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ANY OLD MAP WON'T DO: IMPROVING THE CREDIBILITY OF
STORYTELLING IN SENSEMAKING SCHOLARSHIP

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Any Old Map Won't Do: Improving the Credibility of Storytelling in Sensemaking Scholarship

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Abstract: This paper is motivated by James March's recent emphasis on the credibility of the stories we tell in organization studies. It focuses on the story of the map of the Pyrenees that got a group of Hungarian soldiers safely back to camp in the Alps. It traces the trajectory of the story through the organization literature and presents some newly discovered sources that predate its entry into this field. On this basis, it critiques Weick's "storytelling credentials", and ours. I argue that we must reject the idea that "any old map will do" for leaders and that "any old story will do" for scholars. A more adequate practical criticism is suggested to improve the credibility of, not just our scholarship, but the leadership of the organizations we study.

Introduction

Sometime in the mid-1980s, Karl Weick told Bob Engel one of his favourite stories. Weick, it should be remembered, was at this time completing his tenure as the editor of the world's leading organization studies journal, the *Administrative Science Quarterly*. Engel, meanwhile, was a top Wall Street executive. Indeed, he was about to take leadership of a new strategic planning group at Morgan Guaranty (New York Times 1987), an investment company which would soon again become known as J.P. Morgan, and then, albeit after Engel's death, as JPMorgan Chase, one of the handful of mega-banks that dominate global finance today. The mid-1980s were, in fact, a pivotal moment in Wall Street's rise to dominance (Johnson and Kwak 2010: 56ff). At Morgan Guaranty, Engel was in charge of reorganizing the company into precisely the sort of large integrated operation (Gilpin and Schmidt 1986) that constitute the famously "interconnected" world of finance today, and which many commentators have held responsible for the financial crisis that has been on everyone's minds since 2008.

The story that Weick told Engel, however, had nothing to do with finance and very little to do with strategy. It was about a group of Hungarian soldiers who had gotten lost in a snowstorm in the Alps. After three days of snow, just when they had given up all hope of finding their way back, one of them produced a map. "This calmed them down," the story goes. They pitched camp, and the next day used the map to find their way back to camp. Their lieutenant asked to see the map and discovered, to his surprise, that it wasn't a map

of the Alps at all. It was a map of the Pyrenees. From this story, which he “hauls out every chance [he] get[s]”, Weick drew a now-iconic conclusion for sensemaking research. “When you are lost, any old map will do” (Weick, 1995: 54).

But the insight is fraught with ambiguity. While it has an air of universality, Weick himself would hesitate to say that it belongs to the *theory* of sensemaking, which is not a “tacit set of propositions to be refined and tested, but an observer’s manual or set of raw materials for disciplined imagination” (1995: 18). The story is intended to shape our thinking about sensemaking, to serve as a “frame” or “gestalt” (Weick 2004) for observing organizations, and while this is sometimes all he takes theory to be, what he calls “theorizing” is not quite what we normally call “theory” (Weick 1992). It is perhaps most accurate to describe “any old map will do” as Ian Colville does, namely, as the “moral” of a “story” (Colville & Murphy 2006; Colville & Pye 2010), which then becomes a kind of parable or allegory. It expresses a ‘truth’, but not a literal one. Indeed, the story’s place in organization science has been established by what John Van Maanen (1995) calls “allegoric breaching”, which he identified as the signature style of Weick’s sensemaking research. Van Maanen has famously argued that this style is a theory in its own right, just as Weick argued of “disciplined imagination” (1989)—“style *as* theory”, as the titles put it, “theory *as* disciplined imagination”.

Van Maanen accordingly encourages us to approach Weick’s theory, even as critics, through his style, carefully observing his “literary performances”. More recently, James March has gone so far as to call into question the distinction between research writing and literary composition itself. “The stories of novelists and social scientists are judged, in part, on whether they are credible,” he says, “and it seems unlikely that the assessment of credibility is enormously different in the two cases” (2010: 69). As examples, March suggests the stories of Anton Chekhov and Karl Weick, the source of whose credibility he will not “pretend” to be able to differentiate, and what he says here of novelists and social scientists can, of course, be applied equally to poets and organization theorists. Weick, for example, has noted that “some of the more popular parts of the organizational behaviour books I’ve written have been the poems I *cite*” (2004: 653, his emphasis) and the most popular of these poems is probably Miroslav Holub’s “Brief Thoughts on Maps” (1977), which is the basis of the story about the soldiers in the Alps.

This provides us with a promising approach to reading Weick. Just as there may or may not be an “enormous difference” between how Chekhov and Weick establish their credentials as storytellers, so too may there be interesting points of comparison between how Holub and Weick present the story of the soldiers in the Alps. And just as the meaning of one of Chekhov’s stories belongs less to Chekhov himself than to its tradition of reception, so too must we read the story of the map in the light of how it used in organization studies. The story gives us an ideal opportunity to compare how the credibility of the story is established first in a work of literature (a poem) and then in a piece of scholarship (a journal article and a book on “the foundations of organization theory”). The two accounts, after all, are virtually *identical* since Weick originally plagiarized Holub’s poem as his own prose (Basbøll & Graham 2006; Basbøll 2010), and with the content being thus largely indistinguishable, we can focus all the more easily on the context and framing of the story.

