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BIRKBECK COLLEGE

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How Senior Leaders Make Sense of Organisational Politics

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PhD

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June 2018

DECLARATION

I declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own.

Signed

.....

Adrian Ward

.....

Date

ABSTRACT

HOW SENIOR LEADERS MAKE SENSE OF ORGANISATIONAL POLITICS

Despite much scholarly endeavour in recent decades, understanding of organisational politics is still limited. Analysis of the research literature reveals how personal engagement in political activity presents both threat and opportunity for those in leadership roles. That so little is known about how leaders handle such ambivalence has become a growing source of dissatisfaction with contemporary writers highlighting gaps in understanding and linking this to the dominance of survey-based research. The dearth of richer interpretations of the complexity presented by active involvement in such a controversial arena has led to a call for an increase in sound qualitative investigation.

This study responds by examining leaders' sensemaking of the dilemmas associated with their own lived experience of organisational politics. Interviews with 28 senior leaders used an active approach to confronting participants with contradictions between their definitions of organisational politics and accounts of their own political behaviour. Using a combination of thematic and dialogic narrative analysis, the findings demonstrate first that most leaders drew upon two specific sensemaking processes and a mix of four competing narratives to come to terms with their involvement. Secondly, the research suggests that leaders can resolve ambivalence and contradiction through a belief in their capacity to act pragmatically in the political arena but that, if they experience it as a phenomenon to be endured and over which they have little control, their position may be undermined.

Such findings support the contribution of a sensemaking approach to organisational politics by highlighting the importance of both identity and enactment in responding to the dilemmas presented by participation in political activity.

Keywords: organisational politics; leadership; sensemaking; narratives; identity work.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The writing up of this thesis marks the end of an immensely challenging but rewarding research project and I would like to take the time to thank those who have supported me in this endeavour. My thanks go, most of all, to my first supervisor Kate Mackenzie Davey whose insightful expertise, unswerving support and motivating enthusiasm gave me not just the freedom to develop my ideas but also the confidence to express them and complete such a mammoth undertaking.

The support of my family and friends has made the experience more bearable and stimulating. Special thanks go to my friend Alan Cave for “making sense” of my endless streams of consciousness as we stomped our way round the pubs and hills of the Peak District in the wind and rain and for helping me believe that I had something to contribute and would find a way of reaching the summit.

My thanks go also to all my participants who gave of their time and experience so openly and generously. My interest in their accounts was certainly not just an academic one and my renewed sense of empathy for those in such leadership roles has enriched my practice as an Executive coach. Finally, my appreciation to Sarah Keeble whose IT literacy and remarkable ability to turn my illegible scribbling into a polished thesis I could not have done without.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter introduces the research topic addressed in this study and provides an overview of the thesis document. Section 1.1 below sets out the aims of the research by firstly sharing the personal interest in the phenomenon under investigation that motivated the study and then secondly positioning the research problem and its significance within relevant academic literature and extant empirical analysis. Section 1.2 then provides a summary of how the thesis is structured to address the specific research questions identified.

1.1 Aim of the research

This research is concerned with examining how individuals in senior leadership roles (referred to henceforth as leaders) make sense of their personal engagement in organisational politics (OP) and the role played by stories, narratives and identity work within this. Academic scholars and theorists have traditionally defined organisational politics as a negative and dysfunctional aspect of organisational life (Allen et al, 1979; Mintzberg, 1983; Eisenhardt and Bourgeois, 1988; Zaleznik, 1997). In addition to this, the mature body of quantitative research data that dominates the empirical arena has consistently evidenced how organisational members who experience it regard its manifestation in similar light, correlating such perceptions negatively in areas of, inter alia, trust, stress, performance and commitment (see for example the meta analyses of Bedi and Schat, 2013; Chang et al, 2009; Miller et al, 2008). More contemporary developments in both theory and empirical work have increasingly challenged this one-dimensional perspective, drawing attention to the more functional use of influencing behaviours towards legitimate organisational ends and the importance of the political element of leadership roles (Buchanan, 2016; Landells and Albrecht, 2016, Doldor, 2017). The development of political skill has similarly been connected to an alternative but equally significant range of outcomes such as leadership reputation, credibility and career success (Ferris et al 2000, 2002b, 2005b, 2007; Perrewe et al, 2000,2004,2005; Kimura, 2015). This ambivalence presents, therefore, a dichotomy to those in leadership roles regarding how best to exploit the opportunities provided whilst at the same time defending their own sense of integrity and identity. It is the goal of this research to explore the lived experience of how leaders deal with such ambiguity. More specifically, the aim is to understand, rather than generalise or predict, the way in which leaders make sense of their own personal participation in – or withdrawal from – organisational politics by examining the triggers of such sensemaking activity, the use of

specific processes, the creation of different narratives and the influence of identity work in achieving a positive outcome.

1.1.1 Personal interest

Throughout my previous corporate career as a senior HR practitioner within the financial services sector (1990 -2005), I had become increasingly frustrated by the nature and impact of organisational politics. This had not always been the case. I had joined the organisation in the early 1980's and throughout the formative years of my management development, had always assumed that I was operating in a meritocracy – do a good job and the rest will take care of itself. Such assumptions started to be challenged in the early 1990's when I moved out of a commercial role – in which the relationship between ability and performance outcomes always seemed capable of tangible measurement – and into an HR environment where the very opposite seemed to apply. The shift of emphasis from the “ends” to the “means” was very noticeable, and I became aware of operating in a world where performance and reputation rested less on quantifiable outcomes and more on how my contribution was perceived by “significant others”.

A “merger” with a smaller financial services business in the mid 1990's had a seismic impact upon the culture of the organisation (and my underlying assumptions), creating significant turbulence, uncertainty and ambiguity in an organisation where the long-established norms were more static, predictable and linear. I describe the word “merger” as such to emphasise that this was in name only, a political tactic to assuage a variety of different stakeholder interests in each organisation. The reality was that this was a takeover in all but name and those – I amongst them – who operated in the dominant organisation naively and complacently assumed that this would be reflected in who would get the top jobs and which culture would prevail. The political maelstrom that ensued had a lasting impact: to use Baddeley and James' (1987) model (see 2.2.2 below), a leash of foxes was set loose amongst a larger flock of sheep with inevitable consequences in respect of the make-up of the “new” organisation. Such events were the trigger for the evolution of a dysfunctional and toxic climate in which personal positioning, impression management, backstabbing and tribal warfare became the new cultural norms. I was rescued from the cynicism which this created by my Masters in Organisational Behaviour (2002-04) which enabled me to become less angry and frustrated and instead more curious and stimulated by my experiences. My research project was a study of organisational politics throughout the merger process and I became fascinated by the way in which different individuals could apparently experience the

same “real” events and yet interpret the behaviours, tactics and motives of the key “players” so differently. The way in which different stories were told and the apparent conviction that underpinned them challenged my previously judgemental assumptions and revealed hidden depths and complexity to the whole phenomenon.

Since 2005, I have operated as a freelance consultant and work with a wide variety of different organisations, helping senior executives to develop their own leadership skills and confidence. A striking feature of this coaching work is how the political element of their role is typically the one which is professed to be the most challenging. Individuals typically either deny their involvement (“I don’t do politics” or “I’ve never been a political animal” being oft repeated positions) or declare neither the skill or motivation to engage in something they avow to find distracting, wearing and personally distasteful. This group, though, are not demotivated “backbenchers”, marginalised by their organisations and embittered by the apparent failure of their leadership career. Quite the opposite. All are high achieving leaders, operating successfully “inside the tent” of complex, demanding and pluralistic environments, whether they recognise them as “political” or not.

Addressing the question, “what is going on here?” has proved a research itch that I finally had to scratch. How are leaders negotiating the dichotomy of operating successfully in an increasingly politicised environment whilst at the same time maintaining a credible identity and sense of personal integrity as a leader in the context they describe? In the arena of organisational practice, there remains a strong sense of taboo or stigma about the existence of politics, given its uncomfortable challenge to the notion of organisations as rational meritocracies and, in the academic literature too, there are evidently gaps in our understanding. My hope, therefore, is to reveal insights which both add to the body of academic theory and knowledge and, at the same time, enable leaders to negotiate the identity threat and exploit the opportunities that personal engagement in this most complex and multi-faceted phenomenon presents.

1.1.2 Research problem & significance

Table 1.1: Organisational Politics: what we know, and what we don't

We know more about . . .	We know less about . . .
how politics are perceived	how politics is played
perceptions of politics as damaging	constructive uses of political behaviour
researcher disagreement over the definition of organizational politics	<i>how organizational members experience, interpret and understand political behaviour</i>
political behaviours and tactics	how those tactics are used, in different contexts, with what outcomes
interpersonal political behaviour	political behaviour involving groups and organizations
how individual perceptions of politics correlate with other variables (e.g. stress, satisfaction)	how political exchanges between individuals and groups unfold and develop over time
the contribution of political skill to individual career success	the effect of organizational politics on dimensions of organizational performance
organizational political behaviour in developed Westernized democracies	cross-cultural differences in the perception, use and impacts of organizational politics
the dimensions of political skill different skill	Different skill profiles in different contexts, and how demands for political skills are evolving

(Source: Buchanan, 2016, p.363 – original doesn't include highlighting & italics)

The trend towards organizations as political arenas (Pfeffer, 2010) has been exacerbated by the dismantling of traditional career frameworks (Ferris and Treadway, 2012a), the conflict created by ambiguous matrix structures (Cacciattolo, 2014), the pace of organizational change (Dawson and Buchanan, 2005; Zanzi and O'Neill, 2001), process complexity and resource scarcity (Gotsis & Kortezi, 2010; Othman, 2008; Poon, 2003). As a result, therefore, being skilled politically is seen increasingly as a crucial part of leadership roles and a source of power in the workplace (Kanter, 1997; Zanzi and O'Neill, 2001; Douglas and Ammeter, 2004; Semadar, Robins and Ferris, 2006, Hochwarter, 2012, Kimura, 2015). Others have noted the shift away from understanding managerial work by focusing mostly on formal aspects of power and authority towards an emphasis on its political dimension

(Ammeter, Douglas, Gardner, Hochwarter and Ferris, 2002; Hall, Blass, Ferris and Massengale, 2004; Hartley and Branicki, 2006, Pfeffer, 2010, Meurs et al, 2010).

This thesis builds on the work of those who have argued that the lived experience of how leaders negotiate the political element of their role is under-examined and, therefore, insufficiently understood (Buchanan, 2016, p.343 – see Table 1.1. above) and seeks to further understanding of how leaders balance the need to be politically skilled and active whilst defending reputation and identity. Within the body of work that takes a “micro” perspective to understanding OP, i.e. examining individual reactions, behaviours, skills and the interpersonal dynamics related to politics, two approaches have dominated the literature (Vigoda Gadot & Drory, 2006). The first focuses on employee behaviours and influence tactics at work as the unit of analysis through which the construct can best be interrogated. This line of research is characterised by a variety of typologies for influence tactics as well as possible antecedents and consequences (Kipnis et al, 1980, Zanzi and O’Neill, 2001, Kapoutsis et al, 2012). Grounded in the positivist paradigm ontologically, such work tends to make realist judgements of what does and does not, therefore, constitute *actual* political behaviour and falls short, therefore, of helping us to understand how individuals interpret the extent of their own participation. The second, generally more contemporary, approach focuses on employees’ subjective perceptions of organisational politics rather than on political behaviour itself (Ferris and Kacmar, 1992; Ferris et al, 1996; Kacmar and Ferris, 1991; Vigoda, 2001, 2002; Buchanan, 2008). Such perceptions represent the degree to which respondents view their work environment as political in nature and the legitimacy of the associated behaviours and tactics deployed (Kacmar and Ferris, 1991, pp 193-4; Kacmar and Carlson, 1994, p3). Empirical work in this subjective arena is dominated by positivist / quantitative studies, many of which have used the Perceptions of Organisational Politics Scale (POPS, Ferris et al, 1992). The maturity of this field has facilitated large scale meta analyses which have correlated such perceptions negatively with a range of organisational outcomes such as satisfaction, commitment, stress and turnover intention (Miller et al, 2008; Chang et al, 2009; Bedi & Schat, 2013).

Whilst this second body of work is helpful in making the important distinction between *actual* political behaviour and *perceptions* of such behaviour, the positivist assumptions underpinning such work and its typically survey based design presents difficulties in interrogating the contextual dynamics of political experience, so “whilst large-n quantitative research may be appropriate in some settings, the more subtle aspects of the nature, processes and implications of political behaviour may be more effectively revealed using innovative small-n qualitative methods” (Buchanan, 2008). Highlighting further lines of

enquiry in need of exploration following his study, Buchanan goes further by suggesting that the “processes through which behaviours come to be labelled as political, attributed with political intent, and socially constructed as political remain unexplored” and that little is known about developing a balance between pure politician and demonstrated ability “presumably acquired as an individual’s moral standards and ideas are tested and compromised by organisational realities.” (ibid, p.62.) Responding to Buchanan’s later challenge regarding how “unsatisfactory” it is that many researchers “appear never to have spoken to managers about their perceptions of politics” (2012, p.353), other prominent researchers, too, have argued the need to add to the field through greater qualitative investigation (Ferris and Treadway, 2012; McFarland et al, 2012; Landells and Albrecht, 2016) all of which presents an appealing investigative invitation to provide revealing insights into how leaders interpret the lived experience of their personal political engagement. This call notwithstanding, however, qualitative studies remain relatively rare and a view persists that organisational politics remains a difficult topic to study given perceived problems with getting participants to talk openly with researchers, one which has been challenged as “over cautious” and problematic only through the limitations of the dominant research methods used rather than by the intrinsic nature of the subject (Buchanan, 2016, p.346). Whilst much has been revealed about the construct through the use of positivist-quantitative approaches, “to fill in the gaps in our knowledge, to probe further those aspects of organizational politics about which we know less, methods grounded in a constructivist–processual perspective become necessary” (ibid, p.363).

The adoption of sensemaking as a lens through which to interrogate this lived experience of involvement in politics will be argued throughout this thesis as a useful and distinctive feature of the overall study. Sensemaking refers generally to those processes by which people seek plausibly to understand ambiguous, equivocal or confusing events (Brown et al, 2015; Colville, Brown & Pye, 2012; Maitlis, 2005; Weick, 1995). As Weick argues, “The basic idea of sensemaking is that reality is an ongoing accomplishment that emerges from efforts to create order and make retrospective sense of what occurs” (1993: 635). Such definitions serve to position sensemaking as a thinking process that uses retrospective accounts to explain surprises, discrepancies or ambiguity. “Individuals experience events that may be discrepant from predictions. Discrepant events, or surprises, trigger a need for explanation, or post-diction, and, correspondingly, for a process through which interpretations of discrepancies are developed. Interpretation, or meaning, is attributed to surprises as an output of the sense-making process, rather than arising concurrently with the perception or detection of differences” (Louis, 1980, p. 241). Sensemaking is more, though, than mere interpretation; whereas interpretation implies that there is already something in

the world waiting to be discovered, sensemaking is less about discovery than invention (Brown et al, 2015), i.e. sensemaking refers to processes by which “people generate what they interpret” (Weick 1995, p. 13).

It is more, however, than just this emphasis on the retrospective creation of plausible accounts to deal with ambiguity that makes sensemaking a useful lens through which to examine how leaders experience politics, the role of stories and narratives within this is equally pertinent. As part of what has been labelled as the ‘narrative turn’ in the social sciences, a growing number of scholars have come to suggest that we live in a story shaped world (Maclean et al, 2012). Personal stories open a privileged window on individual organizational experiences and provide a vehicle through which individuals may constitute themselves as subjects, allowing their subjectivity and identity to be reaffirmed (Gabriel, 1995). As far as sensemaking is concerned, “a good story holds disparate elements together long enough to energize and guide action, plausibly enough to allow people to make retrospective sense of whatever happens, and engagingly enough that others will contribute their own inputs in the interest of sensemaking” (Weick, 1995: p.61).

Whilst recent years have seen significant growth in the empirical sensemaking arena, it has been argued that “story telling by elite actors remains under explored in the organisation studies literature” (Maclean et al, 2012) and that sensemaking research has been “largely conservative” with “many relatively uncharted topics and areas of interest” (Brown et al, 2015, p.272). Support for this position can be found in other recent and extensive reviews which highlight how “the application of the sensemaking perspective is currently significantly under-represented within several areas in organization studies” (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015, p.S11). This thesis argues that the lived experience of organisational politics is one such area. Extant writing and empirical sensemaking work focusses on politics in two different ways. Firstly, the way in which issues of power and politics influence individual and organisational sensemaking. As individuals draw on different areas of expertise and/or are located at different levels in the organisational hierarchy, “it is common that conflicting interpretations (what Brown, Stacey, & Nandhakumar (2008) call “discrepant sensemaking”) about one and the same event occur” (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015, p. S17), which tends to create political struggles (Weick, 1995, p. 53). This influence of political dynamics upon the sensemaking process is not the focus here: put baldly, this study concerns itself with the sensemaking of politics rather than the politics of sensemaking. The second way in which issues surrounding organisational politics have been researched by taking a sensemaking perspective is by examining how managers interpret and account for the collective power dynamics and political machinations associated with multi-national companies and/ or large

corporate conglomerates (for example, Geppert & Dorrenbacher, 2011; Clark & Geppert, 2011; Whittle et al, 2016). Whilst these studies do at least attend to managerial accounts of “what is going on here?”, the emphasis is one of interrogating how managers within a multi-national organisational context account for the political events going on around them rather than their own personal involvement in political activity. To be precise, therefore, it is the under exploration of the sensemaking processes and narratives associated with how leaders account for their *own personal participation* in organisational politics and the identification of the factors that determine a successful sensemaking outcome that is the research problem which this study seeks to address.

An associated area of research interest in this study concerns the influence of identity work in such leader sensemaking, given the threat represented by involvement in an arena as slippery and controversial as organisational politics. As Weick himself posits, “Sensemaking begins with a self-conscious sensemaker” (1995, p.22), an insight which renders the establishment and maintenance of identity as a core preoccupation in sensemaking (Maitlis, 2005). Despite a consensus that threats to identity “are as ubiquitous as they are unsettling”, (Brown and Coupland, 2015, p.1318), “there is a lack of agreement regarding what, exactly, identity threat is’ (Petriglieri, 2011, p. 641). This notwithstanding, Brown and Coupland (2015, p.1318) argue that “the pervasive and continuing nature of threats to identities resonates with a substantial literature on identity regulation which highlights the vulnerable, sometimes frail, generally contested and precarious nature of managers’ and other workers’ selves in organizations (Clarke, Brown, & Hope-Hailey, 2009; Fleming & Spicer, 2003; Gill, 2015)”, a position that chimes with the stance adopted by this thesis regarding how the identity challenges posed by the endemic nature of organisational politics are continuous and enduring. The notion of engagement in political activity as an identity threat directs interest towards how leaders respond by way of identity work, the “most widely cited formulation” (Brown, 2015, p.24) of which is that of Sveningsson and Alvesson, who suggest that it “refers to people being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness” (2003, p. 1165). The study on which this definition was based offers four contributions to the understanding of identity work that are relevant to this thesis. Firstly, the metaphor of identity as struggle. Individuals “strive for comfort, meaning and integration and some correspondence between a self-definition and work situation. Discourses, roles and narrative self-identities are all involved – they fuel and constrain identity work” (ibid,p.1188). Secondly, the importance of narratives, as already highlighted in relation to the focus on sensemaking above. Thirdly, the role of negative or anti identity which concerns the “not in my name” positions invoked through anti identity in relationship to work situations and role

expectations. Finally, the importance of “thick” descriptions and studies of identity work (such as this thesis) which challenge the premature linking by dominant “thin” ideas in the organisational identity literature of identity construction to standard categories such as age, sex, ethnicity and occupation. Such conceptualisation of identity work speaks directly to this thesis’ concern with understanding how individuals grapple with their involvement in such a sensitive and controversial arena and the role played by narratives within this.

Whilst the body of empirical work around this concept of identity work is significant and that it is “well established that professionals (Learmonth & Humphreys, 2012), attempt to manage threats to their identities” (Brown and Coupland, 2015, p.1315), the nature of the relationship with sensemaking and, in particular, the direction of influence is more complex and ambiguous, given the observation of Sandberg and Tsoukas (2015, p.S16) that, “the majority of the reviewed studies seem to have focused more on how sensemaking is implicated in identity work (that is, in how identity is constructed through sensemaking) rather than on how identities influence sensemaking (e.g., Kjærgaard, Morsing, & Ravasi, 2011; Korica & Molloy, 2010;Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008; Watson & Bargiela-Chiappini, 1998)”. Similarly, it can be argued that the interaction of identity work with the lived experience of organisational politics is under examined. Although it is possible to speculate what might be implied by applying the findings of other analyses which have explored the threats associated with “dirty work” (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999) and endeavours that are “legitimacy contesting” (Brown and Toyoki, 2013), there have been no specific attempts to excavate the identity threats and responses involved with personal engagement in political activity. Given the stigma attached to the notion of being politically active and the negative way in which it is viewed in much of the literature, and by employees too, this represents an opportunity to add to the field. Similarly, whilst the identity work of elite actors has been the subject of empirical study, such research has been confined to how elite sportsmen in the world of professional rugby use identity threats as flexible resources for working on favoured identities (Brown and Coupland, 2015), how philanthropic identity narratives empower wealthy entrepreneurs to generate a legacy of the self that is both self- and socially oriented (Maclean et al, 2012), how the continual promotion of an elite identity within a management consulting firm leaves many of the consultants feeling acutely anxious about their status (Gill, 2015) and the importance of insecurity in the identity work of business school academics (Knights and Clarke, 2014). The identity work implications of the participation by senior leaders in organisational politics remains, therefore, relatively under explored and an attractive opportunity for potential contribution to knowledge.

Based on this analysis, the following research questions are, therefore, presented;

How do leaders make sense of their own personal involvement in organisational politics? In particular;

- ***How is such sensemaking triggered?***
- ***What sensemaking processes are embedded in the stories that leaders tell about their experiences?***
- ***What overall narratives do leaders create and use to account for their personal involvement or withdrawal successfully?***
- ***How are sensemaking processes, narratives and outcomes influenced by identity work?***

The significance of addressing these questions lies in the opportunity to contribute in five important areas. Firstly, the extent to which the recent trend in the literature towards to a more balanced position on the nature of organisational politics (Buchanan, 2008; Landells and Albrecht, 2016; Doldor, 2017), one which recognises its functional/positive dimension as well as its dysfunctional aspects and harmful consequences, is reflected in the readiness of leaders to acknowledge its existence and their active involvement therein. Secondly, the way in which the ambivalence surrounding organisational politics plays out in the sensemaking pursuits of those who must negotiate it in practice. In other words, to shed light upon how leaders author accounts of participation or withdrawal that allow them to “search for meaning, settle for plausibility and move on” (Weick et al, 2005, p.419). Thirdly, the sensemaking processes that are the most significant when it comes to interpreting personal involvement in political activity and the extent to which these are common to those found in prior sensemaking studies or a novel addition to the mix. Fourthly the role played by different narratives in enabling leaders to negotiate a credible position on their relationship with organisational politics and derive a successful sensemaking outcome. Finally, the influence of identity work on the “end to end” sensemaking process (i.e. from triggers to outcomes) and the extent to which future developments in both theory and empirical work should pay more attention to the underdeveloped stream of work that posits how politics “functions as an affirmation of identity and a means of making sense of the organisation” (Mackenzie Davey, 2008, p652) and, therefore, needs to be better understood in terms of “how individuals seek through political manoeuvrings to further secure their individual careers and identities in an uncertain world”(Knights and McCabe, 1998, p.761).

1.2 Structure of the thesis

This thesis is structured in six major chapters. Aside from this introductory chapter, the structure of the remaining chapters is as follows:

Chapter 2 provides a critique of the relevant literature regarding how organizational politics is both defined by writers and perceived by organisational members. It sets off by drawing attention to and exploring conceptual ambivalence in how the construct is understood and argues how the limitations associated with the dominance of a positivist perspective in both theoretical and empirical arenas drives the need for more studies of an interpretive / qualitative nature in order to advance our understanding. Extant research into how organisational members perceive the phenomenon is then analysed highlighting how such subjective perceptions of politics tend to focus on the construct as a whole or the degree of workplace politicisation rather than issues of personal engagement. The importance of the political element of leadership roles is then argued, highlighting how changes to the contemporary organisational context are increasing the centrality of politics to leadership performance and career success.

Given the use of sensemaking as a lens through which to examine personal involvement in political activity, Chapter 3 explores the nature and properties of the sensemaking perspective alongside an analysis of what is currently known about the role of stories and narratives therein. An excavation of the growing empirical interest in how sensemaking plays out in organisational life reveals that, whilst there is an acknowledgement of the political dimensions of the sensemaking process itself, little is known about how managers make sense of their own political experience. The complex interaction between sensemaking activity and identity work is then explored before Chapter 4 conducts a more detailed analysis of managerial identity, making the case for why understanding the latter as a dialogic form of narrative construction is most appropriate for examining individual sensemaking of political experience. The chapter brings the literature review to a conclusion by outlining the research gaps identified in the literature and how this has formulated the research questions to be addressed by this thesis

Chapter 5 sets out the methodological strategy and research process devised to address these research questions. It begins by laying out the “why”, namely the ontological assumptions underpinning the study, the rationale for the methodological and research design choices made and the analysis strategy created to interrogate the data gathered.

This strategy established, it then describes the “how”, the procedures involved in data collection and recording. This process emphasis is continued in mapping out step by step how each component of a detailed and systematic analysis approach was executed. The overall intent behind structuring the chapter in this way is one of establishing clear alignment and “methodological fit” between research questions adopted and the study of the design itself (Edmondson and McManus, 2007).

Chapter 6 presents the results of the study against each of the research questions. It begins by focussing on how sensemaking was triggered in interviews, namely how discrepancies between participant definitions of politics and descriptions of their own work behaviour rendered the interview as a site for sensemaking in action. Findings from the next step of the analytic process are then laid out, namely the nature and incidence of very specific sensemaking processes apparent in the “micro” stories managers told of their political experience. Scrutinized in particular detail, are both the most frequently deployed process and one not previously identified in extant sensemaking research, itself an additional area of contribution of the overall study. The influence of identity work within such processes is similarly highlighted. Finally, this chapter presents the different “macro” narratives that leaders constructed to account for the totality of their political experience and how different combinations of such narratives and their associated identity work determined different sensemaking outcomes.

Chapter 7 provides a theoretically informed discussion of the findings and articulates the contribution made by the study to the literature on both organizational politics and sensemaking. A number of important implications for future theoretical development in both arenas are identified and these provide a basis for arguing useful directions for further empirical work. As well as deriving meaning from the study in an academic sense, the implications for practice are similarly excavated and examined, providing utility for both leaders, in asserting how the ambivalence associated with this element of their role can be successfully negotiated, and organisations, too, in arguing how they can better support individuals in leadership roles and at the same time attenuate incidence of the more negative manifestation of politics generally. Chapter 8 concludes by restating the research problem tackled and by providing an overview of the study conducted, its contributions, implications, limitations and suggestions for further research. A final brief statement of the personal insights and learning derived from conducting the study brings the thesis to a close.

2. DEFINING & UNDERSTANDING ORGANISATIONAL POLITICS

2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the different ways in which Organisational Politics (OP) is currently defined and understood in the literature and, in conjunction with similar assessments of sensemaking and managerial identity (see Chapters 3 and 4 below), establish a warrant for this particular study and how it will contribute to the overall field. The ambivalence that exists conceptually as to the nature and impact of the phenomenon will be explored together with what is currently known about the perceptions of those who experience it in organisational life. The limitations of the dominant positivist perspective in both theoretical and empirical arenas will be surfaced, highlighting in particular the gaps that exist in our understanding of how those in leadership roles interpret their involvement. An assessment of the contemporary organisational context is also conducted, showing how a number of different factors combine to render the need for leaders to be politically active and skilled as increasingly important. This builds to an overall argument that personal engagement in a phenomenon that is on the one hand potentially toxic for organisational functioning, personal reputation and working relationships and, on the other, essential for role performance and career success presents leaders with a fundamental dichotomy and that there is a need to build on an underdeveloped body of work which adopts an interpretive ontological stance and a qualitative research design in order to advance our understanding of how leaders deal with this dilemma.

Although the associated behaviours have been of interest to philosophers, writers and researchers throughout history (de Vries, 2007), the label of “organisational politics” is a relatively recent development in the literature (Drory & Romm 1990) and has only been studied empirically over the last four decades (Ferris and Treadway, 2012; Rosen and Hochwarter, 2014; Vigoda Gadot & Drory 2006). Interest in the phenomenon was catalysed by early attempts to establish a theoretical framework for examining its role within the workplace (Bacharach and Lawler, 1980; Mayes and Allen, 1977; Mintzberg, 1983; Pfeffer, 1981). Despite this body of work, and the weight of empirical research that has followed, there remains a lack of definitional consensus (Buchanan 2008; Dipboye and Foster, 2002; Drory and Romm 1990; Drory and Vigoda-Gadot 2010; Ferris and Hochwarter 2011; Landells and Albrecht 2016; Lepisto and Pratt 2012; McFarland et al. 2012; Provis 2006)

and the literature reveals ongoing disagreement and ambiguity about the exact nature and boundaries of the concept (Mayes and Allen, 1977; Kipnis et al., 1980; Cropanzano et al, 1997; Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006). As will be explored, a predominantly positivist approach to definition and understanding has enabled some elements to be surfaced (e.g. Mayes & Allen 1977, Drory & Romm 1990, Ferris et al 2002a) and provided the basis for a substantial and continuing body of quantitative studies over a 30 year period, centred primarily around the development of the POPS model (Ferris & Kacmar 1989, 1992, Kacmar and Carlson, 1997; Kacmar and Ferris 1991 – see 2.3.1. below), to aid our understanding of how the construct is perceived by organisational members. Such work, however, has still not been successful in facilitating a widespread consensus about the nature or manifestation of the basic concept (Landells and Albrecht, 2016). Whilst this is of concern to those of a positivist persuasion who argue that “only when consensus is reached about what organisational politics is and how it should be measured, will the field be advanced” (Kacmar and Carlson, 1997, p.656), this thesis takes the position of Buchanan in arguing that such a problem “is rapidly cured if political behaviour is regarded as a socially constructed phenomenon” (2016, p.348) and responds to those (inter alia Hochwarter, 2012; Landells and Albrecht, 2016) who have argued that, rather than the ongoing preoccupation with operationalising core concepts, developing stable measures and building generalisable models, more innovative and qualitative investigation is needed to unearth “new insights that may not be recognised in existing theoretical work” (McFarland et al, 2012, p.116).

Approaches to organisational politics can be broadly classified into macro and micro-perspectives (Doldor, 2011). Macro-perspectives tackle organisational politics at the level of the organisation by focusing on structural factors and organisations as political systems. In contrast, micro-perspectives tackle organisational politics at the individual level by examining reactions, behaviours, skills and interpersonal dynamics related to politics. Given the focus here on leader sensemaking of organisational politics, it is this micro perspective that this thesis adopts. This can be further divided into two approaches that have dominated the literature (Vigoda Gadot & Drory, 2006; Gotsis and Korzei, 2010). The first focuses on either dispositional (traits and motives) or non-dispositional (skills, behaviour, tactics) definitions. This line of research proposes a number of drivers of political engagement as well as a variety of typologies for influence tactics and behaviour (Coopey and Burgoyne, 2000; Diefenbach, 2007; Ferris et al., 1996a; Grossmann, 2006; Peled, 2000; Sussman et al., 2002). The second approach focuses on employees’ subjective perceptions of organisational politics rather than on actual political behaviour itself (Conner, 2006; Dipboye and Foster, 2002; Fedor et al., 1998; Ferris et al., 1989, 2002; Hochwarter et al., 1999; Ladebo, 2006; Ma Chao and Fang, 2006; Parker et al., 1995; Rosen et al., 2006; Valle and Perrewé,

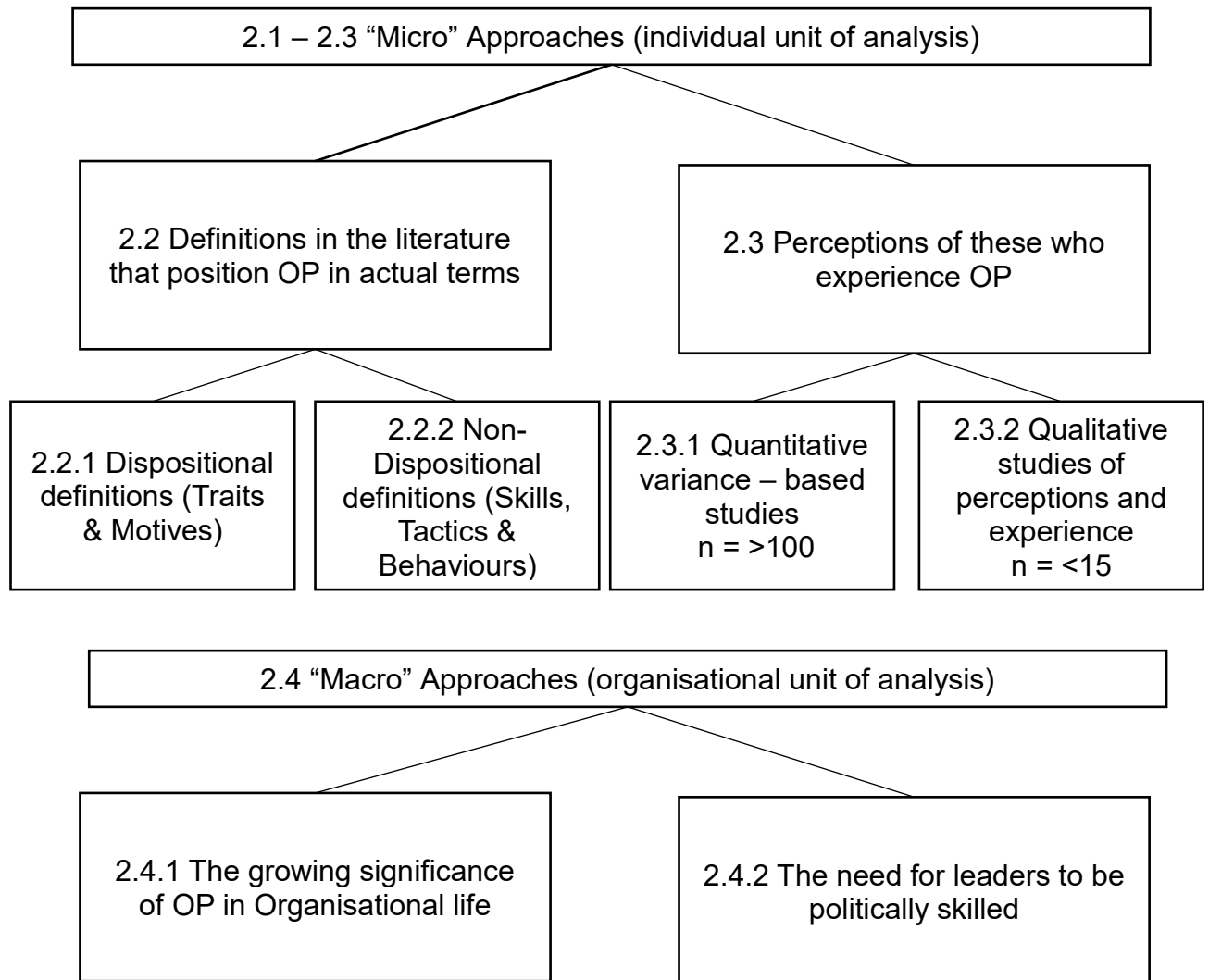
2000). Such perceptions typically represent the degree to which respondents view their work environment as inherently political in nature (Gotsis and Kortzei, 2010) and, therefore, unjust from the individual's point of view (Kacmar and Ferris, 1991, pp 193-4; Kacmar and Carlson, 1994, p3; Vigoda, 2000; Ferris et al., 2002; Poon, 2003; Miller et al, 2008; Chang et al, 2009; Bedi and Schat, 2013). Rather than defining the construct in actual terms, therefore, "perceptions of politics involve an individual's attribution to behaviours.....and are defined as an individual's subjective evaluation about the extent to which the work-environment is characterized by co-workers and supervisors who demonstrate political behaviour" (Ferris et al, 2000, p.90).

Given the interest in this study regarding in how leaders author accounts of their personal engagement in political activity, it is to this second key strain of micro approaches that this thesis contributes. As will be highlighted in 2.3 below, however, although this approach focuses on subjective perceptions of politics, the body of extant empirical work is overwhelmingly positivist in nature, dominated by large-n quantitative analyses (for example, Bedi and Schat, 2013; Chang et al, 2009; Miller et al, 2008). Whilst helpful in shedding light on how the construct is perceived by organisational members, together with the antecedents and consequences of such interpretations, this has been less successful in addressing the subtlety and nuances of how, leaders in particular, deal with their involvement in practice.

Table 2.1 below maps out an overview of how the Chapter will henceforth be organised. Section 2.2 examines in more detail definitions of writers and commentators that focus on both dispositional and non-dispositional factors. The ambivalence that exists regarding the extent to which the construct is defined in either positive or negative terms conceptually is then explored, leading towards an assessment of the limitations associated with such positivist-based thinking and how a more interpretivist stance, one that regards the perceptions of organisational members as the ones that matter most, is needed to advance understanding of how leaders handle such ambivalence. Section 2.3 reviews extant research into such, typically negative, individual perceptions, highlighting again both the dominance and the limitations of its positivist/quantitative orientation and reinforcing further the need for more interpretive/qualitative work if sensemaking of the lived experience of political engagement is to be understood more deeply. Section 2.4 locates the phenomenon in a macro perspective, comparing rational and political organizational models before eliciting how involvement in politics has become endemic to leadership roles given changes to the contemporary organisational context that accentuate the structural antecedents which give rise to political behaviour. Recent evidence of how political skill is correlated positively with a range of performance and career outcomes is then unpacked thereby highlighting not

just the inevitability of political engagement in leadership roles but the desirability too, presenting those in such positions with the dilemma of how best to exploit the opportunities provided whilst avoiding damage to integrity and a positive self-concept from the negative attributions of those around them.

Table 2.1: Overview of Chapter 2 – Defining & understanding Organisational Politics



2.2 How Organisational Politics is defined in the literature.

As set out in 2.1. above, this section takes a more detailed look at definitions of organisational politics that focus on either dispositional (traits, motives) and non-dispositional

(skills & behaviour) factors. In both cases, there is a sharp divide in the literature between commentators who see the construct in positive or negative terms conceptually. An exploration of this ambivalence will lead to an assessment of the difficulties and limitations associated with attempting to understand the phenomenon from the inherently positivist perspective of a neutral observer and that there is a need instead to focus on the definitions and understandings of those that experience it as the ones that matter most.

2.2.1. Dispositional definitions of Organisational Politics (traits & motives).

Early theoretical and empirical work suggested a link between basic personality and organisational politics, namely that some individuals are *Machiavellian* by nature (Christie and Geiss, 1970). Machiavellianism is a term frequently associated with politics, the stereotypical view being that “Machiavellian” individuals are emotionally detached and manipulative (Austin et al, 2007). Christie and Geiss (1970) developed and refined questionnaires and laboratory experiments designed to identify features of the “Machiavellian personality” and determine the likelihood of success of such a personality type. They identified four main dimensions ; lack of emotional involvement in interpersonal relationships (others as objects to be manipulated rather than as individuals with whom one empathises); lack of concern with conventional morality (utilitarian view of others, less concerned with amoral nature of own actions); lack of gross psychopathology (instrumental view of others accompanied by an accurate evaluation of them) and low ideological commitment (getting things done more of a focus than long range ideological goals). Their research around the use of their “Mach IV” questionnaire, designed to measure the degree of Machiavellianism in an individual’s personality, revealed that the typical “High Mach” resists social influence, likes to initiate and control the structure of social situations and tends to win in negotiations involving face to face interaction where emotional involvement is irrelevant.

Others have since suggested that the decision to engage in political activity is driven, at least in part, by Machiavellianism (Porter, Allen & Angle, 1981; Ferris, Fedor and King, 1994). Support for this position has, however, been less than conclusive (Treadway et al, 2005) . For example, whilst Grams and Rogers (1990) found that individuals high in Machiavellianism were more likely to use non-rational forms of influence, Vecchio and Sussman (1991) found no such relationship between Machiavellianism and influence tactic choice. There is some evidence that Machiavellianism may be a predictor of perceptions of organisational politics but the direction of causality is uncertain (O’Connor and Morrison,

2001). A further difficulty is presented by the way in which this view of politics is positioned in exclusively manipulative and negative terms. Interestingly, Christie and Geiss changed their attitude towards the High Mach personality during their research (Buchanan & Badham, 1999, p116-7), gradually adopted a more ambiguous attitude which saw some attractive dimensions of the High Mach personality, for example that High Machs were more likely to be open and honest about their character and motives. Others have suggested that High Machs are neither immoral nor amoral, but that they adhere to a different code of ethics to Low Machs (Leary (1986).

Other definitional strands apparent in the literature attempt to define organisational politics by the motivation or intent of the actor, rather, than their basic personality. Prominent in this line of enquiry is the focus on **self-interest** or “behaviour strategically designed to maximise self-interests of individuals” (Vigoda-Gadot and Kapun, 2005, p252), a perspective echoed in Allen et al’s view (1979, p77) of “intentional acts as influence to enhance or protect the self-interests of individuals or groups” and in other more contemporary analyses (Eisenhardt and Zbaracki, 1992; Gotsis & Kortezi, 2010: 498; Latif et al, 2011). Robbins (1976, 1983) argues that any behaviour by an organization member that is self-serving is political and that as all behaviour is self-serving, all behaviour in organizations is hence political, the only meaningful distinction being between functional and dysfunctional political behaviour depending on how well such behaviour coincides with organizational objectives. Whilst unrestrictive, the helpfulness of such a position is open to challenge. As Drory & Romm (1990) observe, the basic premise that work motivation stems from the striving for personal need satisfaction is well documented in the work motivation literature and merely stating that there is a self-serving purpose in any behaviour adds little to what we already know about behaviour in organizations. Similarly, personal and organisational agendas are not as clearly distinguishable as one might at face value think and political tactics can be used to promote both individual and organisational interests. If political activity can generate organisational benefit as well as personal gain, then “definitions that regard only overtly self-interested acts as categorically political are unhelpful” (Buchanan, 2008, p.51).

Another definitional strand positions organisational politics as not only self-serving but also non sanctioned or illegitimate activity that is **contrary to the organisational interest** (Ferris et al. 1989, 2000; Kacmar and Baron 1999; Ladebo, 2006: 259; Mayes and Allen 1977; Mintzberg 1983; Pettigrew, 1973; Porter, 1976; Rosen et al, 2009; Sussman et al, 2002: 314; Vigoda-Gadot, 2007:665). The classic model developed by Mayes and Allen (1977) draws a distinction between sanctioned and non-sanctioned organizational ends. Influence attempts aimed at non-sanctioned ends are considered political behaviour, whilst only behaviour

where both the means and the ends are organisationally sanctioned is categorised as non-political. Pinning definitions on this aspect alone, however, precludes behaviours which may be labelled as political yet do not go against the organization's goals. For example, a manager may use certain tactics in order to further their own career interests and gain more formal power to pursue goals which are desirable for the organization. Moreover, behaviour may be both self-serving and counter to the organisational interest and yet still not be what many would regard as a political act. For example, should the formal application for promotion by an under qualified but over confident employee who would not in all probability, therefore, serve the organisational interest capably be regarded as a political act? (Drory & Romm 1990). More significantly still, in seeing politics only in terms of damage, such a position denies the possibility that political activity can be positive for organisational functioning (Buchanan, 2008; Landells and Albrecht, 2016).

Finally in this section, another central definitional theme that takes a dispositional stance on the nature of organisational politics is the ***need for the acquisition and maintenance of power*** (Gotsis and Korzei, 2010; Nicholson, 1997; Vredenburg & Shea-VanFossen, 2010) with writers variously defining the construct as “those activities taken within organizations to acquire, develop, and use power and other resources to obtain one's preferred outcomes in a situation in which there is uncertainty or dissensus about choices” (Pfeffer, 1981, p93); “the use of power to influence decisions in order to achieve desirable outcomes” (Daft, 1998) or “the daily process through which the abstractions of power and organisation are experienced.” (Mackenzie Davey, 2008). Others see the relationship as more about enactment than attainment: “how control is exercised, power exerted, authority legitimated, compliance achieved, and consent maintained” (Knights and McCabe, 1998, p772) or highlight “the articulation of various individual and group interests through the everyday enactment of communicative processes that produce, reproduce, resist and transform collective structures of meaning. Politics is power enacted and resisted” (Mumby, 2001, p.587).

Again though, what seems to on the face of it a relatively straight forward definition becomes more problematic in closer inspection. A subtler link with the notion of power is offered by Pettigrew, who argues that “politics concerns the creation of legitimacy for certain ideas, values and demands – not just action performed as a result of previously acquired legitimacy” (1977, p. 85). What is important, therefore, is not so much the formal legitimation of interests but the representation of legitimation. Power, in this context then, becomes the ability to impose one's interpretation on events in competition with the meanings offered by others, or in other words the ability to ‘make your account stick’ (Buchanan & Badham, 1999,

p71). Such ambiguity raises the importance of “accounts” within the political arena and, whilst they are referred to here as power attainment mechanisms, Chapter 3 below will explore their role as sensemaking devices, the means by which managers attempt to resolve discomfort created by their participation in such an ambiguous arena.

Although power is a common goal associated with organisational politics, to equate it exclusively with power attainment behaviour is highly contestable given that it can be argued that not all political behaviour is necessarily power oriented and not every attempt to gain power takes the form of political behaviour (Landells and Albrecht, 2016). Exerting influence in a political manner may be motivated by “personal goals other than the attainment of power; personal convenience, obtaining a more pleasant work assignment, helping a friend out of an altruistic motive, romantic or sexual motives, and furthering a legitimate organizational goal may all constitute desired outcomes for their own sake unrelated to any power considerations” (Buchanan and Badham, 1999, p.54). Similarly, financial gain – rather than power attainment - may constitute a leading motive for informal behaviour and social influence attempts which go beyond techno-economic rationality (Ungson and Steers, 1984).

Table 2.2 below sets out a summary of the dispositional factors apparent in how writers and commentators in the literature define organisational politics, together with their associated limitations. Section 2.2.2 below will now go on to explore non-dispositional factors, that is, definitions of politics from a similar perspective that focus on skills, tactics and behaviour rather than traits or motives.

TABLE 2.2: SUMMARY OF DISPOSITIONAL DEFINITIONS OF ORGANISATIONAL POLITICS

<i>Definitional Heading</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Difficulties/Limitations</i>
Machiavellianism	Personality traits that emphasise emotional detachment in interaction with others, an interpersonal orientation that is cognitive rather than emotional and a willingness to engage in manipulative behaviour to further self-interest (Christie & Geiss, 1970).	Positions OP exclusively as manipulative and negative. Does not allow for positive application of political behaviour or that politically skilled individuals can also be emotionally intelligent (Austin et al, 2007)
Self Interest	Behaviour strategically designed to minimise self-interests of individuals (Vigod, Gadet & Keyan, 2005, p252)	1. Distinguishing between the political and the non-political – isn't all behaviour self-interested to a degree? 2. Skilled actors may also be adept at concealing intent. 3. Individual and organisational interest may not be mutually exclusive (Buchanan 2008)
Contrary to the Organisational Interest	Illegitimate activities or behaviours not sanctioned by the organisation (Mayes and Allen, 1977; Mintzberg, 1983)	Who is arbiter of what is illegitimate or sanctioned – members will have different views / perspectives? (Buchanan & Badham, 1999). Political behaviour and tactics can be used to counter the use of otherwise legitimate means to non-legitimate ends (Harrison, 1987). Precludes the notion of political activity having positive as well as negative organisational impact (Landells & Albrecht, 2016).
Need for Power/ Maintaining of Power	'Activities taken within organisations to acquire, develop and use power' (Pfeffer, 1981, p93)	Not all political behaviour is power driven and not every attempt to gain power takes the form of political behaviour (Pfeffer, 1992). Other drivers of informal influence tactics may be more significant e.g. financial gain (Ungson & Steers, 1984)

2.2.2. Non-dispositional definitions of Organisational Politics (skills, tactics and behaviour)

The plurality of definitions that focus on traits and motives is also apparent in the non-dispositional arena. This section follows Doldor (2011) in distinguishing between capabilities or competencies (political skill) and what individuals actually do (political behaviour or tactics).

Political skill is a concept closely associated with the work of Mintzberg (1983, 1985) who regarded political skill as being necessary for effective personal involvement in organizations. While Mintzberg associated political skill with formal power, recent studies have considered it as the ability to be effective in informal interactions (Perrewé et al. 2004). Consensus has not yet been achieved on how to define political skill, but in a review of most recent studies, Kimura (2015) identified a general reliance on the definition that describes it as 'the ability to effectively understand others at work, and to use such knowledge to influence others to act in ways that enhance one's personal and/or organizational objectives' (Ahearn et al. 2004; Ferris et al. 2005b).

Recent studies have endorsed such interpersonal emphasis. For example, it has been described as an interpersonal style construct that combines social astuteness with the capacity to adjust one's own behaviour to different situational demands (Zellars et al. (2008), a comprehensive pattern of social competencies and a construct consisting of four dimensions: social astuteness; interpersonal influence; networking ability; and apparent sincerity (Ferris et al. 2005b, 2007). The development and refinement by Ferris et al (1999, 2005b) of an 18-item scale called the Political Skill Inventory which has been tested widely in quantitative studies (see 2.3 & 2.4 below). Another conceptualization of political skill further emphasises the salience of influence as a means of defining political skill. Based on a large scale survey examining the views of 1479 senior managers across multiple UK sectors, corroborated with 12 interviews, Hartley et al (2007) mapped out interrelated dimensions of political skill. Within this framework, personal skills are the bedrock of other political skills in that they are related to one's self-awareness and awareness of others. Interpersonal skills refer to "the capacity to influence the thinking and behaviour of others, getting buy-in from people over whom the person has no direct authority, and making people feel valued" (ibid, p. 28).

This notion of informal influence is present in how many of the most active writers and researchers in the field view the basic construct of political skill (Buchanan, 2008; Ferris et al 2007; Treadway et al, 2005; Doldor, 2012) but it is questionable whether an influence-based definition is in itself sufficient. Whilst one can intuitively agree that behaviour not intended to have an impact on others cannot be seen as political, the reverse might not necessarily apply and there are problems with this definitional perspective. It has been argued that all routine social exchanges entail mutual influence and every interaction could therefore be interpreted as political (Mangham, 1979; Astley and Sachdeva, 1984). An influence-based definition therefore, "does not completely distinguish between political and non-political behaviour" (Buchanan, 2008, p.51).

Attempts to define organisational politics in terms of behaviour tend to focus on what individuals actually do when engaging in political activity. As with other definitions examined so far, the literature reveals a lack of consistency in the terms used with 'techniques', 'strategies', 'power tactics', 'behaviours' all being used interchangeably (Doldor, 2011). These are typically captured in taxonomies, the earliest of which was developed by Allen et al (1979) who highlighted attacking or blaming others, use of information, impression management, support building for ideas, ingratiation, coalitions, association with influential others and creating obligations as types of political behaviour. Since then, there have been numerous attempts to endorse or refine these (Ashforth and Lee, 1990; Buchanan and

Badham, 1999; Kipnis and Schmidt, 1988; Kipnis, Schmidt and Wilkinson, 1980; Kumar and Ghadially, 1989; Vredenburg and Maurer, 1984; Zanzi, Arthur and Shamir, 1991).

Whilst these studies demonstrate that the repertoire of political behaviours is potentially very wide, ranging from pro-social to antisocial behaviours (Doldor, 2011), it is interesting from the point of this study to note the emphasis on impression management which features regularly in such taxonomies. Impression management is represented as self-presentation behaviours that individuals employ to influence the perception that others have of them (Goffman, 1959; Brown et al, 2008) and is argued to be a significant aspect of organisational behaviour (Buchanan & Badham 1999, p63). Impression management is a significant element of political activity because “attribution theory suggests that it is important for managers to avoid having their actions labelled with political intent” (Buchanan, 2008, p.51), to be able to attract attributions of legitimate motives (Allen et al, 1979, p82) and to be skilled in disguising self-serving intent (Ferris et al, 2002b, p111). In this domain, decisions and behaviour must simply appear rational (Pfeffer, 1992a, pp. 248-54) and individuals construct accounts of actions, the central feature of which are their coherence and the extent to which they “hang together” in the perception of their audience (Read, 1992). The primary goal is, thus, to construct an account that will be believed and honoured and “the main consideration when constructing such an account is the perspective of the person delivering any challenge. How much does the person already know? What is their current interpretation of events?” (Buchanan and Badham, 1999, p.203). This leads to the need to “evaluate the account we construct from the perspective of the reproacher so that we can judge the likelihood that the account will be honoured” (Read, 1992, p.9): the more coherent the challenger judges the account to be, the more likely it is to be honoured.

Here, therefore, the essence of political behaviour thus lies not in the tactics, methods and techniques deployed, but in the ways in which it is represented by the players in the game or the ‘management of meaning’, which is achieved through symbolic actions, and primarily through the judicious use of language (Buchanan and Badham, 1999, p.71). As already identified in 2.2.1 above, politics “concerns the creation of legitimacy for certain ideas, values and demands – not just action performed as a result of previously acquired legitimacy” (Pettigrew, 1977, p. 85) so what becomes important, therefore, is not so much the legitimisation of interests but the representation of legitimisation of political behaviours used in pursuit of those interests and the ability to impose one’s interpretation on events in competition with the meanings offered by others. Others talk of this as “framing”, the need to appear reasonable in context. What “looks reasonable, or ridiculous, depends on the context, on how it is framed in terms of what has preceded it and the language that is used

to present it” (Pfeffer, 1992a, p.190).

