2002. By June 20, the first complete draft of what was later known as "the dossier" arrived (UK Joint Intelligence Committee, 2002). Three different documents emerged:

- A paper outlining Saddam's WMD that was compiled by Julian Miller, who was head of the cabinet office responsible for providing classified assessments.
- A history of the UN inspections in Iraq compiled by Patrick Lamb, deputy head of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's counterproliferation unit. This paper was also compiled with the help of David Kelly.
- A history of human rights abuses by Saddam Hussein compiled by Dr. Amanda Tanfield, first secretary in the diplomatic corps of the UK Foreign Office.

On September 9th, Dr. David Kelly of the British Ministry of Defense reviewed the dossier along with Mark Peters of the Foreign Office. Then again on September 19th, the weapons inspector met with officials in the Old War Office for a group review of the dossier. The group produced four pages of notes about the report, spelling out concerns, omissions, and other issues. The most controversial and perhaps most widely covered claim of the dossier lied in the notion that Saddam could launch a biological, chemical, or even nuclear attack with 45-minutes' notice.

On September 24th, the government published the dossier and made it public. The intent, from the beginning, was to develop a public document, and many argue that the document provided a source to support the war because it highlighted certain threats while at the same time downplaying counter-arguments against those threats.

##### B. *"If we go to war, I'll be found dead in the woods"*

"If we go to war, I will probably be found dead in the woods," said Dr. David Kelly. British Ambassador David Broucher recounted these words to the Hutton inquiry, the official investigation into Dr. Kelly's death. When the ambassador first heard Dr. Kelly say these words, he thought they must be a throwaway remark, one of those thousands of forgettable statements made each day by individuals going about their business. David Kelly served as a key weapons inspector for the UK Ministry of Defence and was recognized as a world authority on WMD. Ambassador Broucher held the difficult task of selling the contents of the dossier to the UN delegation. The ambassador, according to his testimony, was experiencing a thoroughly difficult time convincing others at the UN that the British dossier on WMD in Iraq was a trustworthy document.

Although Dr. Kelly was not directly involved with compiling or writing the dossier, he served as an adviser, read the dossier, and commented on it. The Joint Intelligence Committee put the dossier together, Dr. Kelly explained, and the goal was to make the report as "robust" as possible. Every intelligence organization in Britain got their say – MI5, MI6, even the diplomatic service. Kelly expressed the most concern about the 45-minute claim. This was the claim that the Iraqis could launch a chemical or biological attack within 45 minutes of an order to do so. Typically, the Iraqis have kept their munitions in a different place from the weapons, Kelly argued. In other words, they keep the materials that go into the weapons far away from the actual weapons that deliver the munitions. If this was still the case, the Iraqis could not easily make or fire the weapons at short notice. It was not clear, in contrast to what was stated in the dossier, how the Iraqis could launch an attack in 45 minutes. Additionally, Iraq has always kept very good records of its weapons. One of the things that continued to serve the weapons inspectors was that the Iraqis kept a detailed paper trail, and weapons inspectors found that the paper trail never led very far. This led Dr. Kelly to conclude that there wasn't much left in Iraq in terms of biological and chemical weapons. What was left would be very difficult to find, he believed. According to the ambassador's testimony, one question in particular continued to trouble him, and he had hoped that Dr. Kelly could answer it. Why would the Iraqis continue to be so deceptive? Why wouldn't they cooperate with the weapons inspectors? Dr. Kelly agreed that this was a problem; he had personally urged them to cooperate, he told the ambassador. The Iraqi fears, he believed, seemed reasonable. The Iraqis feared they would actually increase their chances of being invaded, either by UN-backed forces or by one of their many other enemies, if they cooperated with the UN inspectors. The Iraqis remained fearful that the limits of their program would expose them. The inspections would actually increase the likelihood of their being attacked if they revealed how ill-prepared they were to defend themselves.