To improve the richness of the discussion, I will also present two versions of the story that have hitherto been unknown to organization scholars, and that predate the 1977 publication of Holub’s poem. Both critics of Weick’s work, like Rowlinson (2004: 617), and more appreciative readers, like Mintzberg, Ahlstrand and Lampel (1998: 160n), have raised concerns about its historical accuracy. While details that are currently unknown would be of interest to both scholars and leaders, however, I am aware of no attempt to track down further sources to confirm or to expand the account that now circulates in the literature. Neither what happened that week in the Alps, nor when and where it happened, or whether it happened at all, has occupied organization scholars. It has certainly not been approached as an empirical question to be settled by further research. As Weick says, he first began to tell the story “long before internet search was a common form of inquiry” (2006: 193). Fortunately, the increasing digitalization of our research archives, especially through ambitious projects like Google Books, is making it increasingly likely that more information will turn up even when the story itself is not explicitly indexed. Indeed, it was while searching for interesting *new* uses of the anecdote that I recently and quite unexpectedly discovered two versions of the story that had been presented at conferences in 1971 and 1972, i.e., fully five years before Holub’s poem was published in the *Times Literary Supplement*. These accounts were published in the relevant proceedings in 1972 and 1974 respectively, and I here make them available to management theorists for the first time. Importantly, they were presented in a context more closely related to the

ostensible source of the anecdote, namely, the Nobel Prize-winning physiologist Albert Szent-Gyorgyi. This makes them interesting as new documentation for a very familiar story (albeit only as documentation that the story was told, not for the facts that the story relates) and, on close reading, we find that they in part corroborate and in part contradict the version that Weick derived from Holub. Moreover, they settle (or at least reduce the complexity of) the question Weick leaves open (e.g., 1995: 55): did the leader of the soldiers know it was the wrong map?

By drawing these additional sources into our account of the “incident” I also hope to raise questions about the credibility of the stories we tell in organization studies. My concerns go to the care we practice in our scholarship, and to raise them I will begin by retracing the reception of Weick’s anecdote in the management literature, from its first appearance in 1982 to three recent mentions in 2006 and 2010. I then offer a close analysis of the similarities and differences between Weick’s and Holub’s accounts of the story and, contrary to March, an assessment of the significant differences in both the credibility of each story and its basis. To explore that basis further, I then introduce the two newly discovered versions of the story, which, I argue, force us to rethink the conclusions we draw from the example or, at the very least, provide additional material for thinking about the importance of accurate maps in a crisis. I conclude with some thoughts about the need for more rigorous scholarship to underpin our storytelling—any old tale, it seems to me, will simply not do. While I am motivated, in part, by Anne-Wil Harzing’s (2002) disturbing question “Are our referencing errors undermining our scholarship and credibility?” the problems go quite a bit deeper.

The mundane realism of maps

Weick appears to have told the story of the map of the Pyrenees for the first time, at least in print, in a paper he co-authored with Robert Swieringa in 1982 and published in the *Journal of Accounting Research* (Swieringa and Weick 1982). It here appears in what would become its classic form, destined to be told and retold in the management literature, often verbatim, though it is rarely cited from this paper. It is retold in the same words in Weick’s own uses of the story as well, beginning already in 1983, and continuing in 1987, 1990, 1995 (probably the most commonly used citation), and 2001 (which reprints 1987). While he always presents it as a *true* story, i.e., as something that actually happened, it is

fair to say that Weick uses the story as an allegory, i.e., a story from which readers are supposed to draw some important “moral” about different but obviously related matters.

Not surprisingly, both the allegorical lesson and the implicit reader of the allegory change over time. The story begins as an allegory for researchers, then becomes an allegory for planners and strategists, and at one point once again becomes an allegory for researchers. Indeed, as we will see, before the story was told as a poem to a general audience, and then by an esteemed social scientist (Weick) to his peers, it was told (and retold) as an allegory by an esteemed *natural* scientist (Szent-Gyorgyi) to *his* peers. How the story became an allegory for organization scholars, then, is itself an interesting story, worthy, perhaps, of becoming an allegory in its own right. The moral of that story, I hope, will become clear as we proceed.

After telling the story for the first time, Swieringa and Weick gloss it by way of a simile. “Experiments are like maps,” they explain. “They help observers get their bearings and they animate them. Experiments generate outcomes that help people discover what is happening and what needs to be explained” (Swieringa and Weick 1982: 71). While they use the story to “illustrate the basic argument” of the paper, they do not return to the story explicitly at the end, so to derive the moral we will have to restate their argument. In essence, their paper is a critique of the pursuit of “mundane realism” in experimentation, which they define as the extent to which “laboratory events are similar to real-world events” (Swieringa and Weick 1982: 57), i.e., whether the laboratory conditions accurately simulate or represent the world the experimenters want to learn something about. This ambition, argue Swieringa and Weick, may not always lead researchers in the right direction. In some cases, they explain, “experimental realism”, which they define as the degree to which experimental situations “are believed, attended to, and taken seriously” (ibid.) by the experimental subjects, is a more fitting aim. If “experiments are like maps”, then the moral of the story of the soldiers in the Alps is not hard to discern: the “mundane realism” of a map, i.e., the degree to which it accurately represents the territory, is less important than its, let’s say, “experiential realism”, i.e., the degree to which it is “believed, attended to, and taken seriously” by the people who are lost. Allegorically, then, the moral is that, as long the subjects take it seriously, it does not matter whether the experiment simulates a situation that might actually take place in the real world.

From experiments to plans

Even as Weick was developing the story as an allegory for researchers with Swieringa, it appears, he was also thinking of it as an allegory for managers (Weick 1983: 48-9). This time, however, he would draw the moral, “any old map will do”, more explicitly, while reusing the exact same simile he and Swieringa had invoked for experiments, only this time for plans.

Apparently, when you're lost, any old map will give you the confidence to go on. By extension, when you're confused about productivity, any old plan will do. Plans are like maps. They animate people. And this is the most crucial thing they do. When people actually do things, they generate concrete outcomes that help them discover what is occurring, what needs to be explained, and what should be done next. (Weick 1983: 49)

We do well to note the shift of emphasis here. While people were previously said to use maps also to “get their bearings”, which is of course the most familiar use of them, their “most crucial” function now is only to “animate” people. But is this right at the non-allegorical level, i.e., is it true that literal maps “most crucially” animate people? In fact, it seems that the simile largely breaks down in this application of the story, where the analogy surely runs *the opposite way*. Plans are not *like* maps *in the sense* that they “animate” people; rather, plans animate people and maps orient them (help them to get their bearings). So it would be more accurate to say that *in the story* the map is more like a plan than a map. It gets the soldiers going but does not (it appears) give them any useful “bearing”, which would presumably, as Mintzberg, Ahlstrand and Lampel (1998: 160n) have argued, lead them off a cliff. This becomes all the more clear as we read on:

Plans, even when they are wrong, are useful because they serve as a pretext to start acting. What managers keep forgetting is that it is the action, not the plan, that explains their success. They keep giving credit to the wrong thing—the plan—and, having made this error, spend more time planning so that they'll have more good outcomes. They are astonished when more planning improves nothing. (Weick 1983: 49)

This may be true of plans, but is much less likely to be true of maps. The map normally *does* explain the success of the action, i.e., of moving in the right direction, *if the map accurately represents the territory*. When any old direction won't do, neither, one would think, will any old map.