There are a number of reasons why focussing on the impression management aspect of organisational politics is of relevance to this thesis. Firstly, it again emphasises the importance of the accounts that managers construct of their own behaviour as opposed to what they actually do. Secondly, it draws attention to the existence of an audience for such accounts. Although the assumption latent in such analysis is often that this audience or “important other” in question is another individual, it is equally possible to regard this “other” as one of an individual’s “parliament of selves” that Mead (1934) refers to in his work on identity (see Chapters 3 and 4 below). Such accounts, therefore, have an important identity purpose to serve. If a person’s worth is established by the opinion of others, “individuals spin stories that maximise perceived self-value, offering versions of events which nullify or mitigate any negative implications which may be attached to their actions” (Brown et al, 2008, p.1055). Finally, it gives primacy to the plausibility, rather than objective accuracy, of accounts of political behaviour. Of central concern to this thesis is the sensemaking of personal involvement in the controversial arena of organisational politics, rather than the behaviour itself, and sensemaking, with its emphasis on accounts that are socially acceptable and credible (see Chapter 4 below), is about plausibility, coherence and reasonableness rather than objective accuracy (Weick, 1995, p.61).

Table 2.3 below summarises the non-dispositional definitions of organisational politics together with the limitations that have been discussed above. Having explored the ambivalence apparent in the literature with regard to how best to define and understand organisational politics, section 2.2.3 will now go on to explore similar ambivalence as to whether its impact can conceptually be regarded as positive or negative. For now, the emphasis remains on how such impact is assessed objectively by writers and commentators – how managers and organisational members perceive its impact will be explored in 2.3 later.

TABLE 2.3: SUMMARY OF NON DISPOSITIONAL DEFINITIONS OF ORGANISATIONAL POLITICS

	Definition	Examples	Difficulties/Limitations
POLITICAL SKILL	The ability to effectively understand others at work and use such knowledge to influence others to act in ways that enhance one’s personal and /or organisational objectives (Ahearn et al 2004, Ferris et al 2005b, Kimura 2015)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social astuteness • Interpersonal influence • Networking ability • Apparent sincerity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distinguishing between political and non-political. • Inherent subjectivity of determining intent behind the behaviour (attribution bias) • Distinguishing negative/ illegitimate behaviour from positive/legitimate action. What is the yardstick that separates “dirty politics” from “responsible political action”?
POLITICAL BEHAVIOUR	The techniques, strategies and tactics that capture what individuals effectively do when engaging in organisational politics (Doldor, 2011)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blaming others • Use of information • Impression management <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ingratiation • Coalition building • Association with influential others 	

2.2.3 Dysfunctional aberration or “power assisted steering” (Buchanan and Badham, 1999): is organisational politics a positive or negative construct?

The premise that organisational politics are damaging to most individuals, teams, and organizations has historically been the dominant view in the management literature (Chang, Rosen, & Levy, 2009; Eisenhardt & Bourgeois, 1988; Ferris & Treadway, 2012; Landells and Albrecht, 2016). Unsurprisingly perhaps, given the definitional emphasis upon, inter alia, Machiavellianism, self-interest and power attainment, this is reflected in articles such as “politics – the illegitimate discipline” (Thompkins 1990), and by references to “a walk on the dark side” (Ferris & King, 1991), or the “black arts of the whipping boys” (Cockerell, 1996). Mintzberg (1983, p172) posits that political behaviour is “...ostensibly parochial, typically divisive and, above all, in the technical sense, illegitimate – sanctioned neither by formal authority, accepted ideology, nor certified expertise”. Eisenhardt and Bourgeois (1988) argue that political behaviour in a top management team is associated with poor performance, by creating inflexibilities and communication barriers, restricting information flows, and consuming time whilst Zaleznik (1997) distinguishes ‘psycho-politics’ and ‘real work’.

Some writers have gone as far as denying the existence of politics or at least arguing for its elimination from organisational life (Klein, 1998; Stone, 1997). Others argue that political engagement should be resisted, even if this comes at a price of change management failure: "To ignore organisational politics when managing change is to fail. What then is the alternative? Should one be political? The short answer is no. You should not be political. If you do become political, then professional integrity is sacrificed. You are just another silver tongued hustler parading your wares while seeking to manipulate. This is the road to disaster. Politics does not add value" (Ward, 1994 p.143).

The definitional link with power attainment has prompted other writers to view those deploying political tactics very negatively. McClelland and Burnham (1976, reprinted 1995) distinguish between the "institutional manager" and the "personal power manager". The latter seek advancement at the expense of others, "are not disciplined enough to be good institution builders" and also "more often rude to other people, drink too much, try to exploit others sexually and collect symbols of prestige such as fancy cars or big offices" (ibid, p.130). This is contrasted with the "institutional manager" who, on the other hand, combines power motivation with self control, representing the "socialised face of power". In other words, the effective manager is one who deploys power altruistically and in the interests of the organisation, rather than in pursuit of self advancement: a perspective which does not readily permit the proposition that institution building and personal career enhancement need not necessarily be mutually exclusive (see 2.2.4 below). This dichotomy between organisational interests and personal gain is reflected elsewhere. Egan (1994) bases his prescriptions for "working the shadow side" of organisational life on a distinction between institution building and empire building politics, advocating the benefits of the former and the damaging consequences of the latter. Greiner and Schein (1988) contrast "the high road", in which power brokers deploy their resources and tactics in ways that are "open and above board", from "the low road", where deceit, manipulation and "political games" hold sway in a pursuit of self interest (Buchanan and Badham, 1999, p.44).

Throughout the 1980's and 1990's, voices arguing for a more positive perspective on organisational politics were relatively few and far between. Some argued that political behaviour and tactics can remove blockages to action and facilitate the implementation of decisions reached by legitimate means (Harrison, 1987), play a positive role in resolving competing perspectives (Frost and Egri, 1991) or provide the dynamic for the successful implementation of strategic change (Keen, 1981; Hardy, 1996). Butcher and Clarke (1999) positioned politics as 'battles over just causes', in which debate sharpens the quality of

decisions. There can be effective political behaviour without it necessarily being deceitful or underhand if the interests of both the organisation and the individual can be balanced successfully. Pfeffer (1992a), too, argued that competition and disagreement can be sources of energy and creativity, noting that the quality of debate in the “politics free” organisation is likely to be poor. For Provis (2004, p. 233), therefore, “the widely varied circumstances of political behaviour mean that the claim ‘politics is always bad’ is an easy view that we can set aside”

Arguably the most influential catalyst for a more positive perspective on the impact of organisational politics has been the work of Buchanan (1999, 2003, 2008) and of Buchanan and Badham (1999). The emphasis here is one of a critical assessment of both positive and negative, “nice and nasty”, faces that OP presents together with the argument that the development of political skill by change agents – or “political entrepreneurs” (Buchanan and Badham, 1999, p.4) - is essential if organisational aspirations from change are to be fulfilled. Not all “tricks”, they argue, are “dirty tricks”. This argument is predicated on the belief that politics is a pervasive aspect of organisational life that cannot be “wished or managed away”. It is necessary to confront circumstances as they are and not as one would wish them to be – management in general, and change management in particular, is a “contact sport” and those who do not wish to get bruised should not play (ibid, p.231).

This work and a growing criticism of the prevailing negative conceptualisation and measurement of organisational politics (see 2.3 below) has led to a number of researchers calling for recognition of its potentially functional and positive aspects (Albrecht, 2006; Ammeter et al, 2002; Drory and Vigoda Gadot, 2010; Fedor and Maslyn, 2002; Gotsis and Korzei, 2010; Hochwarter, 2012; Kurchner-Hawkins and Miller, 2006; Landells and Albrecht, 2016; Liu et el, 2010). As such, “the conceptualisation of organisational politics as a positive phenomenon has been gaining momentum,” (Landells and Albrecht, 2016) with others seeing “positive politics” as “an indispensable component of organisational life” (Hochwarter, 2012, p.33).

2.2.4. Limitations

This section has summarised the different ways in which the literature has defined organisational politics in actual terms, preferring either dispositional or non dispositional factors. The difficulties associated with trying to pin down such a controversial phenomenon

in this way have been alluded to throughout and are worth capturing explicitly before turning attention to how those in organisational life experience its machinations.

Attention has already been drawn in 2.2.1 above to the difficulties associated with attempts by detached observers to establish a prior definition from such a neutral standpoint. For example, for those who have sought to define the construct by what is formally sanctioned by the organisation (Mayes & Allen, 1977; Farrell & Peterson, 1982; Narayanan & Fahey, 1982; Porter, Allen, & Angle, 1983; Mintzberg, 1985), the question of who decides what is sanctioned and what is not arises. Most organisations have rules which identify behaviours regarded as “illegitimate” or unacceptable but these rules typically cover the obvious topics of conduct such as theft or the disclosure of sensitive information. Such rules cannot cover every contingency that might arise in interpersonal and group behaviour across the organisation over time (Buchanan and Badham, 1999, p.85). Different members of the organisation, in different functions and at different levels, often have different views on this issue. Some players may describe as political some behaviours which are in fact sanctioned in some form. Other studies have attempted to shed light on this sanctioned versus non sanctioned issue but have bumped up against the same fundamental problem.

Vrendenburgh and Maurer (1984) suggest that a distinction can be made in light of organisational norms i.e. political behaviour can be regarded as non-sanctioned when it deviates from organisational norms and vice versa. This is further extended to include behaviours that people would not want others to know they are using. Apart from the issue of how others would perceive such behaviours, who are the arbiters of deviation from organisational norms, assuming that they too can somehow be objectively quantified and published? In their study of the frequency of use and social desirability of sanctioned versus non sanctioned political tactics (Zanzi & O’Neill, 2001), the authors themselves selected and categorised the political tactics used. Who is to say that the participants would have similarly regarded, for example, “networking” as sanctioned and “control of information” as non sanctioned in the same way?

Such difficulties are also apparent when applied to Mintzberg’s (1983, p.172) oft quoted position on OP as “informal, parochial, divisive and not officially sanctioned”. Apart from the ambiguity surrounding what “informal” implies - one could argue that much behaviour in organisations falls into this category and not necessarily in a negative sense either - an additional problem is that it is difficult to apply to observable behaviour in a manner that will produce consistent judgements. Much depends on who is doing the judging. In any given “critical incident”, the initiators of political behaviour, the targets, the observers on the scene at the time, and the subsequent readers coming to a written account of the incident, will all

typically produce differing assessments of the nature and intent behind what was or was not “political”. As set out in the introduction to this thesis, it was experiencing exactly this phenomenon that sparked initial academic interest in the subject. On whose definitions or understandings of the outcomes, means and situational characteristics of particular behaviours are we to rely? This problematic issue of separating the political from the non-political is one which also dogs attempts to view the phenomenon through a non-dispositional lens. For example, as highlighted in 2.2.2. above, influence based definitions of politics run into the difficulty that all routine social exchanges entail mutual influence (Mangham, 1979; Astley and Sachdeva, 1984) and every interaction could therefore be interpreted as political (Buchanan, 2008, p.51). An influence-based definition therefore, does not completely distinguish between political and non-political behaviour.

In addition to the problems apparent in separating the political from the non-political, the ambivalence in the literature between the dysfunctional and functional impact of political engagement presents another conundrum in distinguishing “good” politics from “bad”. Some have taken an ethical yardstick to such a dilemma. For example, Velasquez et al (1983) established a set of guidelines against which to evaluate examples of questionable political behaviour, thereby allowing a distinction to be made between “dirty politics” and “responsible political action”. Based on the normative ethical concepts of utilitarianism, individual rights and natural justice, they argue that these criteria should be combined in complementary fashion to arrive at ethical judgements of political behaviour. The utilitarian approach judges behaviour in terms of the “balance sheet” of benefit and damage to the population involved, the theory of rights approach judges behaviour on the extent to which fundamental individual rights are respected and the theory of justice approach judges behaviour on the extent to which the benefits and burdens consequent on an action are fairly, equitably and impartially distributed. That such judgements are not as cut and dried as they may seem is tacitly acknowledged by the fact that this “decision tree” model allows for three mediating elements: “overwhelming factors” ; “double effects” and “incapacitating factors”. What, therefore, seems at first glance to be a structured, logical and objective judgement starts to become much more complex and subjective and, as the authors themselves acknowledge, “determining whether a manager’s lack of freedom, lack of information, or lack of certitude is sufficient to abrogate moral responsibility requires one to make some very difficult judgements. In the end, these are hard questions that only the individuals involved can answer for themselves” (Velasquez et al, 1983, pp79-80).

This last quote is an apt summary of the difficulties associated with trying to define a slippery concept as organisational politics in such apparently detached ways. Given the intent of this

study to reveal insights into how leaders resolve the ambiguities and ambivalence associated with their own involvement in political activity, it is necessary to interrogate the construct in more interpretivist terms, one that sees the definitions and understandings of those who experience it in organisational life as the perceptions that matter most. The next section now explores the current state of extant research in this arena.

2.3 How Organisational Politics is perceived by those who experience it.

The last section analysed the literature in one of the two dominant “micro” approaches to understanding organisational politics, namely exploring the phenomenon in actual or objective terms: in other words, what politics is or isn’t in terms of dispositional factors or observable behaviour. Contemporaneously, limitations and difficulties with this approach were identified and unpacked. Having made the argument that the phenomenon cannot sufficiently be understood purely from a neutral standpoint, this section turns to the other dominant “micro” approach to understanding OP, namely that of exploring what is known about the more subjective perceptions held by organisational members of the nature, frequency and impact of political activity. The analysis will highlight that, whilst the dominant body of quantitative studies in this arena has furthered understanding of the nature, antecedents and consequences of how organisational politics is perceived, there is a growing call (Ferris and Treadway, 2012b; McFarland et al, 2012; Landells and Albrecht, 2016; Buchanan, 2016) to add to the much smaller but developing body of interpretivist / qualitative studies that can provide “new and insightful approaches that promote richer interpretations of this important phenomenon” (Hochwarter, 2012).

Early quantitative work, for example Drory and Romm (1988), focussed on validating some of the definitional elements surfaced in the literature. Some of the equivocality and difficulties surfaced in 2.2 above are immediately apparent: formal influence attempts and the presence of conflict were not necessarily seen as political (conflict can be resolved by other means) and perceptions of behaviour as political appeared to depend on both the characteristics of the situation and the observer; for example, managers perceived the stated definition elements as less political than employees in non-supervisory positions. A later study by Drory (1993) endorsed this hierarchical influence: survey findings from 200 supervisors and employees in five Israeli organizations suggested that lower status employees, lacking the power and influence to benefit from ‘the political game’, viewed politics as frustrating, but higher status employees did not associate politics with job dissatisfaction. This finding from

early studies of differing perceptions based on status and influence is interesting given this thesis' interest in top management sensemaking.

2.3.1 Perceptions of Organisational Politics Scale (POPS)

Research into subjective employee perceptions of organisational politics was accelerated significantly by the development of the POPS (Ferris and Kacmar, 1989, 1992; Kacmar and Carlson, 1997; Kacmar and Ferris, 1991) which enabled the core concept to be operationalised and methodologically valid and stable measures to be created. After some initial methodological development, Kacmar and Ferris (1991) identified three dimensions of OP perceptions which they labelled General Political Behaviour, Going Along to Get Ahead, and Pay and Promotion including items such as “People in this organization attempt to build themselves up by tearing others down”, “Telling others what they want to hear is sometimes better than telling the truth”, and “The stated pay and promotion policies have nothing to do with how pay raises and promotions are determined” (Kacmar and Carlson, 1997).

Operationalising perceptions of organisational politics in this way allowed the development of hypotheses regarding how outcomes such as satisfaction, withdrawal, trust, performance and citizenship, depend on perceptions of politics that in turn depend on a range of organizational, environmental, demographic and personality factors. For the last two decades, as has been borne witness by studies in the hundreds and two versions of a Handbook of Organisational Politics (Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2006, 2016) the POPS model has been the dominant methodology for understanding the phenomenon.

Whilst it is unrealistic to attempt to do justice to all of the different studies that have been, and continue to be undertaken, it is informative to consider the findings from three large meta analyses that have been undertaken relatively recently (Bedi and Schat, 2013; Chang et al, 2009; Miller et al, 2008). The Miller et al study (2008) applied a meta-analysis on 79 independent samples from 59 published and unpublished studies involving 25,059 individual participants. The results indicate strong negative relationships between POP and job satisfaction and between POP and organizational commitment, moderately positive relationships between POP and the outcomes of job stress and turnover intentions, and a non-significant relationship between POP and in-role job performance. Moderator tests show that age, work setting, and cultural differences have contingent effects on certain POP relationships. In keeping with these findings, the Chang et al meta-analysis (2009) of 70 samples demonstrated similarly strong positive relationships with strain and turn-over intentions and strong, negative relationships with job satisfaction and affective commitment.

Additionally, the author's argue that their study extends previous research by providing unequivocal support for a relationship between perceptions of organizational politics and aspects of job performance that were not clearly supported (viz., task performance) or tested (viz., OCB) in Miller et al. 's (2008) meta- analysis. The results are further argued to provide compelling evidence in support of a theoretically derived model that integrates the stress- and social exchange-based explanations of the effects of perceptions of organizational politics. Perceptions of organizational politics were associated with increased psychological strain, which was associated directly with reduced performance, as well as indirectly with increased turnover intentions through reduced morale. Finally, in the largest study of the three, Bedi and Schat (2013) report the results of a meta-analysis of the relations between perceptions of organisational politics (POP) and attitudinal, psychological health, and behavioural variables using data from 118 independent samples, totalling 44,560 participants. Among the variables examined, POP was most strongly negatively related to organisational trust and interactional justice, but also exhibited relations with a variety of other criteria, including positive relations with stress, burnout, turnover intentions and counterproductive work behaviour, and negative relations with job satisfaction, citizenship behaviour, and job performance.

The evidence from these meta analyses suggest that, seen through the lens of organisational members who experience organisational politics, the phenomenon is perceived very negatively and connected to a range of undesirable outcomes. Reduced satisfaction, commitment, trust and performance and additionally, increased stress, psychological strain and burn out are all reported consistently from a significant body of quantitative data. This said, there has been an increasing challenge to the negative bias of the underlying POPS model (Landells and Albrecht, 2016). With its use of items such as: 'Favouritism rather than merit determines who gets ahead', 'You can get along around here by being a good guy, regardless of the quality of your work' or 'There are 'cliques' or 'in-groups' that hinder the effectiveness around here' the operational definition of the concept is argued to be loaded with negative connotations and "once OP is equated with unfairness, it is perhaps not surprising that the consequences of perceiving the workplace as politicized are found to be predominantly negative" (Doldor, 2011). A growing number of researchers have drawn similar attention to this inherent bias (Dipboye and Foster, 2002; Fedor and Maslyn, 2002; McFarland et al, 2012, Landells and Albrecht, 2016) arguing that measuring respondents' perceptions to a definition of politics that is essentially negative and restrictive is problematic. Doldor (2011) further argues that revisiting the foundational studies of the POPS empirical stream (Ferris et al., 1989; Ferris and Kacmar, 1992), suggests the authors' working definition of organizational politics to be derived from a selective review of available

literature rather than an exploration of how individuals actually perceive or define politics to be.

Noting the negative bias of the POPS, Fedor and colleagues (Fedor and Maslyn, 2002; Maslyn et al, 2005; Fedor et al, 2008) developed a measure of “Positive and negative perceptions of politics” with the intention of balancing the existing Kacmar and Ferris (1991) POPS scales. However, as Landells and Albrecht (2016) highlight, even their “positive” items retain a negative tone, for example “As long as we are performing well, it doesn’t bother me if my work group is accused of being somewhat political”. They argue that most research studies regarding perceptions of organisational politics continue to focus on the negative aspects of the phenomenon with POPS remaining the most popular measure of perceptions (e.g. Adebusuyi et al 2013; Li et al, 2014; Nasurdin et al, 2014).

Further ambiguity is added into this arena by quantitative studies that examine the role of political skill in shaping perceptions of organisational politics. In another stream of research, Ferris et al (2005) developed the Political Skill Inventory with 18 items that reflected four dimensions of individual political skill: networking ability, apparent sincerity, social astuteness and interpersonal influence. This has allowed a number of studies (Ahearn et al, 2004; Blickle et al, 2008; Brouer et al, 2006, 2013, Harvey et al, 2014) to identify ways in which negative perceptions of politics in the workplace are moderated by political skill or, in other words, how “political skill enables individuals to ward off the potentially harmful effects of a work environment perceived to be political” (Brouer et al, 2013).

One particular study in the political skill arena that is especially relevant to this research is the exploration of the relationship between perceptions of politics and emotional labour apparent in a mixed group of 193 employees (Treadway et al, 2005). Support was found for hypotheses that a) the need for achievement and intrinsic motivation would predict the use of political behaviour at work and b) political skill would moderate the relationship between political behaviour and emotional labour. The interest here is not in the former – the question of whether political engagement can be predicted by various personality traits and characteristics has already been examined in 2.2.1 above – but in the latter. “Emotional labour” here is defined as “the act of evoking or shaping, as well as suppressing, feeling in oneself” (Hochschild, 1979, p.561). The authors draw a parallel between emotional labour that is the product of the dissonance felt by an employee when the emotions they are forced to display at work conflict with the emotions they actually feel toward the customer or their job with that resulting from the conflict between the emotional demands of political behaviour in organisations and the actor’s true feelings towards the individuals involved. This notion is

extended further by the hypothesis that the relationship between political behaviour and emotional labour is moderated by political skill – for individuals low in political skill, there will be a significant positive relationship and vice versa. That is to say therefore, that the extent to which individuals experience emotional labour as a result of political behaviour is dependent upon perceptions of self-efficacy in the political arena. That there was support for such a hypothesis, indicates that personal participation in organisational politics is in some way emotionally significant and linked to a belief in one's capacity to act positively. The lens in use in this thesis is one of sensemaking which is arguably more about cognitive processing than emotional labour, but it is nonetheless interesting that self-efficacy politically, whether warranted or not, may influence the level of emotional turbulence that individuals experience from involvement in political activity.

Notwithstanding such ambiguity, the picture painted by such a substantive body of quantitative data covering a 25-year period suggests that, seen through the eyes of those who experience it in organisational life, organisational politics is largely stigmatised (see Table 2.4). Despite arguments about the distorting influence of the negative conceptualisations of perceptions of organisational politics that have dominated empirical research as well as the overall field (Hochwarter, 2012; Landells and Albrecht, 2016), the prevailing view amongst researchers appears to remain that it is predominantly negative to a wide variety of important organisational outcomes such satisfaction, trust, commitment and performance. Whilst this research paradigm has been successful in addressing particular kinds of research question, it is open to challenge regarding its ability to develop richer understandings of how leaders in organisational life deal with such stigma when it comes to their own personal involvement. Six years after the first quantitative dominated Handbook of Organisational Politics (Vigoda-Gadot and Drory, 2006), Ferris and Treadway (2012b), in their own edited volume (2012a), highlight recognition of the positive use of political behaviour, the role of context in shaping attitudes and the development of the concept of political skill as advances in understanding. In his chapter in the second edition of Vigoda-Gadot and Drory's Handbook (2016), Buchanan, whilst recognising such progress, challenges the one dimensional nature of this dominant positivist/quantitative research paradigm, arguing that "if one continues to study a phenomenon using the same methods, one is likely to generate much the same findings" (2016, p.362) and that the consideration of "piling on" (Mohr, 1982) further development of antecedent, mediating and outcome variables is "an approach of dubious value" (Buchanan, 2016, p.361). However, one designs and tests different dimensions and scales that capture individual perceptions of organisational politics, "survey methods cannot explore in depth the temporal and contextual dimensions of (perception forming) processes and can instead only sketch the outlines,

revealing broad patterns and trends, and indicate issues for further study, with different samples, deploying other research methods” (Buchanan, 2008, p.61). Whilst a small number of other researchers, notably Ferris and Treadway (2012b), Hochwarter (2012), Doldor et al (2012), Landells and Albrecht (2016) and McFarland et al (2012), have responded to Buchanan’s challenge that “positivist-variance-based approaches will struggle when faced with dynamic, contextually shaped social and organizational processes that unfold over time” (2016, p.363), it remains in the case that whilst studies located in this paradigm number in the hundreds, qualitative studies are noticeably rare.

TABLE 2.4: SUMMARY OF QUANTITATIVE META ANALYSES OF PERCEPTIONS OF ORGANISATIONAL POLITICS

Study	Size of Meta Analysis	Key Findings	Difficulties/Limitations
Miller et al (2008)	79 samples involving 25,059 participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong negative relationship between POP and <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Job satisfaction ○ Organisational commitment • Moderate positive relationship between POP and outcomes of <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Job stress ○ Turnover intentions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negative bias of POPS and consequent failure to capture the positive aspects of organisational politics sufficiently (Landells and Albrecht, 2016). • Doesn’t engage organisational members in person to discover how they perceive, use and are affected by political behaviour (Buchanan, 2016).
Chang et al (2009)	70 samples (number of participants not stated)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Significant negative relationship between POP and <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Job satisfaction ○ Affective commitment ○ Task performance ○ Organisational citizenship behaviours • Significant positive relationship between POP and outcomes of <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Strain ○ Turnover intentions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Processes through which behaviours come to be labelled as political, attributed with political intent, and socially constructed as political remain unexplored (Buchanan, 2008). • Cannot access the fine grained contextual detail associated with political involvement (Clegg, 2009) and problematic in face of dynamic, contextually shaped social and organisational processes that unfold over time (Buchanan, 2016).
Bedi and Schat (2013)	118 samples involving 44,560 participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Significant negative relationship between POP and <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Job satisfaction ○ Job performance ○ Organisational trust ○ Interactional justice • Significant positive relationship between POP and outcomes of <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Stress ○ Burnout ○ Turnover intentions ○ Counter productive work behaviour 	

2.3.2. Qualitative Studies of Perceptions of Organisational Politics.

Before the advent of the POPS model and the wave of subsequent quantitative analysis, some of classical early studies of perceptions of organisational politics were qualitative by design (Allen et al, 1979; Gandz and Murray, 1980; Madison et al, 1980). Allen et al. (1979) explored perceptions of a) political tactics and b) characteristics of effective political players by interviewing 87 senior and middle managers from 30 Californian electronics companies. Political tactics mentioned most frequently were blaming others, selective information, creating a favourable image, developing support, ingratiation, creating obligations, rewards, coercion and threats, associating with influential individuals, and forming powerful coalitions.

In addition, 60% of respondents said that political behaviour was either 'frequent' or "very frequent". While 60% agreed that political behaviour could advance careers, respondents were unanimous that politics had the power to harm individuals, through loss of job, power, strategic position and credibility with 45% further perceiving that politics impeded goal achievement, and 33% that politics resulted in the misuse of resources. Despite this emphasis though, the study acknowledged that a simplistic "all politics are negative" conclusion could not be supported, describing it instead as a 'two-edged sword'. Such ambivalence was also apparent in Gandz and Murray's seminal study (1980) of the narratives of 428 North American MBA students contained in self-administered questionnaires. They found that 90% regarded politics as commonplace and that 89% said that executives had to be skilled politicians. On points of functionality and desirability, whilst 55% said that politics impeded efficiency and 50% argued that management should eliminate politics, 42% agreed that politics helps organisations function effectively. In positioning organisational politics clearly as a subjectively experienced phenomenon, the authors propose a particularly restrictive definition of organisational politics, namely that "it should be restricted to denote a subjective state in which organizational members perceive themselves or others as intentionally seeking selfish ends in an organisational context when such ends are opposed to those of others" (p.248). One interesting aside from the study – given this study's focus on leaders – was the denial of the pervasiveness of politics by executives in the top management group, even though others indicated that they thought politics to be more prevalent at higher levels in the organisation. In the Madison et al study (1980), 3 managers from each of 30 organisations within the Californian electronics industry were interviewed and asked to define organisational politics and discuss their experience of it. The data was coded and analysed statistically regarding when and where politics occurred and whether or not it was helpful or harmful. Perceptions of politics were found to be related to power, uncertainty and the importance of the issue to the organisation and the individual.

Whilst these classic studies reinforce the ambivalence and paradox associated with perceptions of organisational politics, how much else can be drawn from them regarding the subtlety and richness of personal experience is open to question. Although qualitative by design, the methods of data collection (narratives contained in self-administered questionnaires in the case of Gandz and Murray) and more quantitative forms of data analysis (statistical factors and generalisable correlations) inhibit deeper understanding of how participants interpreted their experience. This was compounded by methodological assumptions that the term organisational politics is "too sensitive for use in direct investigation" (Madison, 1980, p.83) and that "only rarely will protagonists in political events reveal their innermost thoughts to unknown researchers" (Gandz and Murray, 1980, p.252)

who therefore need to place studies in an “impersonal and non-threatening frame of reference” (Madison et al, 1980) and ask “respondents to report not on their own involvement but on the behaviour of others they would term political” (Gandz and Murray, 1980, p.250).

This builds towards an argument which suggests that it is not just qualitative studies of subjective perceptions that are needed to provide the new insights but a different ontological stance too, one in which “the theoretical constructs of researchers take second place to the interpretations of those who engage in this behaviour” (Buchanan, 2106, p.348). If the issue is one of understanding how leaders make sense of their own political engagement and how this interacts with attempts to sustain a positive and credible identity, this challenges the dominant positivist assumptions which position political experience as something that can be separated from the individual and discovered by detached and neutral researchers producing value free science (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe, 2002) and suggest the need instead to adopt an interpretivist (also described as constructivist) ontological position through which “realities are apprehendable in the form of multiple, intangible, mental constructions, socially and experientially based, local and specific in nature and dependent for their form and content on the individual persons or groups holding the constructions” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Constructions are not more or less “true” in any absolute sense, but simply more or less informed and/or sophisticated and difficult to interrogate outside of an understanding of the meaning attached to the behaviour by those involved (Buchanan and Badham, 1999). Section 2.2.1 above has already noted the work of Pettigrew (1977) as highlighting the centrality of the management of meaning and “the process of symbol construction and value use designed both to create legitimacy for one’s own demands and to “delegitimize” the demands of opponent” (p.85) and such a processual perspective “in contrast with variance-based methods, is thus concerned with “narrative knowing”, paying attention to time, and to the sequence of events and outcomes” (Buchanan, 2016, p.349) which, in doing so, generates a richer, deeper, culturally embedded, temporally sensitive and thus more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon in question (Langley and Tsoukas, 2010, p. 7).

Occasional studies in the POPS era have hinted at such a more interpretivist stance. For example, in a study involving 55 high profile US Fortune 500 female Executives, participants explicitly rejected participation in political activity and denied its role in their career success (Mainiero, 1994). Statements such as “ I am not a fighter politically” , “I feel in the long run I will be defined by what I do” and “I prefer to analyse what’s going on , not play the games and do my work” were typical of the position taken by a majority of participants. Mainiero

accounts for this finding by saying that politics for these women is a dirty word and that a careful analysis of the career histories of her sample group showed that they had “developed a sensitivity to corporate politics that belied their comments”. While most initially denied that political skill had contributed to their success, they had actually progressed by experience through an unconscious “seasoning process”, following which they were practising “political skill at a very high and subtle level” (ibid, 1994). Interestingly, subjects seemed to be no readier to see themselves as political players at stage four, when Mainiero theorised the maturation journey to be complete, than they were at the outset of their careers. This reluctance to see themselves as politically active and skilful, even when fully “mature”, suggests, perhaps, the presence of some form of sensemaking activity and identity work triggered by the identity threat associated with undermining the meritocratic nature of their own career achievements by acknowledging that part of this success may be attributable to engagement in more slippery and covert behaviour.

This work aside though, it is once again the work of Buchanan and Buchanan and Badham that has been at the forefront of driving a “paradigm shift” (Kuhn, 1962) in the understanding of organisational politics. Building on an earlier pilot study by Buchanan and Badham (1999) designed to develop a research methodology for advancing understanding of the shaping role of political behaviour in organisational change, Buchanan’s study of the perceptions of 252 UK managers (2008) established four points of contrast with typical positivist-quantitative studies of perceptions. Firstly, political behaviour is a socially constructed phenomenon and research derived definitions are thus of secondary importance to the definitions and interpretations of respondents. Second, as behaviour only becomes “political” when actors or observers label it as such, an interpretive orientation challenges the distinction between perceptions of politics and actual political behaviour (Ferris et al 2002a; Valle and Perrew 2000; Vigoda 2003). The operationalization of actual political behaviour in the positivist tradition relies upon treating, for example, “rational appeal”, “assertiveness” and “exchange” as categorically political, although actors in a given context may not always understand or label those actions in that way. Third, the survey attempts to explore patterns in experience and perceptions in order to develop a better understanding of how managers view the phenomenon rather than claiming to develop valid and stable measures of the construct. Finally, the constructivist approach seeks to codify the “actor-theory-in-use” of respondents rather than develop a general, causal model.

The findings of the research revealed that most managers viewed political behaviour as ethical and necessary, and that aspects of organisational effectiveness, change, resourcing and reputation were attributed to political tactics, although 80% had no training in this area.

Buchanan (2008) summarised that a consistent pattern of responses concerning willingness to engage in politics, the need to act ruthlessly and the appropriateness of reciprocity when faced with political behaviour implies an attitude of “you stab my back, and I’ll stab yours” and concluded that this evidence suggests that the political theory of organisation held by most managers incorporates the following propositions. First, political behaviour may be precipitated by a combination of individual and contextual factors and is not necessarily perceived to be self-serving. Second, the behaviour repertoire of the organisation politician is diverse, and while “social” tactics may be perceived as more acceptable than covert manipulation, most managers see no ethical impediments to the use of political tactics. Third, political behaviour is not necessarily seen as damaging, but is perceived to generate both functional and dysfunctional individual and organisational consequences (ibid.).

Whilst Buchanan’s challenge to research derived definitions of the construct and the associated notion of “actual” political behaviour chimes with the interpretivist position adopted within this thesis, limitations exist here too. The adoption of a self-report questionnaire research design typically associated with large scale quantitative analyses, sits uncomfortably from an ontological and methodological perspective. Similarly, gaps still remain regarding mechanisms that interpret political experience; the equivocality of the perceptions formed as a result and the role of identity work in all of this. Buchanan acknowledges this in his concluding suggestions for further lines of enquiry, namely that the “processes through which behaviours come to be labelled as political, attributed with political intent, and socially constructed as political remain unexplored”. While political behaviour is perceived to vary in intensity, “little is known about the triggering and dampening mechanisms that are perceived to cause such variation” and, finally, whilst Ferris, Buckley and Allen (1992) advocate a balance between “pure politician” and “demonstrated ability”, little is also known about “the development of that balance, presumably acquired as an individual’s moral standards and ideas are tested and compromised by organisational realities.” (2008, p.62).

This study notwithstanding, there remains a dearth of studies that attempt to get under the skin of how perceptions of personal political activity are constructed by adopting not just a qualitative research design but also a constructivist / interpretivist ontological position. In an illuminating study of the political will and skill of managers in two global organisations (Doldor, 2011), three attitudinal dimensions are argued to define managers’ willingness (or lack thereof) to engage in politics: functional, ethical and emotional. This conceptualization of political will offers a context-dependent perspective on what exactly makes managers more or less willing to engage in politics, by capturing their attitudes toward political engagement

as related to the political landscape of their organizations. The study also refined the concept of political skill by highlighting five dimensions of skilled political engagement and proposes a model of political maturation which emerged as a result of examining how the managers interviewed developed willingness and ability to engage in politics. Doldor's later article (2017) builds on this same study by taking a developmental perspective on leader's engagement in politics and proposes a three stage model of political maturation that not only encompasses observable skills and behaviour but also "deep structure changes in mindsets and cognitive scripts" (p.666). By adopting a qualitative methodology in eliciting retrospective accounts of political experience, the study shares more common ground with this thesis than most prior empirical work. Subtle distinctions nevertheless exist surrounding the prevailing critically realist ontological positioning which necessitates implying that the accounts of managers are treated as "true" in an absolute sense, rather than simply more or less informed and / or sophisticated (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Such ontological positioning is necessary if – as was the case here - definitive judgements are to be supported regarding the political awareness and capability of participating managers but becomes more problematic when trying to explore the ambiguity and equivocality surrounding how managerial perceptions are formed. The intent in this researcher's thesis is not to make claims about the willingness to engage, the political acumen of participants or how such skill has been acquired but rather to shed light upon the triggers and content of the sensemaking processes through which *they* define the construct and interpret their own personal experience together with how this interacts with the maintenance of their leadership self-concept, thereby taking a more identity centred rather than developmental perspective. Another recent addition to this emerging body of qualitative work takes a further step in developing a richer understanding of how employees perceive organisational politics by using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA, Smith, 1996) to interrogate participant definitions and experience (Landells & Albrecht, 2016). Perceptions of politics were interpreted according to four levels (reactive, reluctant, strategic and integrated) and captured how individuals defined, described and perceived the outcomes of political activity. As with the Doldor (2011) study above, whilst the adoption of semi structured interviews – and in this instance IPA - to unpack perceptions of organisational politics is useful in enriching our understanding, again it falls short of plugging the gaps which exist around how such perceptions are formed. Whilst participants (only 8 out of the small sample of 14 were managers, and none of them senior leaders) do relay their lived experience of politics, the emphasis is one of a thematic analysis of definitions aimed at presenting the construct in a more balanced light and challenging the negatively skewed conceptualisations which, the authors argue, still dominate the literature. This thesis argues the need to go one step further by interrogating the way in which individual managers use narratives and sensemaking

mechanisms to account for their personal involvement in organisational politics rather than just explore whether they view the concept positively or negatively.

Table 2.5 below summarises the qualitative studies of organisational politics covered in this section and their limitations. In summary, this section, and 2.2 before it, has laid out the ambivalence associated with how organisational politics is defined and understood in the literature and has made the case for why - in a sensemaking based study - it is the subjective perceptions of those who experience it which matter most. In this arena, the limitations of the dominant and mature field of large scale positivist / quantitative studies using the POPS model have been highlighted and the argument set out for why there is a need to build on a much more embryonic empirical theme which adopts, not just a qualitative research design, but also an interpretive ontological stance to interrogate how those in leadership roles account for their own political activity. Section 2.4 will now turn to the “macro” aspects of organisational politics (see 2.1 above) to examine some of the structural and contextual factors which heighten the dilemma faced by such leaders in reconciling the need to be politically active and skilful with attempts to sustain a positive and credible identity.

TABLE 2.5: Summary of Qualitative Studies of Perceptions of Organisational Politics

Reference	Date	Purpose & Design	Ontology/ Epistemology	Findings	Limitations
Organisational Politics: Tactics and characteristics of its actors. (Allen et al.) Cited: 101	1979	Identifying managerial perceptions of a) political tactics b) characteristics of effective political players. Interviews with 87 managers at different levels across 30 Californian organisations.	Positivist	Range of tactics and mix of positive and negative characteristics identified.	Positivist methods of data collection and analysis restrict deeper understand of how individuals interpret their own political activity.
The Experience of Workplace Politics (Gandz & Murray) Cited: 183	1980	Investigating perceptions of 428 North American MBA students towards frequency, impact and nature of organisational politics. Content analysis of narratives contained in self-administered questionnaires.	Positivist	Perceived politicalisation related to job characteristics, respondents' employing organisation & geographic variables	As above plus the methodological feature of asking respondents to report not on their own involvement but on the behaviour of others they would term political
Organisational Politics : An Exploration of Managers' Perceptions (Madison et al.) Cited: 94	1980	Study of Managers' perceptions of political activity associated with different situations.	Positivist	Politics perceived to be related to power, uncertainty and importance of issue to organisation and individual.	As above.
A Structionist Account of Political Culture	1983	Discovery of symbols used in creating political images of organisational culture.	Interpretivist	Organisational culture should be viewed as system of integrated subcultures.	Particular focus on language and culture rather than sensemaking of political experience.

(Riley, P) Cited: 143		40 interviews with employees of two US organisations.			
<i>On Breaking the Glass Ceiling: The Political Seasoning of Powerful Women Executives</i> Mainiero, L.A Cited: 18	1994	Life history narratives of 55 senior female executives	Interpretivist	Political skill acquired through subtle "seasoning" or maturation process	Female only sample, US Fortune 500 Executives. Particular focus on gender / glass ceiling issues.
Politics and Organizational Change: The Lived Experience Buchanan, D & Badham, R Cited: 72	1999	Qualitative study of five accounts from a pilot study designed to develop a research methodology for advancing understanding of the shaping role of political behaviour in organisational change	Constructivist	Political behaviour an accepted element of change agency role and can serve organisational goals	Focus on change agency rather than leadership. Context information lacking.
You stab my back, I'll stab yours: Management experience and perceptions of organisation political behaviour. (Buchanan, D) Cited: 40	2008	Exploration of perceptions and experience of OP by 250 UK managers. Self report questionnaire.	Constructivist – Interpretivist.	Pattern of responses concerning willingness to engage in politics, the need to act ruthlessly and the appropriateness of reciprocity when faced with political behaviour implies an attitude of 'you stab my back, I'll stab yours'.	Use of self report questionnaire prevents understanding of the richer aspects of individual experience and sensemaking.
Examining Political Will, Political Skill and their Maturation among Male and Female Managers (Doldor, E) Cited: 2011: N/a PhD Thesis.; 2017: 0	2011 & also 2017	Investigation of the content and development of political will and skill across 38 managers in two global companies. Semi structured interviews.	Critical - Realist.	Three attitudinal dimensions define managers' willingness to engage in politics (functional, ethical and emotional) whilst five dimensions of skilled political engagement are identified (political awareness, developing networks and relationships, building alignment, versatile influence and authenticity). Later paper proposes three stage model of maturation.	Critical realism approach drives definitive judgements about respondent's political will and skill rather than exploring the ambiguity and equivocality surrounding how leaders account for their own political activity. Emphasis on dynamic, developmental perspective rather than individual sensemaking.
The positives and negatives of Organisational Politics: A Qualitative Study. (Landells, E & Albrecht, S) Cited: 0	2016	Development of a richer understanding of whether OP is perceived in both positive and negative terms. 14 semi structured interviews using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis.	Interpretivist	Perceptions of OP were interpreted according to four levels: reactive, reluctant, strategic and integrated. Descriptions of OP encompassed positive and negative individual and organisational outcomes.	Small sample managers rather than leaders. Emphasis on thematic analysis of definitions aimed at presenting OP in a more balanced light rather than shedding light on how individuals make sense of their own participation in OP.

2.4 The significance of Organisational Politics in a contemporary organisational context and the importance of political skill for leaders.

The introduction to this Chapter highlighted the distinction between macro and micro approaches to politics (Doldor, 2011). In line with the basic research questions at stake, the emphasis thus far has been on the latter, namely taking the individual as the unit of analysis and examining the definitions, motives, behaviours, skills and interpersonal dynamics related to politics. Whilst this is appropriate, given the focus in this thesis on leadership sensemaking of political experience, it is nevertheless relevant to understand the structural and contextual antecedents that are increasing the significance of politics in organisational life and driving the need for those in leadership roles to become more politically skilled. Individual leaders do not work in a vacuum (Bennis, 2007, p.3): as will be explored later in Chapter 3, the social element is an often overlooked or ignored element of the sensemaking process (Weick, 1995) and the way in which leaders account for their own political experiences in interview-based discussion will inevitably, therefore, be influenced to some extent by their organisational and cultural context.

This section distinguishes political theories of organisations with classical/rational models before analysing the structural and contextual factors that have given rise to the contemporary prominence and significance of organisational politics and the need for leaders to be politically active and skilful.

2.4.1 Rational versus political theories of organizations

Classical thinking about the nature of organisations throughout the first half of 20th Century is dominated by the work of FW Taylor, Henry Ford and, later, Max Weber. The latter (1947) proposed an 'ideal bureaucracy' model which he saw to be the most efficient and rational way of running organizations with the emphasis on centralisation, formal/written rules and regulations, clearly defined roles, hierarchy, specialization and technical competence (Doldor, 2011). Bureaucracies are thus underpinned by rational principles, striving relentlessly toward efficiency, with the metaphor being one of machines (Morgan, 2006) and power considered legitimate to the extent that it relies on the use of rational-legal authority.

Inspired by these classic Weberian ideas, rational organizational models, therefore, equate power with authority; there is an assumption of unitarism amongst employees, common

goals equally shared and pursued in a rational manner. The source of this legitimate power is the formal organizational design and any type of power beyond authority - for example, political behaviour and activity - is either ignored or deemed illegitimate and disruptive (Buchanan and Huczynski, 2004, p.693).

Post war theories of the firm have increasingly challenged many of these rationalist assumptions about the nature of organisations and the behaviour of those within them. The pioneering OD work of Karl Lewin and the National Training Laboratories (Lewin, 1946, 1947a, 1947b) inspired a generation of theorising which placed issues of human motivation and behaviour at the heart of organisational study (Maslow, 1954; McGregor, 1960; Argyris, 1957). The limitations of classical assumptions of centralised, rational control started to break down. For example, Simon's (1957) work on bounded rationality observed that real decision-makers in organizations rarely possess exhaustive knowledge about the available alternatives and their consequences. Apart from these cognitive limitations, he also pointed out limitations related to social factors, highlighting the existence of conflicting preferences that decision makers have with respect to the alternatives pursued.

Throughout the final quarter of 20th century, political theories of organizations began to emerge which legitimized, or at least acknowledged, the existence of differing individual or group interests and the influence processes engaged to defend them (Buchanan and Badham, 1999). The ideas and approaches emanating from the OD grounded school of thought were often criticised for their reluctance to embrace the existence of a political dimension to behaviour and decision making (Greiner, 1972) and, in contrast to the implied unity of the rational mindset, organizations became seen increasingly as political systems within which interdependent individuals and groups must find solutions to reconcile their divergent interests (Mintzberg, 1985; Butcher and Clarke, 2002). Negotiating these conflicting interests entails influence attempts that may or may not rely on formal authority with power being, thus, not only the privilege of those entitled by hierarchical status or formal policies to exert it, but prevalent in the form of more or less obvious influence attempts made at all organizational levels (Doldor, 2011). Political theories of organizations do not, therefore, ignore authority or discount the importance of power, but are rather concerned with unpacking informal, behavioural sources of power which become latent in a pluralistic battle for resources and influence. Such non-authorized forms of power imply expenditure of personal resources (i.e. personal attention, expertise) and entail greater risk (Hatch, 1997, p. 284).

2.4.2 The growing significance of Organisational Politics - contextual and structural antecedents

This view of organizations as political systems suggests that 'power struggles, alliance formation, strategic manoeuvring and 'cut-throat' actions may be as endemic to organizational life as planning, organizing, directing and controlling' (Schein, 1977, p.64). As this quote suggests, however, such a perspective is not an entirely modern or contemporary phenomenon and it begs the question, therefore, as to the nature of more current trends, both in theoretical writing and empirical research. Can it be argued that the cultural context is continuing to shift in a way that accentuates the significance and importance of organisational politics within leadership roles?

There is evidence to suggest a number of factors are combining to make the current organisational climate increasingly political in nature (Pfeffer, 2010). Changes in the contemporary business landscape (blurred organizational boundaries, fast-paced organizational change, flattening of hierarchies) all place increased value on managing individual or group interests (Zanzi and O'Neill, 2001) whilst leaders are increasingly called to make unstructured strategic decisions in the face of change and uncertainty (Buchanan, 2008). Other studies, too, have noted an increase in political activity where there is a fast changing technological and environmental aspect and where decisions, therefore, are unplanned (Curtis, 2003; Gotsis & Kortezi, 2010; Ladebo, 2006; Latif et al, 2011; Poon, 2003; Vredenburg & Shea-VanFossen, 2010).

Equally, it can be argued that other structural factors known to be associated with an increase in the incidence of political activity are more in evidence in today's organisational environment. One of the structural factors frequently associated with organisational politics is the existence of overt or covert conflict within the organisation (Cacciattolo, 2014). This theme in the literature chimes with this researcher's own professional consulting experience in how the pluralist nature of today's matrix structured organisations facilitates disagreement and conflict in the battle to influence decision makers. Each function believes that they have the answers to the complex strategic dilemmas facing the organisation. The route to strategic differentiation and competitive success is through brand in the eyes of Marketing Directors, through systems development for IT people, through skills & culture for HR change agents and through rigid control of cost for Finance gatekeepers. This lack of agreement over the means and sometimes the ends too, creates a highly charged political

climate in which a diverse array of political strategies is played out (Buchanan, 2008; Doldor, 2011, Landells and Albrecht, 2016).

The matrix approach to organisational structure further implies greater complexity of internal processes and an intense battle for increasingly scarce resources, both of which have been shown to increase the incidence of individuals engaging in political behaviour (Gotsis & Kortezi, 2010: 499; Othman, 2008: 43; Poon, 2003: 142). Others have pointed to the political nature of “turf wars” that surface out of the associated ambiguity surrounding who is responsible for what (Cacciattolo, 2014). A range of other factors arguably more prevalent in today’s organisational context have previously been linked to increased political behaviour : goal ambiguity (Pfeffer, 1981; Vredenburg and Maurer, 1984; Drory and Romm, 1990; Novelli, Flynn, and Elloy, 1994; Parker, Dipboye and Jackson, 1995) ; informal process and a decrease in established rules (Gandz and Murray, 1980); and the pace/ scale of change (Dawson and Buchanan, 2005; Zanzi and O’Neill, 2001; Knights and Murray, 1994; Gray & Ariss, 1985; Pettigrew, 1973).

The increasing presence of all these structural and contextual factors – the intensity of internal and external competition, strategic and environmental uncertainty, structural and procedural ambiguity – combine to accentuate the incidence and significance of organisational politics and, in turn, drive the need for leaders to be more politically aware and able.

2.4.3. The need for leaders to be politically active and skilful.

In line with the observation made at the start of 2.4.2 above, the implications for leaders of the shifting organisational context have been apparent for some time now: ‘Managerial work is undergoing such enormous and rapid change that many managers are reinventing their profession as they go. Faced with extraordinary levels of complexity and interdependency, they watch traditional sources of power erode and the old motivational tools lose their magic.’ (Kanter, 1997, p. 59). More specifically, the call for more politically aware and politically skilled managers has been growing steadily (Ammeter et al., 2002; Hall et al., 2004; Hartley and Branicki, 2006; Buchanan, 2008). Authors generally critical of the damaging nature of organisational politics have acknowledged that core areas of managerial work (interpersonal, informational and decisional) increasingly take managers into more informal and contested roles (Mintzberg, 1990; Rosen et al, 2009) whilst others have also recognised the need for political skill in order to reconcile the competing demands of

different constituencies, construct shared meaning and navigate diffuse power systems (Denis, Lamouthe and Langley, 2001; Ammeter et al., 2002; Butcher and Clarke, 2003).

The argument for leaders developing their political capability has been strengthened by growing empirical evidence that links political skill to a range of important leadership outcomes. In a comprehensive analysis of the construct, Kimura (2015) highlights the link with improved stress management (Perrewé et al. 2004, 2005; Jawahar et al. 2007; Hochwarter et al. 2010), individual performance (Bing et al, 2011; Blickle et al. 2011a, 2011b, 2011d, 2012b; Chaudhry et al. 2012; Ferris et al. 2007; Munyon et al. 2014) and career success (Blickle et al. 2011c; Chen and Fang 2008; Ferris et al. 2002b; Huang et al, 2013; Liu, Liu, and Wu, 2010, Meurs et al, 2010; Treadway et al, 2013a). Kimura (2015) also examined the contribution of a leader's political skill to leadership effectiveness from the perspectives of social capital, social exchange and impression management highlighting the evidence which suggests that politically skilled leaders can develop and maintain cognitive and relational social capital with important others in order to acquire and leverage critical resources (Ahearn et al., 2004; Tocher et al., 2012), get things done without appearing manipulative, overt or controlling (Douglas and Ammeter, 2004) and acquire transformational leadership behaviours (Sunindijo, 2012), and entrepreneurial intentions (Phipps, 2012). Other studies have directly examined and confirmed a positive relationship between political skill and leader effectiveness, as measured by perceived organizational support (Treadway et al., 2004), work unit performance, leader performance (Brouer et al., 2013; Douglas and Ammeter, 2004), follower effectiveness (Brouer et al., 2013), team performance (Ahearn et al., 2004), overall firm performance and entrepreneurial performance (Tocher et al., 2012). Semadar et al. (2006) compared the predictive effectiveness of political skill with other social effectiveness constructs (for example self-monitoring and emotional intelligence), and found that political skill was the only significant contributor. Blickle et al. (2013a) reported that politically skilled leaders who are in powerful positions are perceived to initiate structure and demonstrate consideration for their followers, which, in turn, enhance followers' satisfaction.

The breadth and weight of this empirical data serves to strengthen the now more widely (but not universally) held view that "expertise in organizational politics is critical with regard to making things happen and getting things done" (Buchanan, 2016, p.343). This in turn, though, serves merely to heighten the ambivalence associated with the phenomenon and, therefore, the dilemma faced by leaders when it comes to their personal involvement. On the one hand, whatever the "positive turn" in academic literature and research is starting to say to the contrary, the construct still seems to be one that is perceived negatively through the eyes of those who experience it in practice and those seen to be active in its machinations

risk much when it comes to reputation, trust and personal integrity. On the other, not only is the organisational context in which leaders are having to operate increasingly political, thereby rendering some form of participation as arguably inevitable, a growing body of compelling evidence positions the acquisition and deployment of political skill as a “must have” leadership competence, linked both to short term performance / effectiveness and long term career success. Understanding the ways in which leaders make sense of this dilemma, successfully or otherwise, is the central purpose of this study.

