

Elite Sensemaking in the Core Executive: The Case of Denmark's 2020 Minkgate Scandal

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Abstract

This article analyzes the Danish Mink Scandal of 2020 using Karl Weick's sensemaking theory. It zooms in on the 72-hour decision-making process that led to the culling of Denmark's entire 17 million farmed-for-fur mink population in response to the perceived threat of COVID-19 forming a new mutation. Since there was insufficient legal justification for the culling the prime minister was forced to call a snap general election, leading to a change of government. We exploit detailed data material containing text messages, e-mail correspondence, documentary material, and specific inquiries. The article demonstrates the strength of Weick's social-psychological perspective on sense-making. It shows how time pressure can cut across heavily institutionalized standard operating procedures. It can increase the centralization of the decision-making power at the apex and decouple the formal legal responsibilities, which remain institutionalized with the line ministries. The study argues that sensemaking offers learning points that cannot be obtained from formal legal perspectives, which are used to assign responsibilities. Indeed, ex-post thinking may be too convenient – traditional solutions like punishing leaders or agencies may obscure the discovery of more systemic vulnerabilities when crises unfold.

Introduction

As unprecedented events occur with increasing frequency, public administration faces the challenge of better preparing for critical events. The case at hand illuminates a critical gap in organizational theory which is to model how decision-making at the core executive unfolds in times of crisis. Therefore, the objective of this paper is to examine and discuss decision-making in the core executive during times of crisis.

The analysis is based on Karl Weick's sensemaking theory, which was originally developed for studying contexts with less institutionalization and hierarchical authority. However, it is still likely to be relevant for the government's core executive. Sensemaking is “the process through which people work to understand issues or events that are novel, ambiguous, confusing, or in some other way violate expectations”; it “goes beyond interpretation and involves the active authoring of events and frameworks for understanding, as people play a role in constructing the very situations they attempt to comprehend” (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014: 57-58).

This paper starts from the assumption that sensemaking in large bureaucracies is distributed in ways that are influenced by both formal and informal organizational factors. We utilize Weick's inter-subjective sensemaking perspective to guide our examination of how leading government officials respond to unforeseen events (Weick, 1990; 1993; 2001), and we analyze the events by paying particular attention to identifying explanations for decision-making behavior in the informal aspects of organizations (Barnard, 1951; Blau, 1955).

We ask how the organizational fabric underpins the distribution of sensemaking, taking as the case a crisis in Denmark's core executive government. We zoom in on 72 hours in November 2020 when leading government officials tried to make sense of a disturbing public statement by a high-profile expert that Denmark was at risk of becoming “the new Wuhan” and restart the global COVID-19 pandemic. Key findings include that self-inflicted time pressure and stress increased centralized coordination and hierarchical lines of communication, which in turn isolated dissent and decoupled the decision-making from standard operating procedures and formal responsibilities.

Hereby, we contribute to the attempt to renew the interest in organization theory in public management research, which has been underrepresented in public administration journals for the last several decades possibly due to the discipline's turn towards organizational behavior

and techniques that advance the study of large datasets and those that allow for experimental control (Whitford et al., 2020, see also Christensen and Mortensen, 2023). Olsen (2005) called for a “rediscovery” of bureaucracy’s institutional dimensions: not simply instrumental, but a human, value-infused enterprise, the legitimacy of which depends not just on what gets done, but how, through processes that are both effective and accepted as rightful (Stivers et al., 2022). Weicks inter-subjective sense-making contributes to such analysis but has so far rarely been applied to the core executive; it is more frequently applied in analysis of emergency handling agencies (Nowell & Stutler, 2020).

We have taken advantage of an unusually rich empirical data material that was produced by the Danish Parliament’s investigative commission (Kistrup et al., 2022). By law, commissions are entitled to obtain the information they ask for. Hence, the material contains text messages from 150 civil servants, e-mail correspondence from 232 civil servants, 1,200,000 pages of documentary material, and specific inquiries in matters where confidence applies (Kistrup et al., 2022). This uniquely rich material is supplemented by other accounts, including newspaper articles. This material provides documentation for the informal and inter-subjective aspects of decision-making behavior at the core executive level, and we exploit the rare opportunity this provides to overcome the secrecies of decision-making at the core executive.

Based on this, we provide an in-depth study of the so-called Mink Scandal, a heavily criticized aspect of the Danish government’s otherwise publicly highly popular handling of the COVID-19 crisis (World Economic Forum, 2020). On 2 November 2020, the deputy director of Epidemiology and Infection at SSI – the national disease control unit - stated that a vaccine-resistant strain of the COVID virus – *Cluster 5* – had been found among Danish farmed mink, which could potentially restart the pandemic and make Denmark “the new Wuhan.” This sparked a series of unfortunate events. Following a frantic and opaque decision-making process, the prime minister on 4 November 2020 said the government had decided to cull the entire Danish mink population of about 17 million animals. The side effect of this was the destruction of a €500 million-per-year export industry. Crucially, it soon became evident that the culling was decided and enforced without the necessary legal justification. As a result, a major scandal – “Minkgate” – ensued over the following months: Relentless parliamentary and media scrutiny, mink breeders receiving vast compensation, top civil servants being singled out for heavy criticism by a parliamentary investigative

commission (Kistrup et al., 2022), the prime minister being forced to call an early election, and, eventually, a change of government.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section offers a summary of the Mink Scandal case, followed by a brief section offering background information about Denmark's core executive government. Then, we study key aspects of the case in more depth, taking cues from Weick's sensemaking theory. In the final sections, we discuss theoretical takeaways, draw conclusions, and suggest lessons that can be drawn from the case.