In 1987, Weick essentially repeats the argument of his 1983 paper. This time, however, his object is the “strategic plan” instead of simply the “plan”, and it is this version that is then repeated again in *Sensemaking in Organizations* (1995: 54-5), which has become the most commonly cited source. The 1987 and 1995 versions, however, introduce a new twist. By now, Weick had told the story to Bob Engel, and Engel had responded that “that story would have been really neat if the leader out with the lost troops had known it was the wrong map and still been able to lead them back” (2001 [1987]: 346; 1995: 55). Notice that a possibility is here introduced by telling the story of the telling of the story. As we will see below, this narrative frame—that it is story that is told—was actually the standard way to present the story until Weick and Swieringa (1982) and Weick (1983) reframed it authoritatively for management scholars as “an incident that happened”. That this reframing of a story as an incident is here a purely rhetorical move, however, can be seen in Weick’s inability to tell Engel whether or not what he is suggesting really happened. At a practical level, it remains ‘just a story’.

Stories as equivocal

I will return to the sense in which “incident” embellishes “story” and shifts the ground of the account’s credibility, and I will also present versions of the story in which the question Engel raises is settled. For now, however, I want to emphasize that up to at least 1995, Weick is oscillating between two explanations of the success of the map: first, “if you have seen one mountain range, you have seen them all”, i.e., any map of mountains is, in a “mundane” sense, as good as any other map of mountains); second, though “their problem would have deepened materially” (1987: 222; 2001: 346) the troops could have been animated even by a map of Disneyland—albeit presumably only if they didn’t know it was such a map, which would mean that Engel’s proposed leader would have been obliged to lie to them. Indeed, Colville & Pye (2010: 374) explicitly endorse this approach in the case of Eli Lilly’s leadership, an interpretation which we will get to below. On this logic, in any case, any old piece of paper that is *believed* to be a map (of the relevant area) will

do, again suggesting something more like “experimental” realism. The main problem with a map of Disneyland, it is argued, is not that it would be inaccurate, but that it would not look convincingly like a map of the Alps. The artifact must simply be a plausible representation of the territory that the sensemakers are trying to navigate. Taken together, these two explanations, which are essentially *alternative* explanations that cover more or less the whole field of possibilities, constitute an act of what Weick would no doubt call “equivocation” (1995: 61).

Outside the sensemaking tradition, however, the discovery of equivocation in a piece of scholarship normally undermines the credibility of an argument. And it is easy to see how it would do so in this case. If the map merely “animated” the soldiers, but did not actually guide them, then “any old map will do” means one thing; if the soldiers actually followed the map, i.e., used it to “make sense” of the peaks and valleys around them, then “any old map will do” means something altogether different. The difference is crucial because it will affect the advice we give leaders in situations like the one that the story describes; indeed, it will affect what we mean when we advise them to go ahead and “use” whatever map they have. Do we mean, “Use it to animate your team *but make sure no one actually sees it and tries to find their bearings with it,*” or do we mean, “Go ahead, trust the map even if you’re not sure it’s accurate because you’ll just use it to cue your sensemaking anyway (and to do that, in fact, you have to *believe*)”? If we can’t decide between these two alternatives then “any old map will do” means nothing at all. That is, we don’t know when—i.e., under what circumstances—it is true or false, making it impossible to apply in practice.

“Any old story will do”

Equivocation has not hindered (and has no doubt simply fostered) the circulation and influence of the story. In a 1998 address, Weick boldly applied the story to research methodology. Seven years later, Barbara Czarniawska (2005: 274) quoted his suggestion with approval. “If any old map will do to help you find your way out of the Alps,” Weick had said, “then surely any old story will do to help you find your way out of puzzles in the human condition.” This returns us to the original point about “experimental realism”: as long the story is “believed, attended to, and taken seriously” by the reader it does not matter whether it reflects events that actually took place.

This is also, of course, why Czarniawska (2005: 274) encourages us to “suspend disbelief” and “trust the author” when reading Weick’s stories—and that only their plausibility, not their veridicality, matters. Weick’s work, she says, “is always attentive to the needs of the field of practice of management, and is based on *whatever material he judges adequate* for his reasoning” (2005: 275, my emphasis). Indeed, there is good reason (Bottom 2009: 275) to think that business scholars have favored the attentions of “the field of practice” over the critical sanction of their peers in the field of scholarship, a sort of “anything goes” approach.

But notice that anything does not quite go here. On the logic of Weick’s argument, the truth of the story about the map of the Pyrenees is absolutely crucial; *if* any old map will do, he says, *then* any old story will do as well. Let’s leave aside the question of whether maps and stories, mountain ranges and human conditions, are sufficiently similar to support this argument—the analogy can be argued back and forth—and accept, for the sake of argument, that his logic holds. The implication of the truth of the Alps story is then rather shocking. As a basis for thinking about what it means to be human, *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* is now as good as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Anton Chekhov’s “In the Ravine” is, recalling March’s argument, as good as Karl Weick’s “The Collapse of Sensemaking”, his famous paper about the Mann Gulch disaster (1993). *Surely* (to use Weick’s word) this is nonsense. And now, if the consequent turns out to be absurd, we must question the antecedent. Perhaps any old map *won’t* do to get us safely out the Alps, after all.