3. Sensemaking

The central concern of this thesis is understanding examining how leaders make sense of their personal involvement in organisational politics. Chapter 2 of this literature review revealed how the conceptual ambivalence and member perceptions associated with the construct, together with changes to the organisational context for those in leadership roles, combine to position the phenomenon as stigmatised within organisational life yet, simultaneously, an essential skill set for leadership effectiveness and career success, presenting those in senior leadership roles with the dilemma of how best to exploit the opportunities provided whilst at the same time defending their own sense of integrity and identity. The dominant positivist-quantitative research paradigm has been shown “to struggle when faced with dynamic, contextually shaped social and organisational processes that unfold over time” (Buchanan, 2016, p.363) and this has prompted calls for smaller-n qualitative studies which excavate the richness and depth of individual experience. (Ferris and Treadway, 2012a; Hochwarter, 2012; McFarland et al, 2012; Landells and Albrecht, 2016).

Responding to Buchanan’s assertion that “to fill in the gaps in our knowledge, to probe further those aspects of organizational politics about which we know less, methods grounded in a constructivist–processual perspective become necessary” (2016, p.363), this study adopts the sensemaking perspective as the lens through to which to interrogate how leaders grapple with the dilemmas associated with their personal engagement in political activity and how accounting for their involvement is influenced by attempts to maintain a credible and positive identity. This chapter begins by setting out the basic concept of sensemaking and makes the specific case for its suitability as a lens through which to explore the lived experience of organisational politics by those in senior leadership positions. The role played by narratives and stories within sensemaking will then be identified alongside specific sensemaking processes and mechanisms unearthed by extant empirical research. Based on this analysis, gaps or under developed themes within the sensemaking field will be highlighted together with an argument for how this study can make a contribution to the development of the sensemaking perspective as well as our understanding of the lived experience of organisational politics.

3.1 Why Sensemaking: Definitions, Properties and Uniqueness.

Developed originally by Karl Weick, sensemaking is an “enormously influential perspective (or concept, approach, lens or theory) in organisation studies, associated strongly with research that is interpretive, social constructionist, processual and phenomenological” (Brown et al 2015). It continues to interest scholars who seek to understand and to theorise how people appropriate and enact their realities (Holt & Cornelissen, 2014; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015). Though there is “no single agreed definition of sensemaking...there is an emergent consensus that sensemaking refers generally to those processes by which people seek plausibly to understand ambiguous, equivocal or confusing events” (Brown et al, 2015; Colville, Brown & Pye, 2012; Maitlis, 2005; Weick, 1995). As Weick argues, “The basic idea of sensemaking is that reality is an ongoing accomplishment that emerges from efforts to create order and make retrospective sense of what occurs” (1993: 635). Such definitions serve to position sensemaking as a thinking process that uses retrospective accounts to explain surprises. “Individuals experience events that may be discrepant from predictions. Discrepant events, or surprises, trigger a need for explanation, or post-diction, and, correspondingly, for a process through which interpretations of discrepancies are developed. Interpretation, or meaning, is attributed to surprises as an output of the sense-making process, rather than arising concurrently with the perception or detection of differences” (Louis, 1980, p. 241). The role of discrepant events or surprises as some form of trigger is an important characteristic of sensemaking and suggests that sensemaking is partially under the control of expectations (Maitlis, 2005). Whenever an expectation is contradicted by events, some kind of ongoing activity is thereby interrupted and to understand sensemaking is also, thus, to understand how people cope with interruptions (Weick, 1995, 2001). Such surprise and discomfort in turn drives the need to construct accounts of what happened and why in a way that restores cognitive equilibrium. Sensemaking can be viewed, therefore, as a process of social construction (Berger & Luckmann, 1967) in which individuals attempt to interpret sets of cues from their environments through the production of either new “accounts”—discursive constructions of reality that interpret or explain (Antaki, 1994)—or through the “activation” of existing accounts (Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Volkema, Farquhar, & Bergmann, 1996). In either case, the role of such accounts is to allow people to deal with uncertainty and ambiguity and move on (Weick et al, 2005).

The salience of accounts in the sensemaking process highlights another key attribute, namely the focus on retrospect. The idea of retrospective sensemaking derives from

Schutz's (1967) analysis of "meaningful lived experience". The key word here, lived, is stated in the past tense to capture the principle that people "can know what they are doing only after they have done it" (Weick 1995, p.24). Weick further draws our attention to two aspects of this. First, the creation of meaning is an attentional process, but it is attention to that which has already occurred. Second, because the attention is directed backward from a specific moment in time, whatever is occurring at the moment will influence what is discovered when people glance backward (ibid, p.25). It is not just about what this backward glance selects, it is also about what it discards: individuals who know the outcome of a complex, tangled prior history, remember that history as being much more determinant, leading "inevitably" to the outcome they already knew (Hawkins & Hastie, 1990) . Furthermore, the nature of these determinant histories is reconstructed differently, depending upon whether the outcomes are seen as good or bad. If the outcome is perceived to be bad, then antecedents are reconstructed to emphasise incorrect actions, flawed analyses and inaccurate perceptions even if such flaws were not all that obvious at the time (Starbuck & Milliken, 1988, pp.37-38). Whilst retrospective sensemaking may erase many of the causal sequences that made it harder to accomplish the final outcome, a reading of past indeterminacy that favours order and oversimplifies causality (Reason, 1990, p.91) may "make for effective action, even if it is lousy history" (Weick, 1995, p.29). The feeling of order and clarity is an important goal of sensemaking which means that once this is achieved, further retrospective sensemaking stops. This emphasis on reconstruction has important implications for this research in suggesting that participants, when asked to define organisational politics and account for their engagement therein, start with some form of predetermined position before casting a gaze backwards to selectively incorporate cues and events that reinforce such a stance. Any apparent contradictions and discrepancies that are encountered in such a backward glance become themselves trigger for sensemaking in action.

A further implication of this flawed recreation of history gives rise to another key element of sensemaking relevant to this research, namely that it is driven by plausibility rather than accuracy. Sensemaking is not about truth and getting it right, it is about continued redrafting of an emerging story so that it becomes more comprehensive, incorporates more of the observed data, and is more resilient in the face of criticism (Louis, 1980; Weick et al 2005; Brown et al, 2015). As will be emphasised in the role played by stories and narratives set out in 3.3 below, it is not the accuracy of accounts that matters, it is the extent to which they "hang together" sufficiently for the individual and their audience (Read, 1992). Sensemaking does not rely on accuracy and its model is not object perception, instead it is about "plausibility, pragmatics, coherence, reasonableness, creation, invention, and instrumentality" (Weick, 1995, p.57), taking "a relative approach to truth, predicting that

people will believe what can account for sensory experience but what is also interesting, attractive, emotionally appealing and goal relevant “ (Fiske, 1992 p.879). This perspective chimes with the emphasis placed on organisational politics as impression management activity highlighted in 2.2.2 below. The essence of political behaviour lies not in the tactics, methods and techniques deployed, but in the ways in which it is represented by the players in the game or the ‘management of meaning’ achieved through symbolic actions, and judicious use of language (Buchanan and Badham, 1999, p.71). If politics “concerns the creation of legitimacy for certain ideas, values and demands – not just action performed as a result of previously acquired legitimacy” (Pettigrew,1977, p. 85) then accounts of political experience need similarly to legitimise behaviours used in pursuit of those interests and impose one’s interpretation on events in competition with the meanings that might be drawn by others. What “looks reasonable, or ridiculous, depends on the context – on how it is framed in terms of what has preceded it and the language that is used to present it” (Pfeffer, 1992a, p.190).

On the issue of uniqueness, sensemaking differs from interpretation, with which it is argued to often be confused (Maitlis, 2005). The key distinction is that sensemaking is about the ways in which people generate what they interpret: the experience of equivocality leads individuals to extract and interpret environmental cues and to use these in order to “make sense” of occurrences and to enact their environment (Weick, 1995, p.13). Sensemaking thus involves “not merely interpretation and meaning production but the active authoring of the situations in which reflexive actors are embedded and are attempting to comprehend.” (Brown et al 2015). This implies favouring invention over discovery: to engage in sensemaking is to construct, filter, frame and render the subjective into something more tangible (Weick, 1995. p.13). When people make sense of things, they “read into things the meanings they wish to see; they vest objects, utterances, actions and so forth with subjective meaning which helps make their world intelligible to themselves” (Frost and Morgan, 1983, p207). Invention preceding interpretation is also a unique and valuable component of sensemaking because it implies a higher level of engagement by the actor and connotes an activity that is less detached and passive than mere interpretation (ibid, p14). Weick argues that this matters - a failure in it is “consequential as well as existential” and throws into question the nature of self and the world. Failure of mere interpretation is “a nuisance whereas the loss of sense is deeply troubling” (Weick,1995, p,14). This distinction between authoring and interpreting is of direct relevance to this thesis as it highlights the creative element involved in how individuals account for any discrepant events associated with their political experience. It emphasises that when managers make sense of such engagement, they are not simply interpreting a “real” text laid out for all involved to see

equally, they are constructing, filtering and framing such experience in a way which enables them to deal with any surprises or break downs in expectation (Czaeniawska, 2004; Brown, 2006, Boje, 2001, 2008).

Having identified the defining and classical characteristics of the sensemaking concept as originated by Weick and highlighted their utility when considering an investigation of the lived experience of organisational politics; it is relevant to assess what contemporary analyses of the concept have to say about the development of the sensemaking perspective and to consider the implications for this research. Whilst a number of reviews of sensemaking research have been conducted (Brown et al, 2015; Holt & Cornelissen, 2014; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010; Mills, Thurlow, & Mills, 2010; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005), it is the work of Sandberg and Tsoukas (2015) that is most apposite for this study, not just because it is very recent but because it offers the most comprehensive and critical assessment by simultaneously evaluating core concepts, conceptually accounting for gaps, exploring tensions and ambiguities, evaluating underlying assumptions and identifying new directions for future theory and research. The review was based on a database search across nine leading journals (Academy of Management Journal, Administrative Science Quarterly, Human Relations, Journal of Management, Journal of Management Studies, Journal of Organizational Behaviour, Organization, Organization Science, and Organization Studies) which recorded a total of 147 articles in which the sensemaking perspective (SP) had been applied within organisation studies. In addition to those identified in the database search, a more targeted review of sensemaking studies was undertaken to include those that (i) explicitly aim to contribute to the development of SP (e.g. Hernes & Maitlis, 2010), (ii) explicitly apply SP in their research (e.g. Blatt, Christianson, Sutcliffe, & Rosenthal, 2006), and (iii) that have had a widely acknowledged influence in organization studies (e.g., Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). This extensive review of the application of sensemaking in organisational studies identified five basic constituents of the perspective, namely that sensemaking (i) is confined to specific episodes, (ii) is triggered by ambiguous events, (iii) occurs through specific processes, (iv) generates particular outcomes, and (v) is influenced by specific situational factors. These are summarised in Table 3.1 below.

The overarching constituents of the sensemaking perspective			
Sensemaking is delimited to the <i>episodes</i> that take place from the moment some aspects of the ongoing process of organizing are interrupted until they are satisfactorily restored (or in some cases) permanently interrupted.			
Major specific constituents of the sensemaking perspective			
<i>Events that trigger sensemaking</i>	<i>Processes of sensemaking efforts</i>	<i>Outcomes of sensemaking</i>	<i>Factors influencing sensemaking</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Major planned events - Major unplanned events - Minor planned events - Minor unplanned events - Hybrids of events 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Creation - Interpretation - Enactment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Restored sense - Restored action - Non-sense - No restored action 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Contexts - Language - Identity - Cognitive frames - Emotion - Politics - Technology

Table 3.1: Major Constituents of the Sensemaking Perspective (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015, p. S12)

A number of observations can be made about the application of this framework to the study of how leaders make sense of their engagement in organisational politics, all of which reinforce the case for why sensemaking is a useful lens through which to conduct the investigation. Firstly, as the overarching constituent of the perspective highlights, the ***episodic nature*** of sensemaking; in other words, something that occurs from the moment some ongoing activity is interrupted until it is satisfactorily restored (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015, p.S11). There are two ways in which one can apply this notion of sensemaking episodes to this study: firstly, the actual events of political activity which leaders experience in practice and which they are asked to recall in the research interview and / or secondly, the interview itself as a sensemaking episode, during which participants attempt to process and account for that which they have experienced. It is this second position, one that effectively positions the research interview as a site for sensemaking, which this study adopts and builds its research design around (see Chapter 5 below). Secondly, the importance of ***ambiguous events that trigger sensemaking*** in the first place, what Weick labels as the “disruptive ambiguity” (Weick et al, 2005, p.413) which forces retrospective processing in an effort to restore order. The framework highlights how such events needn’t just be major crises or disasters that often form the basis of sensemaking research, for example, the Columbia shuttle disaster (Dunbar and Garud, 2009) or the collapse of Barings Bank (Brown, 2005), but also the minor, unplanned events associated with day to day organisational experience (Bartunek et al, 2008; Barton and Sutcliffe, 2009). In this case, the

disruptive ambiguity that Weick refers to, takes the form of leaders drawing their own attention to, and having to account for, their own involvement in an arena as contentious and slippery as organisational politics. Thirdly, the ***distinction between creative and interpretive elements*** of the sensemaking process. Whilst the creation process involves bracketing, noticing, and extracting cues from lived experience, thereby creating an initial sense of the interrupted situation, which people then start interpreting (Weick, 1995, p. 35, 2001: Ch. 7), the interpretation process involves “fleshing out the initial sense generated in the creation process and developing it into a more complete and narratively organized sense of the interrupted situation” (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015, p.S14). This study will attempt to draw out both what leaders create by noticing and bracketing from their political experience as well as what they then narratively develop and organise, something which in itself adds to the contribution of the study (see also 4.5 below), given that 84% of the prior studies reviewed in developing the framework “did not seem to make a distinction between the creation and the interpretation process but instead treat them as one and the same” (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015, p. S14). Fourthly, the importance of there being ***a restoration of sense as an outcome*** of the sensemaking process. For leaders in this study, this takes the form of individuals being able to satisfactorily account for their engagement in organisational politics in a way that enables them to resolve the disruptive ambiguity triggered by the interview and move on. Defining the goal of sensemaking activity as the resolution of ambivalence and restoration of cognitive order is a widely held view amongst sensemaking scholars (Maitlis, and Christiansen, 2014) and a central concern of this enquiry, therefore, is the extent to which individuals achieved such an aim and the factors that distinguished between successful and unsuccessful approaches. Finally, the notion that sensemaking efforts do not take place in isolation and are instead ***shaped by a number of significant factors in the sensemaking situation***. Of the specific factors that Sandberg and Tsoukas draw out, those of politics and identity are of most interest and relevance here. The relationship between sensemaking and politics will be explored in more detail in 3.5 below, whilst the influence of identity will now be discussed separately given its centrality to this sensemaking based analysis of how leaders experience organisational politics.

3.2 Sensemaking and identity.

At the heart of this research project is the notion that the ambivalence inherent in being actively engaged in organisational politics presents leaders with the dilemma of how to take advantage of the opportunities provided whilst also negotiating a credible and positive identity. Another fundamental characteristic of the sensemaking perspective that makes it an

appropriate vehicle for examining how leaders grapple with this dichotomy is the salience of identity in both Weick's theorising and that which has followed (Brown et al, 2015). Whilst Chapter 4 below will analyse the literature surrounding more broadly, this section explores what is known about its complex relationship with sensemaking.

As Weick himself posits, "Sensemaking begins with a self-conscious sensemaker" (Weick, 1995 p22), an insight which renders the establishment and maintenance of identity as a core preoccupation in sensemaking (Maitlis, 2005). The processes that develop and maintain a person's changing sense of self are argued to operate in the service of three self-derived needs: (1) The need for self-enhancement, as reflected in seeking and maintaining a positive cognitive and affective state about the self; (2) the self-efficacy motive, which is the desire to perceive oneself as competent and efficacious; and (3) the need for self-consistency, which is the desire to sense and experience coherence and continuity. (Erez and Earley, 1993, p. 28). It is the ongoing fate of these needs that affects individual sensemaking in organisations. Associating or disassociating with what come to be seen as threats to identities, or opportunities to repair and reaffirm them, affects a person's view of what is out there and what it means (Weick, 1995, p.21). The perceived judgement of others is of material significance to such a process. "As we see our face, figure, and dress in the [looking] glass, and are interested in them because they are ours, and pleased or otherwise with them according as they do or do not answer to what we should like them to be; so in imagination we perceive in another's mind some thought of our appearance, manners, aims, deeds, character, friends, and so on, and are variously affected by it" (Cooley, 1902, pp152-153). Three elements are important in this: "the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his judgement of that appearance; and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification.....We are ashamed to seem evasive in the presence of a straightforward man, cowardly in the presence of a brave one, gross in the eyes of a refined one, and so on. We always imagine, and in imagining share, the judgements of the other mind" (ibid).

There are two important identity related implications of this in relation to this thesis. Firstly, there are strong linkages here with the importance of impression management activity which has been previously positioned at the heart of our understanding of organisational politics (Pettigrew, 1977; Pfeffer, 1992a; Buchanan, 2008). Essential to the success of the sensemaking process is the construction of coherent accounts which "hang together" in the perception of their audience (Read, 1992). Of greater importance than the conviction of the person presenting the account is how compelling the audience judge it to be, the goal in such situations being one of making behaviour intelligible and warrantable in context (Bies

and Sitkin, 1992). This can be argued to be even more important if the account is of participation in as sensitive an arena as organisational politics. Although the assumption latent in such analysis is that the audience in question is another individual, it is possible to also construe the creation of plausible accounts of political activity to be driven by the need to confirm oneself. No individual ever acts like a single sensemaker (Weick, 1995, p.18) and is instead a “parliament of selves” (Mead, 1934). Accounts of political experience, therefore, can be argued to constitute some form of “identity work” (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Secondly, if the audience is some form of “other”, this listener may act as co-producer of the story by prompting the teller with cues, such as head nods, changes in posture, and utterances that direct the inquiry (Boje, 1991). This implies that, through interviewing leaders about their political experiences, the researcher may become not just the looking glass that Cooley refers to, but also an active “co-producer” of their identity sustaining narratives. The ontological, epistemological and methodological implications of this insight will be addressed in detail in Chapter 5 below.

Sensemaking is, then, inextricably linked with the need to maintain esteem and the consistency of self-conceptions. This in turn implies that “sensemaking processes have a strong influence on the manner by which individuals within organisations begin processes of transacting with others. If confirmation of one’s own enacted “self” is not realized, sensemaking processes recur and a re-enactment and re-presentation of self follows”. (Ring & Van de Ven, 1989, p. 180).” Weick (1995 p22) draws several inferences from this. First, controlled, intentional sensemaking is triggered by a failure to confirm one’s self. Second, sensemaking occurs in the service of maintaining a consistent, positive self-conception. Thirdly, the idea that sensemaking is self-referential suggests that the self, rather than the environment, may be the text in need of interpretation. What the situation will have meant is “defined by who I become while dealing with it or what and who I represent” (ibid, p.24). The implication of this is that, the more selves individuals have access to, the more meanings can be extracted and imposed in any situation and the less likely surprise becomes (Louis, 1980; Reason, 1990). The notion of multiple “selves” suggests that managers may have to deal with equivocality in coming to terms with their experiences of politics. A sense of self as a principled non-combatant occupying the ethical high ground may become problematic in the face of conflicting accounts which imply more pragmatic based participation in political activity. Resolving such identity dichotomies is a preoccupation of the sensemaking process.

The recent literature presents a subtly nuanced view of the scope and significance of empirical investigations into how identity is involved in sensemaking. In their review of eight papers published previously in *Organisation Studies* which have attracted scholarly attention

as indicated by *Thomson Reuters Web of Knowledge*, Brown et al (2015) highlight how often identity features even if only tangentially or implicitly, for example Abolafia, 2010; Karreman and Alvesson, 2001, and how they continue to catalyse recent studies at an individual level (Brown & Toyoki, 2013). In their more comprehensive analysis referred to in 4.1 above, Sandberg and Tsoukas (2015, p.S16) echo the general prevalence of identity interest in sensemaking research but also suggest that there is more to be discovered about the direction of relative influence by observing that “the majority of the reviewed studies seem to have focused more on how sensemaking is implicated in identity work (that is, in how identity is constructed through sensemaking) rather than on how identities influence sensemaking (e.g., Kjærgaard, Morsing, & Ravasi, 2011; Korica & Molloy, 2010; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008; Watson & Bargiela-Chiappini, 1998)”. Given that the aim of this study is to examine how sensemaking of participation in political activity is influenced by attempts to maintain and defend their sense of leadership identity, adding to this more undeveloped theme in the literature represents another area in which this study can make a novel contribution (see also 3.5 below).

3.3 Sensemaking, Narratives and Stories

Another feature of the sensemaking perspective which reinforces the case for its use in a study of how leaders account for their experience of organisational politics is the emphasis on narratives and stories as sensemaking devices. As part of what has been labelled as the ‘narrative turn’ in the social sciences, a growing number of scholars have come to suggest that we live in a story shaped world (Bruner, 1986, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1988; Sarbin, 1986; Somers, 1994; Taylor, 1989; Brown et al, 2008). Within organization studies, the nature and purpose of narratives are theorised in various ways (Cunliffe and Coupland, 2012): as creating a coherent shared experience and aligning employees with corporate values by highlighting social conventions and acceptable behaviors (Rouleau, 2005; Tyler, 2007; Weick, 2001; Wines and Hamilton, 2009); as deliberately ‘authored’ and performed as a means of making sense of a situation (Boje, 1995; Brown and Humphreys, 2003); as a means of giving sense by legitimating and normalizing culture (Currie and Brown, 2003; Rhodes et al., 2010); as containing multiple meanings (Cunliffe, 2002; Yanow, 1998); or as helping storytellers deal with experiences of tensions, trauma and loss (Driver, 2009). Regardless of these differences, “the common theme is that narratives are the means by which we organize and make sense of our experience and evaluate our actions and intentions” (Cunliffe and Coupland, 2012).

As such, stories are “active constructions of embedded participants’ local realities” (Brown et al, 2015, p.268) and “a potent tool for meaning making” (Zilber, 2007, p.1038) whilst storytelling is argued as the “preferred sense-making currency of human relationships among internal and external stakeholders” (Boje, 1991). People engage in a dynamic process of “incremental refinement of their stories of new events as well as on-going reinterpretations of culturally sacred story lines” (ibid). Interestingly, Boje also draws attention to the manner in which different stakeholders tell alternative stories with alternative motives and implications to the very same underlying historical incident, an observation which plays directly to the disclosure, made at the outset of this thesis, that it was this very same phenomenon that sparked this researcher’s original interest and desire to understand “what is going on here?” when it comes to how managers interpret shared experience of organisational politics so differently. Weick highlights that what sensemaking requires above all is a good story: “A good story holds disparate elements together long enough to energize and guide action, plausibly enough to allow people to make retrospective sense of whatever happens, and engagingly enough that others will contribute their own inputs in the interest of sensemaking” (1995, p.61). Such stories also, argue Brown et al (2015, p.269), “fascinate scholars in part because they permit actors to manoeuvre between contradictions, to ignore and to gloss ambiguities, to both mask and disclose emotional responses and intellectual positions, to simultaneously make and to unravel sense in organizational settings (Boudes & Laroche, 2009; Brown, Ainsworth, & Grant, 2012; Golant & Sillince, 2007; Pye, 1993)”.

By focussing on how leaders use narratives to account for their political activity, this study makes a further contribution to knowledge in that, whilst the role of narratives and narrativization is generally recognized as crucial to a fuller understanding of organizational phenomena (Boje, 2001, 2008; Brown, 1994, 1998, 2006; Brown and Jones, 2000; Brown et al., 2008; Czarniawska, 1998, 2004; Gabriel, 1995, 2000, 2004; Rhodes and Brown, 2005), storytelling by elite actors remains under-explored in the organization studies literature (Maclean et al, 2012) and the ways in which they ‘relate to and shape systems of meaning’ is a topic in need of further study (Creed et al., 2002: 475). It has also been argued that whilst personal stories open a privileged window on individual organizational experiences and provide a vehicle through which individuals may constitute themselves as subjects, allowing their subjectivity and identity to be reaffirmed (Gabriel, 1995), the elements of the sensemaking processes that underlie the activity of self-narration remain relatively under-explored (Brown et al., 2008; Sonenshein, 2007), an aspect that will be further explored in 3.4 below.

On the point of distinguishing stories from narratives, it has been argued that stories are primary sensemaking devices within life-history narratives, helping individuals make sense of change (Maclean et al 2012). Although it is common in the organizational literature on narrative to use these terms interchangeably (Hardy & Maguire, 2010; Riessman, 2008; Sonenshein, 2010; Maitlis, 2012), for the purpose of my own research, I follow Boje (2001, 2008) in making a specific differentiation, namely that the sensemaking of political experience recounted by interviewees is enlivened by *discrete stories* that branch off from the *main narrative*, which the self creatively integrates into a unity (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010). This distinction is important because, as the analysis of the data will later reveal, one feature of the sensemaking approach deployed by participants was the way in which individual “micro” stories of political incidents were used to build “macro” narratives of their overall experience which, in turn, facilitated varying degrees of “disruptive ambiguity” (Weick, 1995) resolution.

3.4 Specific sensemaking processes as revealed in extant research.

The argument has already been made in 3.1 above that one of the contributions which this study seeks to make to the sensemaking perspective is by responding to Sandberg and Tsoukas’ call (2015) to shed light on how leaders both create and interpret in their processing of political experience. Relevant to this pursuit is a more granular examination of the literature in order to unearth specific sensemaking processes or mechanisms that have been identified in prior research as providing the means to at least interpret if not also author individual lived experience. Excavating such processes also serves a methodological design purpose (see Chapter 5 below) by providing a template for the analysis of data gathered in this study to see what evidence of such processes is repeated here before also looking for the operation of other sensemaking processes not previously identified in extant research.

In their study of the public enquiry surrounding the “Arms to Iraq” controversy, Brown and Jones (2000) argue that the sensemaking and impression management literatures have developed largely in isolation from each other and that the relationship between them has, therefore, been under explored. Their analysis centred on three categories of inventive sensemaking activity which are also central to impression management : **self-deception** (holding two conflicting self referential beliefs with the more negative belief being less within awareness (Snyder 1985, p.35) , **hypocrisy** (a consciously entertained discrepancy between an individual’s important attitudes and behaviours (Rosenwald, 1985) and **scapegoating** (conscious or unconscious rationalisation that denies alternative explanations

for the attribution of responsibility (Brown and Jones, 2000). They found that self deception can be a significant mode of sensemaking. The capacity for self deception is embedded in our psychic defence processes, and can exercise a profound influence on how we interpret our actions and their consequences (Hilgard, 1949; Murphy, 1975; Gur & Sackheim, 1979). Similarly, hypocrisy can be an important mode of sensemaking that enables individuals to deal, at least temporarily, with belief/act discrepancies in ways which preserve self esteem. Organisational actors are often confronted with what they perceive to be a pragmatic need to act contrary to their deeply held beliefs and such circumstances can make hypocrisy appear to be not just a subjectively appealing, but a rational and sensible sensemaking mode (Brown and Jones, 2000). Finally, scapegoating is a significant mode of sensemaking that involves a denial of some or all of the information potentially available to an individual with the result that the actor is able to subjectively obviate any responsibility linkage (Snyder et al, 1983) between them and a negative act (Brown and Jones, 2000).

There are limitations to the applicability of this study to this thesis: the analytical framework is derived from a single case and the sensemaking processes identified are specifically drawn from how individuals react to specific allegations of belief / act discrepancy rather than how they reflect upon extended lived experience. That said, the parallels and implications are nonetheless worthy of closer consideration. Firstly, the importance of the relationship between sensemaking and impression management activity is highlighted, endorsing the observation made in 3.2 above that the existence of an audience to the narration of political experience is a material factor in the sensemaking process. Responding to the authors' call for future empirical and conceptual research to further explore this linkage is another area of potential contribution of this thesis. Secondly, the identification of self-deception as a sensemaking device is particularly relevant to this research given the taboo nature of organisational politics and the negative attributions easily attached to being seen as a "political animal" given how damaging to a range of important outcomes employees perceive the phenomenon to be (see the meta analyses of Miller et al, 2008; Chang et al, 2009; Bedi & Schat, 2013 in 2.3 above). The possibility that individuals are more active in this controversial arena than they may like to admit, either to others or themselves, suggests the possible deployment of some form of self-deception counter measure and isolating this sensemaking process in the analysis of participant accounts of political experience seems especially apposite. Finally, the isolation of hypocrisy and scapegoating also informs the analysis strategy for this study by providing further specific sensemaking processes that can be tested for in the stories offered by managers regarding their participation in political activity.

A later study of sensemaking processes at work amongst members of a software project team (Brown et al, 2008) highlighted the use of **impression management** more explicitly as a sensemaking mechanism as well as what the authors defined as “**attributional egotism**”. The authors found that “in their efforts to relate narratives that preserved and enhanced self-esteem each individual authored a version of events that was noticeably self-serving, that is, the developers tended to attribute what they considered to be positive outcomes to the self and negative outcomes to external factors, a phenomenon generally referred to as attributional egotism (Brown & Jones, 1998; Heider, 1958)” (Brown et al, 2015, p.1053). By acting on the basis that ‘. . . a person’s worth is established by the opinion of others’ (Boltanski & Thevenot, 2006: 100) individuals responded by “spinning stories that maximize perceived self-value, offering versions of events which nullified or mitigated any negative implications which they felt may be attached to their actions or demeanour” (ibid, p.1055). Whilst the focus of this study was the explanation of discrepant sensemaking amongst members of a group working together as a project team in a single organisation, it is nevertheless helpful in reinforcing the inseparability of sensemaking from the influence of identity and that when there is the threat of potential damage to reputation and esteem from events that are either surprising or difficult to accept – in this case, the recognition of participation in such a covert and contentious arena as organisational politics – narratives become “strategic constructions” (ibid, p.1054) designed to manage others’ impressions of their authors as legitimate and competent.

The relationship between paradox and managerial sensemaking has also been a subject of empirical enquiry (Luscher & Lewis,2008). Through collaborative intervention and reflection during major organisational restructuring, the case is made for transforming paradox from “a label to a lens” and that doing so creates a process for working through paradox. “Working through” here does not imply eliminating or resolving paradox, but constructing a more workable certainty that enables change. Paradox may then serve as a means “for managers and researchers to consider other perspectives, alter their assumptions, and explore issues in fundamentally different ways” (De Cock & Rickards, 1996) and the associated wisdom extracted from organizational paradoxes “can change how we think more than what we think” (Wendt, 1998, p.361). Whilst this study did not identify any specific sensemaking processes and focussed on sensemaking in relation to organisational change, the notion of “working through paradox” chimes with the surprises and complexity of organisational politics and, therefore, the “disruptive ambiguity” (Weick et al, 2005, p.413) that triggers sensemaking in the first place. Of additional interest is the assertion of the researchers that “an external facilitator may be vital to paradoxical inquiry by supporting the sensemaking process from a viewpoint unencumbered by daily managerial responsibilities”. In this case,

the first author played this role by guiding “sparring” sessions with varied forms of questioning techniques. As already identified in 3.2 above, this further reinforces the potential value add to the sensemaking process of the researcher being active in the co-production of the identity influenced narratives that leaders produce in order plausibly account for their political engagement.

Another example of empirical work directly relevant to this thesis can be found in the study of elite business careers through the dual lens of sensemaking and storytelling and the examination of how business leaders make sense of, narrate and legitimise their experiences of building their careers within and beyond large organisations (Maclean et al, 2012). Three sensemaking processes (**locating; meaning making; becoming**) are argued to be intimately related to each of four modes of legitimacy claiming expressed by business leaders in accounting for their success (defying the odds; staying the course; succeeding through talent; giving back to society). Each of the four modes of self-legitimation identified within the life-history narratives of business elites were argued to create an impression and serve a purpose. Through the four modes of legitimacy discussed above, business leaders depicted themselves as successful and worthy human beings located in a particular time, space or organization to which they belonged; making meaning to persuade a social audience to identify with their messages; and building their futures in the field of power (Maclean et al,2012). These claims to self-legitimacy are argued to be most effective when the message is not overt but couched in accounts of socially desirable activities (Lounsbury and Glynn, 2001; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005), enabling the narrator to benefit by appearing ‘on the hither side of calculation and in the illusion of the most “authentic” sincerity’ (Bourdieu, 1977: 214). This is not to allege that motivation is necessarily inauthentic (Mills, 1940); but merely to acknowledge that there are ‘certain arenas in which self-interest is considered morally laudable, or in which social conscience is considered personally rewarding’ (Suchman, 1995: 585). The authors claim two contributions of their research. First, they respond to calls for more research on sensemaking processes in narratives (Brown et al., 2008; Sonenshein, 2007) by identifying and explicating three sensemaking processes – locating, meaning-making and becoming – elicited from the stories told by business elites within life-history narratives. Second, they add to the literature on legitimizing accounts (Creed et al., 2002; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005; Vaara, 2002), by demonstrating how business leaders use sensemaking narratives as a vehicle for legitimacy-claiming in life-history interviews.

Whilst the focus of this study was more about identifying the sensemaking processes used to explicate and legitimise career success rather than those deployed to account for the lived

experience of organisational politics, it does inform this thesis in a number of ways. Firstly, the participation of 16 “business leaders” matches the intent of this study to focus on those in senior leadership roles rather than more junior levels of management. Secondly, the identification of “locating”, “meaning making” and “becoming” offer further specific sensemaking processes that can be tested for in the accounts of political engagement. Thirdly, it emphasises how the need to claim legitimacy influences accounts of life experience, something that one might expect to be similarly apparent in how leaders justify tangling with as a slippery construct as organisational politics, especially since, as has already been established, sensemaking is posited to operate at least partly in the need for self-enhancement in the eyes of “significant others” and that impression management is an important tool for leaders in creating accounts that “hang together” (Read, 1992) and avoid any attributions of “dark side” skulduggery. Fourthly, the very detailed and systematic methodology used in analysing the interview data provides a credible method and research design for how the accounts gathered in this research can be similarly analysed (see Chapter 5 below).

By way of a summary, the sensemaking processes described in detail above are shown in Table 3.2 below, together with their headline definitions.

Table 3.2: Sensemaking processes identified in extant research.

Sensemaking Process	Definition
<u>LOCATING</u> (Maclean et al 2012)	Situating the self in time, space and context. The storied constructions that individuals create situate them in context, retrospectively “fixing” events in space & time, legitimating a set of perspectives and anchoring their selves” (Brown et al 2008). Enables teller to reconcile complexities of location, including dis-location and multiplicities of location.
<u>MEANING MAKING</u> (Maclean et al 2012)	Espousing personal values, beliefs and convictions. A process that culminates in the expression of an opinion, belief or lesson for others (Gabriel 2000).
<u>BECOMING</u> (Maclean et al 2012)	Implies explaining transitions from one configuration of personal / organisational circumstances to another. The “directedness” of a story by whose development the listener is “pulled forward” through time (Ricoeur 1984). In narration there are three senses of time: a “present of past things” which is memory; a “present of present things” which is perception and a “present of future things” which is expectation. Becoming is inherently future oriented, directed to what lies ahead.
<u>IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT</u> (Brown et al 2008)	Self presentation behaviours that individuals employ to influence the perception that others have of them. If a person’s worth is established by the opinion of others, individuals spin stories that maximise perceived self value, offering versions of events which nullify or mitigate any negative implications which may be attached to their actions.
<u>ATTRIBUTIONAL EGOTISM</u> (Brown et al 2008)	Tendency to attribute favourable outcomes to self and unfavourable outcomes to external factors. In efforts to relate narratives that preserve and enhance self esteem, individuals author versions of events that are noticeably self serving.
<u>SELF DECEPTION</u> (Brown & Jones 2000)	The process of holding two self referential beliefs with the more negative belief being less within awareness (Snyder 1985). Superficially reasonable arguments, rather more likely but less palatable explanations, are used either to justify something that is difficult to accept or make it seem “not so bad after all”. A means of defending and maintaining a positive self-concept.
<u>HYPOCRISY</u> (Brown & Jones 2000)	A consciously entertained discrepancy between an individuals important attitudes / self beliefs and their behaviour (Rosenwald 1985). Unlike self deception, which alleviates dissonance, hypocrisy always engenders cognitive dissonance because it threatens the unity of the individual’s sense of self.
<u>SCAPEGOATING</u> (Brown & Jones 2000)	Involves either a conscious or unconscious rationalisation that denies alternative (sometimes subjectively available) explanations for the attribution of responsibility. The psycho-sociological perspective permits an interpretation of scapegoats as intentionally created by others to hide, distract, delay, avoid & deny responsibility for problems (Bonazzi 1983). The product of emotional and logical oversimplifications.

The final section in this chapter will now assess the overall state of the sensemaking field and make the case for how this study can contribute to addressing some of the gaps identified in very recent critical analyses of the perspective.

3.5 Gaps in the sensemaking perspective and how the study can contribute.

Whilst it may have been possible to argue just over a decade ago that there was only a 'modest amount of empirical work on sensemaking' (Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld, 2005, p. 417), recent years have seen significant growth in the empirical sensemaking arena. Sensemaking centred research has begun to broaden to consider issues of mood/emotion (Holt & Cornelisson, 2014; Maitlis, Vogus & Lawrence, 2013), metaphor (Cornelisson et al, 2008; Patriotta & Brown, 2011), moral awareness (Parmar, 2014) and its embodied nature (Cunliffe & Coupland, 2012; Harquail & King, 2010). This said, it has been argued that sensemaking research has been "largely conservative" and that "there remain many relatively uncharted topics and areas of interest" (Brown et al, 2015, p.272). This is supported by the critical review of Sandberg and Tsoukas (2015) which identified some unevenness in how the sensemaking perspective has been applied. Their investigation of the 147 articles identified in their database search (see 3.1 above) suggests that sensemaking has been applied in 37 different areas of organisation studies, most frequently in strategy and organizational change (23 percent), organisational crises and accidents (12 percent), organisational identity (8 percent), and organisational learning and knowledge (5 percent), these comprising almost 50 percent of the sensemaking studies in the review. They also found, however, that sensemaking had only been applied once (i.e., one study) in the other half of the 37 areas identified; so, for example, among the 147 articles reviewed, only one study that had applied sensemaking in the area of recruitment, one in trust, one in organizational commitment, and so on. This, they suggest, highlights how "the application of the sensemaking perspective is currently significantly under-represented within several areas in organization studies" (p.S11).

One such area of under-representation is argued here to be organisational politics. Whilst it is possible to locate a number of different articles that discuss issues of politics in relation to sensemaking, it is the contention of this research that no prior study has to the best of his knowledge applied a sensemaking lens to the personal involvement of leaders in organisational politics; a claim of unique contribution to knowledge that warrants further explanation and justification. Extant writing and empirical sensemaking work focusses on politics in two different ways. Firstly, the way in which issues of power and politics influence the process of individual and organisational sensemaking, put simply, the politics of sensemaking. As individuals draw on different areas of expertise and/or are located at different levels in the organisational hierarchy, "it is common that conflicting interpretations

(what Brown, Stacey, & Nandhakumar (2008) call “discrepant sensemaking”) about one and the same event occur” (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015, p.S17), which tends to create political struggles (Weick,1995, p. 53). Particularly evident in instances of major change initiatives, when several departments try to control and direct the sensemaking efforts to their advantage (Balogun & Johnson, 2004), it is often common that the top managers’ interpretation of a situation takes precedence over other interpretations in the organisation (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010, p. 571) meaning that the way in which organisational politics influences sensemaking is mostly studied in the area of management and leadership (Maitlis, 2005; Hope, 2010, Rouleau & Balogun, 2011). Even here though, scholars have argued that inadequate attention has been given to such power/political influences (Mills, Thurlow & Mills, 2010), an observation supported by the fact that only 4% of the studies in Sandberg and Tsoukas’ (2015) database research “explicitly investigated how politics may influence sensemaking” (p.S17). Regardless of whether this is so, for example, Maitlis and Christianson (2014, p.98) note that it is more common now to see sensemaking analyses that explore the political processes through which some accounts earn greater legitimacy than others, this is a different line of inquiry to this study which aims to explore how leaders actors make sense of *their own personal engagement* in organisational politics i.e. the sensemaking of politics rather than the other way round. Whilst it is possible, probable even, that the accounts of participants will in some way be influenced by wider political factors, such issues are beyond the scope of this study given that the influences upon individual sensemaking of interest here are centred around the use of narratives and leadership identity rather than politics.

The second way in which issues surrounding organisational politics have been researched by taking a sensemaking perspective is by examining how managers interpret and account for the collective power dynamics and political machinations associated with multi-national companies and/ or large corporate conglomerates with subsidiary interests and relationships (Geppert, 2003; Dorrenbacher & Geppert, 2006, 2011; Geppert & Dorrenbacher, 2011; Clark & Geppert, 2011; Whittle et al, 2016). Whilst it is possible to argue that these studies are similar to those above which focus on the politics of sensemaking rather than the sensemaking of politics, studies here do at least attend to managerial accounts of “what is going on here?”. Again though, the focus is subtly different to this study by investigating politics at a macro / organisational level and interrogating how managers within a multi-national organisational context account for the political events going on around them rather than their own personal involvement. To be precise, therefore, it is the specific interrogation of how those in leadership roles account for their *own personal participation* in organisational politics that is the point of difference between this study and other empirical

work that links the phenomenon to the sensemaking perspective and given that – to the best of the researcher’s knowledge though an extensive analysis of the literature – no other study has taken a sensemaking lens to the experience of organisational politics in this way, the claim of novelty in both the nature and design of the research is a defensible one.

There are other ways in which the nature of this study can make a positive contribution to the growing body of empirical sensemaking work. Firstly, by treating the research interview with participants as a site for sensemaking in action, the investigation will add to the relatively underdeveloped theme that focusses on minor unplanned events as triggers for sensemaking (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015 – see also 3.1 above). The author’s extensive database search of 147 articles, revealed that whilst 49% studied sensemaking efforts triggered by major planned or unplanned events (e.g. national disasters or organisational crises), only 17% took minor / unplanned events as “their point of departure for investigating specific sensemaking episodes” (p.,S13), a difference they found somewhat surprising, given that “daily kinds of minor planned / unplanned events are much more common triggers for sensemaking efforts in organisations than major planned / unplanned events” (P.S16). Similarly, by distinguishing between and exploring participant sensemaking processes of *both* creating (noticing, bracketing) *and* interpreting (narratively organising – see also 4.1 above), the study will establish a further point of difference with the 84% of studies in Sandberg and Tsoukas’ (2015) review that “do not seem to make a distinction between the “creation” and the “interpretation” process but treat them as one and the same” (p.S14). On the issue of sensemaking processes, the study will not only look for evidence of mechanisms identified in prior empirical work (see 3.4 above) but also be alert to any not previously excavated.

The case made for the use of sensemaking as a vehicle for interrogating how leaders handle the ambivalence associated with involvement in political activity, Chapter 4 below conducts a broader analysis of what is known about how the issue of identity and the associated concept of identity work may be implicated in such struggle.

4. Identity, identity work and the role of narratives.

That organisational politics “needs to be understood in terms of power and identity relations or how individuals seek through political manoeuvrings to further secure their individual careers and identities in an uncertain world” (Knights and McCabe, 1998, p.761) may not be a new insight but can certainly be argued to be an underdeveloped theme in the literature. This gap in our understanding of the lived experience of organisational politics, allied with the centrality of identity construction in how sensemaking is theorised (Weick, 1995) warrants a more detailed analysis of what we know and what we don’t when it comes to how identity is implicated in the political arena.

“Identity work” (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003) has been theorised to feature in arenas strongly associated with political activity such as socially questionable tactics (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999), legitimacy seeking behaviour (Clegg et al, 2007) and elite actor impression management (Wiesenfeld et al, 2008). Because identity is central to how people “understand who they are and aren’t, what they do and don’t do, and what they should and shouldn’t do”, it is closely implicated in how organisational actors understand themselves and “insert themselves into organisational life” (Carroll & Levy, 2008: 76). Given the pervasive nature of organisational politics and the position of this thesis which sees the presence of political activity, for leaders especially, as an inevitable and naturally occurring element of such organisational existence, there is a strong basis for arguing that politics “functions as an affirmation of identity and a means of making sense of the organisation (Mackenzie Davey, 2008, p652).

As straight forward as this position may at first glance seem, it is not without some associated ambiguity. Constructs such as managerial identity are problematic, contested and “laden with considerable ambiguity” (Snow & Anderson, 1987). Although identity is “at the heart of a burgeoning stream of research” in US journals (Ibarra and Barbulescu 2010, p. 135) and argued to be “implicated in, and thus key to understanding and explaining, almost everything that happens in and around organizations” (Brown, 2015, p.20), writers have drawn attention to the lack of agreement within the field as to the core meanings and definitions (Smith & Sparkes, 2008) and also a bias towards conceptual contributions rather than empirical study (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003).

The complexity of identity is represented in its many definitions which range from those which present it as something which is “singular and consistent”, through those which view

identity as a “central unifying force, which may be expressed and perceived differently in social settings” to those which describes identity as “multi authored” (Beech & McInnes, 2005). Such definitions reflect movement along an ontological continuum from modern essentialist assumptions to those which are postmodern and relativist. Positivist theories such as psychosocial and trait theories see identity as stable and determined while neo positivist and postmodern theories posit identity as “multiple, unstable, in flux, contingent, fragmented, constructed, negotiated” (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000: 11). Given the scale and breadth of the overall field – in his recent review of identity in organisations, Brown’s (2015) database search using Thompson Reuters Web of Knowledge surfaced 1,129 articles in business and management journals that used the terms ‘identity’ or ‘identities’ in their title – there is a need to adopt a clear position on the phenomenon which can establish ontological and methodological fit with the overall study.

This section will, therefore, lay out the argument for why defining identity as, initially, a socially constructed phenomenon and, more precisely, as a dialogic/performative form of narrative construction is most appropriate to furthering our understanding of sensemaking of organisational politics. It will also explore what is known about the concept of “identity work” (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003) and how threats to identity are managed, by elite actors especially, enabling an argument to be made for how this study can add to the field.

4.1 Identity and Identity work.

Contemporary research evidences a trend away from monolithic and fixed/essentialistic views on identity to multiple, discursive and constructed perspectives. This is consistent with a less positivist and more constructivist research paradigm which sees reality as constructed through social interaction and identity as socially manufactured (Shotter, 1993; Gergen, 2001; Smith & Sparkes, 2008). From this perspective, “social and psychological worlds are made real (constructed) through social processes and interaction” (Young & Collin, 2004: 375) and the development of identity is the result of a continuous interaction between social and self definition (Ybema et al, 2009: 31). The framework on which the social construction of identity is based emphasises its interactional nature and highlights that human beings are not mere automatons that respond to the world but that they may “actively contribute to its creation” (Morgan & Smircich, 1980: 498). This underlies the two way, interdependent nature of the construction and the purposive intent realised in talk (Thorne, 2004). Social construction denies that the individual is independent and mutually exclusive from society but “rather society constitutes and inhabits the very core of whatever passes for personhood:

each is interpreted by the other” (Sampson, 1989: 6). Therefore, the interest here matches that of Brown (2015, p.21) in the conceptualisation of subjective identities as construed through discourse and sensemaking (Ainsworth and Hardy 2004; Altheide 2000; Weick, 1995) rather than other functionalist’ and notionally ‘objective’ approaches that focus on cause and effect relationships.

Before looking at the processes of identity construction it is relevant to touch briefly on identity motives, or the need-like properties that guide them and push individuals “toward certain identity states and away from others” (Vignoles et al. 2006, p. 309; Vignoles 2011). In their recent analysis of identity construction in organisations, Ashforth and Schinoff (2016) identify identity motives that seem central to identity construction as belonging, need for identification, self-enhancement, self-knowledge, self-expression, self-coherence, self-continuity, optimal distinctiveness, reduction of subjective uncertainty, self verification, and self-presentation. They argue that “whilst much of the literature on identity motives pertains to internally focused motives, particularly self-enhancement, self-continuity, and uncertainty reduction, identity construction clearly does not occur in a vacuum; holding identities that are valued by others is perhaps just as important as holding identities that are valued by oneself (Baumeister & Tice 1986)” (ibid, p.117). One of Ashforth and Schinoff’s motives that can be seen as entirely externally focused is self-presentation—the desire to project a socially desirable self to influence others’ perceptions of oneself (Baumeister 1989, Roberts 2005) or “the motive to please the audience.” (Baumeister, 1989, p. 62). This links back to the salience of impression management in definitions of political behaviour discussed in 2.2 above and the need for political actors to influence the perceptions that others have of them and create accounts that “hang together” for their audience (Read, 1992).

Shifting the focus from motives to construction takes the analysis into the arena of identity work. Of the many articulations of the concept, whilst the most longstanding is Snow and Anderson’s (1987, p. 1348) conception of it as “the range of activities individuals engage in to create, present, and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept”, the “most widely cited formulation” (Brown, 2015, p.24) is that of Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003, p. 1165), who suggest that “identity work refers to people being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness”. Accounting more fully for its ‘external’ aspects, Watson (2008, p. 129) has argued that “Identity work involves the mutually constitutive processes whereby people strive to shape a relatively coherent and distinctive notion of personal self-identity and struggle to come to terms with and, within limits, to influence the various social identities which pertain to them in the various milieu in

which they live their lives". There have been other recent definitions of the concept (e.g. Down and Reveley 2009, p. 383; Petriglieri and Petriglieri 2010, p. 45) which "do not differ substantially from these versions" (Brown, 2015, p.24). Although the term is often seen as synonymous with identity construction (Pratt, 2012), this study henceforth adopts the metaphor of identity work given that its focus on short term adjustment (e.g. repairing) seems more relevant to the investigation of how leaders experience organisational politics than the implication of long term building that is associated with identity construction (Ashforth and Schinoff, 2016, p.114).

These definitions and Sveningsson & Alvesson's (2003) case study offer four contributions to the understanding of identity work that are relevant to this thesis. Firstly, the metaphor of identity as struggle. Individuals "strive for comfort, meaning and integration and some correspondence between a self-definition and work situation. Discourses, roles and narrative self-identities are all involved – they fuel and constrain identity work" (p.1188). This notion of struggle is likely to surface as leaders grapple with aligning their definitions of the nature of organisational politics with accounts of their own work behaviour. Secondly, the importance of narratives which will be explored in 4.2 below. Thirdly, the role of negative or anti identity which concerns the "not in my name" positions invoked through the anti-identity in relationship to work situations and role expectations. This element is especially relevant given the stigmatised nature of political activity and the associated negativity attached to attributions of covert and self-centred behaviour. Finally, the importance of "thick" descriptions and studies of identity work (such as this thesis) which challenge the premature linking by dominant "thin" ideas in the organisational identity literature of identity construction to standard categories such as age, sex, ethnicity, occupation etc and which, instead, raise the notion that "metaphors, rather than distinct social groups, may be more instrumental" (p.1190).

Brown (2015, p.25) argues that whilst some stress the importance of identity work that occurs more-or-less continuously in the course of organizational life, triggered by run-of-the-mill events as individuals transition between less and more context-appropriate or desired selves (Beech 2011; Gergen 1991), most scholars have preferred to attend to the identity work that occurs in particularly demanding situations or at times of significant transition. Attention has been devoted to the identity work that occurs when individuals move into new professional roles (Ibarra 1999) or organizations (Beyer and Hannah 2002), exit a role (Ebaugh 1988), respond to workplace bullying and stigma (Kaufman and Johnson 2004; Lutgen-Sandvik 2008), and experience identity threat (Collinson 2003; Petriglieri 2011 – see also 3.3 below). Identity work," it seems, is more necessary, frequent and intense in

situations where strains, tensions and surprises are prevalent, as these prompt feelings of confusion, contradiction and self-doubt, which in turn tend to lead to examination of the self” (Brown, 2015, p.25). Positioned in this way, it can be argued that participation in organisational politics, with all its associated ambiguity and caveats, will catalyse some form of identity work and the significance of confusion, contradiction and surprise in the process is consistent with how section 3.1 above has established engagement in politics as a trigger for sensemaking activity.

The notion of identity construction as conscious work further implicates the issue of regulation and maintenance which is important to this thesis given the interest in the sensemaking of political experience throughout the ebb and flow of a leadership career. Analyses that focus directly upon processes of identity regulation are governed by one or more of the following overlapping and interrelated ways of constructing and exploring identity: central life interest, coherence, distinctiveness, direction, positive value and self-awareness (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Of these, the latter two seem particularly apposite. Positive value echoes social identity theory in that identity is invariably related to self-esteem as aspired for identity attributable to a positive social meaning (Turner, 1984). Similarly, self-awareness highlights that identity is also an object of self-consciousness (Hassard et al, 2000) – making a clear link with the argument made in 3.2 above that “sensemaking begins with a self-conscious sensemaker” (Weick, 1995, p.22). On the link with sensemaking, it is pertinent to highlight that this was one of the five areas of recommended future research suggested in Brown’s (2015) recent extensive review of identities and identity work in organisations which drew on over 300 works. The nature of this study plays directly to his assertion that “there is much that still needs to be done to understand in-depth how sensemaking connects to identities and the role of identity work in processes of external interpretation and meaning making” (p.32).

In line with the interpretivist position on organisational politics that sees the perceptions of those who experience it as the assessments that matter most, this study, then, takes a similar ontological position on the nature of identity and identity work seeing both as being grounded in “at least a minimal amount of self-doubt and self-openness, typically contingent upon a mix of psychological/ existential worry and the scepticism or inconsistencies faced in encounters with others” (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002, p.626). This broad stance established, it is then necessary to zoom in closer on the role played by narratives within such identity work.