Dr. Kelly felt a personal role in this situation. Dr. Kelly told the ambassador that he had spoken with the Iraqis directly and said that if they cooperated, they should have nothing to fear. This was the position of the UN, Dr. Kelly reassured them.

With this promise, Dr. Kelly had put himself in ‘a morally ambiguous position’. The Iraqis seem to have trusted, to some degree, his viewpoint. They believed that the country would not be invaded as long as they cooperated with the inspections. Ambassador Boucher told the committee that he had inferred from Dr. Kelly’s statement that the Iraqis might have believed he lied. Then, as Dr. Kelly was leaving the room, the ambassador said to him, “What will happen if Iraq is invaded?” And in his reply, which the ambassador “took at the time to be a throw away remark”, Dr. Kelly said, “I will probably be found dead in the woods” [13]. David Kelly was found dead in the woods, presumably by suicide, on July 17, 2003.

#### *C. The weapons inspector’s inspector*

Some 40 years after the weaponized spores of anthrax had made their way from Terre Haute, Indiana, to Gruinard Island, Dr. David Kelly, a weapons expert working at Porton Down, was called in to lead the clean-up operation. It was by taking on efforts like this, efforts that no one else could manage, that David Kelly became known as the “weapons inspector’s inspector” [13]. Even by his family’s account, Dr. Kelly displayed the typical signs of a workaholic.

In the aftermath of 9/11, Dr. Kelly became the preferred source of information relating to WMD. By late 2002 and early 2003, Dr. Kelly’s reputation as the WMD expert meant that reporters were contacting him two or three times a week seeking answers to questions and opinions about WMD. He regularly interacted with reporters by e-mail, by phone, and in person, which was not an unusual arrangement. Government officials often share a cozy relationship with reporters because it serves the interests of both well. Reporters get a scoop and access to important, sometimes sensitive information, while government officials, especially politicians, can push their agendas through widely read sources.

The relationship between the press and government sources requires certain rules of engagement. Oftentimes government officials will provide information only if they are not directly quoted by name, while reporters will gladly publish the information, scooped as an exclusive, without ever revealing their source. Most of the time, according to one observer, Dr. Kelly’s quotes quickly became “tomorrow’s chip wrappers” [13]. That is to say, his newspaper commentary failed to garner much lasting interest, and the next day the paper would be thrown away – the paper itself used to wrap fish and chips. Not that Dr. Kelly’s insights were insignificant; they simply became overshadowed by the latest breaking and sensational news – the latest exploits of celebrities or royalty providing more interesting headlines than scientific opinion on WMD, even though Dr. Kelly held information that remained relevant.

#### *D. Sexed-up chip wrappers*

Dr. Kelly met a man in the lobby of the Charing Cross Hotel in London. We know with certainty that the meeting occurred at about 4:00 p.m. on May 22, 2003, about two months after the invasion of Iraq. The time and location may be all we really know about this meeting. The two men offered significantly different accounts about their 45-minute exchange. Official inquiries concluded that it was not possible

to reach a definite conclusion as to what transpired. The younger man took sparing but revealing notes that have been made part of the public record. We know that the younger man, a reporter for the BBC, hastily recorded the conversation with his handheld computer. His notes were rife with misspellings and abbreviations and looked like this [14]:

The dossier was transformed in the week it was published, to make it sexier the classic was the 45 mins. Most things in the dossier were sdbl sc but that was single-source one source said it took 4 minutes to set up a missile assembly and that was misinterpreted. His notes referred to the dossier that the British government had compiled at the request of Prime Minister Tony Blair to justify the invasion of Iraq.

*The young man’s scribbles, although revealing, raised more questions than they answered.*

Did the meeting bring into question the authenticity of the dossier, especially its claim to Iraq’s ability to launch biological weapons within 45 minutes? Did the meeting suggest that the intelligence community did not agree with the information put forth in the dossier about Saddam’s weapons capability? Did the meeting suggest that Alistair Campbell, the prime minister’s communications director, directly influenced the dossier’s content? Most important, did the meeting suggest that officials exaggerated the final dossier so that the potential threat of WMD appeared more dramatic and more eminent than the intelligence actually suggested? In the younger man’s words, was the dossier “sexed up” to make it both more interesting and terrifying?