Myth and memory

To round out this overview of the history of the story in the management literature, let me note two mentions of the story from 2010, one of which also hearkens back to a 2006 study. These mentions not only show that the myth is very much alive, but exhibit the underlying anxiety (in Bloom’s 1997 sense) that goes with its questionable provenance. The first is Sally Maitlis and Scott Sonenshein’s (2010) use of it in their retrospective look at Weick famous paper on the Bhopal Disaster (Weick 1988). Here’s their account along with a bit of context:

Yet, in other cases, commitment serves as a vital resource from which to construct meaning to help adapt to crisis conditions. . . . [We see] it in Weick's (1979) retelling of a story of lost soldiers who safely found their way through the Alps by committing to a map that later turned out to be of the Pyrenees. This shows that a tenacious commitment to even the wrong plan provides a foundation for acting that is vital to keep people moving forward, constructing new meanings, and ultimately averting a more dangerous crisis. In this example, commitment did not create a blind spot but facilitated action that kept panic at bay and allowed the soldiers to keep moving so they could update the sense they were making. (Maitlis and Sonenshein 2010: 562)

That it here appears as a myth can be seen in the obvious reliance on memory to tell it. Memory is of course imperfect, and Maitlis and Sonenshein make a number of significant errors in the details: first, the soldiers did not in fact make it *through* the Alps but *back* to camp—that is, they most likely made sense (if they did) of ground they had already covered, not unfamiliar territory. (We don't know for sure, but Maitlis and Sonenshein implicitly rule this possibility out, even though it is the most likely one.) Second, the map didn't "keep them moving"; it "calmed them down"; it got them to stop moving, make camp, and sit out the snow storm; it was not *action* that kept panic at bay but *knowledge*. (We'll see that this is important later on.) Finally, there is nothing in the story, or in Weick's interpretation of it, that tells us anything about how "committed" to or "tenacious" about the map they were. (Indeed, we will see that they may not have been very committed to it at all by the time the snow stopped and they got moving again.) This is merely something Maitlis and Sonenshein are interested in, and like any good myth, the well-known story makes itself available for whatever application they like.

Their mistakes all stem from a basic lack of source criticism, which becomes apparent when we in fact look at their source. They cite Weick 1979, i.e., *The Social Psychology of Organizing*, but the story does not actually appear there and they therefore can't provide us with a page reference either. Likewise, a little bit of research into the source of the story would have turned up a note by Henrik Graham and I from 2006 (Basbøll and Graham 2006) that reveals the true relation between Weick's copy and Holub's original, i.e., that the former plagiarizes the latter. On that basis, it would not have been possible to characterize Weick's use of the story merely as a "retelling". Certainly, we are entitled to

know where he is “retelling” it from, i.e., that it is a story from a war already retold in a poem. I will get into this issue in greater detail below.

Hidden transformations

Ian Colville and Annie Pye’s (2010) version is puzzling in a different way, but also one that seems to be occasioned by anxiety about the provenance of the story. (Again, I use “anxiety” here in Harold Bloom’s [1997] sense. It is the worry about “originality” and “influence” that leads poets to appropriate and misread the work of their precursors. See also Basbøll 2010.) They begin by noting that “a story becomes a good story when it seems to structure and stabilise the unknown”, and they offer the map story as a narrative frame for understanding the difficult concept of sensemaking, i.e., “the ongoing, retrospective development of plausible images that rationalise what people are doing” (Weick et al., 2005: 409). The story of the soldiers in the Alps clearly provides a way for scholars to frame their understanding of this concept. Here’s how they retell Weick’s story to this end:

Sensemaking reminds me of a story. It concerns a small detachment of Hungarian soldiers who are sent out into the icy wilderness of the Alps by a young lieutenant, only to get lost in a snowstorm. Just as they fear the worst, one of the detachment finds a map which calms them down. They pitch camp, lasting out the snowstorm which blows for two days, and on the third day, they make their way back to the base station with the aid of the map. The lieutenant who had sent them out asks to see their map, only to find that on closer inspection, it is a map of the Pyrenees not the Alps (précis from Weick, 1995:54). (Colville & Pye 2010: 374)

The reference to Weick in “précis” is their own and they gloss the passage by saying it “provides a human example of sensemaking in action in the form of a story”. A mere definition, they note, “is likely to increase equivocality as to what sensemaking is rather than reduce it”, especially if you are unfamiliar with the concept at the outset, while the story “leave[s] room for the reader to impose some interpretation of their own”, it “remain[s] open to variant readings, subject to the vagaries of intentional states undetermined” (Colville & Pye 2010: 374). Interestingly, Colville and Pye’s retelling

appropriates Weick's "I" through paraphrase; this is a story, they seem to say, that anyone can tell without attribution; just say, "I am reminded of a story". Indeed, Weick suggested as much when he boldly declared, after his plagiarism had been demonstrated, that he would do the same thing today if he found himself in the same situation, except that he would add a footnote declaring "source unknown" (Weick 2006: 193). Like a myth, he seems to say, this story is public property.

Indeed, we do well to notice what Colville and Pye achieve in their "précis. Most importantly, they replace an instance of plagiarism with a perfectly good paraphrase. In so doing they solve a problem that others, who know of both Weick's and Holub's versions, have dealt with less elegantly. These authors sometimes quote Holub correctly but then incorrectly cite Weick for the quotation (e.g., "as quoted in Weick 1995: 54"). Colville and Pye, however, still fail to attribute the story to its proper source, namely, Holub. Interestingly, they go on to tell an interesting story of their own, which neatly parallels Weick's conversation with Bob Engel, and directly addresses the question of provenance. Stories, "just like good jokes," they note,

tend to travel quickly and invariably become dislocated from their origins. For example, the story of the soldiers in the Alps was retold to us recently by the HR Director of Eli Lilly and Company, a global pharmaceutical company, *who had no idea of its origins*. (2010: 374)

But those origins, it would seem, have been actively obscured by the very scholar (namely, Weick) that, I presume, Colville and Pye tell us the HR director "had no idea about", a formulation that resonates nicely with Weick's response to the charge of plagiarism:

By the time I began to see the Alps story as an example of cognition in the path of the action, *I had lost the original article* containing Holub's poem and I was not even sure where I had read the story. This occurred in the early 1980's which was quite some time before internet search was a common form of inquiry. I reconstructed the story as best I could. I obviously *had no idea* whether the reconstruction was close to the original or not since *I had no original in hand for comparison*. (Weick 2006: 193, my emphasis)

This is what Weick elsewhere calls “moves of the imagination working within soft constraints” (2004: 654), where he also explains the originality of his contribution to organization studies by quoting Valéry: “We say that an author is original when we cannot trace the hidden transformations that others underwent in his mind; we mean to say that the dependence of what he does on what others have done is excessively complex and irregular” (Valéry, quoted in Weick 2004: 654). Weick’s “hidden transformations”, however, while certainly irregular, are by no means complex, nor particularly “in his mind”. They are just the elision of references to the sources he uses. The myths of sensemaking scholarship, it would seem, are produced simply by *hiding* the sources that we draw our stories from, giving our readers (including the leaders we write about) “no idea” where they come from, or how credible they are.