The Danish Minkgate Scandal

On the afternoon of 2 November 2020, SSI's deputy director Mølbak stated that Denmark was at risk of becoming the "New Wuhan" during a meeting between government agencies and agriculture and farming organizations (Kistrup et al., 2022: 31, 172). The statement shocked those present and became the subject of meetings that same afternoon between the Danish Veterinary and Food Administration (VFA), the Ministry of Food and Environment (MoFE), and mink industry representatives. The statement also caught the PMO's attention. Barbara Bertelsen, the permanent secretary of the PMO, had several conversations about the "new Wuhan" threat with the permanent secretary of the Ministry of Health (MoH) and the deputy director of SSI that same evening. A standard operating procedure had been breached in that Mølbak's alarming statement was made at an external meeting without informing MoFE or the PMO in advance. As a result, the PMO risked being accused of inaction. Furthermore, the political risk increased as the potential costs to human health were supplemented by the potential costs to the reputation of Danish agricultural exports more generally if Denmark came to be known as the "new Wuhan". This increased the time-pressure on the decision-making process (Kistrup et al., 2022: 200).

The next day, 3 November, Bertelsen scheduled a snap 9.30 p.m. virtual meeting of the Danish Government's *de facto* inner cabinet, the Coordination Committee (see Box 1). MOFE's minister – not a permanent member of the Committee – was invited to participate as finding a response to the new virus threat was part of his portfolio. At 3 p.m., Bertelsen asked the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) to coordinate the preparation of the case material, despite MoFE's minister shouldering the constitutional responsibility for government intervention based on the Animal Husbandry Act (see Box 1).

The case material, including the essential “cover note” (see Box 1), was emailed to the Coordination Committee six minutes before the virtual meeting started at 9.30 p.m. The MoFE had urged MoJ to inform the committee that culling mink herds beyond regulated safety zones would require legal amendments to the Animal Husbandry Act. However, information about the legal justification for complete culling was not included in the cover note, only in appendices, and the prime minister perceived the situation too urgent to allow a reading break. After 44 minutes, the conclusion drawn by the prime minister was that the entire 17 million population of farmed mink, down to the breeding stock, was to be culled as soon as possible. Cooperation from reluctant breeders was to be secured by means of a financial incentive for expedient culling (a “tempo bonus”). The legal justification for these measures was not discussed in the meeting.

The next morning, 4 November, Bertelsen chaired a meeting in which top civil servants in the affected ministries were informed about the Coordination Committee’s decisions. Once again, the MoFE raised the issue of legal justification. Without amendments to the Animal Husbandry Act, the MoFE representatives argued that culling all the mink, and thus closing the mink breeding industry, would amount to an expropriation of private property in breach of Denmark’s Constitution. The MoJ was not moved and pointed to the risks to human health. After the meeting, the MoJ circulated a summary email stating that the “working hypothesis” was that the legal justification for culling all mink could be found in the Animal Husbandry Act.

At 4 p.m., Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen held a press conference in which she stated that the vaccine-resistant Cluster 5 COVID strain demanded immediate action. The threat to human health necessitated the culling of all mink in Denmark under the auspices of the National Police.

The culling of infected (“Zone 1” as per the Animal Husbandry Act) and nearby mink herds (Zone 2; a 7.8 km radius safety zone) had started weeks before but was intensified from November 5, with the Veterinary and Food Agency (VFA), the National Police, and the armed forces supervising and assisting the mink breeders. Culling outside the safety zones (Zone 3) was initiated on November 6 – this was the part of the operation for which the VFA and the MoFE judged that the government lacked legal justification. Police cadets telephoned mink breeders using a script (“action card”) completed by the National Police – a script that had not been quality checked by the VFA. If breeders were unwilling to cooperate in the

culling and refused to volunteer information about the size of their herds, cadets were to say, “I am sorry to hear that, but the decision [to cull all mink] has been made. A failure to cooperate will mean that you lose out on the financial bonus, and you can expect the authorities to cull your herd anyway. Does that make you change your mind?”. After hearing this, breeders believed they had received a direct order from the police, despite the lack of legal backing.

In the next few days, while the culling was executed, cabinet members and other top officials gradually realized that the risk to human health had been overblown and, crucially, that the legal justification for ordering culling mink in Zone 3 was indeed lacking. On November 10, the Minister of Food said in a media interview that ordering culling outside safety zones had been “a mistake,” and Zone 3 mink breeders received notice from the VFA that culling their herds was only a recommendation, not an order from the government.

At this point, the Mink Scandal was a fact, and political and legal sanctioning processes began. On November 11, the Danish Parliament set in motion an impartial investigation of the mink culling (The Mink Commission). On November 18, the Minister of Food was forced to resign.

On December 21, 2020 the Parliament decided to grant mink breeders up to 18.7 billion DKK (\$4 billion) in compensation (Ministry of Finance, 2021).

In its June 2022 report (Kistrup et al., 2022), the Mink Commission largely exonerated the prime minister but criticized numerous civil servants for having failed in their duty to secure a legal justification for government interventions.

Following the parliamentary scrutiny of the Mink Commission’s report, Prime Minister Frederiksen was forced by a parliamentary majority to call a snap general election in October 2022. The election results forced the government to resign, and Frederiksen later formed a new cross-bloc coalition government.

Box 1: The Danish Cabinet’s Coordination Committee

The Coordination Committee, first established in the early 1980s, is the undisputed *de facto* centre of power within the Danish core executive. This inner cabinet consists of the prime minister as the chair and four to five other cabinet ministers as permanent members; it meets weekly and makes decisions that are politically binding for the whole cabinet.

Permanent membership in the Coordination Committee, which is deeply coveted by the 20-25 cabinet members (Nielsen, 2020: 438-439), is allocated by the prime minister to ensure the representation of all coalition parties and the most central ministries (finance, foreign affairs, justice). The cabinet members who are not permanent members of the Coordination Committee participate only when items from their portfolio are on the committee's agenda. Permanent members are seconded by their permanent secretaries during the committee meetings.