4.2 Identity as a form of dialogic / performative narrative construction.

As argued in 3.3 above, the 'narrative turn' in the social sciences has led to a growth in the perspective that that we live in a story shaped world (Bruner, 1986, 1980; Polkinghorne, 1988; Sarbin, 1986; Somers, 1994; Taylor, 1989; Brown, 1998, 2006; Brown et al, 2008, 2015), implying in turn that lives are storied, and identity is narratively constructed (Smith and Sparkes, 2008).

Stories are performative (Brown, 2006; Goffman, 1959: 40), bringing saying and doing together in a dramatic realization through which storytellers fashion themselves as 'characters' (Downing, 2005; Martens et al., 2007: 1110). Hence, personal stories are "not merely a way of telling someone (or oneself) about one's life; they are the means by which identities are fashioned" (Rosenwald and Ockberg, 1992: 1). Storytelling is bound up with identity (Maclean et al, 2015), the way individuals elect to exhibit themselves (Brown and Jones, 2000; Goffman, 1959), and also with identity work, through which they carve out in discourse their sense of individuality (Brown, 2015; Snow and Anderson, 1987; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Watson, 2008) and 'attach themselves to certain issues ... to articulate and give meanings for themselves and their actions' (Hytti, 2005, p.599). According to Ezzy (1998, p. 239), "a narrative identity provides a subjective sense of self-continuity as it symbolically integrates the events of lived experience in the plot of the story a person tells about his or her life", often during dialogic encounters with others. The self is hence fundamentally a "figured self – a self which figures itself as this or that" (Ricoeur, 1991, p.80). Authoring reflexively accomplished self-narratives allows actors to present to others favoured versions of the self, redefining their sense of who they are (Brown and Jones, 2000; Goffman, 1959; Kornberger and Brown, 2007; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). Assembly though is not straight forward - "identities are complicated narrative constructions of a fluid and continual interaction of the many stories and fragments of stories that are created around the things that appear most important" (Nelson,2001: 106). Nor is it without struggle as, through this lens, self-identity is "a reflexively organised narrative, derived from participation in competing discourses and various experiences that is productive of a degree of existential continuity and security" (Giddens,1991, p53).

Ashforth and Schinoff (2016) highlight the ability of individuals to offer relatively coherent, albeit highly selective and often self-serving narratives which "make sense of the messiness in a manner that resonates with prevailing discourses and the demands of the context, as

well as with their identity motives, desired selves, and emergent affect, behaviour, and cognition” (p.123). Narrating is not a process of passively reporting every experience; “it is an active and motivated process of abstracting from day-to-day events to make sense of oneself in the local context in a manner consistent with salient identity motives. Narratives help confer a sense of order, emphasizing desirable plotlines and de-emphasizing missteps” (ibid). The inextricability of such narratorial identity work and sensemaking has already been explored in 3.2 and 3.3 above.

Yet, although there is a “chorus of qualitative researchers singing that identities and selves are narratively constructed, they are not always in harmony and their voices are not unidimensional” (Smith & Sparkes, 2008, p.6). In their study of contrasting perspectives on narrating selves and identities, the authors offer a typology which organises differing perspectives along a continuum with perspectives that adopt a “thick individual” and “thin social relational” view at one end and those that adopt a “thin individual” and “thick social relational” at the other. At the extreme of the “thick individual/thin social relational” end is the psychosocial perspective where identity is more psychological and less an effect of the social surrounds and relations. Whilst acknowledging from the start that life stories are constructed through social interaction and that socio-cultural factors colour a person’s sense of self or identity, the individual and their interiority is given primacy over the social (McAdams, 2001, 2003). Narratives are “characterised frequently in terms of interior cognitive or psychological structures rather than as stored actions” (Smith and Sparkes, 2008, p.9). The emphasis, thus, is on the essentially personal and ‘real’ nature of individual selves, identities, experience and subjectivity (Crossley, 2000, 2003). Whilst psychosocial perspectives on narrative identity tend, therefore, to construe identities and selves in ways that have a social element, the emphasis appears to be on the individual and their inner made stories. This notion that identity is not purely socially constructed and that there is an inner sense of self developed over time is not without its relevance to this thesis – this study, after all, asks leaders to reflect upon their experience of politics throughout the duration of their whole managerial careers. The primacy, though, of the life story and its psychological development from adolescent to adulthood above the influence of social interaction on the narrative construction process, raises the potential of misalignment ontologically with how both organisational politics and sensemaking have been positioned in other parts of this literature review. Section 3.1 above highlighted that whilst sensemaking is a cognitive process, to miss the role of the audience in its deployment would be to err (Weick, 1995, p.38). Essential to the success of the sensemaking process is the construction of coherent accounts which “hang together” in the perception of their audience (Read, 1992). Of greater importance than the conviction of the person presenting the account is how compelling the

audience judge it to be, the goal in such situations being one of making behaviour intelligible and warrantable in context (Bies and Sitkin, 1992). Given the centrality of identity work in the sensemaking process, it is, therefore, important to mirror this social element in the position taken on the nature of how such work is narratively constructed. In other words, in the same way that accounts of political experience are co-produced in conjunction with an active interrogator, so too is the identity work associated with it. This positioning directs attention to the other “thin individual, thick social relational” end of Smith and Sparkes’ continuum (2008), that which sees narrative identity as a form of dialogic / performative construction.

The dialogical self is a psychological concept which describes the mind’s ability to imagine the different positions of participants in an internal dialogue and is the central concept in Dialogical Self Theory (DST), inspired by the original work of the Russian literary scholar Bakhtin and developed by Hermans (1996, 2001, 2002). Individuals exist through their relations with others and these constitutive relations are characterised by “unfinalisedness, openendedness and interdeterminancy” (Bakhtin,1973:43). Stories and words become important, because “to become a self, one must speak, and in speaking one must use words that have been used by others, words that have come out of their talking bodies” (Smith and Sparkes, 2008, p.21). Therefore, for Bakhtin, the words or utterances that the self-as-author produces “do not arise ex-nihilo from a single, solitary mind, spoken by a single talking body with a voice. Instead, such words or utterances emerge from a dialogical relation with other people” (ibid). This understanding of dialogue has catalysed a rich strain of scholarship in relation to selves and identities (for example Frank, 2005; Sampson 1993; Shotter, 1993, 2003, 2005; Taylor, 1991; Wortham, 2001) and is the basis for Herman’s notion of the dialogical self (Hermans, 1996, 2001, 2002; Hermans and Kempen, 1993; Hermans et al, 1992). Hermans argues that the self is organised in narrative form and that the dialogue between the characters inhabiting its stories is of particular importance. Specifically, the self can be conceptualised in terms of a dynamic multiplicity of relatively autonomous ‘I’ positions: “In this conception, the “I” has the possibility to move from one spatial position to another in accordance with changes in situation and time. The “I” fluctuates among different and even opposed positions and has the capacity imaginatively to endow each position with a voice so that dialogical relations between positions can be established” (Hermans, 2001, p.248). Voices, therefore, “function like interacting characters in a story, involved in a process of questions and answers, agreement and disagreement, each of them having a story to tell about their experiences from their standpoint” (Smith and Sparkes, 2008, p.22). As different voices – akin to possible selves (Markus and Nurius, 1986) – “these characters’

exchange information about their respective Me's, resulting in a complex narratively structured self" (Hermans, 2001 p.248).

This dialogic perspective chimes with the nature of this study given how Chapter 2 has highlighted the ambivalence of organisational politics, positioning it as both a force which is widely perceived as negative and dysfunctional within organisational life and yet simultaneously as a necessary skill set for leadership effectiveness and career success, presenting leaders with the dichotomy regarding how best to exploit the opportunities provided whilst at the same time defending their own sense of integrity and identity. The notion of being a political player – particularly given its potentially negative connotation amongst organisational members and the risk therefore of reputational damaging attribution – presents leaders with many potential conflicts and contradictions. Negotiating such ambiguity and tension resonates with the view of individuals as “parliaments of selves” (Mead, 1934) and the capacity of participants to dialogically hammer out a coherent sense of a self from the processing of their lived experience of organisational politics in order to “keep a particular narrative going” (Giddens, 1991, p.54) is of central interest to this thesis.

Some empirical light on the struggle associated with this perspective of narrative identity construction is shone by the study of multiple antagonistic discourses amongst managers in a large UK-based engineering company (Clarke et al, 2009). Leaders drew on such discourses in order to construct versions of themselves as emotional beings, as professionals and as moral managers who were also members of a distinctive island community. Three ‘antagonisms’ that characterized self-conceptions emerged: emotionally detached yet emotionally engaged, professional but also unprofessional, and responsible for the business but caring for people. The study is useful not just because of its response to previous assertions that “there are relatively few empirical studies addressing specific processes of identity construction’ (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003: 1164), but also in its emphasis on the antagonistic nature of narratives associated with identity work. Individual narratives “may not merely lack coherence but incorporate antagonisms. Work identities are contingent and perpetual works-in-progress, the fragile outcomes of a continuing dialectic between structure and agency” (Clarke et al, 2009, p.341). Based on their analysis, the authors argue a threefold contribution: “First, that managers draw on mutually antagonistic discursive resources in authoring conceptions of their selves. Second, that rather than being relatively coherent or completely fluid and fragmented, managers’ identity narratives may incorporate contrasting positions or antagonisms. Third, that managers’ identity work constitutes a continuing quest to (re)-author their selves as moral beings subject to organizationally based disciplinary practices” (p.324). The ambivalence associated with

participation in organisational politics can be argued to contain similar antagonisms as revealed here; for example, the need for leaders to construct themselves as open, straight forward and up front as well as capable of being able to influence behaviour and events behind the scenes to further not just organisational interests but also personal reputation. This thesis responds directly, therefore, to the author's call for future research to investigate how common antagonisms are in work identity narratives, how individuals broker and adapt to their competing demands, and what implications they have for dealing with equivocality.

Alongside the dialogic self at the social relational end of Smith and Sparkes' (2008) narrative identity spectrum is the view of identity as performative (Gergen 1999; 2001a). Through this identity lens, social relatedness completely precedes individuality, interiority and lived experience and, by implication, all that may be said about narratives, selves and identities is derived from social and relational processes: "narrative identity is viewed as multiple, fragmentary and always changing – it is performative, destabilised and deferred rather than an inherent, unified property of the individual" (Smith and Sparkes, 2008, p.24). As a result, identity is something that people perform or do rather than something they have: language actively constructs the self, and since speech is social, then selves and identities are performed within relationships, done in interactions or talked into being (Potter and Hepburn, 2005; Seymour Smith and Wetherell, 2006; Wetherell 1998; Wetherell et al 2001). Identity work and narratives are not so much a vehicle for conveying experience but more as a productive practice – one that creates the very subjects it believes to discover (Freeman 2003; Georgakopoulou 2006a, 2006b).

The work of Gergen work (1994, 1999, 2001a, 2001b) places the performance, the activity of narrating, the interactional activities that take place between people as central to understanding identity. Language is important but not overridingly so: emphasis is placed on transformative practices and relational patterns more generally, the argument being that narratives are conversational resources; constructions open to continuous transformation or alteration as interaction progresses (1994, p.188). Identities are neither "in here" nor "out there"; they are not found or observed but are achieved through stories by talking bodies in an array of previously situated relationships. That narratives are of great consequence therefore because the self story serves a performative function concurs with the analysis of Ashforth and Schinoff (2016, p.124) who stress how "narratives, of course, are crafted not only for internal consumption but also for external consumption (Ainsworth & Hardy 2004)". Externally espoused narratives can be regarded as identity claims that the individual hopes will be honoured by the audience (DeRue & Ashford 2010) suggesting that they must be reasonably plausible to receive validation from others. Ibarra & Barbulescu (2010) argue that

narratives with coherent plots (i.e., disparate events knit into a compelling storyline) and that reflect the agency of the narrator and socially desirable archetypes are more likely to earn validation. All of this further resonates with the impression management and legitimacy seeking dimensions of political activity highlighted in 2.2 above and how the importance of constructing accounts of behaviour and motives that will be believed and honoured implies that the main consideration when constructing such an account is the perspective of the person delivering any challenge (Read, 1992). The aim is to “evaluate the account we construct from the perspective of the reproacher so that we can judge the likelihood that the account will be honoured” (ibid, p.9): the more coherent the challenger judges the account to be, the more likely it is to be honoured. This performative dimension of the narratives that individuals create of their lived experience serves to further position the audience – in this case an academic researcher – as active rather than passive or neutral in their co-production, a methodological aspect that will be explored and justified in Chapter 5 later.

4.3 Identity Threat.

Chapter 2 above has established how the stigma attached to being involved in organisational politics presents leaders with a threat to a positive self concept. What then has the literature to say about the issue of identity threats and how individuals both construe and manage them?

Individuals’ and groups’ working lives are ‘filled with a desire for security’ (Knights & Willmott, 1999, p. 56), but as has been shown in 4.1 above ‘the socially constructed nature of identity renders it inherently unstable...and...highly problematic’ (Collinson, 1992, p. 27). Identities are often precarious and under threat, being subject not only to an ‘individual employee’s self-doubt and emotional instability’ (Gabriel, 1999, p. 185) but also the judgements of others and the exigencies of organizational life (Humphreys & Brown, 2002). For Giddens (1991, p. 185) ‘in the reflexive project of the self, the narrative of self-identity is inherently fragile’, while for Knights and Clarke (2014, p. 352) professional identities are increasingly ‘insecure’. Drawing on long-standing sociological literature on identity threat (Durkheim, 1933), Brown and Coupland (2015, p.1318) argue that recent studies of managers depict them as locked in continuing states of ‘profound anxiety’ (Jackall, 1988, p. 40) and stricken by frailties (Casey, 1995), while workers’ lives are portrayed as dominated by permanent, unsettling anxiety (Burawoy, 1979). Organizational members are prone to multiple, intersecting insecurities – existential, social, economic and psychological – and this

has resulted in identities which are 'increasingly precarious, insecure and uncertain'. (Collinson, 2003, p. 530).

Despite consensus that threats to identity "are as ubiquitous as they are unsettling", (Brown and Coupland, 2015, p.1318), "there is a lack of agreement regarding what, exactly, identity threat is' (Petriglieri, 2011, p. 641). Some have emphasised the role of discourse by seeing identity threats "as being construed through identity work: they are any discursively constituted thought or feeling that challenges one of an individual or group's preferred identity narratives" (Brown and Coupland, 2015, p.1318): a conception of threat that contrasts with scholarship which has considered threats to identities to be posed by 'objective' factors (Breakwell, 1983), temporally specific events such as bullying (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008) or particular individual/group characteristics associated with stigma (Goffman, 1963). The breadth of this approach allows focus on the ongoing insecurities about the self that are 'a permanent feature of everyday experience' (Collinson, 2003, p. 531). Brown and Coupland (2015, p.1318) argue that "the pervasive and continuing nature of threats to identities resonates with a substantial literature on identity regulation which highlights the vulnerable, sometimes frail, generally contested and precarious nature of managers' and other workers' selves in organizations (Clarke, Brown, & Hope-Hailey, 2009; Fleming & Spicer, 2003; Gill, 2015)", a position that chimes with the endemic nature of organisational politics established in 2.4 above and suggests that the threat posed by the dilemma leaders face with their involvement in political activity is an enduring one.

Also linked to how involvement in organisational politics may present an identity threat is the notion of linking identity work to legitimacy. In their in-depth case study of prisoners in Helsinki Prison, Brown and Toyoki (2013) focus on how identity work affirmed or contested three kinds of institutional legitimacy – pragmatic, moral and cognitive. They argue that the key finding regarding internal legitimacy that emerges from their research is that "it is constructed and reconstructed on a continuing basis by participants through discourse as they fashion versions of their organizational selves". In construing their identities, individuals also engage in "legitimacy work" in which they do not simply accept or reject the legitimacy of their organizations but construe it in multiple and often contradictory ways through their narrativizations of self. It is "from these very many micro, collectively informed identity-based individual claims, judgements and evaluations that legitimacy as an ongoing discursive accomplishment is enacted" (ibid, p.890). Whilst the concept of "internal" legitimacy related to that of the organisation, it is possible to construe it in individual terms too. Just as the authors identified identity work that was pragmatically, morally and cognitively "legitimacy affirming", they equally identified that which was "legitimacy contesting" (ibid, p.883) and it is

possible to see the impact of involvement in organisational politics in this light too. Given the challenge to the legitimacy of political activity conceptually (Mintzberg, 1985), those engaging in it may perceive a threat to their own individual legitimacy as leaders as well as the legitimacy of the organisation in which they work.

Other studies have focussed on the stigma of "dirty work" as a threat to the ability of occupational members to construct an esteem-enhancing identity (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999). Their analysis addresses the question of how individuals, despite the stigma of dirty work, were able to construct a positive sense of self, a finding also apparent in other qualitative studies (for example, Thompson, 1991; Wacquant, 1995). Although the discussion assumed an occupational or workgroup level of analysis, rather than the individual, by examining how members of dirty work occupations (particularly of low prestige) collectively attempt to secure positive meaning in the face of pervasive stigmas, the way in which "taint" can be defined makes it relevant to consider its application to the stigma attached to being perceived to be politically active in organisational life. Alongside physical and social aspects of "taint", the authors highlight too the moral dimension, that is "occupations generally regarded as somewhat sinful or of dubious virtue or where the worker is thought to employ methods that are deceptive, intrusive, confrontational, or that otherwise defy norms of civility" (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999, p.1999). Given the way in which the literature and the perceptions of organisational members (see 2.2 and 2.3 above) have highlighted the slippery and ethically dubious nature of political behaviour, it is conceivable to think of such behaviour as being similarly tainted and therefore constitutive of a potential threat to individual identity.

If this is the nature of identity threat, the question then arises regarding what is known about how such threats are managed in an effort to maintain a positive identity. Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) identify three ideological techniques used "to transform the meaning of the stigmatized work by simultaneously negating or devaluing negative attributions and creating or revaluing positive ones" (p.421). Firstly, **reframing** involves transforming the meaning attached to a stigmatized occupation. There are at least two forms of this: *infusing*, where the stigma is imbued with positive value, thus transforming it into a badge of honour. In the political arena, this may constitute claims of acting in the "greater good" even at the cost of damage to personal reputation. The second form, *neutralizing*, is where the negative value of the stigma is negated and is associated with three specific techniques: denial of responsibility, (occupational members assert that they are simply doing their job-that someone or something else is responsible or that no one is responsible), denial of injury (no harm done) and denial of victim (those "exploited" either desire or deserve their fate). Applied to

the deployment of political behaviour, such neutralising techniques may take the form of claims that the role makes it unavoidable (denial of responsibility), its “just a game” (denial of injury) or that everyone is at it and the need, therefore, to fight fire with fire (denial of victim). Secondly, **recalibrating** refers to adjusting the implicit standards that are invoked to assess the magnitude (how much) and/or valence (how good) of a given dirty work attribute. Adjusting the perceptual and evaluative standards can make an undesired and ostensibly large aspect seem smaller and less significant and a desired but small aspect seem larger and more significant. Leaders may, therefore, defend their sense of self by accentuating the positive outcomes of backstage political activity in, for example, bringing people together in order to diffuse resistance to legitimate organisational change. Finally, in **refocusing**, the centre of attention is shifted from the stigmatized features of the work to the non stigmatized features. Whereas reframing actively transforms the stigmatized properties of dirty work and recalibrating magnifies their redeeming qualities, refocusing actively overlooks the stigmatized properties. In terms of organisational politics, this may take the form of ignoring the fact that in moving a situation forward, individuals were deliberately and covertly excluded, marginalised or denied information available to others in order to limit their ability to influence the desired outcome.

Brown and Coupland (2015) offer a different slant on how threats to identities are managed by identifying “appropriation strategies” through which such threats were made their own by men in order to develop and reinforce desired occupational and masculine identities (in this case as professional rugby players): “focus on the present”, “tough, self-reliant professionalism”, and “aspirational goals”. They argue that in line with other sociological theorizing on insecure, anxious, fragile and resistant selves (Collinson, 1992, 2003; Knights & Clarke, 2014), threats are a resource for identity work and “are not merely rebutted, ameliorated or neutralized, but also are a valuable means for constructing desired identities. From this perspective, identities are reasonably regarded not as responses to threat but as constituted by them.” (Brown and Coupland, 2015, p.1328). This suggests that the direction of identity influence may be two way, in other words, how leaders experience organisational politics is not something that is merely influenced by a stable and static sense of self but is instead the means by which such identity is shaped and reinforced. This certainly plays to the authors’ argument that “processes of identity construction are fluid and dynamic: while we may be spurred by narcissistic preoccupations with establishing a secure, stable identity, identities are never ‘finished’ but continuously worked on in soliloquy and in conversations with others (ibid, p.1329). Finally, other studies have highlighted the role of narratives not just in identity work (see 4.2 above) but also in identity threat management. Gabriel, Gray and Goregaokar (2010) illustrate how unemployed former managers engage in three forms

of narrative coping – *temporary derailment*, *end of the line* and *moratorium* – in order to make sense, console and sustain their sense of self whilst Knights and Clarke (2014) examined how academics react to perceived identity threats by creating self-defining narratives as *imposters* who admit to self-doubts, *aspirants* who work on ideal selves, and *existentialists* who seek (though may not find) meaning through their work.

4.4 Opportunities to contribute to the understanding of identity work

Having identified the nature of identity work, the role of narratives within it and the ways in which threats to identity can be both construed and managed, it is possible to identify two specific areas of incomplete understanding to which this study will contribute. Firstly, whilst there is now a growing body of empirical work around the concept of identity work and that it is “well established that professionals (Learmonth & Humphreys, 2012), attempt to manage threats to their identities” (Brown and Coupland, 2015, p.1315), the interaction of identity work with the lived experience of organisational politics is under examined. As has been shown above, whilst it is possible to speculate what might be implied by applying the findings of other analyses which have explored the threats associated with “dirty work” (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999) and “legitimacy contesting” identity work (Brown and Toyoki, 2013), there have been no specific contexts which excavate the identity threats and responses to engagement in political activity. Given the potential stigma attached to the notion of being politically active and the slippery way in which it is both viewed in the literature and perceived by employees, this is perhaps surprising but represents, nonetheless, the opportunity to add to the field. Similarly, whilst the identity work of elite actors has been the subject of empirical study, none of these have put the political aspect of leadership under the microscope in this context. Such extant research has considered, inter alia, how elite sportsmen in the world of professional rugby use identity threats as flexible resources for working on favoured identities (Brown and Coupland, 2015), how philanthropic identity narratives empower wealthy entrepreneurs to generate a legacy of the self that is both self- and socially oriented (Maclean et al, 2015), how the continual promotion of an elite identity within a management consulting firm leaves many of the consultants feeling acutely anxious about their status (Gill, 2015) and the importance of insecurity in the identity work of business school academics (Knights and Clarke, 2014) but the identity implications of participation by elite actors in organisational politics remains unexplored.

4.5 Literature Review Summary: Concluding remarks, research implications and potential contribution.

This literature review has conducted a detailed analysis of what is known about both organisational politics and the sensemaking perspective together with how the issue of identity is presently implicated in each.

Chapter 2 began by examining the ways in which organisational politics is defined in the literature, either in dispositional or non dispositional terms. The limitations of this approach were highlighted, and the case made for why, in a sensemaking based enquiry, it is the perceptions of those who experience organisational politics in practice that matter most. The key themes emerging from the dominant field of positivist / quantitative empirical studies of such perceptions were identified alongside a further analysis of their limitations when it comes to interrogating the richness and ambiguity of personal engagement. The more emergent and embryonic tradition of interpretivist/qualitative studies was then examined, highlighting what insights are possible from these and what gaps remain. An assessment was then made of the “macro” aspects of organisational politics, highlighting the structural and contextual factors that are increasing the prevalence and significance of politics in organisational life and driving the need for leaders to become politically active and skilled. Chapter 3 examined the sensemaking perspective in detail making the case for how definitional elements of the construct - the influence of identity, the role of surprises or difficulties as triggers, the focus on retrospect, the salience of narratives and the primacy of plausibility over accuracy - combine to make it a useful lens through which to examine how leaders author and interpret their political experience. Chapter 4 conducted a more specific exploration of identity arguing the need to see the associated notion of identity work as a dialogic form of narrative construction. What is known about the nature of identity threat and how such challenges are managed was also analysed.

Reviewing the literature in this way has highlighted some core themes that repeatedly bubble up to the surface when it comes to understanding how managers interpret their political experience and these are now summarised again to show how they have driven the establishment of the core research questions to be addressed in this thesis (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011). The first of these issues is the ambivalence and ambiguity associated with how organisational politics is defined, understood and experienced. On the one hand, the traditional view in the literature is one that positions the construct as a dysfunctional aberration of organisational life, driven by covert behaviour in pursuit of power or other

selfish interests that corrupt performance, destroy trust and undermine the notion of meritocratic fairness (Mintzberg, 1985; Ward, 1994, Stone, 1997, Zaleznik, 1997). Such a view is by and large endorsed by the large number of positivist-quantitative studies and meta analyses that have researched the perceptions of tens of thousands of employees (inter alia Miller et al, 2008; Chang et al, 2009; Bedi & Schat, 2013). The stigma of being perceived to be politically active carries, therefore, the type of identity threat that others have identified to be apparent in work that is “dirty” (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999) or “legitimacy contesting” (Brown and Toyoki, 2013). On the other though, is a more contemporary perspective which challenges the inherent negative bias in how the phenomenon is both conceptualised and measured and sees political behaviour, instead, as an inevitable, naturally occurring feature of organisational life in which actors deploy a range of skills and tactics in pursuit of legitimate organisational or personal goals that would otherwise not be achieved through more formal means (Doldor, 2011; Landells and Albrecht, 2016). For those in leadership roles, it should be embraced as a form of “power assisted steering” (Buchanan and Badham, 1999, p.179), with political acumen being an essential skill set through which a wide range of performance related outcomes and career goals can be achieved (Brouer et al, 2013; Munyon et al, 2014, Kimura, 2015). Rather than being avoided, therefore, “expertise in organizational politics is critical with regard to making things happen and getting things done” (Buchanan, 2016, p.343). Such a dichotomy presents leaders in organisational life with a conundrum of how best to exploit the opportunities provided whilst at the same time defending their own self-concept and, with the stakes being so high in performance and reputational terms, there is a lot counting on its successful resolution.

The second theme is how little is known about how leaders experience and resolve such a dilemma. The empirical arena associated with organisational politics, dominated by large-n positivist-quantitative analyses and often heavily reliant upon surveys of mixed occupational groups of American and Israeli employees, has a lot to say on how politics is subjectively defined and assessed in the workplace generally but struggles to inform how leaders interpret, account for and legitimise their own personal participation in political activity (Doldor, 2011). Knowing little about how actors perceive their own personal involvement in organisational politics also implies de facto that we are similarly in the dark regarding how such perceptions are formed and the role of “identity work” (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003) within this. How “behaviours come to be labelled as political, attributed with political intent, and socially constructed as political remains unexplored” (Buchanan, 2008). The need for balance between ‘pure politician’ and ‘demonstrated ability’ is not a new insight (Ferris, Buckley and Allen, 1992) but little remains known about how the development of that balance is acquired whilst moral standards and identity are challenged by organizational

realities (Buchanan, 2008, p.62). This builds to a position where a continuing focus on positivist variance-based methods runs the risk of applying the law of diminishing returns, given that “if one continues to study the phenomenon using the same methods, one is likely to generate much the same finding” (Buchanan, 2016, p.362). Filling the gaps that exist in knowledge, including how leaders interpret and resolve the ambiguity associated with their personal involvement in such a contentious arena, necessitates the adoption of methods grounded in a constructivist-processual perspective (ibid, p.363). Despite a growing call for more innovative small-n qualitative research (Ferris and Treadway, 2012a; McFarland et al, 2012; Landells and Albrecht, 2016) such studies remain rare and those that have attempted to take a more interpretivist approach have been hampered either by the taboo nature of political behaviour (Gandz and Murray, 1980; Maddison et al, 1980) or by the survey based methods employed to gather data (Buchanan, 2008). If greater progress is to be made about the aspects of organisational politics of which we know less, therefore, there remains a need for “new and insightful approaches that promote richer interpretations of this important phenomenon” (Hochwarter, 2012).

As well as addressing gaps in knowledge surrounding organisational politics, there exists an opportunity to add to the understanding of the sensemaking perspective. Whilst there is a growing interest in the connecting of sensemaking, organizing and storytelling, research has been “largely conservative” and “there remain many relatively uncharted topics and areas of interest” (Brown et al, 2015, p.272). Firstly, whilst it is generally acknowledged that sensemaking is grounded in identity construction (Weick, 1995; Maitlis, 2005) and that people make sense of their work activities under the influence of their individual-specific needs for self-enhancement, self-efficacy and self-consistency (Erez & Earley, 1993), “there is much that still needs to be done to understand in-depth how sensemaking connects to identities and the role of identity work in processes of external interpretation and meaning making” (Brown, 2015, p.32). Similarly, ambiguity remains about the relative direction of influence given that more is known about how sensemaking is implicated in identity work (that is, in how identity is constructed through sensemaking) than how identities influence sensemaking (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015, p. S16). Aside from the interaction of sensemaking with identity work, storytelling generally by elite actors remains under explored (Maclean et al 2012) and ambiguity exists regarding the processes that are most influential within this. Some highlight the role and importance of impression management and attributional egotism (Brown et al, 2008), other devices such as self-deception, hypocrisy and scapegoating (Brown & Jones, 2000) or mechanisms such as locating, meaning making and becoming (Maclean et al, 2012). The breadth implied by the diversity of such sensemaking processes begs the question as to which are more influential when it comes to

accounting for the day to day lived experience of organisational politics? Similarly, is such a list exhaustive or are there any, as yet, unidentified cognitive devices that are more significant in their influence upon the sensemaking struggle? The validity of this challenge is strengthened by two further issues. Firstly, the methodological limitations of extant empirical work, reliant as it is on either single organisation case study (Brown et al, 2008) or retrospective analysis of purely written text (Brown & Jones, 2000). Secondly and more fundamentally though, is the absence of any such empirical evidence when it comes to the specific examination of how managers make sense of their own personal engagement in political activity. Whilst authors and researchers have drawn attention to the political dimensions of sensemaking as a process (for example, Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Brown et al, 2015) and the political influences upon its operation in multi national companies (Ainsworth & Hardy, 2012; Clark & Geppert, 2011; Dorrenbacher & Geppert, 2006, 2011; Geppert, 2003; Geppert & Dorrenbacher, 2011; Golant & Sillince, 2007; Topal, 2009; Whittle et al, 2016), there is an absence of empirical work that uses sensemaking as a lens to excavate specifically how those in leadership roles narrate, account for and legitimise their own personal engagement in political activity. Addressing this gap is both a goal and a contribution of this study.

Based on this analysis of the themes and gaps in the literature surrounding organisational politics, sensemaking and identity work, the following research questions will be addressed in this thesis:

How do leaders make sense of their own personal involvement in organisational politics? In particular;

- ***How is such sensemaking triggered?***
- ***What sensemaking processes are embedded in the stories that leaders tell about their experiences?***
- ***What overall narratives do leaders create and use to account for their personal involvement or withdrawal successfully?***
- ***How are sensemaking processes, narratives and outcomes influenced by identity work?***

The significance of addressing these questions lies in the contribution it will make to understanding in five important areas. Firstly, the extent to which the recent trend in the literature towards to a more balanced position on the nature of organisational politics, one which recognises its functional/positive dimension as well as its dysfunctional aspects and

harmful consequences, is reflected in the readiness of leaders to acknowledge its existence and their active involvement therein. Secondly, the way in which the ambivalence surrounding organisational politics plays out in the sensemaking pursuits of those who must negotiate it in practice. In other words, to shed light upon how leaders author accounts of participation or withdrawal that allow them to “search for meaning, settle for plausibility and move on” (Weick et al, 2005, p.419). Thirdly, the sensemaking processes that are the most significant when it comes to interpreting personal involvement in political activity and the extent to which these are common to those found in prior sensemaking studies or a novel addition to the mix. Fourthly the role played by different narratives in enabling leaders to negotiate a credible position on their relationship with organisational politics and derive a successful sensemaking outcome. Finally, the influence of identity work on the “end to end” sensemaking process (i.e. from triggers to outcomes) and the extent to which future developments in both theory and empirical work should pay more attention to the underdeveloped stream of work that draws attention to the identity related aspects of how politics is experienced in organisational life (Mackenzie Davey, 2008; Knights and McCabe, 1998).

The next chapter of the thesis will provide more detail about the research study itself: its underpinning philosophical perspective together with the methodology employed for data collection and analysis.

5. METHODS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This thesis makes an original contribution to the field of organisational politics by taking a sensemaking lens to the way in which leaders account for their own involvement in, or withdrawal from, political activity and how such struggle interacts with the construction and maintenance of a workable identity. Chapter 2 above has set out how “the argument that political skill is a valued commodity sits awkwardly with the popular view that political behaviour is wicked and unacceptable” (Buchanan, 2016, p.343), a dichotomy which presents a dilemma to leaders regarding how best to exploit the opportunities provided without damaging reputation and credibility. This research examines how individuals make sense of this dilemma and the processes, narratives and identity work linked to a positive outcome.

Such sensitivity has contributed to a traditional view that conducting research in such an arena is problematic given that participants will necessarily be reluctant to discuss their experiences openly (Madison et al, 1980; Kumar and Ghadially, 1989). This research, however, supports the position that such an assumption is “unduly cautious”, that the phenomenon is “not a difficult topic to study” and that any problems are a result of the “research methods that are used rather than by the intrinsic nature of the subject” (Buchanan, 2016, p.346). Despite the observation in the introduction of the first edition of the Handbook of Organisational Politics that “the reality of politics is best understood through the perceptions of individuals (Vigoda-Gadot and Drory, 2006, p.x), the preoccupation of this and subsequent positivist-quantitative dominated volumes (Ferris and Treadway, 2012a; Vigoda-Gadot and Dory, 2016) with construct definition, measurement, reliability and generalisability adds weight to Buchanan’s assertion that “if one continues to study a phenomenon using the same methods, one is likely to generate much the same findings” (2016, p.362).

This Chapter sets out the methodological strategy and research process needed to contribute to the gaps in knowledge and “to probe further those aspects of organisational politics about which we know less” (Buchanan, 2016, p.363). Section 3.2 lays out the “*why*”, namely the ontological assumptions underpinning the study, the rationale for the methodological and research design choices made and the analysis strategy created to

interrogate the data gathered. Section 3.3 describes the “*how*”, the procedures involved in data collection and recording; how participants were approached, the research relationship established, and the style of questioning adopted. This process emphasis is continued in Section 3.4 which maps out step by step how each component of a complex analysis strategy was executed. The overall intent behind structuring the chapter in this way is one of establishing clear “methodological fit”, an implicitly valued attribute of high quality organisational research that establishes coherent internal consistency among elements of the research project – research questions, prior work, research design and theoretical contribution (Edmondson and McManus, 2007).

5.2 Ontological Assumptions, Methodological Choices & Research Design.

The choice of a research strategy involves more than stating a preference for a specific data collection method; it requires the alignment of the three major elements of ontology, epistemology and methodology with the basic research questions that the study seeks to address (Guba & Lincoln, 1998, Cassell and Symon, 2004). This section sets out the rationale for the various strategic choices made in constructing this methodology.

5.2.1 Interpretivist Ontology

Ontological and epistemological approaches to social inquiry range from positivism to interpretivism, depending on the emphasis they place on the idea of objectivity and truth versus interpretation and social construction in investigating social situations. Ontologically speaking, the positivist end of the spectrum claims that reality exists independent of human consciousness and involvement, while the interpretive extreme posits that it is human subjectivity itself that generates reality (Morgan and Smircich, 1980). As has already been identified, the dominant paradigm underpinning the vast majority of the research into perceptions of organisational politics is positivist in nature (Buchanan, 2016), namely an ontological assumption that a definitive reality regarding the nature of politics and political activity, separated from the individual, can be discovered by detached and neutral researchers producing value free science (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe, 2002). Attempts from this ontological position to define the nature of organisational politics, whether they place an emphasis on intent, behaviour or consequences, have proven to be problematic; skilled organisational actors may be able to disguise their self-serving intent

(Ferris et al 2002b, p.111), influenced based definitions do not readily distinguish political from non-political behaviour (Buchanan, 2008) whilst the field divides sharply over whether the consequences of political activity are functional or dysfunctional (Landells and Albrecht, 2016).

Given that the primary concern of this research is the exploration of how senior managers interpret their own involvement in politics, adopting the positivist stance of defining the constructs in question from the neutral standpoint of a detached observer has, therefore, limited analytical or explanatory power (Buchanan and Badham, 1990). Acquiring insight into how individuals construct accounts and narratives of their own participation in political activity requires, instead, the adoption of an interpretivist rather than positivist paradigm through which “realities are apprehendable in the form of multiple, intangible, mental constructions, socially and experientially based, local and specific in nature and dependent for their form and content on the individual persons or groups holding the constructions” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Constructions are not more or less “true” in any absolute sense, but simply more or less informed and/or sophisticated. This perspective regards organizational politics as a fluid and unfolding process which, by being “concerned with ‘narrative knowing’, paying attention to time and to the sequence of events and outcomes” (Buchanan, 2016, p.340), can generate a richer and more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon (Langley and Tsoukas, 2010, p. 7).

This is consistent with the emphasis that interpretive research places upon “participants’ views of the situation being studied” (Creswell, 2003, p.8) and the belief that insights into the social world can only be gained by tapping into individual and collective meanings (Astley, 2005). Meaning, therefore, is not a fixed entity to be discovered by the researcher, but rather a negotiated process (Schwandt, 2003) in which the epistemological aim of the research is to account for this social construction of reality by acknowledging that the researcher’s part therein (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994, see also 5.2.3. below).

Responding to Alvesson and Sandberg’s (2011, p. 247) challenge that ‘the assumptions underlying existing literature for the most part remain unchallenged in the formulation of research questions’, being this explicit on ontological positioning is important to ensure that the research is intellectually coherent in its claims and clearly situated alongside the philosophical perspectives underpinning extant empirical research in the field. In this sense, it is argued that conducting this empirical research from the interpretivist position outlined responds to the call for more innovative approaches (Hochwarter, 2012) and to the

difficulties that the positivist-quantitative tradition has experienced in interrogating such a dynamic and contextually shaped phenomenon (Buchanan, 2016, p.363).

Aside from the enquiry into the sensemaking of political experience, the associated stance of this study on the nature of identity also dictates the need for a similarly interpretivist ontological position. Chapter 4 of the earlier literature review argues that this research builds on the tradition of Alvesson (1994); Alvesson, Ashcraft & Thomas, (2008); Alvesson & Karreman, (2000a, 2000b); Alvesson & Robertson, (2006); Brown (2105) and others such as Pullen & Linstead (2005) and Dent & Whitehead (2002) in challenging the taken for granted assumption (Burr, 1995) that identity is fixed and permanent. Identity is not a given “out there” (Chia, 1995) waiting to be discovered but is instead created through and embedded in the medium of “language, labels, actions and routines which constitute symbolic modes of being in the world” (Morgan & Smirich, 1980, p.494). As well as assuming this interpretive position on identity, Section 4.2 above also argued the case for seeing individual lives as storied and that identity is, therefore, narratively created, a position further refined by taking a dialogic position on such construction, placing the research towards the “thin individual” / “thick social relational” end of Smith and Sparkes’ (2008) continuum (see Section 4.2 above). The concept of the dialogical self (Hermans 1996, 2001, 2002; Hermans and Kempen 1993; Hermans et al 1992) argues that the self is organised in narrative form and that the dialogue between the characters inhabiting its stories is of importance, a perspective which has the potential to add a rich complexity to the identity work associated with the sensemaking of political experience. The notion of being politically active – particularly given the potential for negative attribution amongst organisational members – represents a potential threat to a positive identity. Influencing both events and relationships through a diverse repertoire of often covert behavioural tactics whilst at the same time maintaining a belief in doing the “right thing” in the “interests of the organisation” may not be easily assimilated into a single and coherent self-concept without dissonance and conflict. This raises notions of Mead’s “parliament of selves” (1934), and the way narratives enable a variety of standpoints and interpretations to be hammered out dialogically is of central interest to this research.

By way of a summary then, the adoption by this research of an interpretivist ontological position is fundamental to a successful enquiry into the sensemaking of political experience and how the dialogic nature of narratives reinforce, repair and strengthen leader identity. Exploring sensemaking and the narrative construction of identity from such an ontological position necessarily involves a commitment to an epistemology which “emphasises the importance of understanding the processes through which human beings concretise their

relationship to the world” (Morgan and Smirich, 1980, p.493). As it will now be argued below, it follows similarly that a qualitative research design is better able to access such processes given that when sensemaking and identity work are in operation, they are too complex and intangible “to be simply measured and counted” (King, 2004, p.21).

5.2.2. Qualitative Methodology

Having established an interpretivist ontological position, this section argues the need for a qualitative research design to explore the ways in which individuals construct and negotiate meaning from the ambiguity and contradiction associated with their experience of organisational politics.

The review of the literature discussed in Chapter 2 has established the prevailingly positivist-quantitative nature of empirical investigation into perceptions of organisational politics. Indicative of these implicit ontological and epistemological commitments are a few defining features (Doldor, 2011). Firstly, a preference for large-scale studies employing quantitative methods and allowing for statistical generalization, secondly, the use of a theoretically-informed, deductive approach in order to propose tightly defined constructs and thirdly, that theoretical development of the field will be accomplished through additional large-scale quantitative studies to operationalise core concepts, develop valid measures and build generalizable models (ibid, p.67). The limitations of this methodological approach when it comes to exploring the ambiguity of the lived experience of organisational politics have already been highlighted in 2.3.2 above together with how the work of Buchanan in particular (1999, 2008, 2012, 2016) has been influential in establishing the alternative view that “whilst large-n quantitative research may be appropriate in some settings, the more subtle aspects of the nature, processes and implications of organisational political behaviour may be more effectively revealed using innovative small-n qualitative methods” (Buchanan,2008, p.62). Mackenzie Davey (2008) argues that although accounts of organizational politics elicited by various studies or streams of research may share communalities that “make generalization seductive, it is not clear what these achieve” and a call has gradually emerged to add to the much smaller body of interpretive / qualitative studies that can richer interpretations and new understandings. (Ferris and Treadway, 2012; Hochwarter, 2012; McFarland et al, 2012; Landells and Albrecht, 2016).

Whilst this research is not by any means the first qualitative study in this arena, others are rare (Buchanan, 2016, p.362) and have been hampered by a variety of ontological /

methodological issues (see 2.3.2 above for a detailed critique). By combining an interpretive position *and* a qualitative research design in the manner outlined in this chapter, the study establishes a tighter “methodological fit” (Edmondson and McManus, 2007) for understanding how leaders handle organisational politics than has been possible in much of the qualitative research that precedes it. It is worth emphasising again here that it is not the intent of this work to make claims about how politically active or skilful participants are, but to explore in detail the sensemaking processes through which they define, interpret and draw meaning from their experience and how this interacts with the maintenance of a workable identity. Such a pursuit requires the facilitation of sensemaking narratives of political experience which is why the case is now made for interviews as sites for sensemaking and identity work.

5.2.3 Research Design: Individual interviews as sites for sensemaking and identity work.

Studies of sensemaking aim to explore the ways in which individuals construct and negotiate meaning from “casting a cone of light backwards” (Weick, 1995, p.26) and interpreting experience retrospectively. Such studies depend upon generating rich, open ended accounts to allow the researcher to explore the varied ways in which the sensemaking process plays out and it follows, therefore, that individual interviews are often the design choice adopted in sensemaking research (Brown et al, 2008; Maclean et al, 2012).

Sensemaking takes place retrospectively in interviews, where past events are explored, and meanings given to these events, giving the researcher the opportunity to “... ‘see’ how people make sense of situations” (Vaara, 2000). The suitability of individual interviews as a design choice which maintains the concept of “methodological fit” (Edmondson and McManus, 2007) for this research is accentuated by the fact that that the research questions concern not just sensemaking per se but sensemaking of a concept as sensitive and controversial as organisational politics. Having made the case in 2.4 above regarding the ubiquity and importance of organisational politics in leadership roles, the assumption that is being carried openly into this research (see 5.3.4 Reflexive Considerations below), is that all leaders in organisational life are experiencing organisational politics in one form or another. Central to the conduct of this research, therefore, was the need to get respondents talking in storied form about such experience and accounting for the way in which they either engaged or withdrew. Contrary to conventional research practice, this necessitates establishing a relationship with participants, involving a “dialogue in which the researcher discloses their aims and the participant discloses their understanding. “Contamination” is thus a

requirement, not a problem” (Buchanan, 2016, p.345). Interviews, with their “natural basis in human conversation” (Hannabuss, 1996), produce a discursive co-construction of the lived reality of the interviewee (King, 2004; Cassell, 2008) and are where experience is turned into narratives so that “the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it” (Schwandt, 1994, p.118) is transformed from the personal and “made public” (Denzin, 2001, p.28).

Other qualitative researchers have built their research design around an ethnographic / observational approach positing greater ecological validity (Potter and Hepburn, 2005b; Silverman, 2007). The use of case studies and embedded participant observation have similarly been argued as suitable and underutilised methods for understanding organisational politics (Buchanan, 2016, p.352-353). Whilst these methods have the potential to build further upon the findings of this study (see Chapter 7 below), the position of this researcher, in an interrogation of how leaders “deal with ambiguity, search for meaning, settle for plausibility, and move on” (Weick et al, 2005, p.419) in relation to their experience of politics, is that what matters most are the accounts and judgements of those involved, not the researcher, and, when the interest is in the making of sense, interviews “come into their own as research methods” (Litosseliti, 2010). Litosseliti further challenges the implication of interviews as contrived or somehow “got up” in comparison with naturalistically gathered data (p.165). Discourse analysts have been at the forefront of attempts to highlight the indexical or content-specific nature of spoken data (Speer, 2002). In studying the “expression” of attitudes (Potter and Wetherell, 1987), memories (Middleton and Edwards, 1990) and emotions (Edwards, 1997), they have shown how none of these activities involves the simple reporting of some prior state of mind; but that all such accounts are designed in ways that are sensitive to the contexts in which they make their appearance. In other words, “all discourse data is “got up” for something; there is no such thing as a context free domain. According to this view, the discourse stemming from interviews is no more contaminated or compromised than any other data set and as such it should continue to be respected” (Litosseliti, 2010, p.165).

Having argued the suitability of the individual interview for generating insights into how participants make sense of their own political experience, the question arises of how structured or formal such an interview needs to be. Interview formats can range from highly structured, with standard questions posed to all participants in standard order, to un- or semi-structured (Holstein and Gubrium, 1997). Rather than the questions that appear in structured interview schedules that are based on the interests and perceptions of researchers, it has been argued that a better alternative is “to ask participants about their

own experience in face to face conversations that are either loosely structured or that rely on a topic guide rather than a list of questions” (Buchanan, 2016, p.345). Previous researchers concerned with the exploration of narratives have found this semi structured approach and a focus on gathering “descriptions of the life-world of the interviewee with respect to interpretation of the described phenomena” (Kvale p.174 1983) to be useful. The emphasis is on an approach which “...lets the respondents tell their stories” (Piore 2006, p.20), uses what Brown et al. (2008) describe as non-directive “interaction cues” and is likely to be more productive of relevant data to a study concerned with narrative sensemaking than more formal interviewing (Maclean et al, 2012). Piore (2006), for example, relates how his experience of formal interviews was frustrating, participants did not “tolerate the formal questions well” whereas a less structured questioning guide “basically became an excuse to let them tell that story”. A semi structured interview format has the added advantage of allowing an elasticity which facilitates the modifying of a line of enquiry to elicit subtle differences in sensemaking processes and the giving of a “premium to the distinctive” (Eisner, 2001, p.141) or “the particular” (Madill, Jordan, & Shirley, 2000). Approaching interviews in this way, therefore, allows participants to “generate and answer questions of their own, assuming that the researcher was not aware of, but will be interested in, those related themes thus generating richly detailed information and novel insights” (Buchanan, 2016, p.345).

5.2.4. The case for an active approach to interviewing.

A distinctive feature of this study lies in its adoption of an active interviewing approach over and above the semi structured method advocated above. The concept of the active interview is linked most strongly with the work of Holstein and Gulbriun (1995; 2000; 2003) and is laid out in detail in their book “The Active Interview” (1995), from which this section draws heavily. Although the underlying philosophy behind the active interview approach, as well as its method, presents a challenge to conventional interviewing practice, this thesis argues that its adoption adds to the power and richness of its findings rather than presenting a limitation. Notwithstanding the established reputation of the founding authors’ expertise in qualitative research or the fact that the active interview method appears in authoritative texts of conducting such studies (Silverman, 2004), this divergence from mainstream convention warrants the need for more detailed explanation and justification.

The traditional approach can be argued to treat interviews simply as “pipelines through which information is transmitted from a passive subject to an omniscient researcher” (Holstein & Gulbriun, 1995, p.4). Interviewers are instructed to skilfully solicit answers, but to

pre-formulated questions, under constraints designed to keep them from contaminating that which lies within the passive respondent's vessel of answers. Such restraint features in the guidelines typically provided, such as reading the questions exactly as worded, probing for clarification in a way that does not influence the content of the answers that result, recording without discretion, communicating a neutral and , non-judgmental stance with respect to the substance of the answers and refraining from providing any feedback to respondents, positive or negative, with respect to the specific content of the answers they provide (Fowler & Mangione, 1990, p. 33).

Active interviewing distances itself as from this conceptualization of the interview as a model of mere stimulus and response, where the interview subject is objectified and constructed as passive. Instead of positioning the interview subject as a “vessel of answers” (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 7) whose only purpose is to provide informative answers to the interviewer when approached with questions, the active interview approach emphasizes the interaction as significant. Aside from the narratives' content, the interaction taking place between the interviewer and the interviewee has analytic potential in itself. The widened scope for agency that the active strategy can grant the respondent is argued to make narratives richer and acknowledges the respondent's identity work in interaction during the interview situation as well as through the reconstructive narratives of significant events (Alasuutari, 1995; Fernqvist, 2010; Widdicombe, 1998).

Implicating the interviewer deeply in the production of participant responses suggests the need to consider an alternative conceptualization of the interviewer's role. Here, the researcher activates narrative production: whilst the conventional approach attempts to remove all but the most neutral, impersonal stimuli, the consciously active interviewer “intentionally, concertedly provokes responses by indicating—even suggesting—narrative positions, resources, orientations, and precedents for the respondent to engage in addressing the research questions under consideration” (Holstein & Gulbrium, 1995, p.39). This should not be taken to imply that the interviewer should tell respondents what to say, but instead suggests the need to offer pertinent ways of conceptualizing issues and making connections in the direction and harnessing of the respondent's constructive storytelling to the research task at hand thereby implicating the role of the researcher in the creation of meaning as well as identity : “interviewers are deeply and unavoidably implicated in creating meanings that ostensibly reside within respondents.....meaning is not merely elicited by apt questioning...it is actively and communicatively assembled in the interview encounter” (Holstein & Gubrium,1997, p.114).

Active interviewing is, then, not confined to asking questions and recording answers. Like other instances of ordinary conversation, trouble-free exchanges rely on mutual attentiveness, monitoring, and responsiveness (Sacks et al., 1974). Rather than tightly restricting interviewer participation as traditional convention dictates, active interviews “engage the respondent, working interactionally to establish the discursive bases from which the respondent can articulate his or her relevant experiences” (Holstein & Gulbriem, 1995, p.47). The give-and-take associated with this, whilst anathema to standard approaches, allows the interviewer to not only “keep the conversation going,” but provide the respondent with a measure of narrative guidance that maintains the necessary research focus (ibid).

Whilst conventional interviewing practice would focus on the ways in which interviewers contaminate the data that ostensibly resides within their subjects' repositories of knowledge, the active approach, by rejecting the model of the passive vessel of answers, conceives interviews as “ineluctably collaborative” (ibid, p.49) recognising the ways in which interviewers shaped the conversation without rejecting the final products as somehow tainted. In making a concerted effort to collect actively assembled interpretations of experience that address particular research agendas, the active interviewer may suggest general ways of orienting to the narrative task at hand, inviting narrative associations between mundane and momentous occasions to capture a more or less continuous, if tangled, narrative flow. The aim is “not to provide standardized, neutral catalysts for the respondents' stories but to guide and constrain the conversation so as to produce narratives that were appropriate to their project without dictating how the respondents' lived experience might be portrayed” (p.50). Although active interviewers contribute to storytelling, the stories told “are no less authentic, no less reflective of subjects' “actual” experience than they would have been if the respondents had been incited by ostensibly more neutral questions and probes” (ibid). The aim of the interviewers' participation is to keep the respondents' participation “on narrative course,” by asking them to interrogate their own experiences in particular ways and challenging them to produce a coherent narrative out of a designated, limited stock of mutually relevant resources. The result is the respondent's “artful but culturally grounded construction, assembled, in practice, out of the interpretive materials and orientations at hand” emphasising that, as with all interview data, the lived experience of, in this case, organisational politics, “does not simply await discovery and articulation, but is constituted within the interactional context of the interview” (p.51).