The art of collage

In her defense—indeed, celebration—of Weick’s lack of source criticism, Barbara Czarniawska has called him a “master of collage” (2005: 275). Ian Colville, on this view, would appear to be Weick’s apprentice, as can be seen in a 2006 paper, co-authored with Anthony Murphy, who also seems to be the “HR director” mentioned by Colville and Pye. Colville and Murphy offer the following interpretation of the story:

The moral of the story is **that when you are lost, any old map will do**. The story demonstrates very clearly that it is **what people do** when they are uncertain that is important, rather than **what they plan**. By analogy, **strategic plans function a lot like maps** in which the crucial factor is not the map (or strategy) but the fact that you have something which will get you started on a path to the future. **Once people begin to act (enactment), they generate tangible outcomes (cues) in some context (social) and that helps them discover (retrospect) what is occurring (ongoing), what needs to be explained (plausibility) and what should be done next (identity enhancement)**. [A footnote here refers, correctly, to page 55 of Weick 1995] The bracketed words refer to the seven properties of sensemaking and help to emphasise the similitude between strategy, organization, leadership and sensemaking.

The case of Lilly outlined here exemplifies a compelling narrative **faced by many contemporary leaders, where ‘followers’ feel themselves to be lost and insecure, while the ‘leader’ also shares uncertainty about which path to take. The plan (or map) will not** of itself actually tell them the route to take: **the job of the leader in this situation is one of instilling some confidence in people to start them moving in some general direction, and to be sure that they look closely at cues created by their action, so that they learn where they are and where they want to be.** (Colville & Murphy 2006: 671, my boldface)

The boldfaced passages reproduce essentially verbatim material from two passages from Weick 1995 (page 54-5), without properly marking their debt to this source with quotation marks:

This incident raises the intriguing possibility **that when you are lost, any old map will do.** For example, extended to the issue of strategy, maybe when you are confused, any old strategic plan will do. **Strategic plans are a lot like maps.** They animate and orient people. **Once people begin to act (enactment), they generate tangible outcomes (cues) in some context (social), and this helps them discover (retrospect) what is occurring (ongoing), what needs to be explained (plausibility), and what should be done next (identity enhancement).** Managers keep forgetting that it is what they do, not what they plan, that explains their success. They keep giving credit to the wrong thing—namely, the plan—and having made this error...

At this point, Weick describes his conversation with Bob Engel, which is very much like the role of the Eli Lilly leadership in the Colville and Pye paper. Weick then continues:

What is interesting about Engel’s twist to the story is that he has described a **situation that most leaders face. Followers are often lost and even the leader is not sure where to go.** All the leaders know is that **the plan or the map** they have in front of them are not sufficient to get them out. **What the leader has to do, when faced with this situation, is instill some confidence**

in people, get them moving some general direction, and be sure they look closely at cues created by their actions so that they learn where they were and get some better idea of where they are and where they want to be.

Weick's theoretical prose, then, has simply been interlaced with Colville and Murphy's case material, giving the appearance of analysis without any need for critical thinking. This is especially telling since they use both the story and the experience of a top executive in the very same way that Weick does. Indeed, the Weick-Engel conversation is obviously the template for the way the story is interpreted here. In Colville and Pye's (2010) paper, this move is made even more closely following Weick, where "the HR Director of Eli Lilly and Company" now plays exactly the same role as "Bob Engel of Morgan Guaranty" in Weick 1987 and 1995. But neither Colville and Murphy (2006) nor Colville and Pye (2010) explicitly make the connection back to Engel's interpretation of the story. This, then, is scholarship as "collage".

Weick and Holub in the Alps

It is now time to look at the story in detail. Here is Holub's poem as it appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1977, entitled "Brief Thoughts on Maps" and translated from the Czech by Jarmila and Ian Miller.

Albert Szent-Gyorgyi, who knew a lot about maps
according to which life is on its way somewhere or other,
told us this story from the war
due to which history is on its way somewhere or other:

The young lieutenant of a small Hungarian detachment in the Alps
sent a reconnaissance unit out into the icy wasteland.
It began to snow
immediately, snowed for two days and the unit
did not return. The lieutenant suffered: he had dispatched
his own people to death.

But the third day the unit came back.

Where had they been? How had they made their way?
Yes, they said, we considered ourselves
lost and waited for the end. And then one of us
found a map in his pocket. That calmed us down.
We pitched camp, lasted out the snowstorm and then with the map
we discovered our bearings.
And here we are.

The lieutenant borrowed this remarkable map
and had a good look at it. It was not a map of the Alps
but of the Pyrenees.

Goodbye now.

The poem retells a “story from the war” that, Holub says, “Albert Szent-Gyorgyi ... told us”. Weick, however, introduces the story somewhat differently than Holub does in his first stanza, and even when Weick does mention the poet, he does not tell his readers that his account is a verbatim reproduction of Holub’s poem, albeit with the line breaks removed to produce a well-formed prose paragraph:

This incident, related by the Hungarian Nobel Laureate Albert Szent-Gyortí [sic] and preserved in a poem by Holub (1977), happened during military maneuvers in Switzerland. The young lieutenant of a small Hungarian detachment in the Alps sent a reconnaissance unit out into the icy wilderness. It began to snow immediately, snowed for two days, and the unit did not return. The lieutenant suffered, fearing that he had dispatched his own people to death. But the third day the unit came back. Where had they been? How had they made their way? Yes, they said, we considered ourselves lost and waited for the end. And then one of us found a map in his pocket. That calmed us down. We pitched camp, lasted out the snowstorm, and then with the map we discovered our bearings. And here we are. The lieutenant borrowed this remarkable map and had a good look at it. He discovered to his astonishment that it was not a map of the Alps but of the Pyrenees. (Weick, 1995: 54)

With the two versions of the story side by side, we are in a good position to notice both their similarities and their differences.