Seven days later, the BBC broadcast the reporter’s story. Over the months leading up to and just after the invasion of Iraq, Dr. Kelly spoke with several reporters. He shared his opinions about WMD in Iraq and provided expert assessments of the WMD threat. Reporter Gavin Hewitt spoke with Dr. Kelly and recounted his conversation, based on his notes, during the Hutton Inquiry. Hewitt said Dr. Kelly communicated to him that “Number 10 spin came into play”. In other words, Kelly suggested that members of Prime Minister Blair’s office might have tried to influence the dossier to make the threat appear more dramatic. Even though Kelly believed the quality of the intelligence was fundamentally reasonable, Kelly believed that the interpretation of intelligence wasn’t a black-and-white question, but that there was pressure to present the evidence on Iraq WMD in a black-and-white way. Kelly communicated, according to Hewitt, that he would like to have seen more caveats in the document. In the final analysis, Kelly told Hewitt that he believed that WMD existed in Iraq, but he thought they did not constitute a major threat. If Iraq did have them, they would be hard to find and not in a massive arsenal, as was commonly reported.

#### *E. Britain + inspector + UNSCOM= dissent*

The reports of a “sexed-up” dossier plastered the news across London. Within the government, the news that a “high government official” was publicly questioning the credibility of the dossier exploded like an atomic bomb. It was June 1, 2003, and inspectors had been racing to find WMD in Iraq for

nearly three months. Despite some leads, they continued to come up empty in their search for an active WMD program. The dossier had served as the very basis for the invasion of Iraq. Now a “high-level” insider had begun to question the very foundation of the dossier and the cause for going to war. The political machine took the news with guns ablaze. The details began to take shape. The source was a senior advisor but not an intelligence official. He was involved in the review of the dossier but not in the writing of it. He was an experienced weapons inspector who may be in Iraq. He once worked as a UN weapons inspector. As the officials sought to put together the information, a letter emerged within the government under Dr. Kelly’s signature. The letter explained that Kelly had spoken to Mr. Gilligan and other reporters over the course of the last few weeks. The pieces fit together, and government officials concluded that David Kelly was the source of the reports and the voice of dissent.

The government provided information so detailed that it had to be a deliberate attempt to expose Dr. Kelly. So it proved. One reporter conducted a search on the web with the simple phrase: Britain + inspector + UNSCOM (United Nations Special Commission on Iraq). It yielded a short list of names, among them that of Dr. David Kelly.

“Off the record”, Kelly told a reporter, “they have really put me through the wringer. They are considering grounding me, you know, from going back to Iraq because of all this” [13]. In just a few weeks, Dr. Kelly’s conversations with reporters had changed. Six weeks previously his conversations seemed welcome, at least tolerated by his superiors, because they educated the public and put their issues in a credible light. Now, as the situation quickly moved beyond everyone’s control, Kelly was being characterized as a mole – an insider with an agenda to tell what powerful people did not want revealed. Kelly, the minority voice, in the system was crucified, even though he had valuable knowledge to help the organization.

Not long after that, officials began to distance themselves from Kelly. The loyal weapons inspector became an outcast. Immediately, the government called for a public inquiry. Up to that point, while it may have been unorthodox for a weapons inspector with the Ministry of Defence or the Foreign Office to speak so freely with reporters, Dr. Kelly had been quoted a number of times in *The Sunday Times* and elsewhere, and no one in the government had objected. However, it is one thing to be in the public eye when you are doing the bidding of leaders, but quite another when you challenge their viewpoint.