Written material for Coordination Committee consists of a cover note with appendices for each item on the meeting agenda (Kistrup et al., 2022: 74). The cover note shall contain a presentation of the case to be discussed, a proposed solution, legal justification, central points, and a list of appendices. The ministry to whose portfolio the case belongs, the so-called resort ministry, is responsible for coordinating the preparation of the written material; it makes a draft and circulates it to stakeholding ministries for comments and approval. If there is doubt about to whom a case "belongs", the PMO decides which ministry that should coordinate the preparation (Kistrup et al., 2022: 70). The cover note should state which ministries that have been involved in preparing the documents. If a stakeholding ministry has been unable to approve the written material before the meeting, due to disagreement or time pressure, its name is placed in brackets on headlines of the cover note.

Approved material from the ministries should be sent to the PMO Mondays if the Coordination Committee meeting is scheduled for a Wednesday; the material is then sent from the PMO Monday afternoon so that the ministers have time to prepare for the meeting. It normally takes around six weeks to prepare the material for a meeting in Coordination Committee, but the process can be sped up if necessary, for example, in various crisis situations (Kistrup et al., 2022: 71).

During the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, an alternative procedure was introduced whereby the Ministry of Justice occasionally took over the coordination of written material for Cabinet Committee meetings. On such occasions, the resort ministry was reduced to having a stakeholding role, although a slightly privileged one: as a stopgap routine, the resort ministry would be given the opportunity to subject the cover note to a final review before the written material was submitted by the MoJ to the PMO and the Cabinet Committee (Kistrup, 2022: Ch. 4). This new procedure challenged the principle of ministerial responsibility, which is deeply rooted in the Danish central administration.

Sources: Christensen and Mortensen (2022), Dybvad et al. (2023), Kistrup et al. (2022), Knudsen (2023), Nielsen (2017, 2020).

Analysis of the Case

Distributed sensemaking

There is an important research lead to be pursued, which involves the "New Wuhan" statement and how it led to a series of poor choices and unfortunate events. According to Weick, sensemaking occurs when organizations confront surprising or confusing events in their environment that suggest a discrepancy between the current and expected states of the world – a so-called "ecological change" (Weick, 1993, 1995; 2005; Weick et al., 2005).

However, an event is less an objective fact than something socially constructed – *enacted* – by the organization’s members. Events are brought to existence when something is noticed as a discrepancy and bracketed as important by the organization’s members (Weick et al., 2005: 409). Thus, a crisis, for example, is not something that “happens” in the organization’s external environment; organizations construct their external environment as their members make sense of what is happening around them.

The “New Wuhan” statement constituted an ecological change to the central administration’s ongoing understanding and handling of the problem of COVID-19 infected mink – “ongoing” because it was far from unforeseen that the COVID virus could transmit from mink to humans: Instances had been reported in the Netherlands in April 2020 and in Denmark from June 2020 onwards. Reports of infections in Danish mink herds, some with mutated virus strains, were growing in number as the pandemic spread from urban to rural areas during the summer and autumn of 2020.

Sensemaking can be treated as reciprocal exchanges between actors (“enactment”) and their environments (“ecological change”) that are made meaningful (“selection”) and preserved (“retention”). Hence, in order to understand sensemaking and how it was distributed, it is crucial to understand how the formal and informal organization of the central administration is laid out. As said, sensemaking is distributed contingent on the organizational fabric, and sensemaking both precedes and follows decision-making (Maitlis, 2005: 21).

This explains why the Danish central administration, on one hand, was well aware of these developments but also held internally varying perceptions about what sort of problem the infected mink represented. As stated by the permanent secretary of the Ministry of Commerce: "There was no doubt that the MoFE was concerned with preserving the mink breeders' breeding stock, while the MoH was concerned with human health" (Kistrup et al., 2022: 198). Thus, there were two diverging views and sensemaking evolves around how these objectives can be fulfilled. On one hand, the MoFE administered the Animal Husbandry Act and a central objective of this act to secure the quality of breeding stock, human and animal health, and veterinary production. On the other side there was a concern with “human health” in the MoH, which had been working closely with the MoJ and the PMO in coordinating the government response to the pandemic from the start of the year (Christensen et al., 2021). There had been growing impatience among the MoJ, the PMO and the MoH with the unwillingness of the VFA to use the Animal Husbandry Act to minimize the threat to

human health (Kistrup et al., 2022: 921, 927). In response to pressure from the MoH, the MoFE and the VFA in September reviewed their interpretation of the Animal Husbandry Act but concluded that “the legal justification to cull uninfected mink does not exist” (Kistrup et al., 2022: 884, quoting an internal MoFE email from September 18). The VFA recommended continuing to handle the mink problem within the existing legal framework.

Paraphrasing Maitlis (2005), the central administration’s sensemaking of the mink problem was clearly embedded in the “organizational fabric,” which consists not only of formal but also of informal organizational features—in this case, it became important the MoH, MoJ and PMO had been working closely together since the first wave of COVID-19 in February and March 2020.

According to Weick, organizational members enacting different realities are the rule rather than the exception: “When information is distributed among numerous parties, each with a different impression of what is happening, the cost of reconciling these disparate views is high, so discrepancies and ambiguities in outlook persist” (Weick 2005b: 417). Against this backdrop, it is unsurprising that the New Wuhan statement tipped the balance. While the concerns for political risks regarding the mink industry may have had a strong weight, the communication of the *Cluster 5* finding externally tipped more weight to seeing the mutation to mink as a human health issue which also potentially could endanger the agricultural export at large and not just the mink industry. Hence, it was now much less of a singular-sector concern. As described above, the PMO immediately sprang into action, effectively wresting the handling of the problem out of the MoFE and the VFA’s grip. In this process, sensemaking precedes and follows decision-making. Sensemaking provides questions and answers that feed into decision-making (Maitlis, 2005: 21).