First, note the formulation “incident ... that happened during military maneuvers”, which Weick also uses in his 1987 version. This is very different from Holub’s “story from the war”. War stories are epistemologically comparable to ‘tall tales’ or ‘fish stories’, while military incidents are the stuff of historical narrative (presumably documented in military archives). Also, notice that while Holub tells us only that Szent-Gyorgyi “knew a lot about maps/ [of biological processes]”, Weick makes sure to bolster his general credibility with his reference to the Nobel Prize (which Szent-Gyorgyi won in 1937 for physiology). Mick Rowlinson (2004: 617) was probably the first to object to this appeal to authority, which is made in *lieu* of documentation.

Second, notice the ambiguous link between Szent-Gyorgyi’s “relating” and Holub’s “preserving”. In Holub’s poem it is very clear that Szent-Gyorgyi related it *to Holub* (among others), or at least to the lyrical “I” in the poem. While Holub constructs himself as a witness to the telling of the story (on whom we have to rely), Weick constructs Holub as a kind of incidental archivist of a communication that is also documented elsewhere; indeed, Weick constructs *himself* as a witness of the event, albeit only in the sense in which intellectuals are traditionally allowed to represent the implicit ‘subject’ of history: an epic ‘we’, if you will. Now, as we will see, Szent-Gyorgyi’s act of storytelling seems indeed to have had several witnesses; but in 1982, 1987, 1990, 1995, and 2001, when Weick told *management scholars* the story, these multiple sources were not known. Indeed, it wasn’t until 1990, after “a helpful colleague” had pointed his mistake out to him (Weick 2006: 193), that even Holub was mentioned (and still not quite as his direct and only source of the story)—at that point, source in hand, Weick could have, but did not, correct both his account and his referencing error.

Finally, notice the specificity that the words “in Switzerland” contribute and notice that Holub does not specify the Swiss Alps at all. As we will see, this location is probably altogether wrong, but the thing to emphasize for now is that it is *made up* vis-à-vis the source. It is a *fiction*, a literary embellishment, and one that makes the event more “real” to the reader; it is one of the “concrete details” that Van Maanen (1995: 138) says contributes to the “presence” of Weick’s writing. Along with its characterization as an

“incident”, it is an important part of the reconstruction of this piece of literary fabrication (storytelling in one sense) as a historical episode (storytelling in quite another sense), and therefore as an “example” or “illustration” of sensemaking. But the history of this story can be traced back a bit further still.

Closer to the source

From June 2 to 4, 1971, the New York Academy of Sciences hosted an international conference on cell membrane structure, which “marked a turning point in one of the central problems in biology” (Green 1972: 5). The proceedings were published in the *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* in June of 1972, and in a postscript to his closing remarks Oscar Hechter of Northwestern University Medical School told the now familiar story of the soldiers and their map of Pyrenees. Given Weick’s interest in “mindfulness” (Weick and Sutcliffe 2006; Weick and Putnam 2006), it is worth noting that he used the story as part of a narrative frame about “the route to Zen Stage 3”, which he suggested the membrane field had to find. He was referring to the progression through which students of Zen are said to be like people who learn, then unlearn, and finally relearn that “mountains are mountains, water is water, and trees are trees” (Hechter 1972: 507). Here is Hechter’s version of the story:

Let me close by sharing with you a story told me by Albert Szent-Györgyi. A small group of Hungarian troops were camped in the Alps during the First World War. Their commander, a young lieutenant, decided to send out a small group of men on a scouting mission. Shortly after the scouting group left it began to snow, and it snowed steadily for two days. The scouting squad did not return, and the young officer, something of an intellectual and an idealist, suffered a paroxysm of guilt over having sent his men to their death. In his torment he questioned not only his decision to send out the scouting mission, but also the war itself and his own role in it. He was a man tormented.

Suddenly, unexpectedly, on the third day the long-overdue scouting squad returned. There was great joy, great relief in the camp, and the young commander questioned his men eagerly. “Where were you?” he asked. “How did you survive, how did you find your way back?” The sergeant who had led the scouts replied, “We were lost in the snow and we had given up hope, had

resigned ourselves to die. Then one of the men found a map in his pocket. With its help we knew we could find our way back. We made camp, waited for the snow to stop, and then as soon as we could travel we returned here.” The young commander asked to see this wonderful map. It was a map not of the Alps but of the Pyrenees!

This Conference must not close without a special tribute to David Green. At this critical period in the membrane field, when many are uncertain about the route to Zen Stage 3, he has shown us a map. David has generated the excitement, the enthusiasm, and—yes—the controversy necessary to lead us finally to resolve this fundamental and critical problem in biology. (Hechter 1972: 518)

That, like I say, was published in June of 1972. Soon after, from October 31 to November 3, 1972, the Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions hosted an international symposium on chemical carcinogenesis. “The comprehensive scope of the symposium,” explained the conveners, “clearly indicates that advances in the research on chemical carcinogenesis and the solution to the cancer problem depend on a coordinated, multidisciplinary approach” (Ts’o and DiPaolo 1974: xviii). In his summary of the proceedings, Bernard Pullman told the same story; indeed, it is uncannily similar:

I would like to relate a story to you, told to me by my friend Albert Szent-Gyorgyi. A detachment of Hungarian troops were camped in the Alps during the First World War. Their commander, a young lieutenant, decided to send out a small group of men on a scouting mission. Shortly after the group left it began to snow, and it snowed steadily for four days. The scouting squad did not return, and the young officer had no doubt that he had sent his men to their death. Suddenly, on the fifth day, the scouting squad returned. There was great relief in the camp, and the young commander questioned his men: “How did you survive, how did you find your way back?” The sergeant who had led the scouts replied: “We were lost in the snow and we had given up hope. Then one of the men found a map in his pocket. With its help we knew we could find our way back. We waited for the snow to stop and then as soon as we could travel we returned here.” The young commander asked to see the map. It was a

map not of the Alps but of the Pyrenees! Nevertheless it did its job. So, we hope, will do our model studies. (Pullman 1974: 726-7)

