

Our Methodological Challenges with a Multi-level Archival Study of Strategizing in an Extreme Context

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Abstract

This paper describes methodological challenges when conducting multi-level archival research of strategizing in extreme contexts. Strategizing in extreme circumstances is methodologically tricky, especially given the complexities between the individual and organizational levels throughout time. This study demonstrates how these two levels interact in five sub-processes: sensemaking, organizational learning, producing, prioritizing, and ethical decision-making, and how these sub-processes are essential in defining and reshaping strategy in four extreme circumstances. By showcasing a glimpse of a vignette, we frame our methodological and complexity challenges encountered in a field context.

Introduction

This paper presents some of our methodological struggles with a multi-level archival study of strategizing in extreme contexts as experienced by members of the international humanitarian organization Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières (better known worldwide as MSF). Strategizing in extreme contexts is methodologically challenging, especially considering the intricacies between the individual and organizational levels over time. This paper shows how these two levels interact in five sub-processes: sensemaking, organizational learning, creating, prioritizing, and ethical decision-making, and how these sub-processes are critical in shaping and reshaping strategy in four extreme contexts. Extreme context research (ECR) is becoming increasingly popular in management and organization studies (MOS), as already shown by the evolution of the number of articles published in leading journals between 1980 and 2015 (see Hällgren, Rouleau, & De Rond, 2018, p. 116). This increasing attention to extremes may reflect an awareness of the uncertainties and impacts of extreme events for individuals, organizations, and societies, but also the unusual occasion that extremes offer to investigate “hard-to-get-at organizational phenomena” (Hällgren et al., 2018, p. 112).

An extreme context is defined “as an environment where one or more extreme events are occurring or are likely to occur that may exceed the organisation's capacity to prevent and result in an extensive and intolerable magnitude of physical, psychological, or material consequences to—or in close physical or psycho-social proximity to – organisation members” (Hannah, Uhl-Bien, Avolio, & Cavarretta, 2009, p. 898). The complex nature of extreme events has encouraged researchers to adopt “unconventional methodological perspectives and practices” to study organizations in extreme contexts (Buchanan & Denyer, 2013, p. 205). Using commissioned archival reports as the primary and sole data source to study the unfolding strategizing process, as we did, is considered unconventional in strategic management. Nevertheless, it can be both empirically and methodologically very insightful.

Methodological Challenges

Data Collection Challenges

The data set comprises secondary documentary data, more precisely, four organizational archival reports. These reports had been approved by the organization’s editorial committee and published and shared publicly by MSF. The reports were found by chance when searching for archival documents of the organization to find out about its history. Qualitative research generally depends on access to individuals and spaces within an organization to collect data through observations or interviews (Yates, 2014). Access to appropriate data for research is usually negotiated and rarely easy. However, this secondary documentary data allows online access without restrictions on publication use or citation. Access is one of the reasons why archival data can be fascinating for qualitative researchers. For example, archival data may become available to researchers following legal or governmental proceedings or whistleblowing actions, thus providing unique opportunities to learn more about hard-to-get-at phenomena like corporate scandals or hard-to-reach organizations (Monahan & Fisher, 2015). Interviewing is the most common mode of data collection in qualitative research (Bevan, 2014), and archival data is usually collected to supplement interview or observational data. However, in ECR, it can be risky for the qualitative researcher to collect data directly in the field, as experienced by Jané, Fernandez, and Hällgren (2022). Also, when case studies are historical and enough time has passed, it may be impossible to gain access to those who worked in the organization during that period. The observations in the organization no longer provide the appropriate data to study these cases. In those instances, the researcher must find the

appropriate data in archives (Bansal, Smith, & Vaara, 2018; Clark & Rowlinson, 2004). Interestingly, the analysis of historical data can reveal “the social, cultural, and institutional construction of organizational and managerial phenomena in historical context” (Bansal et al., 2018, p. 1192), therefore, can provide insightful contributions for MOS.