When probed during the November 2 meeting, SSI’s deputy director Mølbak confirmed that the information about the vaccine-resistant virus strain was brand new and that the MoFE minister had not yet been briefed about it (Kistrup et al., 2022: 174). Mølbak was an epidemiologist, but not an expert in virology. Therefore, he lacked the scientific capacity to interpret test results on mutations. It has been alleged by virologists that the test results behind the *Cluster 5* were inconclusive (Kistrup et al., 2022: 184). Additionally, Mølbak was a director of research, not a civil servant, and that may explain his non-observance to standard operating procedures when choosing to discuss the “New Wuhan” scenario with external stakeholders rather than following the hierarchical lines of communication. Instead

of giving advance notice upwards in the hierarchical chain, that is, to the permanent secretary and minister in the MoFE, he blindsided them, and in extension the PMO as well. Hence, there was some confusion of norms associated with roles and professionalism due to tasks normally undertaken by top civil servants now being performed by a director of research¹. Curtailing the political leaders and the PMO's opportunity to "control the message," was a clear breach of the central administration's routines for coordination and communication. Whether this was a conscious decision or a slip of the tongue on Mølbak's part is unclear; in hindsight, he claimed not to remember having used the loaded Wuhan parallel (Kistrup et al., 2022: 181).

In our interpretation, the tension between the MoFE and VFA on the one side and the PMO, the MoJ and the MoH on the other had become so tense that a different event than Mølbak's unfortunate statement could just as well have become the droplet that caused the beaker to overflow. Hence, more important to the enactment of the crisis are the frames of reference according to which the interpretation of the "Wuhan statement" happened.

Frames of reference

Even though the distributed sensemaking can be rationalized with reference to a tug of war between different parts of the central administration, it is worth noting the frantic energy Ms. Bertelsen, the PMO's permanent secretary, put into taking control of the situation and short-circuiting standard operating procedures.

According to Weick, organizational members use their salient frames of reference when they try to make sense of cues from the environment and create a plausible story of what is going on. Plausibility, rather than accuracy, guides this process; actors pay the most attention to cues that fit their frames of reference (Weick et al., 2005). Extracted cues provide points of reference for linking ideas to broader networks of meaning and are "simple, familiar structures that are seeds from which people develop a larger sense of what may be occurring." (Weick, 1995: 50). Two questions are crucial when people in organizations make sense of the streams of happenings around them. First, how does something come to be an event for organizational members? Or, to put it differently, how does something get noticed (Weick et al., 2005: 409)? Here, the Wuhan statement was noticed in a rather unusual way, as

¹ As a backdrop, note that SSI's top executive, the director, had been suspended since early in 2020 (due to a conflict-of-interests problem) and that the PMO had given SSI's deputy director Mølbak a privileged role in advising the government on pandemic management matters (Christensen et al., 2021).

it was communicated externally and not within the normal communication lines in the civil service. Second, what does an event mean? How does it become bracketed as important or as a crisis? Indeed, the political risk of potentially becoming the new Wuhan is a serious matter and a potential crisis to the top executives. These two questions bring an event into existence and, in this case, lead to the enactment of the crisis (Weick et al., 2005: 409).

One explanation for Bertelsen's willingness to act decisively on uncertain information is likely to be found in her experience-based frame of reference (Weekendavisen, 2020). Five years before, in 2015, Bertelsen was the permanent secretary in the MoJ and gained recognition in the central administration and the trust of Mette Frederiksen, then Minister of Justice, for her contribution to responding to two crisis situations. One was a radical-Islamic terror attack in Copenhagen; the other was indicative information that Syrian refugees might make it to Denmark in large numbers. Her interpretations of those situations and the effectiveness of the improvised responses she coordinated were instrumental in earning her the promotion in 2020 to permanent secretary in the PMO under the same – now Prime Minister – Frederiksen.

Drawing on Weick, this can be seen as a sensemaking process in which reality is enacted. As Weick put it, "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)" (1995: 55). As such, the reality that is enacted reflects the sense that the actors make of the situation.

Decoupling dissent

Another research lead to be pursued is the way in which voices of dissent, specifically those of the MoFE and the VFA, were muffled in the days following the "New Wuhan" statement. One side of this story is about the active silencing of dissent; the other is about the reluctance to speak truth to power.

Starting with the former, consider Weick's (1976) concept of tight and loose coupling in organizations. The central administration is typically a tightly coupled organization characterized by hierarchy and specialization, formal procedures, and standardized routines. These qualities make bureaucratic action predictable and reliable. However, the same characteristics endow public bureaucracies with an inertia that risks narrowing their focus to immediate experience and established procedures. According to Weick, there are therefore

advantages to loose coupling. By reducing the level of interdependence or slacking or deviating from procedural rules, one can, for example, improve persistence through rapid environmental fluctuations and the organization's sensitivity to the environment and allow creative solutions to develop (Weick, 1976).

These ideas help interpret why the PMO and the MoJ minimized the MoFE's role in preparing the response to the "New Wuhan" threat. Six hours before the November 3 Coordination Committee meeting, the PMO decided to ditch the normal "resort ministry track" for preparing the committee's written material and to go instead for the alternative "MoJ track" procedure, meaning that the MoJ coordinated the preparation, not the MoFE, to whose portfolio the problem belonged (see Box 1). The go-ahead was a 15:13 pm. text message from the PMO to a MoJ Head of Division requesting material that same evening containing "a clear and shared recommendation from the authorities (SSI, MoFE, Police, et al.)[...] to make the [mink] industry hibernate/close the shit." (Kistrup et al., 2022: 205).