There are several points that can be made in support of this adoption of an active interviewing approach as an innovative and useful design feature of the overall study. The first relates to the sensitive and controversial nature of the phenomenon under investigation

and the danger of “press release” (Wiersma, 1988) narratives from respondents. As has been discussed in 5.2.3 above, this study makes the basic assumption that all leaders in organisational life have, de facto, to operate in a political environment given the ubiquity of political dynamics and behaviour in a modern organisational context (see also the arguments laid out in 2.4 above). Alongside this unavoidable exposure to political situations and dynamics, however, sits the disconcerting possibility of negative and reputationally damaging attribution, given also how stigmatised both the construct and those engaging actively in its manifestation have become in the eyes of organisational members (Miller et al, 2008; Chang et al, 2009; Bedi and Schat, 2013 - see also 2.3 above). This combination serves to render the discussion of personal involvement in political activity as highly sensitive, an aspect underscored by the fact that classical qualitative studies of individual perceptions (Gandz and Murray, 1980; Madison et al, 1980) deliberately asked respondents to report not on their own involvement but on the behaviour of others they would term as political given that “only rarely will protagonists in political events reveal their innermost thoughts to unknown researchers” (Gandz and Murray, 1980, p.252). Given such dynamics and sensitivity, the danger, therefore, is one of being presented with superficial narratives, particularly from individuals who may have one eye on Cooley’s “mirror” (1902, see 3.2 above and 5.2.5 below) and who, as experienced leaders, one could argue, are more likely to be well rehearsed in self-presentation. Wiersma’s study (of women changing careers) demonstrates how “the necessity of interpreting initial accounts as symbolic communication alerts researchers relying on self-report statements to the pitfalls of taking such statements at face value” (1988, p.205). She describes how as she listened to subjects’ initial stories, “they seemed empty, stereotyped, and implausible. Their similarities were uncanny. These women first announced uniformly that this was the best thing that had ever happened to themby some unspecified mechanism that it was clearly taboo for me to ask about, they claimed they had discovered either a “true self or even a “new self which resulted in their present euphoric state.....In more cases than not, I felt as if I had been handed a verbal flyer describing the average “returning woman “.....and began to experience these initial accounts as “press releases “ (p.209-210). Showing how these accounts concealed connections between current behaviour and personal history and prevented appropriate reference to personal experience, she demonstrates how —far from being experimental error or “wrong answers”— they were “actually telling the truth about something when properly interpreted, and how changing the contexts of meaning during the interview process allowed the initially empty press releases to fill with meaning” (p.206). Given the slippery nature of organisational politics and the risks associated with admitting personal engagement therein, the potential for this study to encounter similar stereotypical platitudes is hard to ignore. Against this backdrop, the active interview with its focus on interaction and

“ineluctable collaboration” (Holstein & Gulbriun, 1995, p.49) allows the researcher, not to reject or deny, but to probe, explore and replay narratives, drawing attention to how they correspond or contradict previous assertions and allowing any such apparent contradictions to be in themselves spurs to new contexts of meaning. In other words, to really get under the skin of the way in which highly successful and professional executives interpret their own personal participation in such an ambiguous, slippery and ethically controversial arena, then the interviews need to be challenging, two way explorations, one professional to another, in which superficial soundbites can be excavated and contradictions highlighted and replayed in order to get past the stereotypical emptiness that Wiersma encountered (1988, p.205). As well as being up front about embracing this unconventional aspect, it’s use also necessitates the need for a constant process of reflexivity – an essential feature of qualitative research which renders it transparent and open to the reader to assess its credibility (Alvesson, 2003) and which will, therefore, be addressed in more detail in Section 5.3.4 below.

From a sensemaking perspective the adoption of an active interviewing approach is helpful on two counts. Firstly, a challenging exploration of experience is more likely to act as a trigger for sensemaking activity than conventional interviews. Section 3.1 above highlights the importance of what Weick labels as the “disruptive ambiguity” (Weick et al, 2005, p.413) which forces retrospective processing to restore order (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015). Individuals “experience events that may be discrepant from predictions” which “trigger a need for explanation, or post-diction, and, correspondingly, for a process through which interpretations of discrepancies are developed” (Louis, 1980, p. 241). The role of discrepant events or surprises as some form of trigger is an important characteristic of sensemaking and suggests that sensemaking is partially under the control of expectations (Maitlis, 2005). Whenever an expectation is contradicted by events, some kind of ongoing activity is thereby interrupted and to understand sensemaking is also, thus, to understand how people cope with interruptions (Weick, 1995, 2001). The conventional interviewing approach with its assumption of the respondent as a passive “vessel of answers” (Holstein and Gulbriun, 1995, p.7) and its preference for static questions and answers over interaction and co-construction risks undermining a sensemaking based study by rendering the activation of sensemaking triggers as less likely. If the polished “press release” (Wiersma, 1988) narratives of leaders, especially in such a sensitive arena as organisational politics, are simply recorded at face value then the richness of sensemaking activity and identity work may be lost.

Secondly, the notion of an active exploration of individual sensemaking taps into an underdeveloped aspect of Weick’s original doctrine, namely that which sees “arguing as a

crucial source of sensemaking” (1995, p.145). Weick’s position on the centrality of arguing in sensemaking is grounded in the connection between an individual meaning of the word argument (any piece of reasoned discourse) and a social one (a dispute between people rather than a chain of reasoning) (Billig, 1989, pp44-45). Individual reasoning is “embedded in social controversy and the unfolding is what we mean by arguing as a vehicle for sensemaking” (Weick, 1995, p.137). Building on this, Weick cites Brockriede’s argument: non-argument spectrum (1974) as a way of showing how “of more help for sensemaking are people who provide explanations rather than appreciations, descriptions or classifications” (Weick, 1995, p.139). Explanations create sense by connecting concrete experience and more general concepts and “in the process of developing and criticising explanation, people often discover new explanations, which is why argument can produce adaptive sensemaking” (Brockriede, 1974, p.174). Developing this, Brockriede argues that “when a person advances an explanation that qualifies as an argument, the listener can confront” and that “the product of the process of confrontation by argument and counter argument is a more dependable understanding” (ibid).

A final argument in favour of embracing the co-construction of interview narratives in the way that the active approach dictates, is the way in which it creates ontological alignment and methodological fit with the study as a whole. The interpretivist perspective that the active interview approach takes (Silverman, 2004) on both interviewing process and product aligns with the stance taken here on, inter alia, the lived experience of organisational politics, the nature of both identity and identity work, the plausibility rather than accuracy of sensemaking account production and the dialogic / performative nature of elite actor narratives. Similarly, as will be argued in 5.2.5 below, the active interviewing approach also aligns with the combination of thematic and dialogic forms of narrative analysis adopted to interrogate leader sensemaking and its associated identity work. Rather than acting as a limitation to the credibility of the data and its analysis, as interviewing convention would dictate, it “highlights rich and multi layered insights through its close attention to the relationship between narrator, audience and context” and provides a powerful dimension to the analysis of narratives by “showing their inherently interactive and collaborative nature and by permitting an examination of the different voices through which any single narrative is constructed” (Maitlis, 2012, p.10-11).

5.2.5. A blended thematic and dialogic narrative approach to the analysis of active interview data.

Turning from data collection to analysis, whilst Section 5.4 below will map out in some detail the procedural steps involved in how the data gathered in this project was prepared, managed and analysed, it is important first from a methodological perspective to reiterate the centrality of narratives to this research and set out how, therefore, taking a narrative approach to data analysis aligns clearly with both the research questions and the ontological assumptions that underpins them. In other words, this section sets out the strategic extension of “methodological fit” (Edmondson and McManus, 2007) to the analysis as well as the collection of data.

Narrative analysis refers to a family of methods for interpreting texts (oral, written, visual) that have in common a storied form (Riessman, 2008). The narrative scholar is interested in how a speaker assembles and sequences events and uses language to communicate meaning and make particular points to an audience (Maitlis, 2012). Narrative analysts interrogate intention and language – how and why incidents are storied, not simply the content to which language refers: for whom was this story constructed and for what purpose? Why is the succession of events configured in that way? What does the story accomplish? (Riessman, 2008, p.11).

The reliance by narrative study on extended accounts that are preserved and treated analytically as units, rather than fragmented into thematic categories as is customary in other forms of qualitative analysis, such as grounded theory (Cassell and Symon, 2004), is particularly relevant given the interest here in the “end to end” sensemaking process. Similarly, the approach to interrogating cases rather than population-based samples also fits with the general qualitative design of the research – the aim being more “generalisation to theoretical propositions” (Radley & Chamberlain, 2001, p.324) rather than the statistical approach of generalising from a sample to a whole population.

The salience of narratives in examining sensemaking and understanding identity has already been established in sections 3.3 and 4.2 of the earlier literature review and need not, therefore, be repeated here. With this argument made, this section sets out the rationale behind the selection of a combination of two specific types of narrative analysis (Thematic and Dialogic) to interrogate the data (the specific steps and templates deployed in executing this approach will be mapped out in more detail in 5.4 below). This is important because,

whilst narrative analysis is the central analytic task of narrative inquiry, it comes in several forms and, as in all “families”, there is conflict and disagreement among those holding different perspectives (Riessman, 2008, p11). Having examined a variety of different approaches and typologies (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber, 1998; Boje, 2001; Czarniawska, 2004), a decision was made to draw upon Maitlis’ (2012) analysis of Riessman’s (1993, 2008) classic texts in selecting a thematic / dialogic combination. Before setting out the justification for this, it is appropriate to highlight that explicit in this is the recognition that an entirely inductive approach, such as might be adopted in an area where theory is sparse, was not appropriate for this study, informed as it is by the considerable body of sensemaking research. Neither, however, was an analysis strategy based entirely in a deductive logic as might be adopted in a positivist / quantitative study. Rather, the strategy chosen takes a “reductive” approach, that is, an initial categorization scheme derived from theory which is then adjusted and modified in iterative engagement with, in this case, a blend of thematic and dialogic narrative analysis (Van de Ven and Poole, 2002).

Thematic analysis is probably the most common kind of narrative analysis, exploring the content of a story and focusing on what is said rather than the way it is said (Maitlis, 2012). The aim of a thematic analysis is to identify key themes within a narrative, or, if working with a set of narratives, to identify themes that are common to all stories within the set. This approach can be used with diverse kinds of narrative data, including stories gathered in research interviews, shared between two individuals in meetings, or captured in documents. Thematic analysis is an especially valuable approach to understanding the content conveyed in a narrative, and particularly to highlight the key content elements that give the narrative its power. Thematic analyses are often used to explore core dimensions around which meanings are constructed, for example, answering questions such as, “How do members construct their organizational identity?” can be either theory-led or more inductively derived. Dialogic narrative analysis adds to a thematic approach by exploring how narratives are co-constructed between teller and listener (Maitlis, 2012). Attention is paid not only to the dialogic relationship between narrator and audience, but also to the social, historical, and cultural context in which the exchange takes place. This means that a dialogic narrative analysis, and therefore the transcripts on which it is based, should capture the roles of both narrator and researcher, allowing an exploration of how stories are produced in social interaction. When this exchange is understood as a performance, in which one party involves and persuades another, the analysis is often conducted through a dramaturgical lens (Riessman, 2008). This enables insight into how identities and other narrative accomplishments are produced through certain actors, and in particular settings, performed with and for an audience. Given the open and deliberate adoption of an active interview

approach (see 5.2.3. above), reflecting this in the approach to data analysis as well as collection strengthens overall methodological alignment.

The justification for blending both thematic and dialogical narrative method is fourfold. Firstly, the primary interest here is sensemaking content and process rather than language, as would be more typical in structural methods of narrative analysis. That is to say that the unit of analysis is the sensemaker themselves rather than the language they utilise. The core purpose is to understand the way in which managers account for their involvement in political activity and the nature, content and consistency of the narratives used in such sensemaking are, therefore, more relevant than how language is used to make the narrative more convincing and persuasive. Additionally, the story's internal organisation (another feature of a more structurally focussed analysis) is of less relevance than the selection of its content and the purpose(s) it serves. Secondly, to restrict the analysis to purely a thematic nature would deny the active role embraced in the co-construction of the narratives offered. By consciously deciding to explore, probe and challenge participant accounts of their own political activity, this reinforces the notion of "arguing as a crucial source of sensemaking" (Weick, 1995, p.145) and reminds us that "those who forget that sensemaking is, therefore, a social process miss a constant substrate that shapes interpretation and interpreting" (Weick, 1995, p.39). Sensemaking, therefore, "is never solitary: even monologues and one-way communications presume an audience" (ibid p,40). In asking individuals to narrate and account for their participation in such a sensitive and controversial aspect of organisational life as organisational politics, this study embraces the fact that what participants chose to share was in part influenced by who they were sharing it with and not to do so would, therefore, render any study incomplete. Thirdly, adopting a dialogical element to the data analysis is consistent with the dialogic stance on identity articulated in Section 4.2 above and reinforces the importance of the "audience" in issues of identity construction, grounded as it is in the work of Bakhtin (1973:43) who saw individuals as existing through their relations with others and, as such, the stories and words that people use become important. Form and meaning, therefore, "emerge between people in social and historical peculiarity" (Riessman, 2008; p.107). Finally, a dialogical approach "pushes the boundaries of what is and is not included in narrative analysis" (Riessman (2008, p.105) and adds " a powerful dimension to the analysis of narratives, providing insight into the oft-hidden struggles for control that permeate this negotiated enterprise, and revealing how narrative authority is asserted and relinquished between participant and researcher" (Maitlis, 2012, p.11) thereby augmenting the originality of the study and, in turn, the contribution it makes to extant theory and research.

A final point that is relevant to the development of the analysis strategy is to reiterate the distinction, made previously in 3.3 above, between “narratives” and “stories”. Although it is common in the organizational literature on narrative to use these terms interchangeably (Hardy & Maguire, 2010; Riessman, 2008; Sonenshein, 2010; Maitlis, 2012), this research follows Boje (2001, 2008) in making a specific differentiation, namely that the sensemaking of political experience recounted by interviewees is enlivened by discrete *stories* that branch off from the *main narrative*, which the self creatively integrates into a unity (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010). This distinction is important because, as the analysis of the data will later reveal, one feature of the sensemaking approach deployed by participants was the way in which individual “micro” stories of political experience were used to build into an overall “macro” narrative which, in turn, was used to resolve any ambiguity or contradiction emerging from their accounts.

Having outlined the ontological assumptions and strategic choices in respect of method and analysis, the next section explains in detail the approach taken to all aspects of data collection.

5.3 Data Collection.

Having established the rationale underpinning an interpretivist-qualitative research strategy using active interviews and a blended narrative analysis, this section details all aspects of the data collection process, namely the selection of participants, development of the interview guide, conducting the interviews, reflexivity, ethical considerations and a discussion of research credibility. Given the detailed description and justification of how data collection processes were executed, this section moves to the first person in its presentation.

5.3.1. Research Participants / Context

The case has made in 2.4 above that the structural and contextual factors driving the ubiquity of political behaviour in organisations combine to imply that those in leadership roles will, de facto, be experiencing organisational politics in one form or another and it was important, therefore, that the interview sample was made up of individuals occupying such leadership status (see criteria below).

Methodological choices, such as selecting interview participants, are shaped by inevitable contextual influences such as negotiated objective, layered permissions and stakeholder

demands and it is important, from a research competence and credibility perspective, to give a coherent account of these influences, rather than treating them as problems to be overcome (Buchanan and Bryman, 2009). This is particularly relevant here given the sensitivity of the phenomenon under investigation, with some researchers going as far as deliberately asking respondents to report not on their own involvement but on the behaviour of others they would term as political given that “only rarely will protagonists in political events reveal their innermost thoughts to unknown researchers” (Gandz and Murray, 1980, p.252). Whilst a more contemporary view is that such assumptions are “unduly cautious” (Buchanan, 2016, p.344), I felt it important ethically and conceptually to be transparent about the nature and aims of the project and was always up front and open with participants that the interviews were explicitly designed to explore their personal experience of organisational politics (see 5.3.3 below). A further contextual challenge was potentially evident in interviewing individuals who had some form of existing relationship with me, either as a consulting client, ex colleague or as a member of my extended professional network. I felt that this might be problematic given the sensitivity involved with asking individuals to account for their political behaviour and motives and, in order to accommodate this, sought only to engage with participants from a wide range of organisations who were previously unknown to me in any personal or professional capacity. In other words, selection of participants was purposive (Silverman, 2006), using in this case the snowball or chain method which involves identifying cases of interest from people who know people and cases that are “information-rich” and, therefore, good examples for study or interview subjects (Patton, 1990). This method of selecting participants enabled me, therefore, to tap into diverse perspectives regarding the phenomenon of interest without their being any contaminating conflict of interest or relationship considerations which might put an additional impediment to how individuals would handle the discussions. This is not to deny the active influence that any research interviewer has on the sensemaking process – Section 5.2.4 and 5.2.5 above has set out how the adoption of an active interview approach and a dialogic/performative blend of narrative analysis, both of which place the interviewer as an integral part of the sensemaking / narrative construction process, were deliberate design choices - but it was helpful in screening out what might otherwise have been a problematic influence.

The criteria established for leader status was individuals who had experience of working at Board level or one level below (typically described as Directors or Senior Executives) in more than one organisation. In terms of organisational size or scale, I was not prescriptive but sought individuals who had leadership experience in organisations large enough to have several layers of management and, therefore, some form of matrix structure to work through, rather than, for example, small company founder/owners, given that the structural ambiguity

which such context provides has been typically identified as an antecedent of political behaviour (Zanzi and O'Neill, 2001; Cacciattolo, 2014 and others – see 2.4 above). No specific criteria were set for age, organisational sector or functional discipline so whilst the sample constructed would, therefore, contain individuals from different organisational contexts, common to all would be the challenge of making sense of the lived experience of organisational politics whilst at the same time maintaining a workable and positive identity. A summary of these details is set out in Table 5.1 below.

Table 5.1: Bio details of research participants.

Interviewee number	Name	Role / Job Title	Level/ Seniority	Sector	Age Group	No of different Orgs
1	Bill	HR Director	Senior Executive	Financial Services	40 – 44	2
2	Jack	HR Director	Senior Executive	Financial Services	40 – 44	2
3	Brian	Managing Director	Executive	Financial Services	55 – 59	5
4	Roy	Chief Development Officer	Executive	Business / Contract Services	45-49	8
5	Gary	Director of Underwriting	Executive	Financial Services	55-59	3
6	Tom	Sales & Operations Director	Executive	Financial Services	55-59	2
7	Matthew	Director, Civil Service	Executive	Central Government	50-54	4
8	David	Director of Operations	Executive	Higher Education	45-49	3
9	John	Director, Prof Services	Executive	Local Government	40-44	7
10	Alex	Director of People Development,	Executive	Central Government	60+	5
11	Derek	Public Services Director	Executive	Events Management	50 – 54	9
12	Chris	Director of Strategy	Executive	Logistics	45 – 49	2
13	Richard	Buying Director	Board	Retail	50 – 54	2
14	Mark	CEO & Entrepreneur	Board	Financial Services	40 – 45	3
15	Louise	Director, Government Department.	Executive	Civil Service / Central Govt.	50 – 54	4
16	Mary	Chief Customer Officer	Executive	Financial Services	35 - 39	5
17	Emma	Group Director of Organisational Effectiveness	Executive	Energy	40 – 44	2
18	Lucy	Director, Global Client Management	Executive	Financial Services	45 – 49	5
19	Grace	Account Management Director	Executive	Financial Services	30 - 34	2
20	Jean	Programme Director	Executive	Food	55 – 59	4
21	Holly	Group HR Director	Executive	Strategic advisory organisation	45 – 49	2
22	Tina	Global Academy Director	Executive	Manufacturing	35 - 39	6
23	Ruth	Business Quality Director	Executive	Professional Services	40 – 44	3
24	Dawn	Vice President	Executive	Pharmaceuticals	45-49	4
25	Jane	Finance Director	Executive	Financial Services	35 – 39	3
26	Diane	HR Director	Executive	Professional Services	45 – 49	4
27	Amy	Consultant Director	Executive	Recruitment	35 – 39	4
28	Laura	Head of Equality & Diversity	Executive	Trade Union	55 – 59	2

Recruiting this sample group involved contacting individuals within my own professional network, describing the nature of my research and asking if they knew any individuals, unknown to me but fulfilling the criteria set out above who would be prepared to share their personal experience of organisational politics. Contact details of potential participants were provided once they had indicated a willingness to take part to their introducer and I then made contact direct to set up the interview (see 5.3.3 Piloting & Conducting the Interviews below). Everyone with whom I was put in touch agreed to meet for the interview. Whilst it is possible that I was put in touch with people who were somehow all like-minded on the subject, this is unlikely given the wide spread of organisational sectors from which the sample was constructed and the different narratives and sensemaking strategies revealed in the analysis (see Chapter 6 below) counter any notion that the snowball sampling method had any confounding implications for the research findings.

Given the qualitative nature of the study, the size and nature of the sample was not meant to enable statistical or numerical generalization (see 5.3.4 below), but rather theoretical generalization (Flick, 2005). Overall, I interviewed 28 leaders, (equal gender split) until I considered that saturation was reached, namely the point where anything new that might have been discovered by further interviewing would not have added anything to the overall data given the familiarity of the themes that had already emerged (Cassell, 2008). Research “exploring interview participant numbers is limited” (Saunders and Townsend, 2016, p.3) and within such sparse literature on interviews and participant selection/sampling, guidance in the form of ‘expert voices’ rarely states a precise number of participants (Baker and Edwards, 2012, p. 6). Much of this is summarized by Saunders (2012), who notes a range of four to 12 participants as likely to be sufficient when chosen from populations considered homogeneous, and 12–30 participants when chosen from populations considered heterogeneous, suggesting the sample here as appropriate for the study. In addition, this research conforms with the recommendations set out by Saunders and Townsend (2016, p. 13-14) by reporting participant numbers precisely alongside their characteristics and the population from which chosen, explaining explicitly how the participants chosen enabled the research purpose to be met and justifying the number of research participants through citing relevant expert opinion.

5.3.2 Developing the interview guide.

Section 5.2.3 and 5.2.4 above set out the case for a relatively loose interview structure to allow for an active approach to the excavation of participant involvement in political activity. This informality notwithstanding, it was important to at least have a broad framework which

would demonstrate a clear alignment between the interview protocol and my research questions (Kvale, 1996). The interview protocol in Table 5.2 below sets out the main questions developed to serve as a guide to my interaction with participants, as well as examples of probing questions employed.

Table 5.2: Interview protocol

Interview Protocol.

- **Explanation of research, gaining consent etc.**
- **Overview of Interviewee role & career history.**
- **DEFINING OP.**
 - What do you think about when I use the term “Organisational Politics?” What is your view regarding what it is we are talking about here?
 - How would you describe your attitude towards it?
 - To what extent do you see OP as a (i) healthy, (ii) necessary, (iii) functional & (iv)justifiable part of organisational life? (Explore each)
- **AWARENESS & INITIAL EXPERIENCE OF OP**
 - At what stage of your career did you start to become aware of this aspect of organisational life?
 - What was it that you started to take notice of? What was your reaction to this? (Explore specific incidents / examples).
 - Since this time, how have your perceptions of and attitudes towards OP evolved? What do you put any changes down to?
- **PERSONAL INVOLVEMENT**
 - How would you describe your own involvement in organisational politics? Can you relate any examples where you have been involved in a political situation or have acted in a way that you would describe as political? How do you account for your involvement in the way you describe?
 - To what extent are you conscious of any dilemmas presented by your involvement in political situations / activity? (Explore specific examples). What difficulties did such dilemmas present? How do you reconcile or overcome any such issues?
- **IMPACT & IDENTITY**
 - How would you assess the cumulative impact of your experiences of organisational politics?
 - What impact has it had on how you see yourself within your leadership role?
 - How would you describe the experience of taking part in this interview?
 - What are you taking away by way of thoughts and observations given the nature of the discussion and the ground covered?

These core questions were intended to facilitate the interaction through four distinct phases. First, questions about personal understanding of organizational politics were aimed at collecting initial meanings and understandings surrounding the term and also tapping into what participants brought to the discussion by way of a definition of the phenomenon. Second, questions exploring early experiences of politics were intended to unpack recollections of when participants first became aware of this aspect of organisational life and the impact it had on them. Such questions were aimed at helping participants to move away from an abstract or theoretical discussion about the nature of organisational politics and into the arena of their own lived experience. Third, questions exploring participants' past and present engagement in organisational politics were aimed at triggering both the creation and interpretation of the stories and narratives that participants used to account for their involvement or withdrawal. These questions, and the follow up probes they prompted, were intended to account for the bulk of the interaction, aimed as they were at not just triggering sensemaking activity but also enabling the deployment of sensemaking processes and mechanisms within stories told in an effort to resolve any surprise or contradiction encountered. In particular, I wanted this stage of the active interview to explore whether participants felt that their participation in political activity presented them with any dilemmas and, if so, how they reconciled them. Finally, questions regarding the cumulative impact of political activity were directed at enabling participants to demonstrate the extent to which they had resolved the dilemmas unearthed during the interview and how they reconciled this aspect of their role with their own self-concept`.

5.3.3 Piloting & Conducting the Interviews.

Having created an initial draft of the interview protocol, two pilot interviews were undertaken with members of my own professional network who would not form part of the research sample but who nevertheless met the criteria of being in leadership roles and willing to share with me perceptions of their personal political experience. A close reading and initial analysis of each of these two interviews before continuing any further was important to ensure that the structure was eliciting material which connected with the questions that the research was intended to address (Roulston, 2010). In the course of such close reading, "omissions and deficits inevitably emerged and unnecessary data also became evident" (Sampson, 2004, p.397) permitting me to judge the questions "on the pragmatic grounds of whether they are useful, fitting and generative of further inquiry" (Schwandt, 1994, p.130). In my own case, this manifested itself in a tendency to get drawn into excessively lengthy and theoretical exchanges about the abstract definition of organisational politics at the expense of exploring personal experience which was much more central to the core focus on sensemaking and

the implications for leader identity. From the pilot respondents' data, therefore, the interview schedule was adapted to maximise the opportunity for both the narration and then subsequent exploration of participants' personal experiences of political activity. In practice, this meant simply reducing the number of follow up questions deployed to explore the definitional issues. Additional amendments were made to ensure that one or two ancillary but relevant issues which emerged from the pilot interviews could also be captured when the study started in earnest. Overall, though, I was satisfied that the fundamental shape of the interview protocol outlined in Table 5.2 above was fit for purpose and the pilot interviews were successful in gathering data relevant to the sensemaking process and the use of stories and narratives within this.

On the back of this successful pilot, the 28 interviews were conducted using the snowball sampling method detailed above. Once individuals indicated a willingness to take part and provided their contact details, an invitation letter was sent (Appendix i) spelling out the nature of the project, the interview process and ethical guidelines. Over and above the 28, one other interview was arranged but not completed on the date set as the participant in question was uncomfortable when they realised that the interview would be recorded, notwithstanding the fact that this was made clear in the invitation letter. On this occasion I chose to terminate the interview rather than take extensive notes which could be incorporated later into the overall analysis on the basis that no notes, however extensive, could accurately capture the active discussion and co-construction of participant narratives and be regarded, therefore, as credible research data (Cassell and Symon, 2006). On the back of this incident, however, I made a point of emailing the consent form ahead of subsequent interviews when dates were agreed so that this aspect was explicitly understood before any discussion took place. This interview aside, participants were generally very open and expressive throughout the discussion and my experience supported Buchanan's view that "most people welcome the opportunity to discuss their experience, even with a stranger, safe in the knowledge that what they say will remain anonymous" (Buchanan, 2016, p.345).

The duration of each interview, conducted either at the interviewee's place of work or in a private room at Birkbeck College, was typically 60 minutes or just under. In each case, the consent form was shared, read and signed before the interview commenced along with the completion of a simple template capturing biographical details such as job title, seniority level, industry sector and age category. As laid out in 5.2.4 above, the interviews were of an active nature. Throughout the discussion, therefore, the interview protocol acted as a guide rather than a prescriptive flowchart to be followed slavishly. Each question typically had a set of probes or prompts depending upon the participant's response. The question sequence

was applied flexibly since my aim was to understand the way in which each individual made sense of their experience rather than to find commonality (Cassell and Symon, 2004).

This approach afforded the opportunity to pursue potentially interesting lines of sensemaking enquiry that arose as a result of the stories being told. This often took the form of encouraging participants to consider how others may have interpreted their activity in the stories being told, to reconcile seemingly contradictory positions at different points of the discussion and to reflect upon whether the stories they told presented them with any dilemmas or discomfort. As the data analysis will show (See Chapter 6 later), participants would often take contradictory positions on the scale and nature of their involvement in political activity together with the meaning they derived therefrom in terms of their leader identity. To allow the sensemaking process to unfold, it was important for any such contradiction to be highlighted, replayed and explored. This approach sometimes introduced an element of tension into the discussion which manifested itself in long pauses, sighs, folded arms or other closed body language posture, so it was important that my challenge was always offered sensitively. This was achieved using empathetic listening techniques such as summarising and paraphrasing, rather than through direct disagreement, so that the participant did not become defensive or argumentative through a feeling of being judged in some way (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). In the early interviews, I casually asked participants once the recording had been terminated for their reflections about the nature of the interview itself and the questions I had been asking. Such were the richness of the insights offered in response to this question, I soon made a point of incorporating this question into the main body of the interview so that they could be captured and examined as part of the overall analysis.

Following each interview, I used a research diary to make notes of my impressions, feelings and reflections on not just the interview content and process but also the nature of my questioning and contribution to the discussion. This process supported both my own reflexivity (see 5.3.4 below) and also the development of ideas and further lines of inquiry.

5.3.4. Reflexive Considerations in relation to issues of research credibility

Reflexivity has been increasingly recognized as a crucial strategy in the process of generating knowledge by means of qualitative research (Ahmed Dunya et al., 2011; Blaxter et al., 2006; D'Cruz et al., 2007; Gerstl-Pepin and Patrizon, 2009; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2002; Horsburgh, 2003; Koch and Harrington, 1998) and “there

is hardly any issue of a qualitative methods journal that does not include at least one article addressing issues pertaining to reflexivity” (Berger, 2013, p.220). It is commonly viewed as the process of a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of researcher’s positionality as well as active acknowledgement and explicit recognition that this position may affect the research process and outcome (Bradbury-Jones, 2007; Guillemin and Gillam, 2004; Pillow, 2003; Stronach et al., 2007). More specifically, it has been defined as “the introspective reflection and internal conversation [that] mediate[s] between the researcher’s personal and professional worlds or contribute[s] to the generation of knowledge” (Probst and Berenson, 2014, p. 813). This implies “the turning of the researcher lens back onto oneself to recognize and take responsibility for one’s own situatedness within the research and the effect that it may have on the setting and people being studied....(and) as such, the idea of reflexivity challenges the view of knowledge production as independent of the researcher producing it and of knowledge as objective” (Berger, 2013, p.220).

Reflexivity, then, is more than just thinking about thinking (Johnson & Duberly, 2003), it “refers to the recognition that the involvement of the researcher as an active participant in the research process shapes the nature of the process and the knowledge produced through it” (King,2004:20). The importance of the researcher reflecting on how they are involved in their research is a critical element of an interpretive approach. There is a need to acknowledge tensions between credibility and the personal engagement of the researcher (Harding, 2009): researchers who both reflect and articulate issues related to reflexivity will help the reader to understand their work and also counter any possibilities of bias (Wellington et al, 2005).

The need for reflexivity – always an issue, therefore, in research of an interpretive/qualitative orientation – takes on greater significance for my own research given the adoption, as outlined in 5.2.4 and 5.2.5 above, of an active interviewing approach and a blended form of narrative analysis which incorporates not just a thematic examination but takes a dialogic/performative stance too. Conducting active interviews (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995) explicitly embraces “interviewers’ and respondents’ constitutive contributions and consciously incorporates them into the production and analysis of interview data” (Maitlis, 2012, p.9). Analysing narratives through a dialogic/performance lens explores how narratives are co-constructed between teller and listener, pays attention to the dialogic relationship between narrator and audience and captures the roles of both narrator and researcher, allowing an exploration of how stories are produced in social interaction (Riessman, 2008).

Compared to more conventional perspectives on interviewing, this active approach could be seen as merely inviting unacceptable forms of bias into the information gathering process. As argued in 5.2.3 above, however, a broader view of interpretive practice, however, would see bias as “a meaningful concept only if the subject is seen to possess a preformed, purely informational commodity that the interview process might somehow taint” (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). As products of interpretive practice, interview responses are never preformed or pure and because interviewing is, therefore, unavoidably collaborative (Garfinkel, 1967) it is virtually impossible to free any interaction from those factors that could be seen as contaminants. Acknowledging the “heavy imprints on the accounts produced” (Alvesson, 2003) through reflexivity supports both their authenticity and their credibility. This stance aligns with van Manen’s (2011) approach to “bracketing” - the “holding at abeyance” of all presuppositions while engaging in the research process (Bendassolli, 2014, p. 164).

Against this backdrop of both the nature and importance of reflexivity as discussed in the literature, my personal reflexivity in relation to this research took several different forms. Firstly, as suggested in Hsuing (2008, p.214) I embraced the need for an “epistemological paradigm shift” and the creation of a “painstaking process in which the researcher makes a conscious and deliberate effort to interrogate the subjective self in relation to the research subject” or in other words to “turn the interpretive lens on myself” (Robinson and Kerr, 2015, p.787) in order to question my own motivations for engaging in the research and to reflect on how I impacted the research process. This also drew on Berger’s analysis (2013) regarding how the researcher’s position in relation to the population group and issues under study may impact the research process and its analytic stance and how the benefits, challenges, and strategies to address them vary according to whether the researcher is a part of and shares the experience of the participants. In every interview I undertook, I was very aware how my own experience of organisational politics over many years as a HR Director in a large corporate entity positioned me in the role of the ‘insider’ (Berger, 2013, p.222) and as such offered three potential advantages in studying the familiar: easier entrée, a head start in knowing about the topic and understanding nuanced reactions of participants (Padgett, 2008; Kacen and Chaitin, 2006). Not only did I have many years of first-hand experience of all of the behaviours, tactics and manoeuvres that are associated with organisational politics, my interest in studying the phenomenon was an enduring one with it having provided the subject for my Masters thesis many years previously. This allowed me to approach the study with some knowledge about the subject and to address certain topics more easily or even be aware that I should address them. Sharing the experience “diminished distance and enhanced my willingness and ability to go places that I otherwise would not” (Berger, 2013, p.223), which I felt to be very important given the sensitive nature

of the topic being discussed. Coming from this 'shard experience' position also enabled me to gain insights into implied content and to be more sensitized to certain dimensions of the data. I felt very familiar with many of the situations that participants described in their stories and felt I knew what to ask and how to ask it as well as how to understand the responses in a nuanced way which meant in turn that I was able to hear the unsaid, probe more efficiently, and unearth insights that others may have missed.

This inside position also, however, carries the risks of blurring boundaries, imposing own perceptions and projection of biases (Drake, 2010). While listening to the stories of participants, the risk of comparing them to my own experience was ever present and it meant that I had to make a constant and deliberate effort to maintain the separation between their experience and mine, to let them tell their stories rather than 'push' them in certain directions rather than insinuate and hear them through the lens of my own experience (Padgett, 2008). In addition to this, I also adopted three practical measures suggested by Berger (2013, p.230) for maintaining the necessary balance between my own experience and that of the participants; the use of a log, repeated review, and seeking peer consultation. I used the log in a three-part log fashion, documenting not only the transcription of what was said by participant but also what I felt it may mean (i.e. interpretation of the verbatim), and finally what I thought about it (i.e. which "button it pushed" in relation to my own experience). The repeated review entailed going back over the same interview at different intervals after the original analysis, enabling me to view the same material through a new lens and look afresh for any occasions where my own experience interfered with accurately understanding interviewee's account(s). Peer consultation took the form of challenging exchanges with my Supervisor, presenting at internal conferences and discussing with members of my own professional network (in a way that preserved confidentiality / anonymity). The nature of the study was one that generated a lot of interest amongst this peer group and I found being able to share and be challenged on my thoughts and observation extremely useful as a way of making sense of the data and shaping the emergent analysis.

As well as considering the implications of being "an insider" on the collection and analysis of data, I also examined the influence of other forms of "conceptual baggage", defined as the "interconnections between a researcher's intellectual assumptions; subject location(s) in relation to class, race, sexuality, gender, and so on; and beliefs or emotions, all of which combine to impact on the nature and outcome of a qualitative interview" (Hsuing, 2008, p.212; Kirby and McKenna, 1987). This consisted of reviewing the transcripts of interviews and paying particular attention to occasions where my own personal interest and research agenda affected the substantive direction and content of the interview and compromised my

ability to be an active and attentive listener. I looked especially at instances where respondents hadn't given expected answers. For example, respondents would occasionally talk about organisational politics that didn't fit any of the definitions in the literature or would recount stories of experience that didn't seem to me to be political in nature or would take a position on something that I found myself disagreeing with. Rather than closing down on any such instances, disagreeing or changing the subject, I worked on developing my ability to encourage respondents simply to elaborate, thereby making it easier to suspend any judgement about what I was hearing, whether respondents were concealing something or avoiding an uncomfortable truth and instead refocus on being an effective facilitator and allow the individual to define and interpret their experience in their own words.

I took this examination of the subjective self a stage further by acting on the suggestion of Hsuing (2008, p.221) and effectively interviewing myself about my own experiences of organisational politics by thinking about how I would answer the questions that I was asking. Thinking about my own experience of organisational politics took me back to a corporate career that was often a frustrating experience, dominated as it was by many of the negative manifestations of organisational politics. Some of the stories I would have offered would have been nearly twenty years old, yet I found myself surprised at how their recall still surfaced some strong emotions. I tried to imagine how I would have articulated those experiences to someone that I would have never met before and how comfortable I would have been talking what sort of impact they may have had on my own sense of self. These reflections reinforced just how challenging it can be to be interviewed in this way on such a sensitive subject and how important it is to not just actively listen but to *empathetically* listen too in order to give respondents the time and space to expand on their views. Rather than "going after the data" and getting impatient or frustrated when it didn't seem to be the "right" data, I worked on maintaining a neutral curiosity about what the respondent had to say. This helped me to see the interview not as a technical challenge but as a sensitive exploration of what for some may have been quite emotive or ambivalent experience. During interviews, participants often told very personal stories, revealing triumphs, some failures and powerful emotion and I experienced many of the interviews as quite intense interactions, often feeling moved by both what participants shared with me and how they did so.

The final aspect of my reflexive practice refers to the dialogue with my research Supervisor which came over time to occupy what Janzen (2016) refers to as the "third space". Janzen describes the emotional struggle and challenge involved in developing a thesis on a sensitive subject and how she grappled with "feeling at times that feels I cannot possibly do

a thesis of this nature and at other times that the passion burns brightly, and I feel compelled to carry onward” and how she strove to find “an intermediary place to solve the dilemmas I found myself wrestling with” (p. 1505). In my own case, the dialogue with my Supervisor was “the key that opens the door of the third space by offering a safe place and space to express the emotions that surface and enhance reflexivity” (p.1508). In essence, my supervisor became a “host” for me to navigate not only the research itself, but also reflexive processes (Hawkins & Edward, 2015, p. 35). Debriefing is well documented in the literature as a means to manage and prevent feelings of being overwhelmed during sensitive topic research (Hawkins & Edwards, 2015; Moncur, 2013; Nelson et al., 2013; Woodby et al., 2011). In particular, I found that this helped me to develop the less “authorative or elitist manner” and “more conversational understanding and style” argued for by Alvesson (1996b, see also Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000). Such an approach helped me to be “open for the possibility that everything is less stable and clear cut than it seems and is therefore open for discussion and reconsideration and that such reconsiderations are a major element in the development of ideas” (Alvesson, 1996b, p.475).

All this reflexive practice assisted me in addressing the issue of credibility that surrounds research of a qualitative and interpretive nature. That is to say, reflecting upon and articulating the issues of reflexivity as shown above, demonstrates “interpretive awareness” (Weber 2004: ix) and serves to strengthen a view that any associated findings can be considered to be credible (Patton, 2002). Validating a research process or an argument as credible essentially means showing that it is well founded and sound (Rudestan and Newton, 2007), something often problematic in qualitative research as subjective interpretation cannot be excluded from the research process. In attempting to establish the credibility of my research method, I strove to follow Symon and Cassell (2012) by seeking to demonstrate a good fit between the ‘constructed realities of respondents and the reconstructions attributed to them’ (Guba & Lincoln, 1989: p.237) rather than trying to find best fit between my fixed interpretation and any objective reality. Credibility is further related to the authenticity and plausibility of individual accounts (Miles and Huberman, 1994) and my aim in describing all the non-judgmental and empathetic facilitation and listening skills deployed throughout the interviews is to support such authenticity. I also followed Gray (2014) in further enhancing credibility by using precise quotes only from interviews, by maintaining a reflexive diary, and being careful to make only specific claims whilst also acknowledging context and alternative analyses. Finally, though the generalization of findings is not an aim of this study, Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest that researchers should pay attention to transferability – the likelihood that the patterns identified, and explanations proposed might apply in other settings. This was tackled by making sure that the sample constructed was,

whilst not statistically representative, diverse enough to elicit different and potentially conflicting views from participants and thus provide rich conceptual material.

In summary, whilst it is important to recognise the paradox inherent in reflexivity, namely that it is “used to produce an authoritative text, while relying on a set of assumptions that stress that there can be no such thing” (Alvesson, Hardy et al., 2008, p.489), the practices described here support both the credibility and authenticity of the study’s contribution by demonstrating my awareness of how my research agenda and assumptions, subject location, personal beliefs and emotions entered into the research and how I strove to capture the benefits of this whilst at the same time addressing the challenges presented. It is my contention that such reflexivity reinforces, rather than limits, the power of an active exploration of the lived experience of organisational politics and the dialogic/performance-based analysis of the narratives that this facilitated. By helping to provide “insight into the oft-hidden struggles for control that permeate this negotiated enterprise, revealing how narrative authority is asserted and relinquished between participant and researcher” (Maitlis, 2012, p.11), “new and significant layers of meaning” (Riessman, 2008, p.12) can be derived from how leaders notice, make sense of and move on from their experiences.

5.3.5. Ethical Considerations.

In this section some ethical and practical considerations in undertaking this study are detailed. Ethics is essentially about the rules and principles which shape moral conduct, values and decisions (Liefoghe, 2003) and the researcher has an absolute obligation to the respondent in respecting their rights, values, needs and desires (Cresswell, 1994). Within this context, broad frameworks from bodies such as the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC, 2010) and the British Psychological Society (BPS, 2009) are a valuable reference for ensuring that research is undertaken appropriately. The practice of research can include a number of ethical issues and dilemmas and the ones experienced in this study are now detailed below. These issues and dilemmas also cover those specifically related to the methodological choices involved in this study:

Informed consent

The ESRC ethics framework expresses the key consideration that participants should be advised about the objective of the research, how it will be undertaken and how the results

will be used. It is therefore important that any study ensures that the respondents are fully informed to this effect and comfortable that their comments would be non-attributable.

The invitation, project overview (see Appendix i) and formal consent form (see Appendix ii) which all participants signed, ensured that all these issues were covered prior to the interviews taking place. All participants confirmed that they understood that they could withdraw from the interview at any time. The participants were further advised that following the completion of this project, an executive summary could be made available to them if they wished to receive it. Participants were also advised that my role in this study was one of academic research and totally independent to any organisation, although it was pointed out in consequent discussion that it would aid my professional development as an OD consultant and Executive coach.

Confidentiality

Embedded within the ethical issue of informed consent is the issue of confidentiality and the respondents being made aware as to how the information that they imparted in the interview would be used and to whom it would become visible and in what ways. As participants were introduced to me from members of my professional network via the snowballing technique (see 5.3.1. above), it was essential in respecting ethical guidelines and my commitment to maintaining confidentiality that no feedback or dialogue other than a thank you courtesy was provided or entered into on the subject with the source of the introduction. In terms of data management, all interviews were coded by assigning numbers or fictitious names to each one and all other identifying information was changed to preserve the anonymity and confidentiality of participants.

Harm and risk

A third ethical consideration that was raised in undertaking this research related to harm and risk – again a key principle of the ESRC who affirm that there must be an avoidance of harm to research participants. Considerations here were twofold: the time that the executives had available to undertake the interviews – and that undertaking the interview did not impact on other things of importance that they needed to undertake – and the fact that the interviewees were extremely open in sharing some very personal experience or organisational politics, leading to concerns about my responsibility as an interviewer to ensure that they would be left in a ‘safe place’. Whilst it was often the case that participants would draw retrospectively

on political “war stories” that re-awakened some negative emotion felt at the time or found themselves having to confront their own contradictions as a result of the active interview style, this never extended to my becoming concerned about any participant becoming visibly angry or unduly distressed during the discussion. I followed the guidelines of King (2004) in ensuring that the interview finished on a positive note by asking the respondent their views on the interview process itself and, in responding to this, it was more typical for participants to reflect on the cathartic nature of the discussion and that being able to express and make sense of their prior experience to someone entirely independent of the situation had actually been a helpful, enjoyable even, opportunity, however positive or negative such experience had been.

Having outlined the choices made in respect of collecting the data, the next section will explain the steps that were taken to prepare, manage and then analyse the material in order to address the fundamental research questions at the heart of this project.

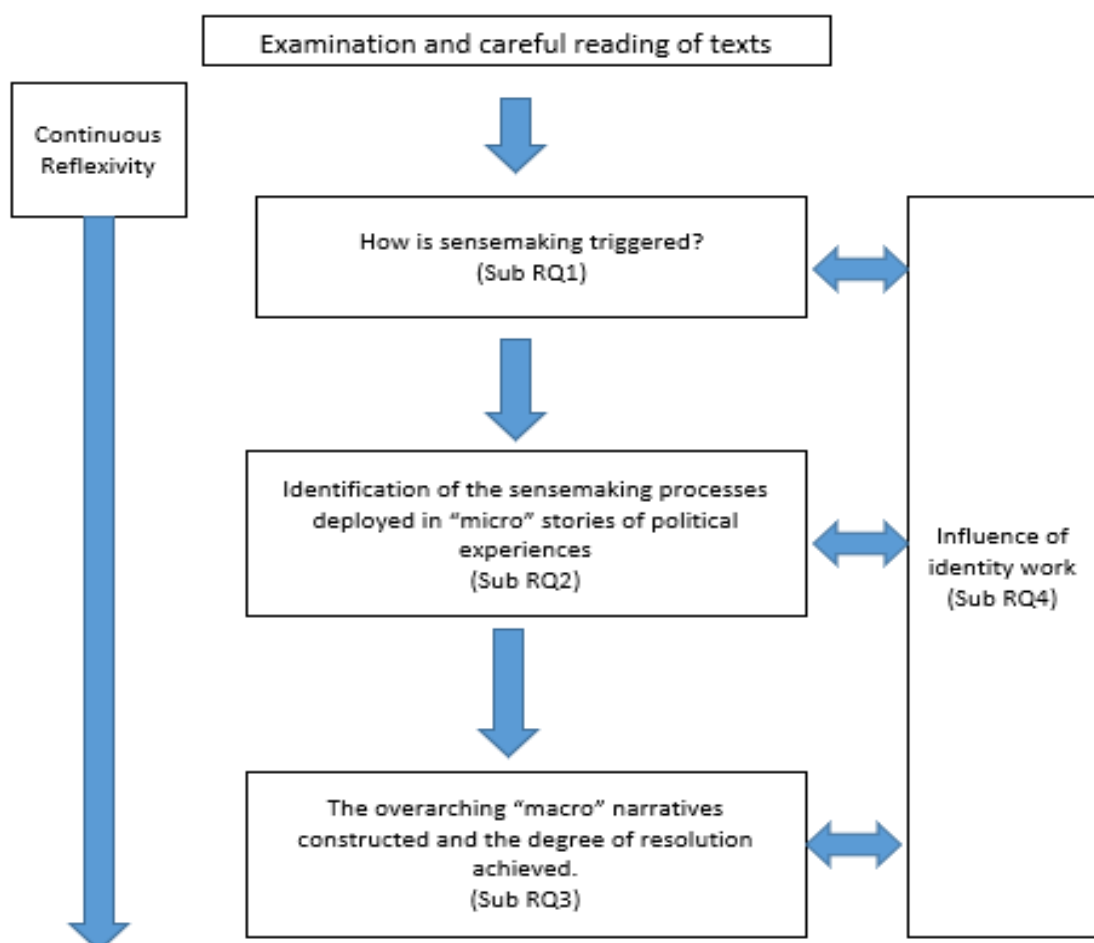
5.4 Data Preparation, Management & Analysis.

In section 5.2 above I laid out the rationale underpinning my choice of how a blend of thematic and dialogical narrative analyses best aligned with my research questions into the way in which leaders account for and make sense of their experiences of organisational politics. This section builds on this by mapping out and explaining step by step the process through which this analytical strategy was enacted. This process was created by drawing upon three significant contributions to the narrative field: Riessman’s (2008) authoritative text on the nature and conduct of Narrative Analysis, Maitlis’ (2012) contribution to Symon and Cassell’s qualitative research practice handbook and Maclean et al’s (2012) study of the storytelling and sensemaking of elite business careers. Riessman’s work was particularly helpful in its illustration of exemplar studies which adopted either thematic or dialogic narrative analyses, this given additional weight by the extent and reputation of her own work in the field of narrative inquiry; Maitlis’ description of her own analytic method and process was instructive in its focus upon patterns of identity construction and identity work common across individuals whilst Maclean et al’s study was influential through its systematic approach to identifying and categorising the sensemaking processes present in micro stories told by elite actors as well as the overall narratives present within their retrospective accounts (see 5.4.3. and 5.4.4. below).

By blending the methods and processes described in such exemplar studies, I was able to create four distinct analytical steps needed to address my research questions : a careful examination and repeated reading of the texts; the identification of sensemaking “triggers”, represented by opposing cognitions encountered in the interview; an analysis of the nature and frequency of sensemaking processes invoked by “micro” stories recounting political experience, including the extent to which these interacted with identity work (Alvesson, 1994), culminating in a final analysis of the overall “macro” narratives constructed to achieve a successful sensemaking outcome.

Whilst the depth and breadth of this analysis presents a potential contribution to the field, there is nevertheless some associated complexity to how it all fits together and addresses the research questions so, with this in mind, Table 5.3 below sets out the sequential analytic steps in process map form to aid understanding and provide a clear and coherent alignment with the research questions adopted by this thesis.

Table 5.3: How do leaders make sense of their personal involvement in organisational politics? (Central RQ): analytic process map and alignment with Sub RQ’s



5.4.1. Preparation, Examination and careful reading of the data.

All the interviews – 28 in total, with an equal gender split – were recorded and transcribed by a professional dictation/transcription service provider. To give an indication of the overall scale of the data, this amounted to just over 28 hours of interview material. The average length of the interviews was 51 minutes and the transcriptions for an interview of that length typically contained circa 7,500 – 8,000 words over 15 – 20 pages of transcription. From a data preparation perspective, when the audio files were returned by the transcription company, I listened to the interview again and edited the transcript accordingly. Though time consuming, this was a deliberate process aimed at consolidating my familiarity with the interview and providing a further opportunity to reflect on both content and process, noting down additional thoughts and ideas that occurred. Effectively, this meant that I had stayed very close to the transcription element without having to physically type every word spoken, meaning in turn that I was still able to exploit the advantage identified by Park and Zeanah (2005), namely that the attentive listening which transcribing involves means that researchers will think more about the interview – particularly in relation to silences, pauses and change of pace.

The further thoughts and insights that this process allowed were added as footnotes to my original reflections. These typically took the form of observations that I had missed at the time about the content of particular stories offered by participants or sometimes questions about what purpose might be being served by their selection and sharing. This preparation, editing and note taking put me in a position to devote much greater time and concentration to the narrative analysis proper (see 5.4.2., 5.4.3., and 5.4.4. below). Further decision rules as to how to prepare and manage the data were made in accordance with guidance provided by Miles and Huberman (1994), namely that transcriptions were verbatim and words such as “er”, “um” were included together with grammatical errors, punctuation was inserted, seeking to preserve the rhythms of speech and apparent emphasis of the audio recording, and any interruptions included. For example, in one interview, the participant asked his P.A (who had just entered the room with hot drink refreshments) a question based on the discussion we were having about the extent to which he regarded himself as acting politically. Any concerns raised by participants during the interview were also recorded. These included questions such as “is this ok?”, “is this what you want to hear about?” and “sorry to be so negative”. Contextual information, such as laughter, sighing, pauses or silence was included though, as the interviews were undertaken face-to-face, it was decided not to record body language or facial expressions as this could not be applied consistently across all the interviews. Where the participant stated something confidential, for example,

the name of the company that they worked for, 'xxx' has been used in the quotation and where it was not possible to decipher any words spoken, '.....' was used to reflect this inaudibility.

Having prepared the data in this way, I then undertook a careful thematic and dialogic narrative analysis of the full interview. In each case, I endeavoured to treat the interview, initially at least, as a whole rather than fracturing the account into thematic categories as grounded theory coding would (Riessman, 2008). I worked with a single interview at a time, isolating and ordering relevant episodes of political experience into a chronological and biographical account. I looked for ways in which interviewees talked about their experiences of politics and sought out ways that they made sense of such experience and their own sense of self. Having read through each transcript twice in this way, I wrote up short initial summary narratives that I created from each interview transcript. These summary narratives were made up from quotations taken from the transcript, woven together with prose through which I could more succinctly describe how each participant had made sense of their political experiences. Had I have taken a purely thematic approach to the analysis of such narratives, I would typically have paid little attention to how it unfolded during conversational exchange or my role as questioner in their constitution – accounts would have been presented as if they “came out of a vessel uncontaminated by human interaction” (Riessman, 2008, p.58). Given my stated intent (see 5.2 and 5.3 above) not to limit my interest to simply what was narrated but also to embrace how such content was co-constructed between teller and listener, I instead sought to locate myself deliberately in the interview and interpretive context rather than pretend that I wasn't there. The dialogic nature of the narratives presented were clear to me and evident in the transcripts, despite my accompanying desire to use a very open structure so as to allow interviewees to tell their stories as they chose. As Maitlis (2012, p16.) experienced in her own study, participants were clearly telling me their stories, doing so at a particular point in their leadership careers and in a way that they understood as appropriate to a research interview into experiences of organisational politics.