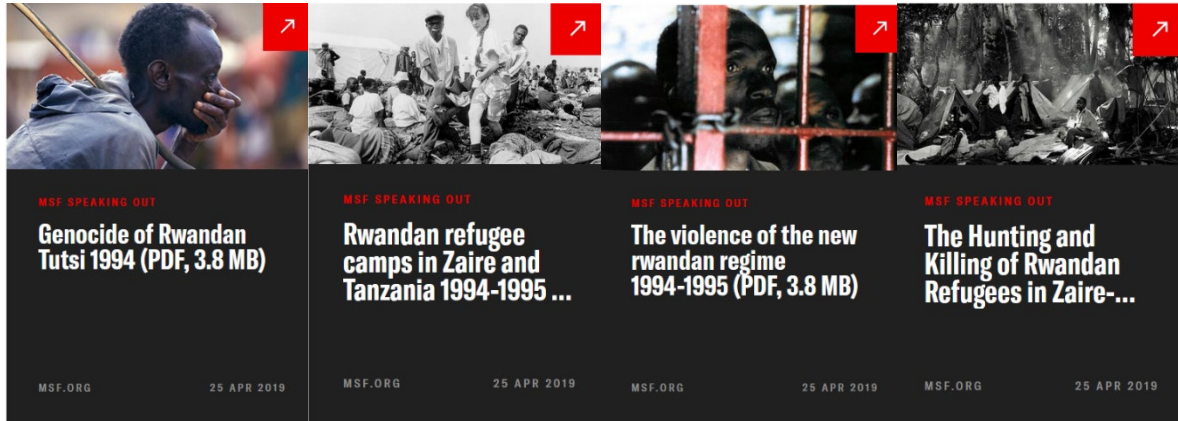


FIGURE 1: Primary source of data: four organizational archival reports

The 578 pages of archival reports represent four cases of the organization MSF strategizing in an extreme context. They are composed of heterogeneous data, including interview extracts, communications with strategists (i.e., presidents, directors, program managers, coordinators, emergency cell workers), field diaries, press releases, newspaper articles, annual reports, situation reports, video transcripts, minutes of board meetings and timelines. Succinct descriptions of events from the MSF director of studies punctuate all these data. Furthermore, the documents that were the sources of the archival reports had been created by multiple internal and external actors in the organization. Data heterogeneity makes it extremely rich in information and, therefore, a valuable data source for this research. The abundance of data is an opportunity to study the complex process of strategizing over time in extreme contexts and see the interaction between the individual and organizational levels. While the scarcity of data would not allow us to gain a rich understanding and theorize from the findings, the abundance of data can also create challenges for the qualitative researcher, one being the data analysis process more generally.

Data analysis

Analysis of archival data tends to be under-explained. Empirical articles typically devote little attention to analyzing archival data, primarily because in qualitative research,

archival data are mainly used as supplementary data sources. Therefore, they tend to receive less methodological attention than interviews or field observations.

The analysis process we have used follows the ‘1st-order/2nd-order method’ developed by Dennis Gioia (Gioia, 2014; Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013) combined with visual mapping to get a better understanding of the timelines. The archival data were imported into *NVivo*, a widely used qualitative data handling software that facilitates the analysis process in assisting the identification, classification, and mapping for analysis purposes. Then, first-order categories representing the “informant-centric terms” (Gioia, 2014) are created. However, using *NVivo* is insufficient to show the ‘time’ element, which is crucial in process studies, especially when studying four cases that sometimes overlap. In looking for ways to integrate the temporal dimension in the analysis, it was decided to use an additional software (*time.graphics*) to create a timeline incorporating the four cases that could be easily edited and downloaded.



FIGURE 3: Screenshot zooming in on the shared timeline of three cases from March 1994 to December 1994 (*time.graphics*)

Second-order themes are elaborated and aggregated at the following analysis stage into “research-centric concepts” (Gioia, 2014). They result from the researchers’ efforts to understand the data by making relationships between identified first-order categories and disregarding others. A data structure is built from this iterative analysis process as a convenient

image of the analysis process from the first-order categories grounded in data to the aggregate dimensions formulated by the researcher.