That last sentence is part of Pullman's framing for the story, and the theme of his remarks, of course. Just before telling the story, he explains the importance of "negative results":

It is better to [deduce negative conclusions] and change or modify the model system than to try to force reality into an unfitting scheme. Provided that one keeps in mind this *fundamental truth*, the utilization of the model compounds and reactions can only be beneficial. They fire the necessary stimulus to progress. (Pullman 1974: 726)

Notice the similarity of the themes. The map of the Pyrenees is like a controversial paper or a tentative model study in science. Whether or not it turns out to be an accurate representation of the 'territory' is less important than the stimulus it may provide to further research, argue both Hechter and Pullman, and this is also likely the intended moral of the story when Szent-Gyorgyi told it. It is also what Swieringa and Weick were trying to say to experimenters in accounting research in 1982.

Notice also the striking *surface* similarities between the two passages of prose. One suspects that Pullman, who no doubt attended Hechter's talk or had read the proceedings, used the latter's account verbatim, perhaps after having sought permission to do so. As I noted above, it is not unlikely that both Hechter and Pullman were present when Szent-Gyorgyi told the story, so their "storytelling rights", if you will, are likely to have been equal. Moreover, Pullman's native language was French, not English, so he may have felt more comfortable using a version of the story that had already been put into good English. What this suggests, then, is that Pullman's account does not offer independent corroboration of Hechter's account in its details (although it does, we should note, differ on a few things), but that it confirms (by presenting himself as a witness) Hechter's recollection of having been told the story by Szent-Gyorgyi. Two independently given but matching accounts, after all, are more credible than one account that is audited and then confirmed by another witness. Pullman's memory, that is, may have been affected simply by hearing or reading the story as told by Hechter. Still, there can be little doubt that these accounts improve the overall credibility of the story.

Among friends: story-telling credentials

All three accounts (Hechter's, Pullman's, and Holub's) have Albert Szent-Gyorgyi in common, and the narrator in each case claims to have heard it first hand from this source. But there is no reason to identify any character in the story with Szent-Gyorgyi. His biography (Moss 1988), which does not include this anecdote specifically, suggests only that the story was *told* among soldiers in the Italian Alps, where he served and, like the young lieutenant, questioned "the war and his role in it" (Hechter 1972: 518). Ultimately, Szent-Gyorgyi shot himself in the arm in order to be discharged and pursue the life in science for which he felt (rightly) destined.

He took the story with him into that life. Holub's version suggests that it was told to a group of people: Szent-Gyorgyi "told *us* this story". Pullman's account suggests a more intimate setting: it was "told *to me* by my friend Albert Szent-Gyorgyi". Hechter also suggests a personal situation, but he leaves out any assessment the relationship. To imagine a context in which Szent-Gyorgyi "told us this story", then, we need to think of nothing more exotic than an informal (or even formal) gathering of scientists, around a highly respected figure. Given the nature of the anecdote, it is not at all unlikely that Szent-Gyorgyi would have had occasion to tell it again and again. Just like Weick: it's "a story that I haul out almost every chance I get," he tells us (Weick 1995: 54). There's no reason to think it would function any differently in the circle around Szent-Gyorgyi.

Since Holub was an immunologist, it is entirely likely that he would have been present on an occasion when the story was told, but there is little biographical research on Holub. Szent-Gyorgyi has been studied in greater detail, but Holub does not appear to play a role in any extant narratives about his life. Holub was, however, a member of the New York Academy of Sciences (Holy and Culik 2000), which means that he may have attended Hechter's talk, and transcribed it at the time or "recollected it in tranquility" (to use Wordsworth's famous phrase) later on. Indeed, the differences between Hechter's version and Holub's may be the result of distortions of memory or, more likely, of its translation first into Czech (the language of the original poem) and then back into English (by Ian and Jarmila Milner). I suspect, that is, that the accounts provided by Hechter and Pullman are

closer to the original than Holub's, which is probably based on theirs, and has been distorted by translation and the procrustean bed of the poetic form itself.

For now, let's return to the *credibility* of Weick's version of the story, Weick's "storytelling rights", as it were. Since Weick cannot say that he "heard this story" told by Szent-Gyorgyi (recall Colville and Pye's "sensemaking reminds me of a story", which identifies neither the storyteller nor the occasion), he has to find a different way to frame it. He could, of course, have said simply that he once read an interesting poem in the TLS, but this would not imbue the story with a lot of credibility. This is an interesting thing to notice about storytelling: some stories are credibly told only as eye-witness accounts and some can be told as hearsay *if the storyteller got it "from the horse's mouth"*. At too great a remove, an implausible story (like this one about the map) is just that—implausible. The listener's natural reaction is not to be moved by the story, or stimulated into thinking, but simply to wonder whether the storyteller has gotten the story right. So Weick makes up for his *prima facie* lack of credibility by, first, obscuring the nature of his source (perhaps even to himself, if his account of how it happened, i.e., Weick 2006, is to be believed) and, next, embellishing it as a historical "incident". Since he is now claiming not just to have "heard a story" but that the event actually "happened", we are more willing to suspend our disbelief, on the assumption, of course, that he has gotten the facts straight. We imagine, even though Weick does not cite them, that there are documents somewhere in some archive that confirm the account. Clearly, however, what is happening here is that Weick is imbuing himself with false credentials in his attempt to make the story as credible as it was when it came from Hechter, Pullman and Holub, who are all Szent-Gyorgyi's peers and, at least one of them, even a friend.

The story reconsidered

In addition to reassessing the credibility of Weick's version of the story, are there any conclusions about "the incident" that we can draw on the basis of the two additional accounts from Hechter and Pullman?