Janice Kelly, Dr. Kelly’s wife of 36 years, may have had the most telling explanation. “My husband felt ‘totally let down and betrayed’ at the way his employers allowed his identity to become public knowledge and how they portrayed him. He had shrunk into himself,” she said [13]. After hearing about Kelly’s death, allegedly by suicide, David Broucher, Britain’s ambassador to the UN conference on nonproliferation of nuclear weapons, reconsidered his initial thoughts about Kelly’s throwaway line about being “found dead in the woods” if Iraq were attacked. At first Broucher speculated, “I thought he might have meant that he was at risk of being attacked by the Iraqis in some way”. Later, the ambassador realized that

Kelly meant something very different. Kelly, described by one of his former bosses as a man “welded to the truth,” most likely believed that somehow the invasion of Iraq would put him in a morally ambiguous position. Despite his reassurances to the Iraqis, Kelly ultimately believed that the invasion “might go ahead anyway” and that he would be in the position of not having told the truth [13].

## V. ANALYSIS

Dr. Kelly’s situation offers four insights about the nature of dissent in general and the ethics of the suppression of dissent specifically.

### A. *The intent of dissent is difficult to decipher*

A source of anxiety for Dr. Kelly was an alleged promise he had made to a group of Iraqis. According to Ambassador Broucher’s testimony, Kelly explained to the Iraqis his belief that if they cooperated with the weapons inspectors, they should not be worried about being invaded. Dr. Kelly believed this to be true but was conflicted because he believed that from the Iraqis’ perspective, this was an exercise in deceit, a promise that could not be kept. The strong anxiety experienced by Kelly is reminiscent of Festinger’s (1957) cognitive dissonance, which explains how individuals resolve a conflicting set of promises or actions through reducing their self-interest or fooling themselves. Cognitive dissonance suggests the challenges that emerge as an organizational actor prepares to dissent from the majority held ideas, beliefs and values. As cognitive dissonance theory suggests, individuals feel tension between two opposing sets of norms. Kelly suspected he might be marginalized for reporting his suspicions, but did not expect the extent of the betrayal.

### B. *Dissent is an expected element of organizational functioning*

Dr. Kelly’s case illustrates that dissent should be a normal and often expected element of sensemaking in organizations, but in practice threatens the identity maintenance of the organization. Dissent exists as a mechanism to deal with the equivocal nature of life in organizations and interjects an alternative way of knowing into the commonly held beliefs and widely held practices. Kelly’s alleged statements about the nature of the intelligence on WMD in Iraq are illustrative of how organizations deal with equivocality. Kelly believed the quality of the intelligence on certain aspects of WMD was ‘fundamentally reasonable’ [13]; at the same time Kelly believed that the interpretation and presentation of intelligence was not a black-and-white question. Organizations face presenting information in unequivocal ways, even when they understand that sensemaking requires shades of gray. The construction of identity, narratives, and meaning tend to rely on statements that ‘energize’ (Weick et al., 2005, p. 419); equivocal statements may be less likely to make sense. Even the ambassador, according to his testimony, was experiencing a thoroughly difficult time convincing others at the UN that the British dossier on WMD in Iraq was trustworthy. The ‘normal’ was not presentation of equivocal truth. A sensemaking approach views dissent as a ‘normal’ (Nyberg, 1993) rather

than 'abnormal' part of organizational sensemaking, rather than a marginalized act that becomes normalized (Ashforth and Anand, 2003).

### *C. Reasoning is a process of sensemaking*

Reasoning as a process of sensemaking describes how organizational actors in the case of Dr. David Kelly think, reason, and act with their stakeholders and their world at large. The mental models that inform the process of organizational sensemaking influence the way the world is perceived within the organization as well as critical decisions related to perceived external and internal demands. How multiple stakeholders make meaning out of power and chance in the dynamics of identity maintenance helps us understand ethical reasoning. Weick et al. (2005) gave insight to consider how suppression of dissent becomes an embedded organizational game and how individual actors become involved in the game. To rephrase Snook cited in Weick et al. (2005), several factors are helpful when analyzing the process of sensemaking: (1) the actors that control the cues, (2) the conversations among select actors, (3) the criteria enforced around plausible stories, (4) the actions permitted or disallowed, and (5) the histories or retrospect singled out.