During the analysis, vignettes were also written to develop the narratives of the strategizing process. These vignettes are used to illustrate findings. While the vignette technique was developed to collect qualitative data by presenting research participants with situations that invite responses in particular scenarios (Jenkins & Noone, 2019), vignettes can also be used to analyze and represent the data. That is because vignettes “are revelatory of particular concepts [...] bringing them to life by describing an actual event or incident in an evocative way” (Jarzabkowski, Bednarek, & Lê, 2014, p. 280). Therefore, using the vignette technique “can have the effect of helping researchers to make their data “come alive” by bringing research audiences closer to a direct experiencing of the issues under investigation” (Jenkins & Noone, 2019, p. 12).

Reporting Challenges

Using vignettes, we explain how the strategizing process in extreme contexts is negotiated between the individual and the organizational levels at MSF. This strategizing process further consists of the sub-processes of sensemaking, organizational learning, creating, prioritizing, and ethical decision-making, which are not sequentially phased but overlap and inform each other. In what follows, we provide a glimpse of a vignette to highlight the complexity of our data analysis process. The main complexity was coping with the abundance of data collected and reported on by others, analyzing these data in a trustworthy manner while unearthing contributions that go beyond detached descriptions of the obvious.

One exemplary vignette

Analysis of the archival data from the first case – the 1994 genocide in Rwanda – first reveals a failure of sensemaking due to the commitment of organizational members to a wrong framing based on organizational norms and institutionalized practices. This failure prevented an adequate and timely response to the situation until sensemaking through individual intuition reshaped the strategy. The new sensemaking initiated organizational learning and created unprecedented organizational actions.

At the individual level, organizational members who experienced extreme events in the field misinterpreted the contextual cues. When confronted with such cues (e.g. machete wounds), the organization's dominant narrative is that of war. This dominant response has introduced certain restrictions on members' cognition, making it much more difficult to question the context.

“It wasn't a war. But that wasn't picked up in Burundi. It was viewed with that ability of MSF of getting used to certain situations, of seeing it as somehow normal: “After all, it's war, it's horrible, that's the way it is.” A somewhat fatalistic attitude. Sometimes, there are those at MSF who think it normal that people can die without our knowing why. In Burundi, a lot of people were dying, but it was as if the MSF people thought it was normal because there was a war. They thought it normal that these people were refugees and that no one was asking why they had fled, what they had fled and who they really were. This attitude of accepting that “the world is tragic but at least we are here to help” is the reaction of an alien, of a saviour who's no longer interested in the nature of people's problems. I think the teams in Burundi and Rwanda were in hero mode. Massacres were taking place and it wasn't our problem. Our problem was to tend to the injured.” [Françoise Bouchet-Saulnier, MSF Legal Advisor (in French).]

At the organizational level, it was not part of the organization's internalized field practices or norms to question the context after extreme events.

“What seems strange to me, in hindsight, is that we in MSF, did not know what was going on. We had a lot of people in the country yet I was not aware of information from MSF people that there was this tension in the country; that the Hutu were planning to kill the Tutsi. That means that we knew nothing about the context, so what exactly were we doing? The people working for MSF Holland in Rwanda were not typical emergency types. They were people for slow, calm situations, technical people who were not concerned by the political context. [...] To tell you the truth, until the day I left, even after I arrived back in Holland, I didn't know that it was a genocide. I had never worked before in a genocide. I didn't know what a genocide was. I knew what a war was.” [Wouter Van Empelen, Emergency Cell, MSF Holland, in Rwanda in April 1994.]