The direct language and the unambiguous marching order are indicative not only of the sense of urgency that permeated the PMO at this time, but also of how close the MoJ had been drawn to the PMO during hundreds of iterations of close collaboration during COVID-19's first wave. Note that interpersonal ties between PMO and MoJ executives were strong also because Barbara Bertelsen had been the permanent secretary of the MoJ until 2020, before switching to the PMO.

The MoJ now had six hours to complete the written material for the Coordination Committee meeting – a process that in normal circumstances takes six weeks (see Box 1). Incorporating the views of stakeholding ministries was therefore, unsurprisingly, cursory. Fatefully, that included the views of the resort ministry, the MoFE. The MoJ ignored the MoFE's insistence on making the cabinet acutely aware of the lack of legal justification for a complete culling of the mink; in breach of standard operating procedures, that information was placed in the cover note's appendix (Kistrup et al., 2022: 72). Crucially, the MoJ did not observe the ministerial responsibility stopgap routine (see Box 1 above), that is, to allow the MoFE as the resort ministry a final review of the cover note (Kistrup et al., 2022: 96; 210).

When the written documentation was submitted from the MoJ to the PMO, Bertelsen edited out of the cover note one of the few sentences that did originate from MoFE's input, namely that "Culling all mink will be fatal to the industry." She judged such pathos-laden language to be beside the point (Kistrup et al., 2022: 211). It simply did not make sense to her with the

political risks on human health and agricultural export at large. Bit by bit, the MoJ and the PMO cleansed the cover note of the MoFE's views. Still, the constitutional responsibility for government intervention invariably would remain with the MoFE.

The MoFE was also decoupled in terms of participating in decision-making, albeit discreetly and at a nuanced level. Five hours before the 3 November Coordination Committee meeting, the MoJ circulated a draft of the cover note, one ignoring key input from the MoFE. The MoFE's point man on the case, Deputy Permanent Secretary Tejs Binderup, did not receive that draft. It was forwarded to him about one hour later, along with an apology from the MoJ: "Huge mistake from here, now [Binderup] is also on the thread" (Kistrup et al. 2022: 206).

The pattern was repeated at 20.12 p.m., when the MoJ distributed a mature draft of the cover note, once again leaving out key inputs from the MoFE. Studsgaard and Binderup, MoFE's two senior civil servants, did not receive it; the MoJ sent the draft to the MoFE's generic email address. When the PMO finally submitted the case material to the cabinet members and their top civil servants, Binderup was overlooked once again; he received the material 9 minutes into the 44-minute meeting (Kistrup et al., 2022: 215).

Later, when questioned about the MoFE's failure to acquaint the Coordination Committee with the legal justification problem, Permanent Secretary Studsgaard metaphorized, "I don't think we [the MoFE] are tone deaf, but one cannot follow the music without hearing the tones" (Kistrup et al., 2022: 1413).

The loose coupling—that is, the decoupling of the MoFE and the VFA—extended to the implementation of the cabinet's decision to cull all the mink. The prime minister placed operational responsibility for coordinating the culling with the National Police, an MoJ subsidiary. The VFA, a subsidiary of the MoFE, was to be consulted; it lacked the capacity to spearhead the operation. As mentioned in the introductory narrative description of the case, police cadets telephoned mink breeders in Zone 3 using a script ("action card") that underplayed the lack of legality; instead, it carried the message that every mink would be culled whether the breeders cooperated or not. The VFA, whose director was keenly aware of the lack of legality for enforcing culling in Zone 3, was not consulted about the contents and wording of the action card; final approval was given by the National Police managers (Kistrup, 2022: 329).

Communication distortion and false hypotheses

It was not only active silencing that prevented dissenting voices from being heard, but also fear-driven reluctance to speak truth to power. Although recruitment procedures may disincentivize leading Danish civil servants from speaking up against their most powerful colleagues, such as the permanent secretary in the PMO (Knudsen, 2023: 537; Nielsen, 2017: 397), the central administration should generally be influenced by the egalitarian culture prevalent in wider Danish society. Furthermore, the Danish central administration underwent a cultural shakeup in the 2010s, emphasizing the importance of legality in government decision-making (Fenger and Gram, 2016). Despite these efforts, officials in the mink case who believed that the government's course of action was ill advised and lacked legal justification repeatedly passed up opportunities to speak up. The question that remains is why.

Weick argues that crises tend to strengthen vertical communication structures, while lateral communication structures are more suited for detecting and diagnosing a crisis (Weick, 1990: 583). According to Weick, stress increases the salience of hierarchies. The increased salience of hierarchies again transforms open communication among equals into stylized communication among unequals. Consequently, communication dominated by hierarchies activates a different mindset regarding what is communicated and what is not, and different dynamics regarding “who initiates on whom” (Weick, 1990: 585) regarding, for example, speaking up and posing critical questions. Subordinate message distortion, which is intended to please the receiver, leads to changing the emphasis in a message and withholding or changing the nature of information. Subordinate message distortion is likely to be further enhanced by the incentive structure of ministerial bureaucracy. Here, a strong hierarchical structure means that superiors’ performance evaluations are important to salaries and promotions (Blau, 1955). This may further strengthen the incentive to communicate in a way that pleases the superior receiver.

One example of message distortion occurred in the afternoon of 3 November, when the MoFE’s deputy permanent secretary, Binderup, finally received the MoJ’s draft cover note. He immediately realized that the MoFE’s input, notably a proposal to preserve the breeding stock, had been ignored by the MoJ. Nonetheless, he failed to realize that the decision that was accreting was to cull *all* the mink. In hindsight, his own account was that he thought the

cover note discussed the culling of infected and nearby mink herds only, that is, those in Zones 1 and 2 (Kistrup et al., 2022: 207).