It was acceptable for Kelly to talk to reporters when he was following the cues in an appropriate way. Dr. Kelly's conversations with reporters had changed over a six-week period. Initially his conversations were sanctioned by the organization because they educated the public and tied the issues of the organization to its identity. This put the issues in a credible light, as what Dr. Kelly stated to the press was consistent with the narratives of the organization's mission. At the end of the six weeks, Kelly was characterized as a mole – an insider with an agenda to tell what powerful people did not want revealed and inconsistent with the identity of the organization. Dr. Kelly's actions at the point that he was labeled a 'mole' were unethical, beyond what the organization was sanctioning. When we consider these factors, it becomes evident how suppression of dissent can become part of the sensemaking process.

### *D. Dissent is not unethical but the suppression of dissent is unethical*

The diversity of definitions of what constitutes ethics leaves room for a wide array of interpretations or meaning assigned to ethics. Based on our definition of ethics as a process of meaning making, based on factors such as the social context in which the meaning emerges, the experience, the culture, and the norms adopted by the organizational actors, Dr. Kelly's case and the broader metaphor of intelligence show us that dissent can be ethical [12]. A sensemaking approach to ethics is more concerned with the process that actors in a social system draw on to label the images, the interactions, and the context of behavior and make sense of it. Those involved in the final composition of the dossier agreed that the document needed to be 'sexier', a version different from its original form. Andrew Gilligan in his interview with Dr. Kelly reported that Dr. Kelly said: "It's really not very exciting, you know, . . . nothing changed". "Until the week before, it was just like I told you. It was transformed the week before publication, to

make it sexier" [13]. This transformation of the dossier was not an "attack on norms" (Levine, 2005), but an effort to ensure that the norms that support the organization were in fact adhered to. The 'sexed-up' dossier supported the identity of the organization. However, speaking the truth about what had transpired threatened the identity of the organization and was suppressed, and the suppression of minority viewpoints is unethical. This brings us the unanswered question about the role of power and how it gets expressed in organizations. How does shaping of power occur? The question is not how do bad people make unethical decisions but how do good people struggle to make sense of a situation.

One key intelligence official we interviewed described dissent, deception and its role in the rationalization of the Iraq war. He described deception as an attempt to create an impression that is incorrect – for example, to create a link between Saddam Hussein and the al Qaeda terrorist network. He described how deception was rhetorically woven in a way that was not only false, but often contrary to the intelligence. It often involved making a certain kind of impression and it crept into things in countless different ways. He noted two types of deception that might have played a part in fueling the WMD justification: public deception and private deception. The former involved the use of intelligence to convince or persuade the US and Britain to go to war. Policymakers, the end users of intelligence, along with those in their sphere of influence, went on a hunt to find intelligence that solidified a connection between al Qaeda and Hussein. In this way, intelligence served not to inform a decision but rather to substantiate an existing case in order to influence public opinion. Private deception, on the other hand, occurred outside the public eye. One example of this came in the form of the subtle pressure applied by customers of intelligence for more and better details on WMD in Iraq. As one analyst noted, "We [the CIA] would provide information, intelligence, and then it would be worded a certain way that made it look like something it wasn't" [13]. As long as organizational actors did not publically express or privately acknowledge dissent from this deceit, it could continue unchecked and unresolved.

Dissent is a mechanism that keeps deceit in check, and without dissent, these deceptions perpetuate. In particular, one analyst believed that these 'clients' could easily deceive themselves into seeing intelligence in a certain way. He explained how policymakers might spin a web of self-deception:

First, you might get policymakers starting to ask questions, asking for specific information or specific kinds of information. Next, they start seeing these details in the report regularly. Then they start thinking, "Hey, if these things are in the report, then they must be important," and they kind of forget that they asked for them to be there in the first place.