Finally, in this section, on a point of data management, close attention was paid to the tracking, systematic organisation and storing of material (McLellan et al. 2003; Miles and Huberman 1994). Hard copies of interview transcripts were filed in date then alphabetical order. Other materials were kept in date order. Soft copies (including audio files) were also maintained, and these were imported into a Nvivo 10 database to facilitate the processes involved in data analysis. Proxy files were set up in the database to represent field notes, my

research diary, and any other documentary sources such as relevant statistical bio data, thus ensuring that all materials were available in one place.

Having laid out my analytical method to organising, storing and interrogating the data, the next sections explain sequentially in more detail the three analytical processes headlined in the process map shown in Table 5.3 above.

5.4.2 The Identification of Sensemaking “triggers” (opposing cognitions encountered during the interview).

As set out in Chapter 3 of the literature review, “the basic idea of sensemaking is that reality is an ongoing accomplishment that emerges from efforts to create order and make retrospective sense of what occurs” (Weick, 1993, p.635). Sensemaking occurs typically when members confront events, issues, and actions that are somehow surprising, difficult to accept or confusing (Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Weick, 1993, 1995). This positions sensemaking as a struggle, triggered by discrepant events which require explaining or accounting for through a process in which interpretations of discrepancies are developed. This sense of struggle was very apparent to me as participants grappled with coming to terms with their own political activity or withdrawal, strongly reinforcing the strategic choice of the active interview as a site for sensemaking and identity work set out in 5.2.3 above. That is to say that being asked to narrate their experience and account for their involvement in or withdrawal from political activity presented interviewees with not just a problem - defined here as “some kind of gap, difference or disparity between the way things are and the way one wants them to be” (Smith, 1988, p.1491) – but a problem that both mattered and was difficult to close, two conditions highlighted by Weick (1995, p.89) as needing to occur if a gap is to be pursued and to become a trigger for sensemaking.

This prompted me to look more closely at each interview to analyse the competing cognitions on show that gave rise to any gaps or discrepancies, the plausible arguments, generated to justify such disparities or make them seem “not so bad after all” and finally any associated identity work deployed to reinforce self enhancement, efficacy or consistency. The template used to execute this process is shown in Table 5.4 below (see Appendices for completed examples referred to in Chapter 6 below).

Table 5.4: Interview analysis template

PARTICIPANT :		SENSEMAKING	
SENSEMAKING "TRIGGERS" : CONTRADICTION/OPPOSING COGNITIONS		SENSEMAKING RESPONSES	IDENTITY WORK
•	•	•	•
•	•		
•	•		
•	•		
•	•		
•	•		
•	•		
•	•		
•	•		

By way of an illustrative example, an opposing cognition / gap / discrepancy might be an individual observing that “I avoid organisational politics because I find it personally distasteful and wearing” alongside a statement that “The environment I work in is very political”. The sensemaking response to address such difficulty might include “Every organisation is like this, there’s nothing you can do” whilst the associated identity work could take the form of “I’ve achieved the success I want so I don’t let it bother me anymore”. Drilling down into each interview in this way provided rich insights into the way in which, triggered by uncomfortable and contradictory cognitions, each participant struggled to restore order and negotiate a workable self-concept.

Having explored the detailed sensemaking triggers apparent in each interview, the next stage of analysis was aimed at identifying the specific sensemaking processes embedded in the stories told by participants in their effort to account for their experiences.

5.4.3. Analysis of the nature and incidence of sensemaking processes apparent in “micro” stories of political experience.

Understanding the role played by stories in the sensemaking of political experience is a central concern of this thesis. The challenge of this step of the analytical process, therefore, was one of finding a method of interrogating the frequency of stories told and the nature of the sensemaking processes embedded within them. To do this, I adapted the analytical process used by Maclean et al (2012) in their study of the sensemaking and storytelling of elite business careers. This involved firstly reading the transcripts independently and marking up stories, defined for analytical purposes as an “account given by an interviewee of a discrete chapter, episode or series of events within a career narrative” (Maclean et al, 2012). This is consistent with my earlier distinction in 5.2.4. above between discrete *stories* that branch off from the main *narrative* (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010). Discrepancies were deliberated and reconciled, and names assigned to the identified stories before I then examined the data to discern the specific sensemaking processes at work. In doing this, I used the “reductive” approach (Van de Ven and Poole, 2002) set out in 5.2.4. above which, in this case, was one of using the sensemaking processes identified in extant research as a starting point but then looking additionally for any additional categories that emerged from the stories analysed. This involved firstly creating a template (King, 2004) of processes isolated by previous studies of narrative sensemaking. I then analysed each story recounted in each interview and looked for evidence of either these processes at work or perhaps some others previously unidentified.

Table 5.5 below sets out the sensemaking processes used to develop the template mentioned above, their definition and their source in the literature.

Table 5.5: Sensemaking processes & their definition/source.

Sensemaking Process	Definition
<u>LOCATING</u> (Maclean et al 2012)	Situating the self in time, space and context. The storied constructions that individuals create situate them in context, retrospectively “fixing” events in space & time, legitimating a set of perspectives and anchoring their selves” (Brown et al 2008). Enables teller to reconcile complexities of location, including dis-location and multiplicities of location.
<u>MEANING MAKING</u> (Maclean et al 2012)	Espousing personal values, beliefs and convictions. A process that culminates in the expression of an opinion, belief or lesson for others (Gabriel 2000).
<u>BECOMING</u> (Maclean et al 2012)	Implies explaining transitions from one configuration of personal / organisational circumstances to another. The “directedness” of a story by whose development the listener is “pulled forward” through time (Ricoeur 1984). In narration there are three senses of time: a “present of past things” which is memory; a “present of present things” which is perception and a “present of future things” which is expectation. Becoming is inherently future oriented, directed to what lies ahead.
<u>IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT</u> (Brown et al 2008)	Self-presentation behaviours that individuals employ to influence the perception that others have of them. If a person’s worth is established by the opinion of others, individuals spin stories that maximise perceived self-value, offering versions of events which nullify or mitigate any negative implications which may be attached to their actions.
<u>ATTRIBUTIONAL EGOTISM</u> (Brown et al 2008)	Tendency to attribute favourable outcomes to self and unfavourable outcomes to external factors. In efforts to relate narratives that preserve and enhance self-esteem, individuals author versions of events that are noticeably self-serving.
<u>SELF DECEPTION</u> (Brown & Jones 2000)	The process of holding two self-referential beliefs with the more negative belief being less within awareness (Snyder 1985). Feeble but seemingly plausible arguments are used either to justify something that is difficult to accept or make it seem “not so bad after all”. A means of defending, maintaining and promoting self-esteem.
<u>HYPOCRISY</u> (Brown & Jones 2000)	A consciously entertained discrepancy between an individual’s important attitudes / self-beliefs and their behaviour (Rosenwald 1985). Unlike self-deception, which alleviates dissonance, hypocrisy always engenders cognitive dissonance because it threatens the unity of the individual’s sense of self.
<u>SCAPEGOATING</u> (Brown & Jones 2000)	Involves either a conscious or unconscious rationalisation that denies alternative (sometimes subjectively available) explanations for the attribution of responsibility. The psycho-sociological perspective permits an interpretation of scapegoats as intentionally created by others to hide, distract, delay, avoid & deny responsibility for problems (Bonazzi 1983). The product of emotional and logical oversimplifications.
<u>ROLE DISTANCING</u> (Goffman 1959,1961,1968)	Individuals distance themselves from one identity in order to preserve or embellish another. In situations where, at best, one’s identity or sense of value as a person is rarely confirmed and, at worst, is constantly threatened or undermined, mental distance, if not complete physical separation appears to be the only viable solution. It apparently offers a way of both protecting one’s sense of value and re-establishing a sense of personal control in an environment which denies one influence. It also allows one to tolerate aspects of situations which would otherwise not be acceptable.

From this it is evident that I went beyond the work of Maclean et al (2012) who identified three specific sensemaking processes (Locating, meaning-making and becoming) by analysing nine in total. Of the additional six, five were processes drawn from extant sensemaking studies. The sixth – Role Distancing – was one that emerged with sufficient significance or frequency to qualify as a discrete process in its own right. The identification of

a sensemaking process not identified in prior empirical research represents a further contribution of this study to knowledge and, whilst I will lay out and discuss the significance and implications of this in Chapters 6 & 7, it is appropriate here to be clear on the rationale for its inclusion as a sensemaking process to be analysed.

Role distancing is a concept from dramaturgical model and is most closely associated with the work of Erving Goffman (1959, 1961, 1968), whose “interesting and innovative” work is credited with influencing serious scholarship on influence and politics, given how it “laid the foundation for viewing organisational participants as actors who selectively choose the reality they disclose to various audiences with whom they interact” (Ferris and Treadway, 2012a, p.6). Role distancing is the act of presenting oneself as being removed or at a distance from the role one is required to play. The essential idea is that it is behaviour undertaken by the occupant of a role with the intent of communicating to others that the individual's actions should be attributed to the role rather than to the individual. The person's intention is to create or maintain separation between themselves and the role. The individual is not denying occupancy of the role but instead denies that they would act the same way if it were not for the role. Distancing suggests, therefore, that the individual has some resistance to their role (Goffman, 1961). Throughout the analysis process, described in this section and in 5.4.1 above, it became apparent that role distancing was being used by interviewees as a sensemaking device, a mechanism by which they could address some of the contradictions and dissonance associated with the political element of their leadership role.

Returning to the overall analytic process, each interview was analysed for the total number of stories told and the number and percentage which contained evidence of any of the nine sensemaking processes at work. The percentage element was necessary as it became quickly apparent that stories often included a suggestion of more than one sensemaking process and that, therefore, in any one interview the incidence of sensemaking processes would be larger than the number of stories told in total. It seemed to add meaning, therefore, not just to show how many stories invoked a particular process but also what percentage of the total number of stories told in that interview this occupied. Again, this was consistent with the approach taken in Maclean et al (2012).

5.4.4. Identifying overall “macro” narratives constructed to make sense of the totality of political experience and sensemaking outcomes.

The analytic steps described thus far take a “micro” approach to the data. In other words, they analyse either the sensemaking triggers evident in each interview and then the sensemaking processes embedded in each discrete story offered during the interview. This final stage allowed the identification of different overall narratives which emerged from the data. Rather than focussing on discrete stories, the aim here was to identify the main narrative, off which such stories branched and which enabled interviewees, therefore, to “creatively integrate into a unity” the totality of their political experience (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010) and restore order successfully.

Having again prepared the data in the way set out in 5.4.1 above, moving from sensemaking processes to narratives involved undertaking a careful thematic and dialogic narrative analysis of the full interview. This meant treating the entire interview as the unit of analysis rather than the discrete stories or critical incidents contained therein. My purpose “zoomed out” from a fine-grained analysis of particular moments where respondents described how they had or had not acted politically to identifying the overarching narratives that individuals used to position their relationship with the phenomenon in its totality. In each case, I endeavoured to treat the interview, as a whole rather than fracturing the account into thematic categories as grounded theory coding would (Riessman, 2008). I worked with a single interview at a time, looking for ways in which interviewees made sense of their experience over an extended career time frame. Having analysed each transcript in this way, I wrote up short initial summary narratives that emerged from the data. These were based on quotations taken from the transcript, woven together with prose through which I could more succinctly describe how each participant had made sense of their political experiences. Had I have taken a purely thematic approach to the analysis of such narratives, I would typically have paid little attention to how it unfolded during conversational exchange or my role as questioner in their constitution – accounts would have been presented as if they “came out of a vessel uncontaminated by human interaction” (Riessman, 2008, p.58). Given my stated intent (see 5.2 and 5.3 above) not to limit my interest to simply what was narrated but also to embrace how such content was co-constructed between teller and listener, I instead sought to locate myself deliberately in the interview and interpretive context rather than pretend that I wasn’t there. The dialogic nature of the narratives presented were clear to me and evident in the transcripts, despite my accompanying desire to use a very open structure to allow interviewees to account for their experience as they chose. As Maitlis (2012, p16.)

experienced in her own study, participants were clearly grappling with the contradictions and ambiguities that accounts of their own work behaviour revealed, doing so at a particular point in their leadership careers and in a way that they understood as appropriate to a research interview into experiences of organisational politics.

Through repeated analysis of the transcripts, four distinct narratives were identified; **“No Such Thing”**, **“Weary Endurance”**, **“Conscientious Objection”** and **“Pragmatic Engagement”**. These are laid out and analysed in Section 6.4 of the Findings chapter below. Having isolated these “macro” narratives, I then went back and assessed the extent to which there was strong, moderate, weak or no evidence of their presence in each interview. This enabled an assessment of the extent to which interviewees maintained a singular and consistent position on their involvement in organisational politics and also the extent, therefore, that such narratives were simply an output of the sensemaking process or, where inconsistency was encountered, a trigger for further sensemaking activity.

The final level of analysis conducted concerned the outcome of each individual’s sensemaking activity or, in other words, the level of resolution that each participant was able to achieve through their sensemaking activity. In order to be clear what resolution means in this context and how I derived its extent from the data, it is necessary to recall that at the heart of the sensemaking perspective is the idea of a struggle to restore order triggered by events that are either surprising, ambiguous, contradictory or difficult to accept (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015). The design of this study was configured to ensure that, by pursuing a deliberately active approach, my interviews with participants became a site for sensemaking. By replaying their stories and conclusions and by offering alternative possibilities for how their tactics and behaviours may have appeared to others, contradictions and difficulties within participant accounts emerged, challenging individuals’ “press release” (Wiersma, 1998) positions of their involvement in political activity and their own sense of leadership identity. What I was interested in discovering was the extent to which each individual was successful in resolving such ambiguity and defending the threat to their identity. In other words, the degree to which they were successful in the searching for meaning, the settling for plausibility and the moving on that Weick summarises as being core to the pursuit of sensemaking activity (Weick et al, 2005, p.419). The ability to “move on” is a crucial element in how principal sensemaking writers and researchers define a successful sensemaking outcome. Whilst, the loss of sense is “deeply troubling”, the restoration of sense reinforces identity and enables agency (Weick, 1995, p,14).

The process of analysing this extent of resolution as a sensemaking outcome involved focussing, in particular, upon the closing exchanges of each interview. Each interaction was a challenging affair, intentionally so as the adoption of an active approach was key to providing the trigger for sensemaking activity within the interview. However clear or certain each individual appeared to be on their position in relation to political engagement, their narratives were explored and excavated in detail rather than being accepted at face value, with alternative possibilities and interpretations presented. The concluding section of each interview enabled me to assess the impact of such challenge and the degree to which each participant had constructed a plausible and workable position on their engagement in organisational politics that was congruent with rather than a threat to their ongoing identity work. By asking participants for their closing position and reflections upon the interview, I was able to elicit their sense of resolution with the alignment of their definitions, stories and narratives. In analysing the data, I focussed on whether this sense of themselves as an active political protagonist changed in the anyway from before the discussion? How aware were they of any inconsistencies or contradictions in their accounts and narratives? Did they appear to find any realisation of such ambiguity troubling in any way? In other words, if the active interview had triggered a challenge to the meaning they had derived from their involvement in organisational politics and their own sense of identity, to what extent had this threat been repulsed, sense restored, and identity defended?

There are two particular aspects of this analysis that it is important to emphasise. Firstly, the assessment of the level of resolution achieved by individual leaders was independent to the analysis of how many different narratives were constructed and the strength with which they were apparent throughout the interview. That is to say “resolution” here is not synonymous with narrative singularity. If an individual constructed and drew upon conflicting narratives in an effort to account for their own political engagement that does not mean to say that they were by definition “unresolved” at the end of the interaction. The rationale for this is the second point worthy of emphasis, namely that it was the participant’s own sense rather than that of the mine as the researcher that matters in this analysis of resolution. My concern was the subjective assessment of the individual themselves rather than my own evaluation – a position that is consistent with the interpretive stance taken throughout this thesis, namely that in the slippery arena of organisational politics it is the assessment of the individuals involved rather than the realist judgements of the objective observer that matters most (Buchanan, 2016). In this way, it was perfectly possible, as indeed many did (see 6.4 below), for individuals to draw frequently upon contradictory narratives and yet present themselves ultimately as being comfortable with both the nature of their involvement in political activity

and how this reinforced rather than challenged their own sense of self in a leadership context.

In order to provide a bridge between the description of this analytic method and the findings generated therefrom, Table 5.6 below gives a breakdown of the incidence and strength of each of the four narratives identified, juxtaposed against the degree of sensemaking resolution that each individual achieved by the end of the active interview. Chapter 6 below will now present such findings in greater depth, explaining the three distinct groupings apparent from this analysis and aligning such outcomes with the core research questions adopted by the study as a whole.

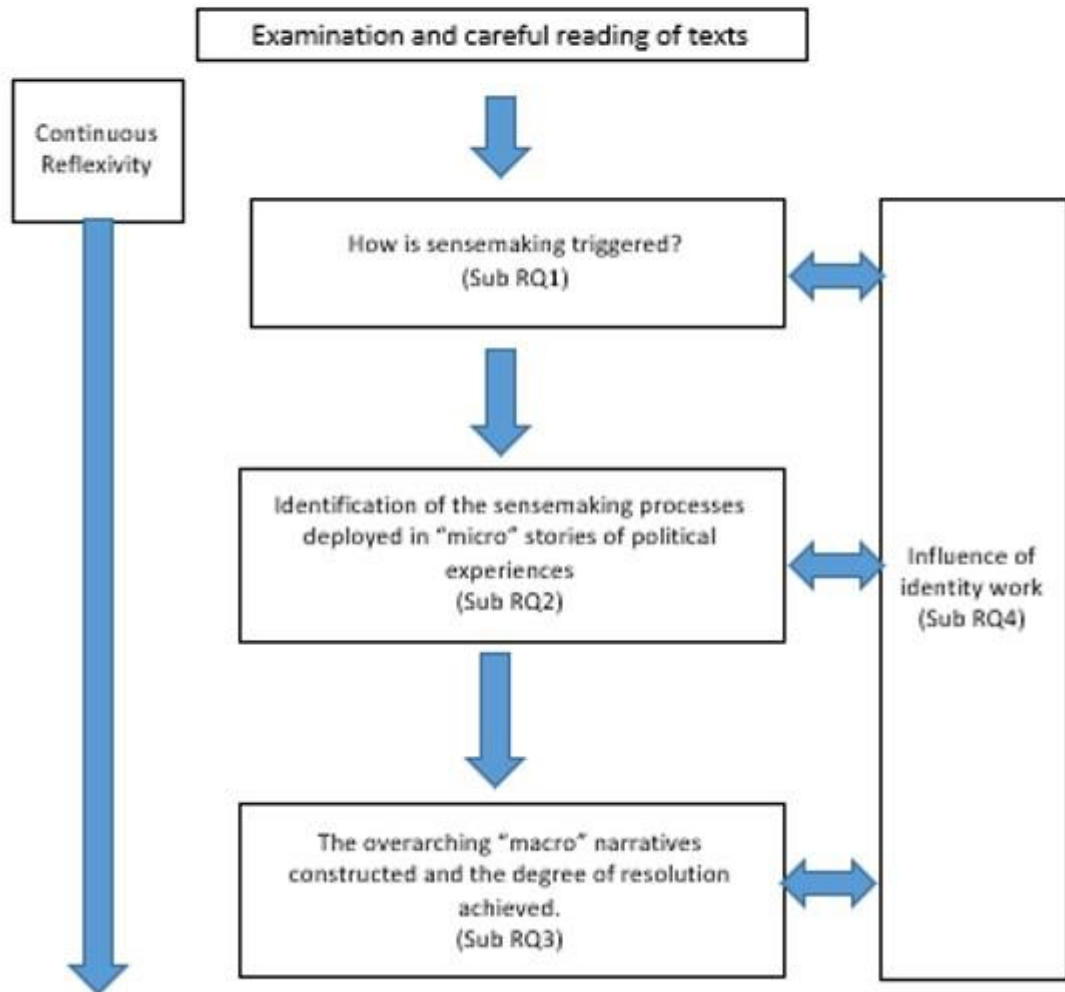
Table 5.6 – Narratives and resolution : interview by interview analysis

	<i>Nature and Strength of “Macro” Narrative Regarding totality of Political Experience</i>					<i>Sensemaking Outcome</i>
	<i>No Such Thing</i>	<i>Weary Endurance</i>	<i>Conscientious Objection</i>	<i>Pragmatic Engagement</i>		
<i>Participant</i>	OP as an unhelpful and/or misleading label that is applied to natural human influencing behaviour and the “yin and yang” of daily organisational life. Organisations are rational meritocracies in which change is enacted & delivered through formal decision-making processes and logical debate.	OP as a pervasive organisational phenomenon over which members have little control. Withdrawal impossible, collusion inevitable.	OP as “not in my name”. The game is understood and observed but participation is disavowed on grounds of ethics, values and personal integrity.	OP as a legitimate and essential means of stakeholder influence and goal fulfilment		The degree of resolution achieved through the creation and use of narratives
GROUP 1						
Single Narrative / Successful Sensemaking Outcome	Jane	STRONG	NONE	NONE	WEAK	HIGH
	Jean	WEAK	WEAK	WEAK	STRONG	HIGH
	Mark	STRONG	NONE	NONE	NONE	HIGH
	Mathew	NONE	NONE	NONE	STRONG	HIGH
GROUP 2						
	Jack	NONE	WEAK	STRONG	STRONG	HIGH
	Tina	WEAK	MODERATE	WEAK	STRONG	HIGH
	Dawn	MODERATE	MODERATE	WEAK	STRONG	HIGH
	Bill	MODERATE	WEAK	STRONG	STRONG	HIGH
	Holly	NONE	WEAK	MODERATE	MODERATE	HIGH
	Diane	WEAK	WEAK	MODERATE	STRONG	HIGH
	Emma	STRONG	NONE	WEAK	STRONG	HIGH
	Brian	NONE	MODERATE	STRONG	STRONG	HIGH
	Roy	WEAK	WEAK	STRONG	STRONG	HIGH
	Gary	MODERATE	NONE	MODERATE	WEAK	HIGH
	Tom	WEAK	WEAK	STRONG	STRONG	HIGH
	Louise	NONE	MODERATE	WEAK	STRONG	HIGH
	David	NONE	WEAK	STRONG	MODERATE	HIGH
	Derek	NONE	NONE	STRONG	STRONG	HIGH
	Grace	NONE	WEAK	MODERATE	MODERATE	HIGH
	Alex	WEAK	NONE	STRONG	STRONG	HIGH
Richard	NONE	MODERATE	STRONG	MODERATE	HIGH	
Laura	NONE	MODERATE	STRONG	MODERATE	HIGH	
Chris	NONE	MODERATE	MODERATE	STRONG	HIGH	
GROUP 3						
	Lucy	NONE	STRONG	STRONG	WEAK	LOW
	Mary	NONE	STRONG	STRONG	WEAK	LOW
	Amy	NONE	MODERATE	STRONG	WEAK	LOW
	Ruth	WEAK	STRONG	STRONG	MODERATE	LOW
	John	NONE	WEAK	STRONG	STRONG	LOW
	Incidence of “strong” categorisation with each narrative	3	3	15	16	

6. FINDINGS

6.1 INTRODUCTION

How do leaders make sense of their personal involvement in organisational politics? (Central RQ): analytic process map and alignment with Sub RQ's



The previous chapter set out the method and analysis strategy constructed in order to interrogate leader sensemaking of political experience as well as describing in detail both how participants were selected and the manner in which the 28 active interviews were conducted. The purpose of this chapter is to present the findings from this analysis and, in doing so, mirror the analytic process set out in 5.4 and repeated above.

By way of a brief overall summary to guide the reader, the findings demonstrate the ambiguity and complexity associated with the lived experience of organisational politics, the

challenges that this presents to leaders in terms of their identity and the differences between successful and unsuccessful sensemaking approaches. More specifically, a number of important findings against the research questions adopted will be evidenced;

How is sensemaking triggered? (Sub RQ1, see section 6.2 below)

To varying degrees, sensemaking activity was triggered by the awareness of opposing or contradictory cognitions on the extent of personal involvement in political activity. This was stimulated by the active interview approach which probed beyond initial “press release” (Wiersma, 1988) positions and confronted inconsistencies between how individuals defined organisational politics and the stories they told of their own work behaviour. This led to uncertainty and discomfort for most that needed to be resolved, thereby creating the interview as a site for sensemaking. In a few cases, participant sensemaking responses were more defensive in nature, being directed at adhering to a fixed position that they brought into the interview and maintained throughout rather than exploring alternatives. Section 6.2 uses the interviews with John, Alex and Mark to illustrate the full range of responses.

What sensemaking processes are embedded in the stories that leaders tell about their experiences? (Sub RQ2, see section 6.3 below)

Once triggered, a wide variety of different sensemaking processes were deployed by leaders to restore order in relation to the extent and nature of their political engagement. Amongst the processes adopted from prior sensemaking studies, the most frequently deployed was self-deception. Section 6.3 uses the interviews with Lucy and Jack as illustrative examples of this. Over and above the processes unearthed in previous empirical work, the use of role distancing (see 5.4.3 above) emerged from the data as a significant sensemaking mechanism, and the interviews with Brian and Roy are used to show this in detail. Within all four interviews, examples of identity work will also be highlighted, showing the way in which the sensemaking processes embedded within stories of experience were influenced by attempts to defend a positive identity throughout.

What overall narratives do leaders create and use to account for their personal involvement or withdrawal successfully and what is the influence of identity work? (Sub RQ 3 & 4, see section 6.4 below).

By drawing upon specific sensemaking processes, leaders constructed different narratives to account for their overall relationship with political activity. Four such overarching narratives were identified: ***No such thing, Weary endurance, Conscientious objection and Pragmatic engagement***. The use of these narratives, either singularly or in combination with each other, enabled different degrees of success in respect of the sensemaking outcome, defined here as the restoration of sense (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015) through the extent to which individuals are able to “search for meaning, settle for plausibility and move on” (Weick et al, 2005, p.419). Three groups emerged from the data. Firstly, a small number maintained a sense of resolution through the consistent adherence to a single narrative which they brought to the interview and maintained throughout, thereby reducing, but not eliminating altogether, the amount of dynamic sensemaking activity required. The interviews with Jane and Matthew are drawn upon to show this. Secondly, a much larger group constructed and used more than one competing narrative in their sensemaking activity but were still able to achieve a successful outcome. Within this group, the commonest narrative combination was that of *Conscientious objection* with *Pragmatic engagement* indicating that leader sensemaking is not necessarily derailed by using contradictory narratives simultaneously. From this group, the interviews with Emma, Brian and Alex are drawn upon as good examples of how this was achieved. Finally, a small third group also drew upon multiple narratives but were less successful in arriving at a satisfactory resolution of their involvement in the political arena, thereby suggesting that the existence or otherwise of multiple and contradictory narratives is not in itself predictive of either sensemaking success or failure. The interviews with Ruth and Amy are analysed to illustrate how this played out in detail. Within this smaller unresolved group, all maintained a narrative of *Conscientious objection* to being involved in politics personally but, here, this tended to be combined with one of *Weary endurance* rather than the strong pragmatic approach of the more resolved, suggesting the possibility that the collapse of sensemaking activity is linked in some way to a lack of belief in the capacity to engage positively and constructively in this element of their role.

Taken as a whole, these findings highlight how different processes, narratives and identity work are all involved in attempts to make sense of personal engagement in political activity and that, whilst most leaders in the study ultimately resolved this satisfactorily, a smaller

group were less successful in restoring order and reconciling the dilemmas they encountered.

6.2 HOW SENSEMAKING WAS TRIGGERED DURING THE ACTIVE INTERVIEW

Sensemaking is a process that is triggered when members confront events, issues, and actions that are somehow surprising, difficult to accept or confusing (Weick, 1995; Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Maitlis, 2005). This section lays out how the active exploration of tensions between participant definitions of organisational politics and stories of their own work behaviour stimulated different levels of sensemaking activity. Discrepancies became ones that both mattered and were difficult to immediately resolve: two conditions needing to occur for such difficulty to become a trigger for sensemaking (Weick, 1995, p.89). This section illustrates the role of the active interview in triggering sensemaking through detailed analysis of three different responses to the exploration of inconsistencies and contradictions implicit in participant accounts. The first (John) highlights the conflict in recognising own behaviour previously defined as negative; the second (Alex) shows the struggle inherent in accepting behaviour as political; and the third (Mark) is an example of a refusal to acknowledge politics or change ideas when confronted. Whereas the sensemaking response was proactive and intense in the first two cases through being forced to address equivocality, sensemaking in this third case was more defensive in nature due to the rigid adherence to a more fixed position.

For this first section, therefore, the emphasis is on the initiation of sensemaking activity: the struggle triggered through leaders grappling with opposing cognitions surfaced by the active interview. An analysis of the sensemaking processes deployed to resolve such difficulty together with the extent to which individuals were ultimately successful in plausibly restoring order and moving on will be laid out in 6.3 and 6.4 below.

6.2.1 John: “It’s kind of say one thing and do another really”

The first example of how defining and accounting for political experience acted as a trigger for sensemaking is shown in the interview with John, an HR / OD Director in local government. John’s initial position on organisational politics in the interview was very negative. He shared several stories illustrating how he’d seen underhand behaviours used to

further hidden agendas contrary to the functional running of the organisation he was leading in at the time.

I'm choosing to attach, I suppose, a very negative undercurrent..... I use the word politics to describe dysfunctional elements of the use of power in organisations....you know, poor communication, ostracising individuals, fear about inadequacy, capabilities not being sort of tackled. And it's always...I've always just seen it to its detriment. I've never come across it being used in a way that is positive. It's got a touch of the dark arts about it.

His starting position was that this negative experience had shaped a quite principled position of never engaging in such behaviours personally and that he saw himself as having a form of guardian role in modelling more functional behaviour. In the face of exploration and challenge, however, this narrative quickly started to break down as John realised that perhaps he had been more politically active himself than he may have wanted to believe.

At the heart of this struggle lay two essential dichotomies. Firstly, the tension between rejecting what he had defined as such a dysfunctional force and recognising that he too had engaged in the very activity that he used to describe how politics manifests itself negatively in organisational life. To begin with, his principled position of not engaging in politics extended to wanting to drive it out altogether.

John: I would say that I see that having seen it, observed it, experienced it to an extent, [short pause] I think it makes..... you want to ...yeah, do all that you can to eradicate it within your own spheres of control..... So, you know, it sounds a bit odd. I actually...it's slightly positive that I've experienced it, because it's actually equipped me to be a, what I'd like to think, is a leader who can recognise that a lot quicker. And also, someone who would never engage in that because I'm aware of the destructive nature of it.

In explaining what “eradicating it” looks like in practice, John explained how he made informal alliances with like-minded colleagues.

So, it's funny, because it's almost happened naturally. You create a stronger force. You create a stronger force. So, we've created a [short pause] a group of like minded Assistant Directors and Directors that won't tolerate it. And it's going back to my xxx days, we've created a bigger gang.

At this point of the interview John became quite animated as he talked enthusiastically about how he felt that this group were providing some resistance against the forces of the “dark arts” and acting as a bulwark against dysfunctional behaviour.

And so, there would have been the whispered conversation. “I don't like this, what's going on now? Let's...a few more of us get together.” we've now got a group of seven or eight who are the...have become the real power base of the organisation even though that doesn't include the chief exec of the organisation.

For John, this forming of alliances and whispered conversation was positioned as a legitimate response to dysfunctional manipulation but when I suggested that elements of such behaviour matched elements of his own earlier definition of political activity, his unease was very apparent, not just in the text below but also in the way he shifted uncomfortably in his seat and adopted rather more defensive body language.

Interviewer: So, when you think of you doing that, one could argue that it is in itself a political strategy on your part?

John: [long pause] I suppose now that you've posed it like that, yeah, I suppose it is. It's awell, it's an intervention, isn't it? Of some description...for want of a better word. It's a response to those circumstances. But it's very much led by power, behaviour, influencing, moulding, setting up groups. It's got all the ingredients of being quite political. Yes. [embarrassed laugh]. So, it's...yeah. Yeah. Quite interesting. Yeah.

Aware of this dilemma, John started to shift his position away from never engaging in the type of backstage influencing that he had seen so negatively in others and towards one of acknowledging being politically active but claiming that doing so was necessary and justified in upholding positive conduct and values in the organisation around him.

Interviewer: Do you see yourself as being in any way...in some form of political player or operator, and if so, what type?

John: [short pause] Yeah, I think I do. So, actually yeah. Because you've kind of felt responsible for that organisational good conduct, you've deployed strategies that are political in their very nature to try and move the organisation to where you think it will be in its best place, the best place for it to be.

Far from resolving this dilemma though, it merely acted as a catalyst for the second tension within his narrative, namely that he may not have always used such a political mandate as ethically and transparently as he initially maintained. The longer he struggled to negotiate how his (now acknowledged) political tactics and behaviours were consistent with his self-appointed role as the guardian of good organisational conduct, the more he became aware that such a position was open to different interpretation, an awareness that culminated in him admitting openly that he had engaged in political tactics to force someone out of the organisation.

John: It's scary really. Because if you're a kind of narcissist, you can be doing all sorts of weird and wonderful things with the organisation. Because particularly with the HR and OD role that gives you a legitimacy to do things in the organisation around this area. It gives you permission to kind of get on the battlefield and kind of play a little bit, really. So, yeah, that maybe even more makes me think of the kind of responsibility to do it well, to do it ethically and soundly.

Interviewer: Can you think of any other examples of that where you've used that political influence actively to achieve a particular purpose or outcome?

John: Yeah. And [short pause] and this is the bit that's I suppose I should say it's less positive. You've used it to take a person out.

Interviewer: Right.

John: [Very long pause] Yeah. [sighs] You've used it, I suppose, where you've had a problem employee in the organisation, and knew that you didn't have the management capacity above to manage that person out for capability routes. So, yeah, you would...not a massive extent. But again, it would be the word in the right ear. Well, it's not really going to work until we get some change at that level, in order to force a turn of events that would end in someone's kind of exit of the organisation.

John's use of "you've" rather than "I've" and "it" rather than "political behaviour" suggested his discomfort. Having initially defined the nature of organisational politics as being distasteful manipulation which involved talking about people behind their back in a negative way, ostracising individuals, not tackling capability issues openly, John was having to confront his awareness that he, too, had not just been politically active but, in being so, had put "words in the right ear" to "take someone out". This presented John with a clear problem: how to square such an admission with his previously stated view that his political involvement was purely in

the name of upholding positive conduct and organisational values. After grappling with this for some time, John conceded the contradictory nature of his position.

John : Yeah. So, an acceptance that you've got to bring some of the dark arts into play in order to move the organisation on from where they kind of are. So, and [long pause] andyeah... [long pause].... But not an acceptance of use, you know, of the dark art, political arts that aren't in the best...that aren't advantageous and in the best interest of the organisation. I would think I would have to accept..... So, yes..... Kind of a bit...a bit say one thing and do another here, really.

In John's case, therefore, his confrontation of these discrepancies and contradictions triggered an occasion for making sense of his experiences. What started out as a relatively straight forward position along the lines of rejection and abstinence became challenged by a troubling recognition of active and covert engagement which had resulted in an outcome that had significant personal consequences for the individual on the receiving end of such tactical manoeuvring. This proved to be a sensemaking challenge too far for John and he was one of the small number who ultimately did not successfully resolve the dilemmas they encountered (see 6.4 below). A full summary of the sensemaking triggers apparent in this analysis together with the sensemaking response and associated identity work can be found in Appendix iii.

6.2.2. Alex: "I'm probably more political than I thought I was."

The sensemaking struggle triggered by surfacing contradictions between a participant's abstract definition of organisational politics and stories of their own work behaviour was also present in the interview with Alex. Alex is a Director of HR within central government, having had a varied career that also involved running his own business as well as occupying leadership roles within a global professional services practice. His initial definition of organisational politics was pragmatic, neutral and objective and, unlike John, he did not see it as being a particularly harmful or dysfunctional aspect of organisational life.

Essentially, it's about things that go on in and around the whole process of making decisions and managing the work. It's about using [Short Pause] the decision-making processes that exist formally or the decision-making that can go on around the formal processes in a way that's to someone's advantage. So [Short Pause] being successful in organisational politics is being able to use those processes, I suppose to your advantage in some way. I mean that's the way I see it..... it's not necessarily something that's a bad thing. It's the reality of what is essentially a

group of humans working together. The same thing happens in a community, in a family; it just takes different forms when you're within an organisation.

This more benign view of political behaviour was also present in his description of someone who is skilled politically.

A very good networker within the organisation,.....someone who is astute to the implications of issues that are coming up...someone who's an effective influencer in getting people to see their viewpoint, or behaving in a way which results in their viewpoint being achieved. [Short Pause] Have sensitivity to others, understanding of other people, what makes them tick.

As the interview progressed with the probing of his early experiences of political activity, he started to hint at a less positive perspective, talking of how “*working alongside people who were much more adept at manipulating other people took some getting used to*” and how “*an ability to manage upwards set people apart from their similarly graded colleagues*” but preferred still to take a neutral rather than negative position.

I don't feel I was surprised by it. It was just interesting to note that some were much better at it than others.

Notwithstanding this neutrality and how he cast political operators as emotionally intelligent individuals exercising considerable influence, Alex was, however, keen to distance himself from such activity.

I really play to my strength which is about being able to do things quickly, deliver quickly, deliver things to a good standard. I have never regarded myself as someone particularly playing politics. It's more about, as I said, delivering the results that were needed.

The use of the term “playing politics” hinted at a view of politics that was less benign and functional than his starting position and by preferring to see himself as being someone who “delivers”, there was a clear implication that he wanted to present himself as being straight forward and open rather than someone who engaged in any backstage influencing. However skilled he claimed political operators to be, he was uncomfortable with aligning himself with them. Knowing that Alex had worked at a very senior level in a variety of Government departments which would have entailed his “delivery” being enacted in an intensely political

environment, I probed further and gradually he started to acknowledge the acquisition of political skills and tactics. Whilst in a senior policy role that involved working with senior civil servants and junior ministers, he learnt how to write things in a “*politically nuanced*” way and “*who to include or exclude in correspondence*”. He also talked about all the one to one relationships he had to develop in order to build support for what he wanted to do. He was still though extremely reluctant to acknowledge this as being political behaviour.

Interviewer: And when you reflect on that, some of those examples, do you see yourself as having acted politically in any of that influencing?

Alex: Well, [Short Pause] well, in a way, yes, because it was about trying to get other people to agree to what I wanted. But the political part, I think is more about a description of a particular way of going about influencing other people, which is rather less analytical and more emotional I suppose.

Interviewer: But building that body of support for your agenda, do you regard that as political?

Alex: Um, [Short Pause] it depends on your definition of it really.

By his own definition of it earlier in the interview, it certainly was being political (building relationships, informal influencing to move things forward) but still Alex was reluctant to embrace this. He talked about ways he tried to influence some key stakeholders behind the scenes by having separate one on one meetings with them but was reluctant to recognise this as being political in any way.

Alex: But I think in the general use of the term, “political” is the unorthodox way of going about getting things done, the unofficial way of getting things done. I think to a certain extent it has been political. So for example, here, I have a people strategy programme board with representatives from people from around the house. I always have meetings with each of them to just generally, build a personal relationship with them.

Interviewer: But with an objective in mind?

Alex: Yes, absolutely.

Interviewer: You’re building relationship so that they are able to support the outcome that you are trying to influence.

Alex: That’s right. Yeah.

Interviewer: So, what I’m exploring is, do you see that as being political?

Alex: Yeah, [pause] I suppose it is because it’s actually going over and beyond what’s in the formal process

Interviewer: And...so what's interesting about that is that [Short Pause] previously you described yourself as someone who doesn't play politics in that sense. You talked about somebody who gets things done and delivers rather than playing politics.

Alex: Yeah. And I still on balance..... still that's the approach that I try and use. But it changes depending on the role you play.

Despite acknowledging the use of many different forms of stakeholder influencing tactics that he had put at the heart of his own definition of organisational politics, Alex continued to present himself as being a-political. As I probed further, it became apparent that two different forms of identity work may have been behind this reluctance to embrace the political element of his influencing activity. Firstly, a strong desire to see himself as being open, honest and with strong personal values and integrity.

Interviewer: And in exploring these situations, are you conscious of any dilemmas that this presents in terms of the nature of how you try and influence?

Alex: I mean I think for me fundamentally, the dilemma is that I believe my personal value, my personal belief is that I have a high level of integrity so I am open and honest with people. I think generally, I try as hard as I can to do that.

This was interesting as his previously stated view of politics didn't include any element of it being covert or underhand. Office politics was just a natural thing that occurs when people work together and people who are skilled politically were those who were influential, sensitive and understanding of what made other people tick. It was possible though, that one of Alex's reasons for refusing to acknowledge the political nature of his own activity was that he just didn't regard it as being somehow straight and that to admit to his own personal participation, therefore, compromised his own sense of integrity. His efforts to hold onto this position in the face of further exploration served only to deepen this sense of struggle rather than resolve it.

Alex: I recognise that you will very often say different things to different people depending on who they are and what it is you want out of it. So, to an extent, you can say that undermines your integrity. But, you're not actually [Short Pause] telling an untruth; you're simply choosing things to say and not to say.

Interviewer: Is there anything that you feel that you wouldn't be prepared to do?

Alex: I think based on what I said earlier about having a strong sense of my own integrity I wouldn't do anything that was not honest. So I wouldn't say anything dishonest to him about what has been agreed.

Interviewer: And in between the bit about...because that's quite a polarised view, isn't it? "I'm not prepared to be dishonest and say something that I know is not true." What about some of the other behaviours and tactics that go on? For example, [Short Pause] not sharing information openly that may add to the strength of this person's position or not inviting them to a meeting in which these things are going to be discussed, or

Alex: [Interrupts] Well, I mean both of those things I can say definitely I've done that. So [Short Pause] if there's an issue I'm raising with someone, I would perhaps not copy in somebody else because I don't really want to hear what they have to say because I've got an idea what they might say. So deliberate exclusion; I've certainly done that. So I suppose [Short Pause] being honest with myself that is being slightly dishonest, certainly not being completely open about it.

In an effort to defend his identity of being a straight, open and honest person, Alex was having to confront the realisation that he had withheld information or deliberately excluded people in order to move his agenda forward. Faced with this recognition, he fell back on a more pragmatic and rather less principled position of simply hoping that he didn't get called out.

But, you know, (sigh) those are the sort of decisions you make in order to get your viewpoint taken forward, I guess. You're just going to [Short Pause] hope, in a way, that the other individual doesn't find out about it. And if they do, they may not be bothered, but...so yeah, definitely. Those sorts of tactics, I think we use to a fair amount.

The other element of identity work that seemed to be playing a role in Alex's reluctance to embrace his involvement in political activity was his sense of being a rational, analytical person rather than someone more emotionally driven. This was apparent at three points of the interview. Firstly, as highlighted above, when being challenged about the possibility of him acting politically in a story he recounted, his rebuttal of this was based on seeing the political element as more emotional than analytical.

Alex: Well, [Short Pause] well, in a way, yes, because it was about trying to get other people to agree to what I wanted. But the political part, I think is more about a description of a particular way of going about influencing other people, which is rather less analytical and more emotional I suppose.

Later in that same exchange, he also talked of politics being the “*unorthodox*” way of getting things done, something he clearly did not see as being akin to his own *modus operandi*. Secondly, when asked if he had ever been on the receiving end of political tactics, he was reluctant to acknowledge this, preferring instead to see it as simply not presenting a strong enough argument.

Alex: There's been plenty of times when I've wanted to do something which other people haven't supported. So I think sometimes I'm not as good making a case.....I don't see it as sort of Machiavellian or something that's really against me. It's just the others preferred to do something different to me.

Thirdly, this sense of a detached and objective identity was also apparent in his explanation of why he wasn't able to influence his partners in a previous business he ran.

Alex: And the interesting thing is that my Myers-Briggs profile was in every respect opposite to three out of four of the others. So I'm ISTJ and they were ENFP.

Myers Briggs is a personality profiling instrument and a profile of ISTJ is long on detached, analytical rational logic and short on intuitive or emotionally based decision making preferences. There seemed to be something here about Alex seeing organisational politics as being an emotionally charged arena that was inconsistent with his identity of being someone who gets things done by logical persuasion and his interpretation of his experiences was that when he got his way it was because of the weight of his argument rather than by “playing politics” and that when he didn't, it was simply that he either lost the argument or people just wanted to do something different, for equally rational reasons.

Whilst defining organisational politics as simply a naturally occurring phenomenon and quietly admiring those skilled in its associated behaviour, the emotional content inherent in some questionable tactics represented, therefore, a threat to Alex's identity as a rational actor with unimpeachable integrity. As with John in 6.2.1 above, confronting the possibility that he had perhaps not been quite as a-political as he claimed and that this more active engagement had potentially compromised some dearly held values was the trigger for an intense sensemaking struggle. Unlike John, however, it was a struggle that he resolved successfully (see 6.4 below) suggesting that the determinant factor in sensemaking success for leaders in this research lay outside the way in which the process was triggered. A full summary of the sensemaking triggers apparent in this analysis together with the sensemaking response and associated identity work can be found in Appendix iv.

6.2.3 Mark: “It’s not a term that I’ve actually used in the past or even heard of...”

The exchanges with John and Alex were very typical of the way in which active intervention rendered interviews readily as sites for sensemaking activity for a large majority of the leaders participating in this research. This was not universally the case, however, and the last example in this section draws from the small minority of leaders who brought a very fixed position on their involvement in politics to the discussion and adhered to it consistently throughout, meaning that the sensemaking response was more defensive in nature given the resistance to the recognition of conflict or ambiguity.

Mark is a highly successful entrepreneur having started, built up and then sold on a number of businesses. These businesses grew to a significant size, employing thousands of people and having management structures more typical of medium size businesses than start-ups. He has a high public profile and has written a number of articles for leading publications regarding leadership skills based on his personal success. Although I had sent Mark the same briefing note I sent to every participant ahead of the interview itself, I quickly became aware that he was not expecting – or wanting – to have a discussion about organisational politics. For much of our meeting he attempted to revert to what felt like a well-rehearsed narrative about the route to leadership and organisational success, none of which included acknowledging the existence or significance of organisational politics.

Our opening exchange set the tone for much of the discussion that was to follow.

Interviewer: My opening question for you is, what words are in your mind if I use the term organisational politics?

Mark: [Sighs] It’s.....[short pause] it’s not a term that I’ve actually used in the past or even heard in the past. So, obviously I know what an organisation is. And [short pause] do I know what politics means? But I guess I would not normally use the phrase politics in the context of organisation....er....organisation dynamics, which is obviously important and organisational accountability and making sure that everybody within the organisation knows what you want them to achieve is important. But it would be wrong to say that I spent much or any of my time thinking about organisational politics. I’ve never really read anything or heard people discuss about the impact of politics on an organisation.

Straight away, therefore, Mark refused to engage. It seemed implausible that someone who had started, built up and sold on significant size businesses over an extended career timeframe would not have heard of the term organisational politics. In the face of this resistance, rather than back off a little and simply allow Mark to use the discussion as an opportunity to showcase his leadership style and provide his world view of how to build businesses successfully (which he clearly has done), I chose to explore this position further in an effort to establish whether Mark recognised any tensions or dilemmas in the position he was taking. As I started a sentence intended to cue him with what it typically means to many people, he immediately interrupted...

Mark: ...I suspect that if we're going to get the most out of this session, you probably need to explain to me what your understanding of what organisational politics is.

Interviewer: Well, it's often regarded...

Mark: I mean, I should...I guess, yeah. People say that there is a politics...certain organisations are political, which would mean that [long pause & sigh] it's not a positive point because certainly, you know, within a business, you want to have all the people in your organisation working in the same direction for the same purpose and, as much as possible, working as a team. So, I guess, you know, organisational politics is a negative to the extent that people are acting for their own best interests or their department's best interests which may not necessarily be for the organisation's best interest.

This framing of politics as the misalignment of personal and organisational agendas seemed at odds with his initial position of never having heard of the term. Later in the interview, there was a rather subtler indication that Mark had a much clearer view on politics than he was prepared to admit when we were briefly interrupted by his P.A who brought in coffee. I was asking him at the time about how, if he didn't regard politics as being of any significance in his organisation, he would describe his general leadership approach, to which he responded by bringing his P.A into the discussion.

Mark: [sighs] [Leans over to PA) how would you describe my leadership style?

P.A. Very good.

Mark: [Looks back to me] There you go, political! [Laughs]

As well as identifying the misalignment of interests as characteristic of the phenomenon in question, he also, therefore, recognised flattery and upward ingratiation as its behavioural

manifestation. Now that we had got to a point where we at least had something to discuss regarding politics, further questions attempted to get Mark talking about his personal experience of it. Once more, however, he downplayed any possibility of its significance.

Interviewer: Are you able to recall any situations where you feel that either you or others around you have acted politically?

Mark: [Sighs] If you're going to ask me, I can't tell you that...I can't come up with an instant answer because I'm trying to think if I've had many instances where I've necessarily experienced it. [Short pause] because I guess, very often, when you're the head of things, you can kind of float above it.

Pressed further, he talked at length about how it was important to communicate organisational goals and make people accountable for their delivery. He was keen to emphasise that he had a very open environment with his leadership team and that anyone could say anything to him.

Mark: I always encouraged at that meeting everybody to have the ability to be able to say whatever they thought without any fear of retribution and we had a rule that anybody could say anything and we'd discuss it and nobody would be criticised for saying anything but, you know, in that meeting only. Not necessarily outside that meeting.

Mark rejected any challenge to his contention that this sort of one meeting communication “amnesty” was evidence of an a-political environment, maintaining that it highlighted how open and transparent communication was in the leadership teams he built. He stuck rigidly to a position that everything was open and above board and that what others saw is what they got from their interaction with him.

Interviewer: Might that not mean that political behaviour simply went on outside that meeting?

Mark: [Sighs] [very long pause] One issue is I'm not a particularly political person. I say things that I mean. Anyone can say anything to me, pick up the phone at anytime. Everyone has the opportunity to contribute.

The lengthening pauses and deepening sighs suggested a growing frustration in Mark at being pinned down on a potentially negative and slippery issue that didn't fit with his overall narrative of organisations, his own especially, as positive and functional meritocracies. This

was most evident as I explored the tensions in his position between healthy competition and destructive self-interest. On the one hand he was strong on individualism (*“I think you have to expect everybody to look after themselves. Everybody should be looking after themselves”*) and competition (*“I want to recruit people who are hungry to make more money”*) but found this difficult to reconcile with his emphasis on teamwork and with the view, prised out earlier, of politics as a negative misalignment of personal and organisational goals.

Interviewer: So, this notion of where the line sits between healthy, productive competition and dysfunctional behaviour can often be, you know, people often describe this as being quite murky but I’m just interested in how you see that dilemma or that tension between what’s okay and what isn’t.

Mark: [very long pause] I do think...I think it is an organisational issue and therefore, it’s down to the managers or the leaders to sort it out. I do think that you can’t look to try and make people do anything other than looking after themselves.

Whilst being forced to confront such ambiguity and justify his position did initiate an element of sensemaking activity, Mark maintained his dismissal of there being any tensions between his denial of politics and the interpersonal dynamics within any organisation he’d led, falling back on observations that *“no organisation is perfect and if you start listening to every single tittle tattle, you’d drive yourself mad”*. A further insight into Mark’s refusal to engage was evident in his final response to my invitation to reflect on the interview as a whole.

Mark: [sighs] [very long pause] I think this is an area that very few people look at. Probably because it’s just too difficult and also because it tends to be something that people at the senior level don’t see.

Mark’s consistent denial of having any experience of organisational politics, even in the face of active exploration and challenge, dictated that his sensemaking response was defensive in nature as he stuck to a fixed position throughout rather than recognise equivocality and alternative positions. This reduced the need to confront any surprises, tensions or ambiguities in his accounts and in turn meant that he ended the interview as resolved as he began in his view of the construct as simply a non-issue for leaders, a dysfunctional aberration that just had to be stamped out if ever it surfaced. A full summary of the sensemaking triggers apparent in this analysis together with the sensemaking response and associated identity work can be found in Appendix v.

6.2.4 Summary.

Table 6.1 : Contradiction exposed : how sensemaking was triggered

	Initial Definition	Description of own behaviour	Sensemaking response	Outcome (see 6.4 in more detail)
John 6.2.1	Negative – dysfunctional dark arts	Accepts behaviour as political	Confronts contradiction	Unresolved - conflicted
Alex 6.2.2	Neutral – naturally occurring	Delivery focussed – apolitical	Struggles to maintain self-concept	Resolved - pragmatic
Mark 6.2.3	Not heard of – non-issue for leaders	Rises above OP – open and transparent	Unequivocal defence of position	Resolved – leaders don't see it

Traditional approaches to interview data collection would have recorded the “press release” (Wiersma, 1988) definitions and accounts of respondents without further exploration or challenge within the interview itself. Taken at face value, such accounts of the nature of organisational politics contained many of the elements – personal agendas, informal influence, and impression management - that have been surfaced by prior theory and research and, in themselves therefore, would have added little to what is already known about the construct. The adoption of a more active exploration of how individuals reconciled their own personal involvement in political activity with such definitions allowed a much richer excavation by triggering the interview, to differing degrees, as an occasion for sensemaking in which interviewees had to confront events, issues and actions that were somehow surprising, difficult to accept or hard to reconcile with other aspects of their own accounts. Table 6.1 above summarises the range of responses encountered in the illustrative examples shown here. In the case of John, this took the form of realising that his sense of self as the guardian of organisational values and good conduct was inconsistent with him having “taken someone out” through whispered conversation. For Alex, the struggle was one of defending his identity of transparent behaviour and personal integrity alongside an awareness of having used political tactics to withhold information, pursue covert agendas and exclude stakeholders from decision making. Whilst this initiation of sensemaking was very similar for both these leaders and for most of the sample as whole, the different levels of success each later achieved in resolving such dilemmas points to other aspects being

more salient in determining positive outcomes. For example, as the interview with Mark highlights, a small group of leaders were able to maintain a strong sense of resolution regarding their relationship with organisational politics through less substantive sensemaking activity.