It is unclear whether this misunderstanding was due to Binderup's interpretation being distorted or to a reluctance to take issue with the MoJ and, indirectly, the PMO. According to Weick, the likelihood of selecting a false hypothesis increases in emergency situations; people tend to interpret clues in ways that reduce stress and fear (Weick, 1990: 184). The stress level was extraordinarily high among civil servants involved in resolving the mink issue, in large part due to accumulated exhaustion following months of COVID-19 crisis management (Politiken, 2021).

During the 3 November virtual Cabinet Committee meeting, upon having received the finalized cover note, Binderup texted his boss, Studsgaard, who attended as the MoFE's permanent secretary. Binderup pointed out that the cover note submitted by the MoJ had been substantially altered, contained factual errors, and, crucially, downplayed the problem of legal justification for culling all mink. However, Studsgaard did not raise this issue in the meeting. Later, when questioned about his failure to uphold the norm of legality, he answered that it was the decision about culling all mink that was at the "top of his mind" during the meeting, not the question of legality. Weick (1990: 584) states that a false hypothesis is likely to thrive when an actor's attention is on something else.

The MoFE's minister, Mogens Jensen, did not raise the legality issue during the Coordination Committee meeting either. His attention was also apparently on something else, namely, to preserve the image of being a responsible and loyal team player. Halfway into the meeting, he received a text message from his closest political advisor in the MoFE, Søren Andersen, who urged him to avoid raising the issue of legality for culling the mink breeding stock: "She [PM Mette Frederiksen] will simply call us irresponsible and say we're not taking the situation seriously enough if you propose our line" (Kistrup et al., 2022: 725).

The text message (and the minister's adherence to its advice) illustrates Weick's point about how hierarchies influence communication and cause message distortion, driven by a bias to please the receiver. Andersen's instinct was to protect his minister from being the one who protested and conveyed bothersome information to a determined hierarchical superior. As a backdrop, note that Mette Frederiksen is an unusual prime minister in the Danish context in her declared and proven willingness to make decisions and take responsibility on the cabinet's behalf: "[s]ome decide more than others. Cabinet government is not a collective

endeavor [...] the foundational policy is my responsibility, not that of the individual ministers” (Frederiksen quoted in Knudsen, 2023: 520).

Message distortion continued the next day, 4 November, in the follow-up meeting between the PMO and the top civil servants in the affected ministries. Despite raising the legal justification issue, the MoFE was unable to deter the MoJ from concluding that culling all mink should not be considered as expropriation of private property; instead, the “working hypothesis” was that legal justification could be found in the Animal Husbandry Act – subject to “final clarification” by the MoFE (Kistrup et al., 2022: 268). Despite believing that the MoJ’s interpretation of the Animal Husbandry Act was wrong, the MoFE’s Binderup was reluctant to protest vigorously. He acquiesced to the conclusion, because the MoJ was generally perceived as having superior legal expertise (Kistrup et al., 2022: 270). Only later in the afternoon, after new consultations with the MoFE and the VFA’s legal experts, did Binderup report back to the MoJ that the MoFE stood by its position that culling all mink lacked legal justification (Kistrup et al., 2022: 270). At that point, it was too late; the matter was in the hands of the prime minister, who, at a 4 p.m. press conference, stated that the government had decided to cull all mink in Denmark.

Cues and identity

In the Minkgate case, the police hanging onto a false hypothesis was strengthened by the organizational identity of the National Police. Weick et al. (2005) stated:

Who we think we are (identity) as organizational actors shapes what we enact and how we interpret, which affects what outsiders think we are (image) and how they treat us, which stabilizes or destabilizes our identity (Weick et al., 2005: 416).

The National Police’s self-identity is that it is an organization that implements and gets things done; decision-making and securing legality are done elsewhere in the central administration. The National Police Commissioner Thorkild Foged—later relieved of duty following the Mink Commission’s criticism for failing to secure truth and legality—perceived the prime minister’s statements at the November 4 press briefing as “a political decision which according to tradition was to be followed up by legislation and government execution” (Kistrup et al., 2022: 306–307).

The readiness to implement a perceived marching order based on a cue from the prime minister’s press briefing was also found in the lower echelons of the organization. The two

middle managers who approved the “action card,” Legal Section Manager Birgitte Buch and Police Inspector Uffe Stormly, worked on the assumption that the necessary law would be made shortly by actors responsible for that, as they took it for granted that all mink had to be culled (Kistrup et al., 2022: 1356–1359). Thus, Weick’s description of the false hypothesis in the Tenerife Air Disaster case fits our story well:

The false hypothesis that the runway was clear was something the crew expected to be true, something they wanted to be true, something they dimly felt might not be true, but in the context of hierarchical communication was something they jointly treated as if it were true (Weick, 1990: 584).

Discussion

The core executive is heavily institutionalized and hierarchical, with vested interests and fine-grained working procedures; as such, it deviates from the more loosely coupled organizations, which typically have been the empirical focus of emergency management. For exactly that reason, Weick’s conceptualization of organizational processes offers a welcome social psychological view, which adds insight into how inter-subjective interaction is crucial to the sensemaking and actions taken in the ministries in situations with high time pressure and emergency.

In the Danish Minkgate case, the crucial political decision – the culling of all mink – is not an unfolding catastrophe; it is a decision made due to a political risk that leads to the enactment of a crisis. In Weick’s classic case studies, the subjects are drawn out of their well-established roles during a catastrophe, be it an airline accident (Weick, 1990) or a wildfire (Weick, 1993). In contrast, the crisis at hand in the Danish case is largely enacted from within the organization.