I think that the analysis of the conflict in Rwanda was poor and not very relevant. Even though we'd been working there for several years, there was no thinking in the group

here, and even less internationally, that integrated the work of others to better understand the conflict. As a consequence, MSF did very little to sound the alarm about how dangerous the situation was... We didn't have much of a political understanding of the conflict. [Dr. Jean-Hervé Bradol, Rwanda Programme Manager, MSF France (in French).]

At headquarters, MSF strategists' understanding of the field context depends on interpretations made in the field. As the organization recognized, the field workers at the time lacked the expertise to assess extreme events, inform headquarters accurately and act appropriately in such an uncertain context. This situation is troubling when looking back at the origin of MSF since it was created to heal wounds, bear witness to the context, and advocate for change. It also shows the lack of organizational learning, as highlighted by the criticism made at MSF's French headquarters during a board meeting, ironically two weeks before the genocide began:

"There's a kind of 'travel agency' mentality. They go to one place and if they don't like it, they move on ... they give no thought to the political aspects: the right to asylum, why people are fleeing, the nature of the enormous conflict between Hutu and Tutsi." [Extract from Minutes of the Board Meeting of MSF France, 25 March 1994 (in French).]

Nonetheless, organizational norms blurred contextual cues until one individual questioned this sensemaking with a new meaning. Here, it happened intuitively.

"Reginald wrote a paper that used the term 'genocide'. I did not think that the argument was very good, but he had sensed it. And in this business it is necessary that at a certain moment, people sense things. Afterwards it is important that the point is articulated, but first we need people who sense it." [Dr. Bernard Pécoul, General Director, MSF France (in French).]

Complexity Challenges

This vignette highlights the power of narratives in organizational sensemaking, in line with the great interest in studying storytelling to understand organizational sensemaking (Abolafia, 2010; Boudes & Laroche, 2009; Brown, 2003, 2005; Taylor & Lerner, 1996). MSF field workers had a similar experience to the smokejumpers who landed at Mann Gulch when they expected a 10:00 fire and rationalized this image tragically for too long (Weick, 1993).

The commitment to a specific framing has been identified as a common source of failed sensemaking in extreme contexts (Cornelissen, Mantere, & Vaara, 2014). Further, when things are misinterpreted and called what they are not, this affects the decisions made due to sensemaking. Because “people enact the environments which constrain them” (Weick, 1988, p. 305), field workers enacted the ‘war’. Sensemaking precedes action, so MSF’s actions in the field were constrained by the context of ‘war’ in which MSF became embedded.

Furthermore, it is difficult to perceive that a mistake has been made. Indeed, crises “defy interpretations and impose severe demands on sensemaking” (Weick, 1988, p. 305). The organizational blindness to the political context, the organizational members’ mental models, and the low probability of being in the midst of a genocide defied the interpretation of field workers to understand the context. Later, the questioning of the organization’s sensemaking in this extreme context showed that even though the organization is one of the best-known in the world for responding to emergencies, it was ill-equipped to respond to disrupted contexts (see the distinction in Hällgren et al., 2018). Furthermore, we see how first-order sensemaking (in the field, where extreme events occur) leads to second-order sensemaking (at headquarters), giving rise to organizational learning opportunities and unprecedented actions. For instance, it led to a humanitarian organization’s call for armed intervention for the first time in history.

Conclusion

This paper presents some of our methodological struggles with a multi-level archival study of strategizing in extreme contexts. This type of research has relevance for both practice and research practice as it reveals the interplay between the individual and the organizational levels when the stakes of strategizing are exceptionally high for individuals and the organization. This paper deepens our understanding of the methodological study of strategizing under conditions of uncertainty, which is critical in an era where extremes are no longer rare. Using vignettes, we illustrate the relationship between the two levels and the five processes that drive extreme context strategizing in an organization known to respond to extremes. Further, this paper demonstrates how archival data can, when actions and events have been extensively recorded and are accessible to the researcher, provide a rich source of data for a process study. Here, archival reports reveal the strategizing process in extreme contexts as it unfolded over time in four past cases.

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