In fact, I think these new accounts allow us to settle the question that Weick attributes to Bob Engel, who, we should recall, was a top Wall Street executive at the time (the mid-1980s). "Now, that story would have been really neat," Weick (1995: 55) quotes Engel as

saying, “if the leader out with the lost troops had known it was the wrong map and still been able to lead them back.” Weick deals with this as an intriguing possibility, a “twist to the story” that would make it resemble more closely “the basic situation that most leaders face”. And it is certainly a possibility given *Holub’s account*, which has the lieutenant speaking to the whole unit: “Yes, *they said*, we considered ourselves lost...” But in Hechter’s and Pullman’s versions, which are, as I have just argued, probably closer to the source of the story than Holub’s, the lieutenant gets the story from “the sergeant who had led the troops”, *and the sergeant does not say that he knew the map to be false*: “With its help we knew we could find our way back. We made camp, waited for the snow to stop, and then as soon as we could travel we returned here” (Hechter 1972: 518). Surely, if the sergeant had known, this detail would be part of the story when told in this way. So it appears that we can safely reject Bob Engel’s suggestion.

But notice that we are also forced to temper the confidence with which we take the map to have actually been *used* to find their way back. After all, if Engel had been right, we would expect the sergeant to have only made a show of using the map to, as Holub puts it, “find our bearings”. Knowing that the sergeant himself thought that he held a true map of the Alps, we face Mintzberg, Ahlstrand and Lampel’s (1998: 160n) concern, which presumably stems from Mintzberg’s own experiences as a mountaineer. A false map, he knows, would have been very unlikely to lead to a happy outcome if it had actually been followed. It is far more likely, as Weick suggests (as an implication of Engel’s suggestion), that the only role the map played in the story was to “instill some confidence in people”.

Interestingly, neither Pullman nor Hechter explicitly say that the unit *used* the map to find their way home. They say only that the soldiers had “given up hope” until they found the map. Then, “knowing” that they would be able to find their way back, they *made camp*, something that, in their despair, they may not otherwise have done and which would then have exposed them to the elements, perhaps killing them. “Then as soon as we could travel we returned home.” That is, after the snow stopped, they may not have needed the map at all; indeed, they had, it seems, gone into the mountains without expecting to use one. All the map did was give them hope. The point of the story is not that “any old map will do”, then, but that any source of hope, which gives you the will to survive the

immediate crisis (here, the snowstorm), is likely to be useful. Once the immediate crisis is over, you figure things out in the usual way.

Is this a significant result, or do the new sources leave us exactly where we started? Well, whatever the implications, and beyond the merely historical interest in sourcing a widely circulated sensemaking anecdote, we now have a sounder basis for telling the story, a “richer” (Weick 2007) source of thinking about sensemaking, a different “gestalt” or “frame” (Weick 2004) for “disciplined imagination” (Weick 1989). But I would argue, also, that the new sources force us to change the way we tell the story in management studies (as scholars and teachers), and in development seminars (as consultants and managers). Already the discovery of the true relation between Weick’s version and Holub’s should force us to stop telling this story as though it is “an incident that happened”; we should present it as what it is, namely, a “story from the war”, and we should stop saying it happened “in Switzerland” (we have no basis for saying so). We should present it with the richness of detail that the Hechter and Pullman versions afford us, and, I think, we should note that it has been used as a parable for research before it was used as a parable for management. We should present it, in short, as the *myth* it is, not *affirm* it as being true.

Conclusion

In a 1982 piece published in *Small Group Research*, which was originally a 1979 address to the Academy of Management, Weick argued that social scientists should stop being so critical of practice—he described criticism as a “wet blanket”—and instead “affirm” the images and stories that practitioners like to tell. I hope I have shown here that there is much to be gained from telling this story accurately, i.e., in accordance with the sources we have, and that a bit of source *criticism* can, in fact, turn up rich results. Harold Bloom (1997: 5) said scholars should “de-idealize” their image of the genius and creativity of poets by applying an “adequate practical criticism”. Peter Armstrong and Geoff Lightfoot (2011) have issued a much needed call to arms in the managerial sciences.

Moreover, criticism may of course actually improve storytelling. By presenting it as a “story from the war” that was circulated among biologists and cancer researchers in the early 1970s, where it was used as an *allegory* for theorizing and discovery, its narrative

force—and its credibility—is enhanced without making any claims to truth. The story can be told as an anecdote, not about soldiers in the Alps following a map, but about scientists in the lab working with models (i.e., Pullman’s use of it), and the stories *they* told each other (about soldiers and maps) as they shared their ideas. This gives us an appropriately open framework in which to exploit (but not abuse) the ambiguities that remain in Szent-Gyorgyi’s story, and here we might invoke James March’s recent emphasis on the relation between “the ambiguities of experience” and the problematic “truth value” of social science (2010: 61ff.). Careful, ongoing scholarship that seeks to trace the stories we tell back their sources can only make those stories stronger, or help us to discard weak ones, and thus make our scholarship more credible.

“Hidden transformations” (Weick 2004), by contrast, can only undermine the credibility of organizational research as time goes on. Perhaps more distressingly, it can undermine the quality of organizational practices. Consider, by way of conclusion, the HR director at Eli Lilly (again, presumably Anthony Murphy) discussed by Colville and Pye (2010). Although the leadership of Eli Lilly, did not know the source of the story (or anything about its credibility), they nonetheless immediately recognized its moral. Indeed,

What is also intriguing is that the leadership, as it were, knew that [the strategic plan they had] wasn’t a map of the Alps [because the situation had changed so radically that the plan was obsolete]. They were clever enough to know that it was what people did rather than the map that made strategy in such circumstances. *The leadership was also smart enough to keep this knowledge to themselves.* (Colville and Pye 2010: 372, my emphasis)

Let us keep in mind that Eli Lilly is the largest manufacturer of psychiatric drugs in the world, an industry that has a lot of influence on the “maps according to which life is on its way somewhere or other,” to use Holub’s phrase. Or consider, perhaps more in keeping with the anxieties of our time, Bob Engel’s position in Morgan Guaranty, a major financial institution that has only become more major since Weick and Engel spoke and has played a key role in the crisis “due to which history is on its way somewhere or other” today. Perhaps Wall Street executives have too long believed that any old map, any old plan—any old financial statement—will do? If so, I would argue, it is clearly time to

deconstruct this myth, which, to use an appropriately disconcerting metaphor, we have until now in fact been underwriting.

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