From a sensemaking standpoint, when the daily flow of information is cast in a certain direction by the organizational majority, you tend to see it in a certain way. Analysts, too, may get caught up in self-deception, as they may have been caught up in previous beliefs and an atmosphere where challenging

those beliefs was not allowed [13]. An important aspect is the process of highlighting particular evidence and suppressing other evidence in the service of trying to influence a target's behavior or beliefs. Perhaps the most important consideration in this case lies in *an identity that hinged on proactivity* towards invasion of Iraq. The nature of the proactivity was captured by the chief of CIA field operations, who asserted, "There was no doubt in the minds of everyone who worked at the CIA that the administration was headed in one direction and that we were supposed to follow. . . . Our leaders set the course" (Drumheller, 2006, p. 86; see also Pillar, 2006; Lang, 2004). Kelly noted bits of this proactive sensemaking in the British government's dossier whereby evidence that supported the existence of WMD was highlighted or 'sexed up' and counter-evidence was eliminated or limited. This proclivity towards proactivity may have increased Kelly's cognitive dissonance so he set out to update how people made sense of this evidence. But this retrospective sensemaking was discouraged and even became the source of disciplinary action. An important factor in this story became Kelly's relationship to the press, because this relationship threatened the existing majority belief system about WMD in Iraq.

Five aspects of sensemaking – (1) identity, (2) proactivity, (3) updating, (4) relationships, and (5) highlighting or suppressing evidence – represent a possible formula for how suppression of dissent is unethical. Meaning making best occurs by negotiating majority and dissenting opinions. Suppression of dissent does not allow for adequate meaning making, but short circuits the process. This is key, because the suppression of a minority opinion in Dr. Kelly's case prompted action to rectify this through his existing relationships with external stakeholders such as the press.

## VI. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Our characterization of the ethics of the suppression of dissent as a process of sensemaking contributes to our thinking about behavior in organizations in several ways. First, it moves the conversation of ethics away from normative labels of bad people completing deceitful and unethical acts to an interpretive approach of how people construct meaning in concert with others. This is consistent with a casuistry approach to ethics [21].

Second, it shows how the process of dissent is normalized in organizations and is not always a deviant or rare event motivated by deceit, corruption, fraud, or other negative variables.

However, suppression of dissent can lead to negative organizational outcomes such as deceit, corruption, and fraud.

Third, it highlights the difficulty of dissent for organizational actors. The anxiety that individuals experience when their mental models differ from the 'accepted' or majority view causes dissonance, and the mechanism for reduction of this dissonance is self-deception. These scripts that individuals create to rationalize and make sense of their actions are oftentimes in context or aligned with the scripts

that are created with other actors. Thus, further work needs to be done on understanding how intent and alignment with workplace norms plays a part in dissent (Robinson and Ryff, 1999).

Fourth, and finally, this research supports calls for conceptualizations of business ethics that account for the role of power in organizations and the different consequences that occur for the majority voice versus the minority voice (Robin, 2009). Sensemaking is about constraints that are enacted and created by the actors involved in organizations.

This also carries implications for managers in practice. Some of the practical factors of this research include the system of meaning making to which managers adhere. It is managers, after all, that (1) value or reject the identities formed in organizations, (2) accept or discredit meanings of actions, (3) set the standards of accuracy used in organizations, and (4) attune to which cues are highlighted or suppressed.

## VII. CONCLUSION

A sensemaking approach to ethics compels us to look for explanations for ethics in terms of how people create meaning by suppressing dissent and how this process is normalized. The case of Dr. Kelly provided data for how meaning emerges through identity maintenance, proactivity, updating, power relationships, and highlighting or suppressing evidence. The trade-offs between identity maintenance and stakeholder satisfaction enlist a compelling force for actions that will be judged by others.

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