Moreover, the organizations that Weick studied were much less institutionalized than a mature central administration apparatus. In the Tenerife Air Catastrophe, actors flew in and out of the organizational setting from different nations and airlines (Weick, 1990) and in the Mann Gulch disaster (Weick, 1993), the firefighters had not worked together before (Weick, 1993). In contrast, Danish ministries are heavily institutionalized hierarchies, where power relationships, workflows, routines, and roles are well established. Therefore, as a rule, role ambiguity should play a minor role (as confirmed by the crisis-triggering property of the “New Wuhan” statement, made by a scientist dabbling in government communication).

Hence, we consider the Minkgate case to be a critical test of the wider analytical usefulness of Weick's sensemaking perspective.

Sensemaking and power

What is the utility of the sensemaking perspective in contexts characterized by hierarchical power? Sensemaking has been criticized for being a “naïve” theoretical construct, one that does not sufficiently account for the role of power in organizations (Weick et al., 2005: 417). From a sensemaking perspective, power is expressed in acts that shape what people accept, take for granted, and reject. This shaping occurs through having control of numerous phenomena: cues, who talks to whom, proffered identities, actions permitted and disallowed, criteria for plausible stories, and current and retrospective narratives (Weick et al., 2005: 418). Our study shows that this view adds nuance to the analysis of how power unfolds in the core executive. Indeed, power in the core executive concerns both how decisions are taken as well as how sense is made of them *ex post facto*—also when they prove to lack legal justification.

Having control over who gets to talk to whom in preparing the Coordination Committee meeting is highly important. Allegedly, the MoFE could not follow the music because they were not allowed to hear the tones (Kistrup et al., 2022: 1413). A standard bureaucratic politics perspective (Allison, 1969) may suggest that a “hawkish” human coalition and a “dovish” veterinarian coalition were built up prior to the decision based on power and institutionalized interests. Weick's perspective emphasizes the importance of intersubjectivity in sensemaking and how the organizational structure influences which information is presented to decision-makers. The power dynamics between the “hawks” and “doves” shifted following the announcement of the “new Wuhan.” In this process, controlling cues and coordinating communication were essential instruments of power. Furthermore, it is remarkable how much identity matters. The identity of the MoJ as the ministry that knows best when it comes to issues of legal justification is hardly questioned; other actors assume that the legality is in place if the MoJ says so, or at least that it is not their responsibility to secure the legal justification. They have other proffered identities. It is its proffered identity—rather than, for instance, its scope for sanctioning other's behavior—that gives the MoJ the position to provide “credible” signals and interpretations (ones later proved to be erroneous).

Sensemaking and institutionalization

A second boundary condition for the usefulness of sensemaking is the balance between sensemaking and institutionalization. Is reality renegotiated in social interactions or does institutionalization simply construct the way things are, rendering alternatives literally unthinkable (Weick et al., 2005). Since it is a heavily institutionalized setting, the core executive is a critical setting for investigating this balance. Czarniawska observed that “[i]ntentional action never leads to intended results, simply because there is a lot of intentional action directed at different aims in each time and place” (Czarniawska, 2003, p. 134). In other words, even if acts are intentional and rational they will not lead to the anticipated outcomes. Not surprisingly, institutionalization is seen as a *post-factum* myth in this view.

In the Minkgate case, the balancing between institutionalization versus sensemaking was clearly displayed, for example, in the preparation of documents for the fateful 3 November meeting of the government’s Coordination Committee. As described in Box 1, this process is highly institutionalized in the Danish core executive, with clear norms for participation, contents, and timelines. In the Minkgate case, several norms were deliberately breached, with sidelining of the responsible ministry, downplaying of legal authority information, and with condensing down to six hours a process that usually takes six weeks. Hence, one conclusion is that, in highly institutionalized settings, SOPs can be overruled when crises are enacted, with sensemaking triumphing over institutionalization.

Distributed sensemaking

A third boundary condition is distributed sensemaking. Weick et al. (2005: 418) argue that scholarship on distributed cognition should focus less on the assembling and diffusing of preexisting meaning and more on the collective induction of new meaning. When information is distributed among numerous parties, each with a different impression of what is happening, the cost of reconciling these disparate views is high, so discrepancies and ambiguities in outlook persist. Thus, multiple theories develop about what is happening and what needs to be done. People learn to work interdependently, despite couplings loosened by the pursuit of diverse theories, and inductions may be more clearly associated with effectiveness when they provide equivalent rather than shared meanings (Weick et al., 2005: 418).

We argue that sensemaking in the core executive is distributed and supported by the organizational fabric in which each ministry has a distinct role and jurisdiction. In the

Minkgate case, legal investigations serve as a means of providing shared meaning. The Parliamentary Kistrup Commission came up with a legalistic assessment of what had occurred and who should be held responsible. This is an example of an institutionalized procedure that works to create shared sensemaking across very diverse interests and worldviews. This process of establishing shared sensemaking is lengthy and costly, as Weick predicts. However, the legal commissions be a means to create shared sensemaking in cases where divergences in sensemaking make it difficult for the core executive to continue functioning.

Power is also about making sense ex-post. Following Kistrup's commission report, 10 top civil servants received severe critique, but the sanctions against all but two relatively low-ranking MoFE officials were removed after the personnel case against the Chief of the National Police (Foged). This reinterpretation might well be justifiable from a strictly legal point of view (Ministry of Justice, 2023a; 2023b) but it also shows that the legal conclusions can be arbitrary, and it showcases the potency of the power to reopen cases and thereby renegotiate and redefine the ex-post evaluation of responsibility and culpability. These reflections on the boundary conditions indicate that in the core executive power is highly important to sensemaking. Sensemaking is a tool in the hands of the more powerful. While this outcome might make sense from a legal point of view, it does not, in our interpretation, produce much understanding of the course of events and it offers few possibilities for learning. By contrast, Weick's perspective has much to contribute in the way of drawing analytical and practical lessons from the case.