Having presented findings of how sensemaking activity was triggered, 6.3 below will set out an examination of the sensemaking processes that individuals drew upon as a response.

6.3 SENSEMAKING PROCESSES EMBEDDED WITHIN “MICRO” STORIES OF POLITICAL EXPERIENCE

Chapter 3 of the earlier literature review has already established that whilst stories are important for sensemaking, elements of the sensemaking processes that underlie the activity of self-narration remain relatively under-explored (Brown et al., 2008; Sonenshein, 2007) and storytelling by elite actors remains similarly so in the organization studies literature (Maclean et al, 2012). Helping to address this gap is one of the contributions of this thesis to the field.

In 6.2 above it has been shown how an active interviewing approach to exploring individual experience of organisational politics surfaced opposing cognitions and thereby rendered the interview itself as an occasion for sensemaking. This section lays out and analyses the way in which individuals responded to such dilemmas by identifying the various sensemaking processes present in the stories that leaders told, the frequency of their deployment and the interweaving of ongoing identity work. Section 6.4 below will then set out how these sensemaking processes enabled the creation of overall narratives that leaders used to resolve such cognitive strife and move on, thereby maintaining the definitional stance taken from Maclean et al (2012) and adopted throughout this thesis, namely that of stories of specific events branching off from main narratives (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010).

Section 5.4.3 of the Methodology chapter above set out in detail the analytic approach adopted to this part of the data, based largely on Maclean et al's (2012) study of the sensemaking and storytelling of elite business careers. Using this method, evidence of eight specific sensemaking processes, drawn from the wider literature and prior empirical work, was analysed (Locating; Meaning Making; Becoming; Impression Management; Attributional Egotism; Self Deception; Hypocrisy; Scapegoating) to which one was added (Role Distancing), having emerged separately from the analysis of the data. With each interview,

the total number of stories told and the number and percentage which contained evidence of any of these nine sensemaking processes were identified. The percentage element was necessary as stories often included evidence of more than one sensemaking process and that, therefore, in any one interview the number of stories invoking sensemaking processes would be larger than the number of stories told in total. It seemed to add meaning, therefore, not just to show how many stories invoked a particular process but also what percentage of the total number of stories told in that interview this occupied. Detailed analyses are available in the appendices, either interview by interview, (Appendix vi) or grouped in terms of the different outcomes achieved (Appendix vii) but for the purpose of this Chapter a summary is shown in Table 6.2 below which sets out simply the incidence of each sensemaking process in total and how many of the 28 participants drew upon them.

Table 6.2 SENSEMAKING PROCESSES CONTAINED IN STORIES OF POLITICAL EXPERIENCE

Process	Source	Overall Incidence (# People)
Self Deception	Brown & Jones, 2000	92 (26)
Distancing	Emerged from the data	82 (27)
Impression Management	Brown et al, 2008	61 (20)
Meaning Making	Maclean et al 2012	52 (23)
Locating	Maclean et al 2012	28 (20)
Attributional Egotism	Brown et al, 2008	26 (4)
Hypocrisy	Brown & Jones, 2000	23 (15)
Becoming	Maclean et al 2012	7 (6)
Scapegoating	Brown & Jones, 2000	4 (4)
TOTAL		375 (28)

The table shows that the stories told by leaders of their political experiences contained use of the sensemaking processes selected for analysis on 375 occasions. Of the nine processes analysed, the most frequently deployed were self-deception (92 occasions by 26 out of 28 participants) and distancing (82 occasions by 27 participants). Use of these processes, therefore, was made by individuals irrespective of whether they defended an existing position or addressed equivocality and also whether or not they were ultimately successful in resolving the sensemaking dilemmas they encountered (see Appendix vii for detail). This suggests that whilst their use is clearly an important part of efforts to restore order in the face of active challenge, they are not of themselves necessarily predictive of a

successful outcome, an insight that will be discussed in detail in Chapter 7. For now, this section illustrates the use of self-deception and distancing as the processes most frequently used by the largest number of people by analysing in detail four different interviews (Lucy, Jack, Brian and Roy) as exemplars of how such sensemaking mechanisms were both embedded within the stories individuals told and interwoven with ongoing identity work.

6.3.1 Self Deception

Section 5.4.3 above defined self-deception as the process of “holding two self-referential beliefs with the more negative belief being less within awareness” (Snyder 1985) and the use of often unconvincing but plausible arguments to either justify something that is difficult to accept or make it seem more palatable (Brown and Jones, 2000). Its significance here is specifically in its use as a sensemaking process, instrumental in resolution of discrepancy or contradiction and the ascribing of actions or events to causes that are superficially reasonable rather than less creditable or agreeable (Martin, 1985; Snyder, 1985; Brown and Jones, 2000).

6.3.1.1 Lucy: “This is just how it is everywhere and you can’t really fight it”

Lucy is a Senior Executive working in a major client relationship role within the financial services industry. My interview with her triggered some uncomfortable cognitions about her relationship with the business she worked for and the political terrain within it. She presented herself as someone who was ambitious, successful, straight forward and authentic. Her career to this point had been one of unimpeded progress, featuring a number of hallmarks of the contemporary Executive career track: a wide network, high profile sponsors and inter organisational mobility. In this role, however, she was confronting the realisation that she was not being particularly successful, had no high profile sponsor, was having to collude with covert activities that were neither straight forward nor authentic and was increasingly angry and frustrated. She shared a number of stories about the lengths she had to go to, inside and outside of normal working hours, to try to get people “onside”, how people “*out and out lie and set people up to fail because of personal grudges*” and how “*I am cross all the time, go home and go rahhhh at everyone and end up hating the company*”.

The stories and accounts offered by Lucy, informed by ongoing identity work, revealed significant use of self-deception as a way of plausibly accounting for her actions in an

attempt to resolve her sensemaking dilemma. To begin with, her definition of politics suggested a benign and accepting position.

“But I often advise my team or people that I mentor, you need to go forget the word ‘politics’ as being a negative, it tends to bring really bad connotations but it’s a reality and its around how you get things done and how people make decisions - so does everyone understand what the org structures are to start with? You know anyone you interact with, what is their reporting line? You know all the way up to the very top. Do you know who gets on with who, who was appointed by whom?”

For much of the interview that followed, however, Lucy spoke with real feeling about how “furious” she felt about “all the crap that goes on”, how disturbed she was by the “depths to which people stoop to stitch each other up” and how angry she, her husband and her family were about it all. Here, though, she suggested that others should forget thinking about it as a negative and see in much more objective and naturally occurring terms. This starting position of trying to take a more positive stance also suggested an element of identity work that was often present later in the interview too, namely the importance to her of being a wise mentor and protector of others, her team especially. Part of her way of maintaining her own sense of authenticity in the face of constant duplicity was to talk of how open she was with her team.

“And I guess being authentic as well is with my team, I share very openly my opinions and views about things and about the politics in the organisation and they do with me and so they trust me and they know that I look after their interests and they understand why I do things. Now I say to them “ok if we have issues with our boss and how he is doing things and his politics we can discuss things together as a team and be completely open, I will always tell you what I think about things”. So that is me trying to be very authentic with them.”

The dilemma of maintaining authenticity in light of her political environment was a constant struggle during the discussion and she told a variety of stories in support of her position that she was always “completely open and honest with everyone in my dealings and would never want to be seen as playing the underhanded style of politics”. The difficulty with this, though, was that they sometimes suggested the opposite. In one example, she talked about how she had a high profile client meeting that a powerful Executive from a different part of the business wanted to join. She did not want this because she did not trust him or his motives and believed he wanted to sabotage the deal on offer. This Executive was pressing her for the

timing of the client meeting and Lucy was aware that it was scheduled for the same morning as she was due to have a 1:1 with him just beforehand.....

“So I thought I can’t say that it is not happening, I don’t want to lie to him so I said to xxx ‘cancel my meeting with him at 8.30 this morning’ because I don’t want to be in a position where I’m meeting with him and I’m then going down the hall at to meet the client at 9.00 and have to lie and say that I am not meeting the client and I don’t want to be personally put in that position because it would be too difficult; easier if I just don’t meet him and then I meet him later in the week and say that the client meeting came about.”

Rather than discuss the situation with this colleague and have a frank discussion about why his attendance would not be helpful, Lucy evades his attempts to join in with the client by surreptitiously cancelling her meeting with just him beforehand. Because she has not told an outright lie to his face, Lucy is able to make sense of her actions as consistent with her sense of being open, honest and authentic. Although her own justification in the face of my active exploration may seem rather weak to the reader, for her it’s sufficiently plausible to resolve the discomfort about her potential collusion with all the duplicity going on around her.

“I kind of feel that I have done the right thing, my obligation is to my client and to get the business done in the best way possible and he is a hindrance, he gets in the way and his intentions are not pure . So I’ve kind of found a way..... ok, it’s still not open and honest, if it were I would have said ‘oh yeah, we have this meeting, you’re not invited for this reasons and we would prefer you don’t come’ but I don’t want to create conflict, but that is me trying to still retain some integrity and be authentic.”

Further inconsistency was evident in Lucy’s attempt to make sense of her political activity by ascribing her personal involvement to a pervasive and inescapable characteristic of organisational life over which no one can have any control. One of the stories she told to achieve this was that of her younger brother who regularly went from one role to another.

“He always has this huge realisation that he doesn’t trust the people above him or people take the wrong decisions. He is very idealistic and has a lot of integrity, very ethical and he is constantly being shocked and disappointed by the behaviours of the people in the academic institutions in which he is working and I have watched a pattern, you know every year and a half there’s some big fall out, and I

keep saying to him “you know this is reality, if you are going to take the cheque every month you are implicitly agreeing to play by their rules and this is a rule of a big organisation”

With the identity work, seen earlier, of Lucy striving to position herself as a wise mentor, dispensing sagacious advice to individuals around her again in evidence, the self-deceptive element is apparent in the way in which she attempts to make sense of her continuing to subject herself to such an intolerable situation by concluding that it's the same everywhere and, therefore, inescapable. Rather than present herself as a victim, she instead tries to account for her situation as being the result of a wise choice based on perceptive insight, unlike those such as her brother who naively chase a politics free nirvana that simply doesn't exist. This form of self-deception is more rationalisation than denial. In an effort to suppress her anger at the political environment around her and her inevitable collusion with it, Lucy offers superficially plausible arguments to either justify it (“it's the same everywhere”) or make it seem not so bad after all (“I can coach and mentor my team to help them deal with it”).

Section 6.4 below will show that, despite the frequent deployment of this type of sensemaking process, Lucy was one of the small group of leaders who were ultimately unsuccessful in arriving at a satisfactory resolution of their relationship with organisational politics, reinforcing the point made at the beginning of this section that being the most frequently used process by the largest number of participants did not necessarily make the use of self-deception in itself predictive of a positive sensemaking outcome. A full summary of the sensemaking triggers apparent in this analysis together with the sensemaking response and associated identity work can be found in Appendix viii

6.3.1.2 Jack: “Don't worry, this is only a game”

Whilst the stories told by Jack to make sense of his experiences of organisational politics also showed signs of self-deception as a sensemaking process, the form it took was subtly different. Jack is a HR Director in the financial services sector. His initial view of politics was quite negative, seeing it as a manipulative, hierarchical and self-centred phenomenon;

“I think the more senior I've become it's made me realise that individuals are kind of in it for themselves, the more senior they are. And whilst they may, on one hand, show support of their immediate line or peers, in reality, I think they're constantly asking themselves the question, “How does it show me?” “What would it do for

me?” “How am I portrayed in this way?” And then, that may cause them to go behind people’s backs, discuss things with other people, bad mouth people, try and gain support from other people at the other end of the spectrum, as I say, to try and manoeuvre themselves and it’s quite a selfish approach which I personally find quite uncomfortable.”

He found the existence of hidden agendas and all the manoeuvring that went with that quite distasteful, especially the way in which it meant that *“the day job becomes a little bit of a distraction to people getting what they really want”*. Like many other participants, however, the awareness that he too had engaged in covert activity in order to achieve an agenda quite different to the one openly espoused, created an occasion for sensemaking and the need to plausibly account for his involvement. For example, in one story he talked of how he had sought out a more senior HR Director as a mentor in a deliberate effort to position himself for a job opportunity he wanted to exploit in his area. Rather than seeing this as underhand or manipulative, he positioned it in more creditable terms;

“So, that’s very positive in my respect, in terms of being decisive and wanting to do something about a situation, exploiting the relationships I have to enable... enable something to happen.”

When I challenged him on how this was different to the negative definition of politics he had provided earlier, his justification was that he had somehow earned the right to behave in such a way;

Interviewer: “I’m just wondering how different that is from your earlier definition? The example you’ve just given is one of exploiting a relationship towards a hidden end”

Jack: “There’s not.... Now, you replay it in that way, it probably does feel like that. But I’m not.... I may say something wrong but I think I’ve done enough for this organisation to warrant the occasion when I had to look out for myself when in the past, I probably haven’t.”

Making sense of political activity took the form here, then, of claiming that he had been in the organisation long enough to earn the right to act covertly and selfishly. This justifying caveat of length of service or experience was not present earlier when Jack spoke of the negativity of political behaviour in which relationships were manipulated for selfish ends. As Jack continued to grapple with the dilemma of accounting for his own political engagement, the

self-deceiving element took on a subtly different form by isolating or disassociating himself from the impact of his behaviour. In other words, his way of making sense of this was that he had done it in a way that wouldn't have done any harm to anyone.

“So, yes, I've been here long enough. I think I'm a bit more worldly wise as to how this place operates. And so, therefore, to be able to get things on my agenda means that I have to behave in a way that we've been talking about, that perhaps makes me feel a little bit uncomfortable but I try and do it in a way which is quite nice”

This sensemaking strategy of having done no harm underpinned much of the interview. By differentiating himself from those around him in this way, he was striving to resolve the discomfort associated with the realisation of his political activity and defend a more positive sense of self. Being “nice” about it though, whatever that may have looked like in practice, does not necessarily mean that no one would have suffered as a result. If Jack's manipulation of his “mentoring” relationship was successful in ingratiating himself to a key decision maker, then he would have got something at someone else's expense. Someone, perhaps, who might dearly have wanted that same opportunity, who had believed that the playing field was level and that decisions would be made on a meritocratic, best person for the job basis. Rejection for that person could have been taken badly, prompting a loss of self-efficacy through “obviously being not good enough”. This chain of events would have been entirely possible as a consequence of Jack's political behaviour, but his isolation of affect successfully screened out such unwelcome possibilities and enabled him to see himself as legitimately pursuing ends that would have had no detriment to anyone else.

The disassociation present in Jack's sensemaking continued to manifest itself most tangibly in his persistent positioning of political activity as “just a game”.

“I'm not as political as some people but, yes, I certainly played the game. I certainly remember line managers who told me, “Jack, don't worry, this is only a game.” So, I do remember that fondly and I always keep that in the back of my mind, so I never take things too seriously”

The game metaphor enabled Jack to present himself as a person who would “do no harm” and make sense of his active political engagement by positioning it as a bit of harmless fun with players deploying various tactics to gain an advantage but only through artificial pieces or counters rather than human beings. In another story, he talked about how he had

brokered a discussion between two very powerful Executive stakeholders whose relationship had broken down with very real potential consequences for both teams and everyone who worked within them. He shared how he had been able, through some covert tactics with each individual, to get to a positive outcome that had been appreciated by both. He talked specifically of how one had praised him for this which “*was really nice to hear because that affirmed what I had done was the right thing*”, again consciously or unconsciously screening out that this covert manoeuvring towards a hidden end was what he saw as being so negative in others around him. The main sensemaking significance, though, was again about his use of the “game” metaphor.

Jack: So, the game I've played, and it is only a game, was to enable that meeting to be quite consensual and reach the right outcome.

Interviewer: Yes. And I'm just picking up on the phrase it is only a game. If that game had gone wrong, it could've had very real consequences. When I think of a game, it's like, you know, monopoly or a game on the play station and you lose and no big deal. But if that had gone wrong, someone could have been leaving the business or could have had their reputation tarnished. I mean, there were potential implications for them, you and others too. So, is that really a game as such?

Jack: The other thing I keep in the back of my mind is if I wasn't here, the world would still keep turning, this business would still operate and I...you know, I know I got a part to play and I enjoy playing that part. But ultimately, if it had gone wrong, what was the worst thing that could have happened to me? I'm not going to die as a result of it. I might end up without a job but then, I've got confidence in my ability that I'd go and do something else.

Again, therefore, Jack had managed to account for his involvement in political activity by downplaying any consequences it may have had. Even when directly challenged with an alternative possibility, he made sense of this by making light of the situation, preferring instead to brush it off with a “world will keep turning” comment and seeing that if anyone was going to be harmed as a result of his involvement, it was only going to be him and no one else. As well as helping him to author a plausible account of his own political actions, his stories also served an identity work purpose in presenting himself as a self-confident individual free of the type of personal anxiety and insecurity that organisational politics can create in others. A full summary of his sensemaking triggers, processes and identity work can be seen in Appendix ix.

The interviews with Lucy and Jack were both very typical examples of the way in which leaders drew upon self-deception as a sensemaking response to the active exploration of the difficulties and ambiguities apparent in how they positioned their involvement in political activity, irrespective of whether they were ultimately successful in their resolution. Section 6.3.2. below now focuses on role distancing, the second most heavily used sensemaking process and one drawn upon to some degree or other by 27 of the 28 interviewees.

6.3.2. Role Distancing

Section 5.4.3. of the Methodology chapter set out how the use of Role Distancing (Goffman, 1959, 1961, 1968), a sensemaking mechanism not identified in prior empirical work, emerged from the data gathered and analysed in this research. Role distancing involves presenting the 'self' as being removed or at a distance from the role that is required to be played. The individual is not denying occupancy of the role but is rather denying that they would act the same way if it were not for the role, suggesting the presence of resistance in some form. Throughout the analysis of stories offered by participants, it became apparent how prevalent it was as a mechanism for attempting to make sense of personal experience of political activity. Section 6.2 above has set out how confronting the participation in a phenomenon described very negatively by participants, triggered for most an intense struggle to account for and resolve the difficulties this presented. If individuals couldn't plausibly deny such engagement, then being able to somehow distance themselves from the tactics and behaviour that the nature of their role dictated presented a mechanism for potentially resolving uncomfortable tensions in their accounts whilst at the same time defending a positive leadership identity. As with self-deception in 6.3.1 above, its frequent use by leaders who achieved different levels of resolution suggests that, though an important part of efforts to restore order, its use in itself was not necessarily predictive of the sensemaking outcome. Replicating the approach taken in 6.2 and 6.3.1 above, different examples are drawn upon to illustrate in detail how this typically unfolded in interview discussions.

6.3.2.1 Brian: “They look at you as if you’re from Zortan!”

Brian is a Client Director for an American owned Investment Bank. He described the nature of organisational politics as being people driven by their own agenda at the expense of the greater organisational good, the manifestation of that being a disparity between rhetoric and reality: core values of teamwork and integrity were often espoused but rarely exhibited or upheld in day to day interactions. More negative still was what he saw as an aggressive,

macho culture in which being tough generally equated to the bullying and marginalisation of peers and rivals. Although he didn't go into detail, he alluded to the fact that a restructure had recently taken place and that he hadn't fared well in the outcome. This notwithstanding, Brian presented himself as a positive, capable Executive with a strong sense of integrity who *"loved the job and the industry"*. His sensemaking dilemma was triggered by the realisation surfaced during the interview, that, alongside this, he often had to do or say things that weren't true and was working for *"egotistical liars and bullies"* in a culture that was anything but a meritocracy. One of the sensemaking processes that Brian utilised to address these dichotomies was role distancing. Right from the outset, when I asked him about his earliest experience of politics, his approach was to completely disassociate himself from the dysfunctionality of it all;

"I'd have been 18 at the time, joined at the xxx. A manager of a department and deputy manager could not have been further apart relationally and philosophically and it was open combat really. Whichever one you spoke with would actively denigrate the other and would refuse to do what the other one wanted and you thought 'my goodness'. I almost left the organisation. I see the good in everybody and I can't believe that people would be this way and why? Why would you do that? It just doesn't make sense. I was so shocked and I wanted to leave and I actively tried to leave the industry and to go effectively into an isolation suite. I wanted to go farming, I just thought I will get out, I'll go and live in the country and I will run a farm, which I had the opportunity to do."

Brian did not, though, go and live in the country to run a farm, rather he embarked on a very successful career in the Investment Banking sector which brought him to his current position as a Client Director. This success, though, meant that, by his own admission, he was having to operate in a very negative political environment that he found personally distasteful. His way of making sense of this dilemma was to attempt to separate himself from the role and project himself of only having to act in a certain way because of the role he had no choice but to perform. In one story, he talked at great length about how he had been put in an intolerable situation with a major client organisation. To the reader it may not immediately read as a story of political experience but Brian's point in telling it was to highlight the way in he had been set up politically and then hung out to dry. This client organisation had discovered that there was a huge price differential between what Brian was charging in the U.K. and what the US part of the Bank was charging the same client for the same work in the U.S. In Brian's eyes, there was no possible justification for this differential; the client was right, and the organisation needed to recognise this and bring the price charged down to the

lower figure. Sadly, for Brian, it was not that simple. The instruction from his Executive was that he had to hold the line and that if he didn't he was weak and just not tough enough. This meant that Brian had to say things to the client which he knew to be untrue and take a position that he felt was fundamentally dishonest. Over a long period, the differential was gradually and painfully narrowed until eventually, the Bank conceded the whole thing. For Brian though, the cost was high, he felt his credibility with the Client had been shattered (*"they think I was lying to them the whole time"*) whilst internally, he was labelled as weak and positioned as the fall guy. Throughout this story, he went to great lengths (often replaying to me conversations he'd had internally) to highlight that, whilst he had no choice but to collude with the process, he fundamentally resisted the whole thing and made life as difficult as possible for his superiors.

"I don't know what fury is but that is what it felt like,outrage and I guess it's those sort of times when you wish that you were financially independentreally the organisation doesn't encourage direct engagement with people who are being difficult. You go through the hierarchy. "You tell me ...Sorry I'd like to hear it from you directly why, because I need some argument to support going to the chief of the client organisationoh tell them we do great things for them?, yeah they understand all that, they're not stupid people, they do understand but they know that they are paying too much for one product and their clients are suffering as a consequence of that and they just want to deal with that". So, there's all that righteous indignation."

The use of this role distancing helped Brian plausibly account for his involvement in very questionable political tactics without damaging his sense of identity as an honest personal with strong personal integrity. Yes, he had been forced to collude but at least he'd been the grit in the oyster. A final postscript to the story served to shore up the identity defences just that little bit more.

"My boss said "that's what drives me crazy about you, you always go for the moral high ground". And I said "Sorry, help me understand, is that a criticism or am I being praised for that?" The line went silent."

As well as distancing himself from specific decisions, Brian also attempted to separate himself from the prevailing culture of the organisation which he found alienating and lacking in any sophistication. In another story, he talked of how he was leading attempts to win a significant bit of new business. All of the indicators were positive, but the potential client

organisation was taking its time coming to a decision. Brian and other Executives were due to engage one of their business leaders in a “fairly warm environment” and were planning their approach. Brian ridiculed the way his own organisation approached these things.

This is an organisation with a certain culture, it's a culture that was developed west of here, out of the Bronx if you get my drift, 'we're gonna pump up...' it's a broker, dealer over two telephones, 'no you go screw yourself', 'no you screw yours' – that sort of stuff, that idiotic 'we're gonna kick their butt, we're gonna do it'. You think “You idiots”. So, with this situation our people are saying 'we ought to go out there and kick their butt, and we are just going to tell them blah, blah, blah'. I think, “You idiot, are you really going to tell, I don't know, the President of the United States or the Chancellor of Germany, and its neither of those people, but are you actually going to tell them 'you appoint us or we're never going to do business with you again?' Of course you are not, it's just lunacy but what it is, is this corporate tough guy, it's like 'Wow gosh xxx's a really strong guy and look what a great leader he is', its idiocy but there is a cadre of that sort of corporate bravado that seems to be at a certain level.

This suggested that Brian's role distancing was being driven by a further and different strain of identity work, namely that he wished to present himself as being smarter or brighter than those around him. Previously, his attempts at separation were more about integrity and honesty. The organisation wasn't open and honest, it espoused ideals but did the opposite in practice, anything for a fast buck was fair game, even it meant “screwing” clients or colleagues. Here though, the issue was not about ethics but ignorance. As well as wanting to distance himself from his role because it forced him to do things that were dishonest, Brian wanted to separate himself from what he saw as the unsophisticated crudity of his colleagues and maintain his sense of himself as intellectually their superior. This was further apparent in another story he told about the general approach that the organisation took to new business development.

“When people say we're gonna go and kick butt and take names. So fantastic baseball expression or whatever it is, we'll kick butt and take names, ok terrific – “Can I just ask in terms of strategy, once we've kicked their bottoms and written their names in a book, what are we going to do? Because that's what you're saying to me”. And they look at you as though you are from Zortan! I should just dismiss that but I think actually you've got to stop talking stupidly, so instead of kicking butt and writing their names in a book, why don't we formulate a strategy

to go and present something that is quite sensible to them, economically advantageous to both groups and secure the long term thing, but actually doing that doesn't sound as tough or as clever as kicking their butt and taking names!"

Aware that he was an active part of the political culture that he found so alienating, Brian made sense of this dilemma by separating himself from the role that he had no choice but to perform. Outside of such a role, he would act in a much more civilised, sensible and intelligent way. This role distancing served a further purpose in helping him to account for his recent loss of status and influence in the organisational hierarchy. By separating himself from the prevailing attitude and behaviours of those around him and positioning himself "outside the tent", he was able to make sense of a negative restructuring outcome by ascribing it to his refusal to conform to such unsophistication.

"I do feel part of the organisation, I absolutely do but I'm not married to it and understand that actually when that very tight circle is drawn, that I won't be in that tight circle because I don't 'kick butt and take names' and do the psychobabble. I had the photographs. They either had to deal with the photographs, which they couldn't, or deal with the photographer which they did."

A full summary of the sensemaking triggers apparent in this analysis together with the sensemaking response and associated identity work can be found in Appendix x

6.3.2.2. Roy: "I've got the customer shadow behind me saying "This is stupid, this is indefensible"

The use of role distancing as a sensemaking process was also present in my interview with Roy. When I met Roy, he was working as an independent consultant specialising in the sales management / customer operations arena. He had built his career initially through small start-ups backed by venture capitalists before taking executive leadership roles in larger corporate organisations. This culminated in him being an Executive Director in a high profile outsourcing business that administered large contracts for a variety of Central Government departments. Although he didn't go into the detail of his exit, it was apparent that Roy had either walked or been pushed at the same time as the business got into major and very public difficulties surrounding the way in which it was managing these contracts.

Roy presented himself as entrepreneurial ("*I'm and out and out capitalist*"), financially driven ("*I have to be political or my earning capacity will be capped*") and customer focussed (he

regularly used the phrase *“I’ve got the customer shadow behind me”*). Unlike many other participants, he embraced the notion of being politically active (*“I’ve got over the “I don’t play politics” thing because everyone does, it’s about how you make it work for the organisation that matters”*) and took a much more pragmatic stance of how he influenced relationships using political skills rather than seeking any moral high ground. So, in this instance, the sensemaking struggle was not, as it was for many others, triggered by a sense of being more political than he may have wanted to see himself, rather it was more about the clash of his brand of positive politics that worked in the organisational interest with the self-centred agendas of others in a failing organisation that had *“lost its moral compass and crossed the line between right and wrong”*. His response was to relate stories that distanced himself from the organisation in different ways.

The first way in which he achieved this was to separate himself from the politics associated with what he saw as the arrogance, complacency and internal focus of the bureaucratic culture he was operating within. To Roy, it was clear that there were layers of middle management focussed not on the customer but instead on justifying and protecting their existence;

“And that’s where the cynicism comes - because of the gaps in the management information, because of the gaps in the process and they were able to manipulate the situation for their own good as opposed to me saying “Hang on a minute, why don’t we put the system in and make ourselves redundant?” I challenged but couldn’t see a lot of that sort of healthy thinking coming in”.

This self-protectionism also spilled over into a “I’ll scratch your back” approach to performance management and remuneration. Roy repeatedly emphasised the transparency of previous organisations he had led – *“your numbers were your numbers and there was no hiding from them”*, maximising his ability to distance himself from the *“smoke filled room discussions”* held amongst cliques (which didn’t include him) that he encountered in this role;

“It held healthy objectivity, so, it didn’t have this, “Hang on a minute, I’ve worked with xxx before. So don’t worry about his numbers, we can move him around”. So, it was “You and I have worked together and that’s fine”. People spent all the time negotiating how they’d done a really good job this year and yet there was no evidence for it, just a campaign of”you and I, xxx, we’ve worked together, remember when we were back in 2000 when we did the”...and a huge amount of energy was spent on that versus in the business”.

Roy stressed how he had kicked back against this complacency, positioning himself as not just a subject matter expert but also as the customer, employee and shareholder champion.

“You had the arrogance of “We’re really a successful company” and you think, we are successful, but the way we do it isn’t world class because I do know what good looks like having worked in these environments. That to me is the most negative side of politics because it didn’t help the customers, didn’t help the employees, didn’t help even the shareholders, but it was because the organisation was so fluid in its process and its culture, the informal network was more powerful than the formal network. And people who have been there for a long time absolutely knew which levers to pull personally and they spend their time pulling them”.

These attempts at separation became most intense in the stories which Roy told about the politics, and his role within it, that surrounded the period when the company faced allegations of fraud and malpractice. John’s way of accounting for his involvement in this was that he had he had been a lone voice trying to get the business to face up to difficult issues and that ultimately the organisation chose instead to shoot the messenger.

“I was the “Hang on a minute; I’ve got the customer shadow behind me saying, “This is stupid. This is indefensible”. I was the one, the person saying, “This is wrong. We’ve got to face up.” and there was this acknowledgement, “No, no, no, we’re a good company. We’re values-based” “But it’s indefensible!” “Yeah, but you don’t understand.” The resistance to change was incredible. I think the politics turned and said actually we don’t like the person telling us what we don’t want to hear. It was, “Roy, you know, you’re not one of us.”

As with Brian in 6.3.2.1 above, Roy’s response to the active exploration of his involvement in organisational politics was the deployment of a subtle cocktail of distancing and identity work, a sensemaking strategy that, in his case, was successful in achieving a positive resolution of the tensions and ambiguities surfaced. A full summary of the sensemaking triggers apparent in this analysis together with the sensemaking response and associated identity work can be found in Appendix xi.

This section has illustrated how the use of self-deception and role distancing was the most prevalent sensemaking response by the largest number of leaders participating in the study, irrespective of whether each individual was ultimately successful in resolving the difficulties

identified. Whilst self-deception has been excavated as a sensemaking mechanism by prior empirical work (Brown and Jones, 2000), the emergence of role distancing as a response not previously identified represents a potentially valuable contribution to the sensemaking perspective, an aspect that will be built upon in Chapter 7 below. For now, however, section 6.4 moves from processes to narratives in order to present out how the mechanisms contained in the “micro” stories told by leaders of their experiences enabled the construction and use of different overarching narratives, through which individuals attempted to make sense of the totality of their relationship with this complex phenomenon.

6.4 The overarching “macro” narratives constructed and the degree of sensemaking resolution achieved.

Previous sections of this Chapter have presented how sensemaking activity was to varying degrees triggered by an active interview approach and how individuals deployed different sensemaking processes, self-deception and role distancing especially, as a response. This final stage of analysis pulls these threads together by showing both how such stimuli and processes enabled leaders to construct different overall narratives and whether they were ultimately successful in making sense of their personal involvement in political activity.

Identifying such narratives builds on previous analytic stages by taking the full narrative as the unit of analysis (see Section 5.4.3.1 of the Methodology Chapter for detail). The purpose was to identify how individuals creatively integrated the stories and processes highlighted in the previous stage of analysis into a “narrative unity” (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010) through which they could attempt to make sense of the totality of their political experience. Through repeated analysis of the transcripts, four distinct narratives were identified which are laid out below;

Narrative 1: “No such thing”

This narrative sees organisational politics as an unhelpful or misleading label that is wrongly applied to naturally occurring activity in the “yin and yang” of daily organisational life. The existence of political activity is either denied altogether or rejected as simply the manifestation of an alternative, more functional form of organisational behaviour. The possibility of personal agendas being covertly pursued contrary to the organisational interest is similarly downplayed. Organisations are positioned as rational meritocracies in which

legitimate intent is enacted and delivered through formal decision-making processes and logical debate.

Narrative 2: “Weary Endurance”

Politics here is a pervasive and unhealthy organisational phenomenon over which members have little control or influence. The existence of personal agendas, backstage behaviour and manipulative tactics is inextricably linked to and inseparable from all aspects of getting anything done at senior level. Although not exclusively so, much of this behaviour is negatively driven and experienced, resulting in high levels of emotional “wear and tear”. Nothing is as it seems on the surface and reading the agendas and behaviours of a complicated network of stakeholder interests is both a time consuming and exhausting challenge. Organisational life is perfused with political activity to such an extent that withdrawal is impossible and collusion inevitable, however much one might not want it to be so.

Narrative 3: “Conscientious Objection”

This narrative locates politics as “not in my name”. The use of covert and manipulative strategies to gain advantage at the expense of others is seen as divisive, illegitimate and contrary to the organisational interest. The game is understood and observed but participation is disavowed on grounds of ethics, values and personal integrity. Being apolitical is “doing the right thing”. Whereas this narrative takes a similar position to “weary endurance” on the nature and impact of political behaviour, it differs in its implicit assumption that separation is possible without damage to performance influence or career interests.

Narrative 4: “Pragmatic engagement”

Contrary to the three narratives above, the existence of organisational politics is both recognised and viewed in more ethically neutral and practical terms, it being regarded as a legitimate and essential means of stakeholder influence and goal fulfilment. Organisations are complex matrices and moving legitimate agendas forward requires the deployment of a sophisticated array of relationship building strategies and influencing behaviours. Not all tactics are, necessarily, underhand and manipulative. Occupying remote moral high ground condemns individuals to the side-line where they are without influence and easily marginalised. In this narrative, players play in order to further legitimate organisational and personal career interests.

Two further steps of analysis were undertaken. Firstly, the extent to which there was evidence of these four narratives in each interview was categorised in a four-point scale ranging from strong, moderate, weak or none, reflecting the approach taken in Maclean et al (2012) on which the analysis strategy of this research was largely modelled (see 5.4 above). A complete analysis of this, interview by interview, can be seen in Appendix xii but for the purposes of this Chapter an overall summary is shown in Table 6.3 below.

Table 6.3: Nature and Strength of Overall Sensemaking Narratives (N=28)

Extent to which present in interviews	NARRATIVES (Definition)			
	NO SUCH THING (OP experienced as an unhelpful and/or misleading label that is applied to influencing behaviour and the “yin and yang” of daily organisational life. Organisations are rational meritocracies in which change is enacted & delivered through formal decision making processes and logical debate)	WEARY ENDURANCE (OP experienced as a pervasive organisational phenomenon over which members have little control. Withdrawal impossible, collusion inevitable)	CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTION (OP experienced as “not in my name”. The game is understood and observed but participation is disavowed on grounds of ethics, values and personal integrity)	PRAGMATIC ENGAGEMENT (OP experienced as a legitimate and essential means of stakeholder influence and goal fulfilment)
STRONG	3	3	15	16
MODERATE	3	8	5	6
WEAK	7	10	5	5
NONE	15	7	3	1
TOTAL	28	28	28	28

This analysis immediately suggests a complex position given that it is evident from an initial inspection that some individuals at least were clearly constructing and drawing either moderately or strongly upon more than one conflicting, narrative.

Secondly, the final stage of analysis was concerned with the issue of sensemaking outcome, namely the degree of resolution that everyone achieved in accounting for their own involvement in organisational politics and any threat to their leadership identity that this

implied (see p 59 of Chapter 3 and also 5.4.4 for detail). This evaluation of sensemaking success – the restoration of order and the ability to “move on” (Weick et al, 2005) – was based on the extent to which each individual presented themselves as having resolved any dilemmas or surprises they encountered by the end of the interview and is consistent with the interpretive ontological position that underpins the entire study, namely that it is the subjective accounts and assessments of the participants themselves that matters most in advancing the field beyond what is known already (Buchanan, 2016). Viewed through this lens, a successful outcome is defined as the extent to which the individual leaders presented a workable position on their own experiences which negotiated any apparent narrative multiplicity or contradictions in their accounts and repulsed any associated threat to their identity (Maitlis, 2005; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015). In this way, by making the assessment of this sense of resolution independent from simply how equivocal individuals were in their use of competing narratives, it allowed for the possibility of individuals drawing simultaneously upon conflicting narratives and yet still restoring order and moving on despite such apparent ambivalence.

By integrating this analysis of outcome into that of the presence and strength of different narratives in each interview, the three distinct groups referred to previously in this Chapter emerged. Firstly, a small group of four 4 participants who, however active the challenge, adhered consistently and unequivocally to a single narrative that they brought to the discussion thereby maintaining a high level of resolution regarding their personal involvement. Secondly, a larger group of 19 leaders who drew upon contradictory narratives to varying degrees but who nonetheless achieved a successful outcome. Thirdly, a further small group of 5 individuals who drew similarly upon multiple narratives but who were unsuccessful in resolving the dilemmas and difficulties they encountered. The presentation of the detail behind this summary is now structured around these three groups, continuing the approach taken in 6.2 and 6.3 above by drawing upon typical “exemplar” interviews from each.

6.4.1. Singular narrative, successful sensemaking outcome.

Table 6.4: Nature and Strength of Overall Sensemaking Narratives : Group 1 (N=4)

Extent to which present in interviews	Narratives			
	No such Thing	Weary Endurance	Conscientious Objection	Pragmatic Engagement
STRONG	2			2
MODERATE				
WEAK	1	1	1	1
NONE	1	3	3	1
TOTAL	4	4	4	4

Table 6.4 above shows how four 4 of the 28 leaders who participated in the research adhered unequivocally to a single narrative, with two taking a strong No Such Thing position and two a Pragmatic Engagement stance throughout. In each case, there was no substantive evidence of any other narrative. Whilst it is tempting to consider this group homogeneously, this overall similarity conceals some very interesting differences in the narratives constructed and used to deal with any challenge presented by the active interview.

Alongside Mark (see 6.2.3 above) another good example of the unitary use of a No Such Thing narrative was apparent in my interview with **Jane**. Jane is a Finance Director with an American owned Asset Management business. At the time we met, the industry was still in a degree of post credit crunch turmoil, with large scale restructuring and compulsory redundancies very much to the fore. Even in the good times, the organisation was renowned for the type of “kick butt, name taking” culture that Brian described in my interview with him (See 6.3.2.1 above - Brian worked in a different organisation but within the same overall sector). Jane, however, saw it all very differently. Her position on politics was that it didn’t really exist as a phenomenon and was instead just a repository for individual shortcomings.

“Most people use politics to describe things that are out of their control. I think politics is a catch-all term which is used too loosely to be fair and I tend not to use it because it’s like politics, I didn’t get the job because of politics, ok you probably

didn't get the job because you weren't networking, you didn't have the right level of relationship. I just think that people blame things on politics which is silly. I think at the end of the day what people should do is break it down to the component parts to really figure out what it really is they want to influence and how they want to influence it."

This rejection of politics was consistent throughout our exchanges and seemed to be serving an identity purpose of presenting herself as a high achiever through her own skills and abilities. In other words, what happened to her was largely the result of her own endeavour and competence rather than circumstances beyond her influence. The denial of politics enabled her to reinforce this self-concept rather than acknowledge other less wholesome or meritorious influences upon her success.

I think it is a very passive aggressive word politics and..... like stuff happening to you and you have no control over it as opposed to saying well there are things I have control over and there are things I don't have control over and let's just break it down and figure out what are the things that I can do the best at figuring out and sorting and then the rest should fall in place. People always say what is it, chance?, favourite?, be prepared? or other people will say it's a combination of chance and preparedness and some people go oh that person is always so lucky, but luck typically is not winning the EuroMillions, luck is typically when people say someone is lucky who always gets the plum job , always picked for the next role, always getting the credit that they deserve and I think most of the time a lot of the stuff is controllable if you break it down in that way.

In line with her own apolitical stance, Jane constructed the environment she was working within in open and positive terms.

"I think people see politics as an insidious thing that exists in organisations to trip them up and I don't really think that this exists here. A lot of weight is put on openness, honesty and getting things done not on who you kiss up to and how you you know , for want of a better word, play that game."

Jane saw her organisation as "pretty straight forward" and that whoever got on was just a question of "numbers and statistics". I explored whether she felt that political acumen played a role in her career success or of those around her but was met again with a flat denial:

“No, not political, we are talking meritocracy. I think at the end of the day it is always a combination of a meritocracy, preparation and you being in the right place at the right time if you are going to get that right job because there is no other way to explain why somebody else at aged 42 is the CEO of xxx and another person isn’t who’s equally educated and competent.”

Her use of the phrase “*no other way to explain*” highlighted the extent to which she had screened out the possibility of individual progression being possible by any means other than capability or chance. That the career success of other senior leaders, and by implication, her own, could be attributed to political acumen manifesting in behaviours such as self-promotion, ingratiation or scapegoating, represented a potential threat to her self-concept as someone who had achieved everything purely by dint of her own skills and endeavour. Steadfastly refusing to acknowledge the political element to her organisational existence meant that there was nothing, therefore, to either wearily endure, conscientiously object to or pragmatically engage in: it simply didn’t exist. However, naïve or self-deceiving this may seem to the neutral observer, the strength, singularity and consistency of her narrative and the absence of any recognised contradictions or dilemmas meant that, for Jane as it was with Mark (6.2.3 above), sensemaking activity was defensive in nature.

Interviewer: Do you feel that being apolitical in this environment, with all the change that has happened here, presents any dilemmas for you? That this sense of just saying ‘look this isn’t me and I’m not going to engage in it’ presents you with any challenges?

Interviewee: No. No, because I actually..... if you tear away the random term and you go to the actual pragmatic things that you need to do when the organisation is changing, then you need to think about “ok is there a spot for me in the change?” If there is not, then where should I be looking at my other options and how do I deal with that..... lurking by doorways and trying to intercept people in their path in hope that they might give you a nugget of information that you might be able to leverage and use....you can get there without having to do that.

A full summary of the sensemaking triggers apparent in this analysis together with the sensemaking response and associated identity work can be found in Appendix xiii.

Another example of how the consistent use of a single narrative underpinned a high degree of resolution in respect of participation in political activity was evident in the interview with **Matthew**. The narrative itself though could hardly have been more different. Matthew is a

Director within the Civil Service and had acquired broad leadership experience not just by working at Executive level within Central Government Departments but also by running a number of “arm’s length” Government agencies. Unlike Jane, he embraced rather than denied the existence of organisational politics:

“I see it as the difference between what’s written down in terms of a structure and how the organisation actually works. I’ve always thought there’s something going on here above and beyond just structures. It’s the bit of the life of an organisation above the formal structure that governs relationships and how things are made to happen. As soon as you get a structure where influence matters, you will get more politics. The less clarity there is about accountability and responsibility, the more people’s roles and authority rely on influencing and the more confusion and ambiguity there is about that, the more it’s possible for political tactics to arise.”

As well as highlighting the informality of political activity, he also emphasised its inevitability - “you will always get a degree of organisational politics by nature of asking human beings to interact towards either a common goal or a series of goals.” Not only did he see it as inevitable, his experience of it had brought him to the point of seeing it as largely functional and even value adding. In narrating his early management experience, he talked of how he had experienced a dawning realisation that his delivery skills – which he had always felt secure about – were not enabling the career success he aspired to. Something was missing:

“It was basically about an ability to project, to influence which I hadn’t at that point developed. So when it came to selecting people for roles – they would be thinking, ‘Right. I’ve got five people here all with good delivery. Who actually will I choose?’ And unless your name is...unless you’re thought of, you won’t be thought of. You have to be good at – whether you like it or not – you have to be good at this stuff”

Being “good at this stuff” had, however, shown Matthew more than just how to develop his career; it had given him insights into how you could really take ideas forward, legitimate ideas that otherwise might not see the light of day.

“People who win these games are the people with the best ideas and the strongest thought leadership, you know, the actual ability to project their ideas into a system. That has been my learning experience. And for a long time since, I have thought a lot about the power of somebody having great ideas and finding allies and getting

people to work with you and do things. And it can take you a long way, further than simply command and control. There is actually a bit of a shortage of ideas, the genuinely transformational ideas. And therefore, people are genuinely seeking them because there's a whole set of problems in society which need new thinking. And actually he or she who has the ideasif you can convince people, it's a very powerful way of getting your beliefs put into practice actually."

Politics for Matthew then was not about dysfunctional behaviour and was bigger than just fulfilling career ambition; it was about selling ideas and enabling transformational change. He spoke several times about *"locking people in warm embraces"* and forging powerful alliances with compelling propositions. The negative manifestation was not outside his visible spectrum (he felt that it was an important role of leadership to *"police it and reward positive behaviour"*) and, as far as his own involvement was concerned, felt that it was *"not an effective strategy not to be clear with people what it is you're working towards. I've learnt that there are ways of being influential that don't end up... that aren't backstabbing and behind stairs-type ways. But they are...it's open and visible. And people see you're quite clear and open about what you're seeking to do."* In other words, not all tricks were dirty tricks (Buchanan and Badham, 1999).

The practical realism that ran through this whole narrative was underpinned by Matthew's self-concept as a pragmatic, self-effacing and delivery focussed person, an identity that was topped off by a grounded outlook (the most emotional he got was when he talked - in the best Civil Service tradition - of being a *"bit irritated"* about a time when he had been politically outflanked) and sanguine attitude (*"you can't always get your way, at the end of the day you basically have to shrug your shoulders a bit and just realise that nobody's dead and could we all just get on with it."*). Unlike Jane who resolved her relationship with organisational politics by denying its existence and influence upon her own career success, Matthew constructed his political skill not just as a "must have" career management competence but a capability that allowed the execution of much needed and transformational ideas in society. Political acumen was cast here, therefore, in almost philanthropic light rather than the pursuit of narrower and less selfless personal aggrandisement. A full summary of the sensemaking triggers apparent in this analysis together with the sensemaking response and associated identity work can be found in Appendix xiv.

Having presented examples from the small group of leaders who maintained a satisfactory resolution of their involvement in organisational politics through narrative singularity, the next section illustrates examples from a much larger group who achieved a similar outcome despite constructing and drawing upon contradictory positions.

6.4.2 Multiple narratives, successful sensemaking outcome.

Table 6.5: Nature and Strength of Overall Sensemaking Narratives : Group 2 N=19)

Extent to which present in interviews	Narratives			
	No Such Thing	Weary Endurance	Conscientious Objection	Pragmatic Engagement
STRONG	1		10	13
MODERATE	3	7	5	5
WEAK	5	8	4	1
NONE	10	4		
TOTAL	19	19	19	19

Table 6.5 above presents the analysis of the narratives constructed by a group of nineteen leaders who also achieved a successful outcome but this time, from more vigorous sensemaking activity triggered by the active interview. Immediately apparent is how members of this group constructed and used competing narratives, the most striking aspect of this being both a Conscientious Objection and a Pragmatic Engagement combination (the full table in Appendix xii shows how fourteen individuals drew either strongly or moderately on both). One might intuitively have expected the tensions between such conflicting narratives to have been problematic for achieving a sense of resolution and identity affirmation. On the contrary, however, this was not an insurmountable barrier to successfully negotiating the ambivalence associated with the contradictory ways in which they narrated their experience of organisational politics and this section sets out some typical examples of how this was achieved.

The importance of a strong sense of pragmatism in dealing with ambivalence is evident in my exchanges with **Emma**, an interview not analysed previously. Emma is an OD Director within a global Petrochemicals business and used the discussion as an opportunity to showcase the work she had been leading to re-orientate the culture of the business towards more inclusive and transparent norms. She talked at length about how values had been “refreshed” and new behaviours “launched” in an effort to present the organisation and the leadership group of which she was a part in positive light. Her desire to illustrate the success

of her work necessitated the construction of a narrative that downplayed the existence of any political activity or tension.

“It can sound very divisive and I don’t think that I would say..... it is not intended to be divisive. I think it has just been as a result of, a lot of people have known each other for a lot of time and therefore just know how stuff gets done – not that it is intentionally not written down. We are on the change. I would say fast forward 5 years and we’ll be much more system based. The change is coming from within, it’s not being forced on us , its not being.....the people who are doing the changes are not coming from outside the company, its us inside creating that system which can be a bit counterintuitive because we’ve all been amongst individuals who know each other really well.”

Politics for Emma, therefore, was simply an accidental by-product of people working effectively together for a long time. She acknowledged there was *“a range of behaviours”* but argued that there was not any organisational intent behind this- *“Absolutely not, absolutely there is not a dominant force whatsoever. We are waking up to the fact that we need to get more transparent and write it down because unintentionally, a small amount of the population really does not know how to get stuff done”*. The narrative at this stage was one of people reading too much into the significance of organisational behaviour and that, even if politics did exist, there were no malevolent motives driving it, it was just a function of the fact that *“we haven’t written down how to get things done”*.

This denial of the significance of politics ran uncomfortably alongside a narrative of much more active engagement. She talked at length about some of the stakeholder management techniques she had deployed in order to make change happen and how much of this work had to be covert and hidden in order to gain traction in the business.

Interviewer: Would you say, do you see yourself as having acted or having to act politically as part of your role?

Emma: “Oh yes. I have to understand how the system works today to be able to shift it over time because you can’t, I don’t believe in how change really works, how you can shift something by standing on the outside of it. So absolutely, I spend an awful lot of my time in my role having one on one conversations, finding out what people think and adjusting and nudging and listening and working out different communication styles and how to get stuff done in the matter of shifting the way in which we get stuff done. So if I stood on the outside, nobody would hear

and nobody would listen and would probably be an almost allergic reaction that would reinforce what we are doing now because that is all “somebody is telling me that is wrong”.

Throughout our exchanges, Emma walked a sensemaking tightrope between both downplaying the significance of a phenomenon that threatened to undermine the success of her culture changing activity and at the same time enthusiastically recounting how she had personally utilised a range of political behaviours and tactics to serve an agenda that had to remain covert if it was to succeed. The role of identity work in resolving the contradictions she encountered in these conflicting positions seemed significant, in particular her repeated emphasis on herself as a positive person.

“I am a massive optimist, a huge optimist. I recognise some of the negatives but rather than try to shoot it down, I try to crowd it out with the good stuff so that there is no place for this crappy, egotistical behaviour to breathe. I am also a complete pragmatist because I think that otherwise I could not do my job. I would be permanently angst ridden, exhausted, miserable, I’d be depressed. So I don’t hold the view that politics is bad and I don’t feel that I have been a victim of politics”

The desire to avoid positioning herself as a victim and instead as someone able to act positively and pragmatically despite the *“crappy egotistical behaviour”* around her seemed to be significant in how Emma achieved a successful sensemaking outcome that resolved the tensions between contradictory narratives of being very active in an arena that she was reluctant to acknowledge even existed. The determination to present herself in an optimistic and pragmatic light enabled her to push political activity into the near invisible extreme of the organisational behaviour spectrum and restore order by accounting for her own engagement as skilful influencing in the wider organisational interest. A full summary of the sensemaking triggers apparent in this analysis together with the sensemaking response and associated identity work can be found in Appendix xv.

The role of a pragmatic self-concept in addressing the ambivalence of contradictory narratives was also present in others who achieved a similarly successful outcome. For example, 6.3.2.1 above highlighted the sensemaking tensions between “pragmatic engagement” and “conscientious objection” apparent in the accounts of **Brian** regarding his own political engagement. On the one hand, Brian told stories that highlighted his disdain for not just the hypocrisy, back stabbing and manipulative behaviour of his leadership

colleagues but also for their ignorance and stupidity. On the other though, the active exploration of this surfaced the realisation that he too had been complicit in such activity. The identity threat associated with this dissonance was that he risked presenting himself as either bitter and irrelevant or hypocritical and manipulative. The use of identity work to resolve this dilemma successfully centred around the reinforcement of himself as being driven by a sense of duty. He argued that the world was *“crying out for more integrity”*, that he had a *“responsibility absolutely to do what is right so I am going to stay and do that”* and that he would continue to be an irritating *“grain of sand on the beach”* towards the organisation.

“One person said to me, in fact it was my boss 24 months ago, said “that’s what drives me crazy about you, you always go for the moral high ground”. And I said “Sorry, help me understand is that a criticism or am I being praised for that? “The line went silent because there is no right answer, there is a right answer but sorry I’m not holding myself out as a paragon of virtue but I think that I have a responsibility to do what is right and do what is sensible”.