Conclusion and Lessons Learned

“Minkgate” is full of paradoxes when seen as a case of core executive decision-making. Ironically, the Cluster 5 mutation died out one month before the “Wuhan statement” was released, and indeed the initial scientific evidence was retrospectively judged as being very weak (Kistrup et al., 2022: 1444). Furthermore, culpability for Minkgate was doled out based on the assumption that civil servants failed to fulfill their obligation to secure legality. As our study shows, however, several key actors were unable to do so due to the informal organization and power wielded by the Prime Minister's Office (PMO). Denmark also has a world-class system of government with high levels of trust and competence (Fukuyama, 2004), and had recently ached numerous other aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic (Olagnier and Mogensen, 2020; Christensen et al., 2021). Still, it managed to bungle a relatively

straightforward decision-making process wherein the fog of urgency was self-inflicted by the actors themselves.

In-depth systematic studies of crisis decision-making at the core of the executive government are rare despite it being a classic political science topic (Allison, 1969; but see Boswell et al. 2021). This is not because cabinet ministers and top civil servants are peripheral actors in responding to crisis—they will often be deeply involved—but due to secrecy and limited access to data. As a result, studies of the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, have produced little systematic knowledge about how leading government officials deliberated and collaborated when forced to make quick and consequential decisions about government responses to the crisis (but see Christensen and Mortensen, 2023; Askim and Christensen, 2022). Unpacking what actors knew, thought, and did during the COVID-19 crisis has, in several countries, been left to inquiry commissions tasked with placing legal responsibility for failures to comply with plans, rules, and role requirements. We take a different approach, using instead Weick’s inter-subjective sensemaking perspective.

Weick’s ideas about the benefits of loose coupling in organizations could have been the point of departure for a positive exegesis of this story of the Danish government’s detection of a vaccine-resistant virus threatening to transmit from mink to humans, potentially restarting the global COVID-19 pandemic. The primary responsibility for avoiding the catastrophe lay, after all, with a section of the central administration perceived to be too occupied with the veterinary aspects of the situation and too reluctant to proactively safeguard human health. Decoupling this “veterinary coalition” from the decision-making process and placing the MoJ center-stage facilitated a considerable speeding up of the decision-making process. However, it also meant that the information on the lack of legality did not reach the meeting in the coordination committee. What transpired was a horribly mismanaged decision-making and implementation process, unnecessarily resulting in negative consequences for animal welfare, the destruction of an industry, heavy strains on the public purse, and a political scandal, including a forced election and a change of government.

Weick’s sensemaking perspective has proven useful in understanding this outcome. Using this perspective on a case taking place at the core of the executive government shows how breaking free of standard operating procedures carries with it the danger of unleashing strong and harmful undercurrents, specifically the desire for and willingness to use power—and the fear of power too, leading to the decoupling of dissent and please-the-receiver message

distortion. It leads to the very unfortunate decoupling of decision-making and responsibility. Decision-making is concentrated at the apex decoupled from legal responsibility which is institutionalized with the line ministries.

In the case studied, fear is mixed with stress and uncertainty. At the same time, power is concentrated and potent. A signal from the very top is picked up as a cue and implemented without question the next day. Then, standard operating “good governance” procedures are critically important; the decoupling of dissent can have catastrophic consequences via a range of actors’ psychological tendency to cling to a working hypothesis that tells them they can do as they are told and be free of blame for any consequences.

Which lessons can be learned from the Minkgate case? One is that crises can be enacted from within the core executive government. “The new Wuhan” statement was the spark that ignited a decision-making process – albeit not because of an objective threat (remember that *Cluster 5* had in fact died out one month before the decision to cull was made) but because it changed the assessment of the political risk and created a window of opportunity for decision-making. This serves as a warning that a crisis can be used instrumentally and that the reason for the crisis may seem less urgent in hindsight.

A second lesson concerns how stress can decrease the quality of communication and decision-making. This is certainly the case at the intersubjective level in the Tenerife Air Accident or the Mann Gulch fire (Weick, 1990, 1993) but also between actors in highly institutionalized settings such as the Danish government’s Coordination Committee meeting on 3 November 2020. We rarely get detailed information about communication at meetings in the Coordination Committee, as no minutes are kept. However, the stress level where no time is given to even read the material for the meeting (which is sent out 6 minutes before the meeting, which starts at 9.30 p.m.). This does decrease the quality of the decision-making, as the remarks on the lack of legality are only found in the appendix and not in the cover note. The explanation for this is, again, the stress level in the preparation of the material for the meeting as well as the reinforcement of hierarchical and centralized lines of communication before the meeting in the coordination committee.

A third lesson concerns how communication is influenced by hierarchical relationships. Here, what is not said is as important as what is said. In the Tenerife Air Catastrophe, the captain failed to speak to the pilot, which resulted in an accident where 583 passengers died. In the case of the Danish government’s Coordination Committee meeting the MoFE was decoupled

as MoJ took over the preparation of the cover note. MoJ was eager to respond to the PMO's demand for a unified and hawkish recommendation from the central administration, and this left little time to consult MoFE. Furthermore, it was known to MoJ that the MoFE had concerns about the legal justification. The failure of the participants to speak out resulted in the unlawful closure of an entire industry, a significant burden on taxpayers, and substantial bureaucratic and political turnover. Hence, concerning communication, resisting the temptation to avoid displeasing a powerful receiver is an important point of learning. If this is not ensured, the quality of the decision-making deteriorates.

Finally, note that the practical politico-administrative outcome of the mink case is one that makes sense from a legal perspective but where legitimacy toward the population leaves much to be desired. Re-analyzing the case using Weick's sensemaking perspective tells a different story and, we venture, produces more important and instructive insights. Hence, extending Weick's perspective to the core executive and elite decision-making is of great potential value to both organizational learning and democratic legitimacy.

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