Presenting himself as having such selfless sense of duty was supplemented by seeing himself as that little bit smarter than other political protagonists. In this way, Brian resolved the sensemaking dilemma associated with the realisation that he had done more than simply occupy the moral high ground. In contrast to the *“idiotic posturing”* of others, his approach was more sophisticated: *“you’ve got to play those games but judiciously, you’ve got to be a little wiser”*. Doing the right thing meant *“using the judo rather than karate approach – the judo approach is to go with it.”* This combination of integrity, wisdom and belief in his own efficacy in the political arena meant that, far from being undermined by the realisation of active collusion with ignorant and unethical bullying, Brian was able to resolve his active engagement and reinforce his own self-concept.

I’ve never really looked at this in the linear type way but what you have done is that you have forced me to look back over my life and say what are the different events or other with politics and I guess my abhorrence to overt political stuff has yeah, just probably been more cemented and I can see how I have been consistent through the years so to that extent I have been true to myself.

In other cases where the sensemaking struggle was particularly intense, such an efficacious identity was similarly instrumental in achieving a successful outcome. Section 6.2.2 above highlighted how **Alex’s** sensemaking activity was triggered by his confrontation of the realisation that he had been more politically active than he had previously perceived. This

included the uncomfortable recognition that *“I often say different things to different people depending upon who they are and what I want out of them”* and that withholding information and deliberate exclusion were tactics he had regularly employed to move issues forward. This sat uneasily alongside a self-concept of being open and transparent in his dealings with those around him.

I still see myself despite what I said as having a fair level of integrity and honesty about being open and approachable. I see myself as friendly and supportive. I don't see myself as manipulative and saying something very different to different people simply in order to influence them.

To a neutral observer, Alex's struggle to present himself as apolitical may well appear riddled with contradiction and unresolved dilemmas. For Alex though his self-concept as a delivery orientated individual meant that he was able to successfully make sense of such ambiguous nuances and “move on” without apparent difficulty.

Interviewer: When you talked about it (the interview) being revealing and thought-provoking, are there any insights or observations that come to mind then?

Alex: I mean I think some of it would be (Pause) without realising it, I'm probably more political than I thought I was. (Pause) I think I've probably absorbed more than I realised some of the techniques and behaviours that you need to use (Short Pause) to be successful. That being said, I don't regard myself as someone who's political in getting their own ideas implemented. I try to play to my strength, which is about being able to make things, do things quickly, deliver quickly, deliver things to a good standard.....but then you have to be sanguine about the fact you can't always get your own way and I don't mind that.

Unlike section 6.4.1 above which presented how a small number made sense of personal involvement in organisational politics successfully through the consistent defence of a particular narrative, however implausible that may sound to the neutral ear, this section has shown how that was not the only path to a positive outcome and that an agentic identity brought about sensemaking closure for many, despite the presence of multiple and seemingly irreconcilable narratives. Section 6.4.3 below now turns attention to the small number who were less successful in resolving the ambiguities and dilemmas unearthed in the active exploration of their experiences.

6.4.3. Multiple narratives, unsuccessful sensemaking outcome.

Table 6.6: Nature and Strength of Overall Sensemaking Narratives : Group 3 (N=5)

Extent to which present in interviews	Narratives			
	No such Thing	Weary Endurance	Conscientious Objection	Pragmatic Engagement
STRONG		3	5	1
MODERATE		1		1
WEAK	1	1		3
NONE	4			
TOTAL	5	5	5	5

This final section focuses upon the small group who, like most of the overall sample analysed in 6.4.2 above, drew upon more than one competing narrative but who differed in not being able to achieve the same positive sensemaking outcome. Table 6.6 above presents the different narratives drawn upon by this group and an important difference with Group 2 above is immediately apparent. As with many of their more resolved counterparts, all in this group drew strongly upon a Conscientious Objection position but rather than this being combined with a strong sense of pragmatism, here this sat alongside a narrative of Weary Endurance, suggesting that for this group, individuals perceived a lack of control or an inability to be an active or skilled protagonist themselves. Such a finding suggests that a sense of agency in the political arena may be crucial in determining between successful and unsuccessful sensemaking approaches.

The way in which a lack of such efficacy undermined a successful sensemaking outcome is demonstrated in the interview with **Ruth**, a senior leader within a global professional services business. She was passionate about her work but also experiencing frustration that the organisational direction of travel was for more and more strategic decision-making responsibility to be transferred to functions in North America. This was presenting her with several challenges regarding her ability to influence key relationships and achieve her performance objectives. A further round of restructuring was in the air when we met. Whilst the sensemaking struggle for others (see John and Alex in 6.2 above) centred around the realisation that they had perhaps been both more politically active than they previously had

recognised and that, in doing so, had potentially compromised either their own sense of personal integrity or their role as guardian of good organisational conduct, for Ruth, the dilemma was the need to be more politically active and her emotional capacity and behavioural capability to be so.

Ruth's definition of organisational politics was relationship centred – *“it's around who you know, not what you know.... there isn't a level playing field and so it's about how you navigate your way around key relationships”*. She felt at a disadvantage by being remote from the U.S. where key functions were being centralised. Others were able to *“walk in and out of each other's offices”*, so there was more opportunity to build networks and influence. Her insight that *“if I'm good at my job and this person is good at their job, if they're good at organisational politics they can achieve 20 times more than I possibly could”* was the stimulus for her making sense of the need to be more politically active and skilful. Her challenge in this pursuit was dealing with the recognition that she lacked the emotional resources and motivation to do so.

I think I am negative about it – I went on a positive power and influence course and leadership about two months ago. I thought a lot of that was around organisational politics. And actually what I came away with was how exhausting it was to actually do that. So when I talk about negative it's because for me personally I feel like I have to learn a whole other set of skills. I can't just have basic skills, you know competencies, I've got to have that whole extra layer and so it's just all tiring. Very tiring – and it just gets on top of you.

This was a dilemma that ran through our entire discussion. On the one hand she was ambitious and saw that political skill was a capability linked to achieving what she wanted to in her role, and indeed she'd had first hand and very positive experience of how positive it had been when she was led by someone who knew all the right people and was able to open all sorts of doors and remove barriers in her way. On the other, though, was the weary realisation of what that meant for her in terms of having to build *“a whole other set of skills”* and finding the time and energy to put herself “out there” in relationship building activity. Ruth was at her most passionate when she talked about her work: she spoke of her “brand” being centred on her expertise and what she had done around raising standards and reengineering processes. She seemed desperate for this to be enough but was continually grappling with the recognition that it probably wasn't.

One issue that seemed to be a barrier to her resolving her dilemma was a lack of confidence in her own capability to engage – “I just don’t think I’m any good at it” – and how that conflicted with her own self-concept.

“It all feels so insincere, all this networking and schmoosing. My personality is that I can’t suddenly be all lovely and nice to somebody that actually fundamentally I don’t respect or like. It just makes me cringe. That’s how it feels, it feels like I’m just prostituting myself. Maybe that’s being British and not wanting to blow your own trumpet, but I see people do it and I think to myself, I can’t, you know”.

Equally, her own sense of personal ambition seemed merely to highlight the realisation that she was lacking this “other set of skills” needed to achieve it.

So I am ambitious but I think that I associate organisational politics with progression and ambition and I don’t think I can do all that stuff. I like tangible things, I don’t like intangible things that have to be done like this.....ugh...and also...sigh ...maybe I should just go ‘you know what – in my situation, because of all my competing priorities it’s just easier not to go there’. I’ll do my little bit. Just be happy where you are – except I probably won’t.

The dilemma between an intellectually compelling argument for her to be more politically active and the significant emotional and identity cost that this implied was one that no deployment of sensemaking processes was ultimately able to resolve. The intensity of this struggle was apparent in her facial expression and body language, and, ultimately, she presented herself as far from resolved in her sensemaking activity.

“By talking about organisational politics it’s made me realise how conflicted I am by all this stuff. Rather than... rather just thinking that I’ll do my bare minimum and that it’s not me. Actually I think I should be thinking more about how I can influence...and maybe I should be... don’t know...maybe just think about looking at it.”

A full summary of the sensemaking triggers apparent in this analysis together with the sensemaking response and associated identity work can be found in Appendix xiii

A sense of ineffectiveness politically was also very apparent in undermining **Amy’s** sensemaking of her negative experiences of organisational politics. Amy is a Senior Executive within the recruitment industry. She had experienced some particularly negative

behaviour within her corporate life which she described as including being pitted against colleagues, starved of the resources she needed to do her job, set up to fail and having the credit for her work taken by others. Whilst others tolerated or even colluded with this, Amy took the decision to leave and become self-employed. The recruitment industry was still struggling to recover from a long and deep recession and it was evident that this decision had resulted in a loss of earnings potential.

The opposing and uncomfortable cognitions that triggered her sensemaking activity centred around her perceived inability to deal with the politics she experienced and the impact her decision to leave had on her professional life and identity. On the one hand, she presented herself as a principled person of integrity who walked away when she felt to stay would compromise her values. On the other, she spoke of being an ambitious and driven career individual and her realisation that many in her network, who she regarded as less capable, had continued to thrive within the political environment she had walked away from, prompted her to grapple with whether her judgement had been a good one or not. Interwoven with this conflict was a constant strain of identity work in which Amy struggled to defend her self-concept as a smart, rational person in the face of having made what could be seen as an emotionally based or irrational decision. Amy's sensemaking dilemma, therefore, was one of accounting for an emotionally based decision to walk away from the corporate political terrain that had incurred a heavy cost to her career, financial position and identity as an ambitious, rational and "savvy" person.

In an effort to resolve this dilemma, Amy initially attempted to make light of her experiences by claiming that, however bad the consequences of her reaction to negative organisational politics had been, it was no big deal when considered from a wider perspective.

Interviewer: Given your experiences and how things have turned out as a result, is there any emotional scar tissue or legacy of any sort?

Interviewee: No, because it doesn't mean anything, no, no, no. I mean it depends on what you have in life, so on a personal side there has been a number of tragedies so this pales in comparison. So no.

Amy didn't elaborate any further on what she meant by this but the attempt to brush aside the impact of what she had been through seemed unconvincing given how she had spoke with great feeling about the scale of what she regarded as "*proper psychological control*", "*emotional beatings*" and humiliation on the part of the owners of the business she was leading. It seemed more likely that this was an attempt to make her experience seem not

seem quite so bad after all, a strategy which was not entirely successful given how she continued to vacillate over whether she had made a good call to walk away from it all.

“I think I am constantly re-evaluating it so I think, so for me personally my 30’s were...I was quite ambitious in my 30’s. I think I still am. What has happened has made me look around and going ‘gee so and so’s got this job” and you know I was better than that and that made me look at this and go ‘did I make the right decision?’ Is it really where I want to be in life? Am I really doing what I want? Should I be tolerating that politics and going back to a big environment?”

At other times during the discussion she attempted to resolve the discomfort of her dilemma by claiming how better off she was out of it all – *“All that stuff that went on..... at home that doesn’t happen and in my home office that doesn’t happen.”* This was similarly undermined, however, by a sense of disappointment in herself that she hadn’t been able to function in a political environment more effectively. *“It’s a weakness not being able to play those games. I’m not comfortable with it but I wish I was, I really wish I was”.*

Not being able to address the identity conflict implied by how, as a smart, savvy and rational person, she had made what she labelled herself as a reactive and irrational call to turn her back on a successful organisational career meant that Amy was ultimately unsuccessful in rebutting a sense that she had been a victim of her political experience.

“I was just annoyed, really annoyed. And I think..... I think that’s what politics does to you. Uses emotion even though we all claim that we are all rational, actually, no, we’re not, we’re all human beings and we’re driven by emotion. In my case, my Achilles heel was my emotion and I think that is what drove my exit and my decision.”

Whereas Emma and Brian (see 6.4.2 above) had been able to restore cognitive order successfully through efficacy beliefs that underpinned a capacity to act politically, either in the organisations best interest or as the grit in the oyster to others, sensemaking activity for Amy broke down in the face of the realisation that she had not been able to do either, at considerable cost to her own career. A full summary of the sensemaking triggers apparent in this analysis together with the sensemaking response and associated identity work can be found in Appendix xiv.

This collapse of sensemaking was symptomatic of other interviews in this category, two of which have been analysed previously in this Chapter. **Lucy's** (see 6.3.1.1 above) attempt to address the frustration and career impasse associated with her political experience by positioning it as an inescapable part of the political terrain everywhere rather than through her own shortcomings founded on the realisation that she was therefore destined always to feel as angry and alienated as she did now no matter what organisation she worked in. Similarly, for **Mary**, her realisation of naivety in the face of backstage manipulation served merely to enhance the sense of never being able to engage in the political demands of operating in male dominated, power driven environments with her values of transparency and decency. The one exception to this was the case of **John** (see 6.2.1 above) who's sensemaking failure can be attributed not so much to a lack of pragmatism but instead to the realisation of the consequences of such engagement and how this undermined his own self-concept as his organisation's "holder of the values". This exception will be further discussed in Chapter 7 below.

6.4.4 Summary

The research findings laid out in this chapter demonstrate the importance of recognising a range of understandings of the lived experience of organisational politics and the complex mix of sensemaking processes, narratives and identity work involved in attempts to resolve the dilemmas encountered successfully. When considered in more detail against the specific research questions adopted in the study, they show firstly how sensemaking was triggered by confronting the inconsistencies between participant definitions and accounts of their own work behaviour surfaced in the active exploration of experience. Secondly, in order to address discomfort and surprise, a wide variety of different processes were deployed as a response, self-deception and role distancing the most prominent among them. Use of these processes was equally prominent in the stories of leaders who were both successful and unsuccessful in ultimately resolving the dilemmas encountered, suggesting that, although an important element, they are not of themselves predictive of the sensemaking outcome. Thirdly, leaders built on these processes by constructing four overarching narratives: *No such thing*, *Weary endurance*, *Conscientious objection* and *Pragmatic engagement*. For most, use of these narratives contributed to a successful sensemaking outcome. Within this majority group, whilst a small number were resolved through unequivocal and defensive sensemaking, most achieved success despite drawing on conflicting narratives, the most common combination being that of *Conscientious objection* with *Pragmatic engagement*. A further small group, despite also drawing upon multiple narratives, were less successful in resolving the ambiguity they encountered, suggesting that, just as with the processes in use,

narrative equivocality is not necessarily predictive of either sensemaking success or failure. Within this smaller unresolved group, all maintained a strong position of *Conscientious objection* but combined instead with a narrative of *Weary endurance* rather than the strong pragmatic approach of the more resolved, implying that their negative sensemaking outcome is linked in some way to a lack of belief in their capacity to fulfil this element of their role. In conclusion this research demonstrates that leaders can resolve the ambivalent nature of personal involvement in politics through a pragmatic self-concept but are left struggling when they experience it as a phenomenon over which they have little control and in which they cannot engage positively. Chapter 7 now discusses the contributions of these findings in more detail together with their implications for theory, leadership practice and future research.

7. Discussion.

This research has been concerned with answering the following research questions.

How do leaders make sense of their own personal involvement in organisational politics? In particular;

- ***How is such sensemaking triggered?***
- ***What sensemaking processes are embedded in the stories that leaders tell about their experiences?***
- ***What overall narratives do leaders create and use to account for their personal involvement or withdrawal successfully?***
- ***How are sensemaking processes, narratives and outcomes influenced by identity work?***

Having presented the findings in relation to these questions, this chapter discusses how they add to what is known already about both organisational politics and sensemaking, what such contribution implies for both future theorising and leadership practice and how their limitations may be used to inform subsequent empirical work.

7.1 How research findings contribute to the understanding of how leaders make sense of organisational politics.

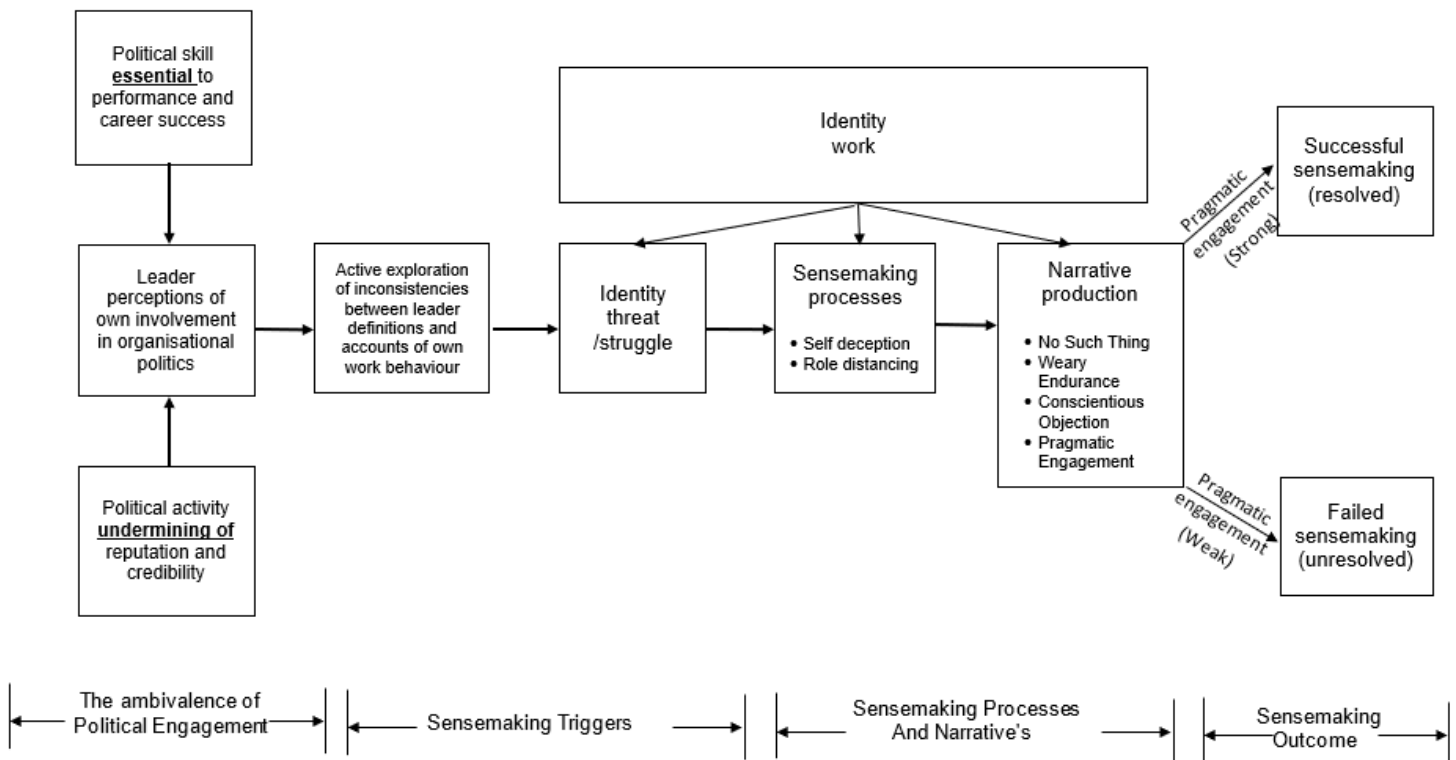
By way of a brief restatement, the earlier literature review of this thesis framed the following analysis as a warrant for the relevance and contribution of this study. Firstly, despite much scholarly endeavour in recent decades our understanding of organisational politics is still limited (Lepisto and Pratt, 2012; Ferris and Treadway, 2012a; Buchanan, 2016) with research “progressing slowly and marked by a few dominant paradigms and models” (Ferris and Treadway, 2012a, p.14). The study of organisational politics is well suited to sound qualitative investigation “yet little has been conducted and published to date” (Ferris and Treadway, 2012a, p.16) and there has been a growing chorus of writers and researchers calling for new insights, research methods, models and richer interpretations of this complex phenomenon (Buchanan, 2008, 2016; Hochwarter, 2012; McFarland et al, 2012; Landells and Albrecht, 2016; Doldor, 2017). What is known from the large scale meta analyses of the quantitative work that dominate the field, is that the construct is widely perceived in negative terms by organisational members, thereby carrying risks to the reputations of those involved

in its machinations (Miller et al, 2008; Chang et al, 2009; Bedi and Schat, 2013). This portrayal of politics in purely negative terms has been increasingly challenged by others who argue that it has “gotten a bad rap” unjustifiably (Hochwarter, 2012) and that it has a positive side that can be equally connected with performance improvement, change management and career success (Bass and Bass, 2008; Hochwarter, 2012; Ellen et al, 2013; Kimura, 2015; Landells and Albrecht, 2016). What is less understood is how leaders handle such ambivalence and interpret the lived experience of their personal participation in political activity, a gap that has prompted arguments of how “unsatisfactory” it is that “researchers appear never to have spoken to managers” (Buchanan, 2012, p.352) and that the fields of politics and leadership, having long been examined independently, “should be integrated in order to generate multiple avenues for discovery” (Ellen et al, 2013, p.854).

This section argues the contribution of this study by embedding the findings laid out in Chapter 6 into extant knowledge analysed throughout the earlier literature review (Chapters 2-4), thereby identifying how the understanding of how leaders experience and interpret their involvement in organisational politics is advanced as a result. By way of an overall summary, the study makes three primary contributions both to understanding of organisational politics and, separately, to the development of the sensemaking perspective. In terms of organisational politics, this research adds to what we know already by firstly highlighting the complexity of how leaders experience their own personal involvement, thereby challenging the binary, positive versus negative categorisation of rationalistic perspectives and demonstrating how leaders make sense of such ambiguity successfully despite holding multiple and conflicting positions simultaneously. Secondly, by showing how participation in political activity represents a threat to fragile leadership identities and that identity work, particularly in the capacity to engage pragmatically, is crucial to resolving dilemmas and contradictions positively. Thirdly, that conceptualisations of political skill may need to be widened beyond a purely behavioural domain to include a cognitive element represented by an ability to cope with ambiguity and ambivalence. From a sensemaking perspective, the study contributes firstly by illuminating the specific role played by stories, narratives and, especially, identity work in the process of sensemaking and the outcome generated therefrom. Secondly, by unearthing a specific mechanism – role distancing – not previously identified in the literature and thirdly, by showing the value of an active interviewing approach to extracting richer sensemaking material thereby building on Weick’s underexplored idea (1995, p.135) of how sensemaking as argument produces more dependable understandings.

Table 7.1 below offers a framework which is offered as a map to guide the reader through the “end to end” sensemaking process, rather than a positivist-based model to establish causal linkages, starting from the “why” and the “how” of sensemaking being triggered, through the specific processes deployed and narratives created as a response and ending with the different levels of resolution achieved. The model serves a further purpose in providing a framework for structuring the discussion of contribution in a way that ensures that the research questions adopted are addressed directly. Against each question, a brief restatement of extant theory and research will be summarised before discussing how this study adds to such knowledge and understanding.

Table 7.1: How Leaders Make Sense of Their Engagement in Organisational Politics : Overview



The ambivalence about involvement in Organisational Politics.

Whilst the suggestion that 'power struggles, alliance formation, strategic manoeuvring and 'cut-throat' actions may be as endemic to organizational life as planning, organizing, directing and controlling' (Schein, 1977, p.64) is not purely a contemporary one, a number of structural and contextual factors have combined to make the current organisational climate increasingly political in nature (Pfeffer, 2010). Changes in the contemporary business landscape (blurred organizational boundaries, fast-paced organizational change, flattening of hierarchies) all place increased value on managing individual or group interests (Zanzi and O'Neill, 2001) whilst leaders are increasingly called to make unstructured strategic decisions in the face of change and uncertainty (Buchanan, 2008). Other studies, too, have noted an increase in political activity where there is a fast changing technological and environmental aspect and where decisions, therefore, are unplanned (Curtis, 2003; Gotsis & Kortezi, 2010; Ladebo, 2006; Latif et al, 2011; Poon, 2003; Vredenburg & Shea-VanFossen, 2010). Similarly, the matrix approach to organisational structure further implies greater complexity of internal processes and an intense battle for increasingly scarce resources, both of which have been shown to increase the incidence of "turf wars" (Cacciattolo, 2014) and individuals engaging in political behaviour (Gotsis & Kortezi, 2010: 499; Othman, 2008 p.43; Poon, 2003 p.142). All these factors combine to establish the ubiquity of politics in organisational life and personal participation therein as an unavoidable aspect of leadership roles (Buchanan, 2008).

Prior empirical work has also implied, rather than been explicit about, how participation in political activity, as well as being inevitable, presents an identity threat to leaders through its challenge to personal integrity and reputation. The development of the POPS model (Ferris and Kacmar, 1989, 1992) and the subsequent development of a substantive body of positivist/quantitative data and meta analyses over a 25 year period evidences that, seen through the eyes of those who experience it in organisational life, organisational politics is generally perceived negatively and correlated adversely to a range of important outcomes (Miller et al, 2008; Chang et al, 2009; Bedi and Schat, 2013). Despite arguments about the distorting influence of the inherently negative conceptualisations of organisational politics (Hochwarter, 2012; Landells and Albrecht, 2016), the persistently negative perceptions amongst organisational members suggests that participation in its machinations runs the risk of attributions of slippery behaviour and is parlous to reputation and credibility. This notwithstanding, understanding of involvement in politics as a threat to identity is limited. Whilst it is possible to speculate what might be implied by applying the findings of other analyses which have explored the threats associated with work that is "dirty" (Ashforth and

Kreiner, 1999) or “legitimacy contesting” (Brown and Toyoki, 2013), this study has demonstrated more explicitly how the way in which leaders experience, interpret and resolve dilemmas about their involvement in the political arena is interwoven with attempts to negotiate and defend a positive leadership identity.

The ambivalence surrounding involvement by leaders in political activity is created by the recognition, surfaced through detailed analyses of political skill (for example, Kimura, 2015), that, alongside being both inevitable and a threat to a positive identity, it is also essential for leadership performance and career success (Doldor, 2017). Positivist empirical work has directly examined and confirmed a positive relationship between political skill and leader effectiveness, as measured by perceived organizational support (Treadway et al. 2004), leader performance (Brouer et al. 2013; Douglas and Ammeter 2004), follower effectiveness (Brouer et al. 2013), team effectiveness (Ahearn et al. 2004) and overall firm performance (Tocher et al. 2012). The breadth and weight of this empirical data serves to strengthen the now more widely held view that “expertise in organizational politics is critical with regard to making things happen and getting things done” (Buchanan, 2016, p.343).

The dilemma for leaders then is this. On the one hand, whatever the “positive turn” in academic literature and research is starting to say to the contrary, the construct still seems to be one that is perceived negatively through the eyes of those who experience it in practice and those seen to be actively involved, therefore, risk much when it comes to reputation, trust and personal integrity. On the other, not only is the organisational context in which leaders are having to operate increasingly political, thereby rendering some form of participation as inevitable, a growing body of compelling evidence positions the acquisition and deployment of political skill as a “must have” leadership competence, linked both to short term performance and long term career success.

Whilst the dominant body of positivist/quantitative work tells us much about the perceptions of politics and political skill which create this dichotomy, rather less is known about how leaders handle such ambivalence (Buchanan, 2016) and this study contributes to the literature by adopting an interpretive/qualitative perspective and, more specifically, a sensemaking lens to advance understanding of how leaders experience and interpret their own personal involvement. Sensemaking is important for leadership (Maitlis, 2005) and its emphasis on identity construction, retrospective accounts and plausibility makes it a useful vehicle for interrogating leadership experience of such a slippery arena as organisational politics. Whilst existing empirical work draws attention to the political dimensions of sensemaking as a process (for example, Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Brown et al, 2015)

and the political influences upon its operation in multi national companies (Ainsworth & Hardy, 2012; Clark & Geppert, 2011; Dorrenbacher & Geppert, 2006, 2011; Geppert, 2003; Geppert & Dorrenbacher, 2011; Golant & Sillince, 2007; Topal, 2009; Whittle et al, 2016), this study contributes by examining sensemaking in action in greater detail and identifying more precisely how those in leadership roles account successfully for their own engagement in political activity and the factors that determine such a positive outcome.

Triggering the interview as a site for sensemaking.

The basic idea of sensemaking is that reality is an ongoing accomplishment that emerges from efforts to create order and make retrospective sense of what occurs (Weick, 1993, p.635). Such definitions serve to position sensemaking as a thinking process that uses retrospective accounts to explain surprises. Individuals experience events that may be discrepant from predictions. Discrepant events, or surprises, trigger a need for explanation, or post-diction, and, correspondingly, for a process through which interpretations of discrepancies are developed (Louis, 1980, p. 241). The role of discrepant events or surprises as some form of trigger is an important characteristic of sensemaking and suggests that sensemaking is partially under the control of expectations (Maitlis, 2005). Whenever an expectation is contradicted by events, some kind of ongoing activity is thereby interrupted and to understand sensemaking is also, thus, to understand how people cope with interruptions (Weick, 1995, 2001). Such surprise and discomfort in turn drives the need to construct accounts of what happened and why in a way that restores cognitive equilibrium.

A distinctive feature and, therefore, contribution of this study was the adoption of an active interviewing approach to trigger an investigation of sensemaking in action. The active interview (Holstein and Gulbriun, 1995, 2000, 2003) has been argued to enhance the power and richness of findings from qualitative research by eschewing the tendency of more conventional methods to treat participants as passive “vessels of answers” and instead assuming that their lived experience – in this case of organisational politics - does not simply await discovery and articulation, but is constituted within the interactional context of the interview (Holstein and Gulbriun, 1995, p.51). With its focus on interaction and “ineluctable collaboration” (ibid, 49) this allowed the researcher, not to reject or deny, but to probe, explore and confront leaders with any inconsistencies between their own definition of organisational politics and stories of their own work behaviour. Whilst there is a view that the assumption of participants being necessarily unwilling to speak openly to researchers about such a sensitive aspect of their role is “unduly cautious” (Buchanan, 2016), findings

from the traditional research interview approach adopted by other studies in this arena (for example, Landells and Albrecht, 2016) can be limited by unchallenged “press release” narratives (Wiersma, 1988) and the use by this study, therefore, of a more active approach to surfacing inconsistencies and contradictions implicit in participant accounts contributes by triggering sensemaking in action within the interview itself, thereby generating richer sensemaking material. For example, in the case of John, this took the form of realising that his sense of self as the guardian of organisational values and good conduct was inconsistent with him having “taken someone out” through whispered conversation. For Alex, the struggle was one of defending his identity of transparent behaviour and personal integrity alongside an awareness of having used political tactics to withhold information, pursue covert agendas and exclude stakeholders from decision making. This also suggests that the more recent “positive turn” in the literature regarding organisational politics may not yet be reflected in how leaders see this element of their role in practice and that there remains considerable discomfort in embracing the notion of being active in the political arena, given the identity threat and risk of negative attribution that this implies. Whilst the struggle to account for their own involvement in line with how they defined the construct was quite intense for most, it was noticeably less, however, for a small group who brought a very fixed position to the discussion and adhered to it consistently throughout, be it one of either complete denial (Jane and Mark) or wholehearted embracement (Jean and Matthew). The unwillingness to recognise alternative positions meant that sensemaking in this minority of cases was defensive in nature, being directed more at justifying an existing position rather than dealing with equivocality.

The use of sensemaking processes within stories.

Once triggered through surprise, contradiction or difficulty, sensemaking involves processes deployed in the restoration of sense (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014), represented in this case by individuals being able to satisfactorily account for their engagement in organisational politics in a way that enabled them to resolve the “disruptive ambiguity” (Weick, 1995) triggered by the active interview. This study builds on the work of Maclean et al (2012) by examining the use of sensemaking processes contained within stories to achieve this, stories being similarly defined here as “an account given by an interviewee of a discrete chapter, episode or series of events within a life-history narrative” (Maclean et al, 2012, p.24). Stories are an important part of sensemaking given their capacity “to hold disparate elements together long enough to energize and guide action, plausibly enough to allow people to make retrospective sense of whatever happens, and engagingly enough that others will contribute their own inputs in the interest of sensemaking” (Weick, 1995, p.61).

This said, storytelling by elite actors remains under-explored in the organization studies literature (Maclean et al, 2012) and the sensemaking processes that underlie the activity of self-narration remain relatively under-explored (Brown et al., 2008; Sonenshein, 2007).

Such as it exists, prior empirical work has identified a range of different sensemaking processes (Brown and Jones, 2000; Brown et al, 2008; Maclean et al, 2012). This study contributes over and above such work in three ways. Firstly, by examining the use of previously identified processes within a different context, namely the lived experience of organisational politics, and highlighting the salience of self-deception (Brown and Jones, 2000) as a sensemaking device in controversial arenas that imply a threat to a positive identity. Defined as the process of “holding two self-referential beliefs with the more negative belief being less within awareness” (Snyder 1985), self-deception here involves the use of often unconvincing but plausible arguments to either justify something that is difficult to accept or make it seem more palatable (Brown and Jones, 2000) and is instrumental in the resolution of discrepancy triggered by apparent contradiction through the ascribing of actions or events to causes that are superficially reasonable rather than less creditable or agreeable (Martin, 1985; Snyder, 1985; Brown and Jones, 2000). The stories recounted by interviewees contained more use of self-deception than any other form of sensemaking process in order to ignore or suppress the discomfort triggered by discrepant accounts of political involvement. Going back to the transcripts and some of the interviews drawn on in 6.3 and 6.4 above shows how some individuals achieved this. For example, Jack (see 6.3.1.2 above) dealt with the emerging realisation of more active involvement alongside a conscientious objection narrative by talking about how it was all “just a game” and that, if he was actively engaging, he was doing it “in a nice way”. Alex (see 6.2.2 and 6.4.2 above) dealt with the difficulty of maintaining an apolitical stance in the face of admitting saying different things to different people in order to achieve his aims by maintaining that when he did so, he wasn’t being political he was simply “choosing what to say and what not to say”. In the case of Brian (see 6.3.2.1 and 6.4.2 above) the discomfort encountered at the realisation of having to collude with “egotistical liars and bullies” was ameliorated by claiming a moral duty to stay and do what is right by being an irritating “grain of sand on the beach”. Finally, Emma’s (see 6.4.2 above) sensemaking tightrope walk between downplaying the significance of a phenomenon that threatened to undermine the success of her values & behaviours project whilst at the same time enthusiastically recounting how she had personally utilised a range of political behaviours and tactics, was facilitated in part at least by claiming that such undercover work was the only option to serve an agenda that had to remain covert if it was to succeed. What these examples suggest, therefore, is that, for most leaders, the restoration of order was facilitated at least in part by drawing on plausible or

superficially reasonable justifications rather than more likely but less creditable or agreeable alternatives.

The second contribution on the issue of processes lies in the identification of an additional sensemaking mechanism not previously identified in the literature, namely that of role distancing (Goffman, 1959). Serious scholarship on politics has previously been credited to Goffman's dramaturgical view of interpersonal influence in everyday interactions (Ferris and Treadway, 2012a) and the associated notion of role distancing as a mechanism for presenting the 'self' as being removed or at a distance from the role that is required to be played offers an additional dimension to such metaphor. The individual is not denying occupancy of the role but is rather denying that they would act the same way if it were not for the role, suggesting the presence of resistance in some form. The analysis of stories offered by most leaders in this study shows how, when confronted with participation in a phenomenon they previously described very negatively, then, if they couldn't plausibly deny such engagement, being able to somehow distance themselves from the tactics and behaviour that the nature of their role dictated, presented a mechanism for potentially resolving uncomfortable tensions in their accounts whilst at the same time defending a positive leadership identity. Taken together, the incidence and frequency of both self-deception and role distancing reinforces the suggestion, already expressed above, that whatever the literature may argue about the importance of political skill to performance and career success (Kimura, 2015), leaders remain troubled by this element of the role and the threat that active involvement therein poses to a positive self-concept.

Finally, the findings here about processes add nuance to what is known about overall sensemaking activity by highlighting that, whilst they are clearly of importance in dealing with ambivalence, they are not necessarily predictive in themselves of a successful sensemaking outcome. Closer examination of the breakdown of sensemaking processes into the three groups identified (see Appendix vii) shows how the use of self-deception and role distancing was not restricted purely to those leaders who achieved a successful outcome but also featured strongly in the efforts of the small number for whom sensemaking ultimately broke down. Within this group, the use of role distancing was apparent in how each individual strove to present themselves as somehow being removed or at a distance from the political aspects of their role whilst self-deception typically took the form of rationalisations which served a purpose of either justifying the difficult to accept cognitions around the inescapability of politics and their involvement in it or making it somehow seem not so bad after all. For example, Lucy took comfort in how her painful experience at least allowed her to be a wise mentor and protector of her team, Ruth talked of how working with a coach to

improve her skills whilst Amy tried to come to terms with her emotionally driven decision to walk away from a lucrative and career boosting role by claiming that at least there was no backstabbing and manoeuvring in her home office now. In each case, plausible – if sometimes unconvincing – arguments deployed to address discomfort and contradiction, unearthed during the active interview in an attempt to restore order. Given that these individuals did not ultimately come to a successful resolution of their engagement in political activity, this points to something other than the processes deployed in sensemaking that was more salient to the outcome.

The overarching narratives created to deal with ambiguity.

Narratives are fundamental to sensemaking given that they “are the means by which we organize and make sense of our experience and evaluate our actions” (Cunliffe and Coupland, 2012) and have been widely recognised as an important device for dealing with ambiguity (Weick 1995; Boje 1991; Brown 2005; Brown and Jones 2000; Maitlis, 2005). The argument of sensemaking as a narrative process (Brown et al, 2008) is predicated on the view that “man is, in his actions and practice as well as his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal” (MacIntyre, 1981, p.201) and that narrative is “a primary cognitive instrument through which human experience is made meaningful” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p.1) and “the preferred sensemaking currency ... among internal and external stakeholders” (Boje, 1991, p.106). Although such insights have been incorporated into organization studies by a range of authors who take the position that “narratives provide members with accounts of the process of organizing” (Mumby, 1987, p.113), “there are still relatively few empirical studies of sensemaking and narrative” (Brown et al, 2008).

This study contributes by demonstrating how the enactment of plausible and coherent narratives is a critical tool for organizational elites (Abolafia, 2010) and, in doing so, follows Boje’s distinction (2001, 2008) between discrete stories that branch off from a main narrative which the self creatively integrates into a unity (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010). This distinction is important given how the findings laid out in Chapter 6 above set out how individual “micro” stories of political incidents were used to build “macro” narratives of overall experience in order to address the difficulties which leaders encountered in the active interview.

The findings here surrounding the creation and use of narratives build further on the contributions already argued earlier in this discussion in different ways. Firstly, the nature of the narratives themselves add to the sense that being actively engaged in political activity is

something that is troubling for most leaders, whatever the intellectual arguments might be regarding the performance and career benefits (Kimura, 2015; Landells and Albrecht, 2016). Of the four narratives identified, only one speaks to positive engagement in pragmatic terms, whilst the other three suggest denial, abstinence or involuntary collusion, suggesting again that this element of their leadership role presents a sensemaking challenge that many would rather do without. This sense of struggle is emphasised further by the analysis shown in Tables 6.5 and 6.6 which show how most leaders drew on contradictory narratives during the exploration of their experience, claiming, for example, that they used political tactics judiciously in the organisational interest alongside simultaneous positions of being inexorably sucked into collusion against their will or of disavowing any such distasteful manoeuvring altogether. The notion of leaders creating multiple and contradictory narratives regarding their relationship with organisational politics becomes more nuanced and interesting still when linked to the issue of the sensemaking outcome achieved. Intuitively, one might have expected the existence of competing narratives to be problematic for a successful outcome, yet the findings highlight that this was just as apparent for the majority that were able to satisfactorily resolve their involvement as it was for those for whom sense ultimately broke down. That the holding of conflicting narratives is not necessarily predictive of the sensemaking outcome points, as with the use of processes above, to another aspect being more salient in determining the level of success achieved in dealing with the ambivalence confronted during the active interview.

The role of identity work in securing a positive sensemaking outcome.

A central concern of this study has been how leaders create a workable position on their personal involvement in the political arena and the factors that seem to differentiate between successful and unsuccessful sensemaking approaches. Once triggered, the restoration of sense is the primary goal of sensemaking activity (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015). Achieving such a successful outcome matters given that a failure in sensemaking is consequential as well as existential because it throws into question the nature of self and the world (Weick, 1995, p.14). Sensemaking involves individuals reading into things the meanings they wish to see, vesting actions with subjective meaning which helps make their world intelligible to themselves (Frost and Morgan, 1983). Whilst the failure of mere interpretation is a nuisance (Weick, 1995, p.14), efforts to replace one sense of the world with another are more fundamental and, whenever such sense is lost, it can be rather more troubling (Asch, 1952; Garfinkel, 1963; Milgram, 1963).

In exploring the ways in which leaders “search for meaning, settle for plausibility and move on” (Weick et al, 2005, p.419) from their involvement in organisational politics, the study has shown that whilst leaders took different routes in doing so, the influence of identity work was crucial in securing a positive outcome. One path to a successful outcome was demonstrated by a small minority of leaders who brought a very fixed and singular position on their involvement to the interview and adhered to it consistently throughout. Although the narratives adopted by this group could hardly have been more different, being positions in which the construct was either denied (Jane & Mark) or wholeheartedly embraced (Mathew & Jean), what they had in common was maintaining a strong sense of resolution by not acknowledging any dilemmas or ambiguity, suggesting that, for these individuals, it is not the content of any particular narrative that is predictive of success but the unequivocal refusal to recognise any difficulty, contradiction or personal dilemma. Whilst it is tempting to conclude that these individuals did not, therefore, engage in any sensemaking at all, the defence of such unequivocality in the face of active challenge still necessitated some use of the same type of self-deception and distancing processes deployed by others (see the detailed breakdown in Appendix vii). This is especially so in Jane and Mark’s case, where the former’s insistence on stressing the meritocratic nature of an American investment Bank in near financial meltdown at the time and the latter’s insistence of never even having heard the term organisational politics would stretch the credulity of most neutral observers. So, whilst this group still engaged in an element of defensive sensemaking activity, the absence of any outward recognition of difficulty or ambiguity in their position, no matter how active the exploration thereof, meant that they were able to maintain their initial sense of resolution regarding the nature of organisational politics and their involvement in it. This maintenance of a single and consistent narrative was also interwoven with identity work in order to negate the threat associated with acknowledging active involvement in political activity. For Jane, it meant that she was able to construct her career success as being attributable to her own effort and capability rather than other contextual or less palatable influences, whilst Mark’s denial of politics allowed him to sustain his identity of an entrepreneur with an open and transparent leadership style. In Jean and Mathew’s case, by embracing wholeheartedly the notion of being politically skilled and active, they could present themselves as sagacious and organisationally aware “change agents” rather than more naïve Executives blindly pursuing the “good of the organisation” in a potentially vulnerable manner.

A second much larger group of individuals were able to achieve a successful outcome despite drawing upon contradictory narratives. Closer examination of the findings in this regard (see Table 6.5) reveal the frequency for this group of a strong Pragmatic Engagement narrative alongside that of Conscientious Objection, suggesting that whilst

these individuals are aware of the ethical problems and reputation threat that attribution of political involvement implies, they nevertheless carry a sense of being able to deal with this in positive and pragmatic terms. Seeing the successful resolution of dilemmas related to personal engagement in politics in this way takes the spotlight away from the specific processes that individuals may deploy in their sensemaking activity and towards the importance of identity work that allows individuals to position themselves in very pragmatic terms as leaders utilising a range of legitimate influencing behaviours to “get the job done”.

As well as demonstrating how a pragmatic leadership identity underpinned the successful resolution of the dilemmas associated with personal engagement in political activity, the study also shows how its absence can hole sensemaking activity beneath the waterline. Examination of the findings from the small group who did not achieve a successful outcome show that, whilst they also drew upon multiple narratives in the same way, what was noticeably different was the prominence of a strong Weary Endurance position alongside that of Conscientious Objection, rather than the Pragmatic Engagement narrative of the more resolved (see Table 6.6). So, unlike most other leaders, who were able to counter balance the “not in my name” rejection of politics with a strong pragmatic sense of still being able to engage positively in getting things done, the narratives of these individuals point to a sense of powerlessness and being out of control in the face of an all pervasive and dysfunctional phenomenon. This was very evident in the negative emotions expressed, sometimes evident visibly. For Lucy it was the anger she carried – and often took home - about all “the crap that goes on” and how it made her feel “small” and uninfluential. For Mary, it was her sense of exclusion from the male dominated inner circle of golf days and strip clubs where decisions were made and reputations built or dismantled. For Amy, the overwhelming emotion was one of bewilderment at what “politics does to you”, in her case making her walk away from a lucrative and successful career trajectory, whilst Ruth was ultimately overcome by just how exhausting it was “to try and learn a whole set of other skills” and to keep “prostituting herself” to other stakeholders at the expense of her own professional authenticity. What this points to again, therefore, is that of more influence in whether leaders in this study were able to make sense successfully of their involvement in politics was not simply whether they drew upon singular or multiple narrative positions, nor necessarily the specific type of processes that they utilised in the sensemaking struggle but instead the extent to which individuals believed in their capacity to act positively in the political arena. In other words, whilst most were able to shrug off the contradictions, caveats and ambiguities surfaced during the discussion with a strong dose of pragmatism and an ability to get involved positively, for a minority, the “being done to” helplessness revealed in their sensemaking activity undermined a positive outcome.

Before expanding upon this argument regarding the salience of such agentic identity work in determining different sensemaking outcomes, it is important to acknowledge that as consistent as this feature was across four of the five individuals in the group discussed above, Table 6.6 above shows how the profile of the fifth – John (see 6.2) - is quite different. Despite a much weaker emphasis on Weary Endurance, sense, for him too, still broke down for some reason. In comparing John to other leaders who also drew upon multiple narratives yet were more successful in achieving resolution of the ambiguities encountered, it is evident that his profile of the relative strength of each narrative is identical to that of Jack (see 6.3.1.2 and the full analysis in Appendix vi) and one way of getting to the bottom of what was going on here was to look at what was different for each of these individuals by going back to the transcripts. In both cases, sensemaking activity was triggered in a similar way, the catalyst being the emergence, through an active exploration of their stories, of an uncomfortable awareness that they had been personally complicit in an arena that they had initially disavowed on grounds of personal values and integrity. What was different was their sensemaking response to such dissonance and how this led to very different outcomes. In Jack's case, order was successfully restored through self-deception, rationalisations that offered plausible – if unconvincing arguments – that either justified his involvement or made it seem not so bad after all. This took the form of him claiming that, if he had been political, he had earned the right to do so, having been in the organisation so long. Furthermore, when he did engage, he did it “in a nice way” that didn't disadvantage anyone else at his expense. Throughout our exchanges, he referred continuously of it all being “just a game”, implying that whatever happened, no one got hurt and that “the world would keep spinning”. From the stories he told of his involvement, it was equally in the realm of possibility that others may indeed have lost out as a result of his influence and that the consequences of his activity could instead have been very significant for other individuals' careers and livelihoods, yet Jack managed successfully to screen out these less palatable ramifications and emerge unscathed. In John's case, his sensemaking activity was derailed by the realisation that, not only did all his activity as “holder of the values” bear all the characteristics of the type of covert manipulation he saw so distastefully in others, this had even included him “taking someone out” through corridor conversation and backstage manoeuvring. His attempts at rationalising this away à la Jack, by talking about this being the “dance floor we have to dance upon right now”, did not seem to allow him to ameliorate his own discomfort at the hypocrisy of his position laid bare by accounts of his own behaviour. The sighs, silences and body language by the end of the discussion suggested that the discussion had surfaced some fundamental contradictions which he had not been able to resolve. The difference between sensemaking success and failure in this particular case, therefore, would appear to lie in the extent and strength of self-deception as a sensemaking mechanism. Whereas Jack

was able to resolve the contradictions he encountered by constructing plausible – if unconvincing to the neutral ear - warrants for his actions and by downplaying their consequences, John's inability to do the same left him in a state of troubling confusion. Therefore, whilst this discussion concludes that it is not defensible to argue the use of self-deception as the single deciding factor in determining whether all the leaders in this research achieved a satisfactory resolution of their involvement in organisational politics, it is clearly of some importance in the overall sensemaking mix.

This exception aside, the study contributes by evidencing the importance of identity work, rather than specific sensemaking processes, as being more crucial to a successful outcome in respect of coming to terms with personal involvement in political activity. The literature review earlier in this thesis highlighted the argument that managerial identities are often precarious and under threat, being subject not only to an 'individual employee's self-doubt and emotional instability' (Gabriel, 1999, p.185) but also the judgements of others and the exigencies of organizational life (Humphreys & Brown, 2002). The narrative of self-identity is inherently fragile (Giddens, 1991, p.185), and professional identities are increasingly 'insecure' (Knights and Clarke, 2014, p.352) rendering individuals as locked in continuing states of 'profound anxiety' (Brown and Coupland, 2015, p.1318). Whilst it has been argued that threats to identity "are as ubiquitous as they are unsettling", (Brown and Coupland, 2015, p.1318), and that they can be linked to work that is "legitimacy contesting" (Brown and Toyoki, 2013) and "dirty" (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999), more explicit and detailed examination of their role and significance in the political arena is relatively absent from the literature. Similarly, whilst the importance of identity in Weick's theorising ("Sensemaking begins with a self-conscious sensemaker" 1995, p.22) has meant that it has become central to much of the sensemaking literature that has followed (Brown et al, 2015), "there is much that still needs to be done to understand in-depth how sensemaking connects to identities and the role of identity work" (Brown, 2015) given the tendency of existing work to focus "more on how sensemaking is implicated in identity work rather than on how identities influence sensemaking" (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015, S16).

This study adds to what is known already, therefore, by demonstrating how a pragmatic centred identity is crucial to a successful sensemaking outcome for leaders in the slippery arena of organisational politics. The juxtaposition of the "pragmatic engagement" narrative for the resolved majority against that of "weary endurance" for the less so, provokes more speculative thought regarding whether such identity work may be underpinned by a belief of efficacy in this aspect of their leadership role. There is some evidence in the literature in support of this notion given how the self-efficacy mechanism has been theorized as central

to human agency (Bandura, 1982) and oriented toward maintaining and enhancing feelings of “competence and control” (Breakwell, 1993, p.205). Efficacy beliefs are concerned with judgments of how well one can execute courses of action required to deal with prospective situations: whilst those who judge themselves inefficacious in coping with environmental demands dwell on their personal deficiencies and imagine potential difficulties as more formidable than they really are (Beck, 1976; Lazarus & Launier, 1978; Meichenbaum, 1977; Sarason, 1975), those with a strong sense of efficacy deploy their attention and effort to the demands of the situation and perform assuredly those that they judge themselves capable of managing (Bandura, 1982, p.123). Experience of such self-efficacy has also been previously conceptualized as a defining feature of identity (Codol, 1981) and, as a motive, has been found to be directly relevant to processes of both identity enactment (Vignoles et al, 2006, p.329) and maintenance (Erez and Earley, 1993, p. 28), a link reinforced by very recent positivist empirical work (Brenner et al, 2018) that found support for a hypothesised feedback loop from role specific efficacy beliefs and identity salience, defined here as the probability that a given identity will be invoked in social interaction (Stryker 1968, 1980, 2003). Whilst it is important to emphasise here that the findings from this study do not enable definitive conclusions to be drawn on this aspect – section 7.2.1. below will explore the identity related implications in more detail - it is nevertheless reasonable to suggest that, when combined with such other insights, this builds on Weick’s position (1995, p.20) by suggesting that the ongoing fate of a need for self-efficacy doesn’t just affect individual sensemaking but can be outcome defining too. By drawing upon a sense of self that included the efficacy to engage in political activity positively, despite all the difficulties, caveats and contradictions, most leaders achieved a successful outcome to the sensemaking activity triggered by an active interrogation of their experience. Alternatively, an inefficacious self-concept, as evidenced by a narrative denoting a weary powerlessness and inability to influence any of the negative but inescapable machinations of organisational politics, undermined the sensemaking efforts of some others and left them struggling to resolve the ambivalence inherent in this aspect of their leadership role.

Having discussed how the findings of this research contribute to what was known before, the next section argues their implications for future theoretical work regarding both organisational politics and the development of the sensemaking perspective.

7.2 Implications of findings.

The discussion in 7.1 above regarding the contribution of this research suggests a number of important implications for future theorising surrounding both organisational politics and

sensemaking. The implications for leadership practice will be separately argued in section 7.3 below before 7.4 approaches the issue of future empirical work by basing such suggestions on an assessment of the limitations or unanswered questions associated with this particular study.

7.2.1 Theoretical implications – organisational politics

The findings of the study have a number of important primary implications for how future scholarship on organisational politics might develop from this point onward. Firstly, the discomfort exhibited by a large number of participants regarding their participation in political activity presents a challenge to the recent “positive turn” in the literature towards a perspective that positions organisational politics, not just in more functional terms, but as a prerequisite for improved organisational performance and individual career success. The earlier literature review (See Chapter 2 below) summarised a traditional / classical view of the phenomenon as “activities that are illegitimate, self-serving and often harmful to the organisation or its members” (Rosen et al., 2009, p.203). Consistent with this definition, organisational politics has historically been characterised almost exclusively in negative terms, being variously described in behaviourally as back stabbing, self-promotion and ingratiation (for example, Allen et al., 1979; Gandz and Murray, 1980). Although many have challenged the negative bias of the popular 12-item POPS measure (for example Fedor and Maslyn, 2002; McFarland et al., 2012; Doldor, Anderson and Vinnicombe, 2012), comprehensive meta analyses of studies that have used the scale consistently report adverse impacts upon individuals and organisations (Bedi and Schat, 2013; Chang et al, 2009; Miller et al, 2008).

Such a prevailing negative conceptualisation of the phenomenon has led to a more contemporary shift in thinking, one that recognises the potentially functional and positive aspects of organisational politics. Much of this has been inspired, once again, by the work of Buchanan who, as far back as 1999 with Richard Badham, was arguing the case for politics as “power assisted steering” for successful change management and that those in leadership roles needed to regard themselves as “political entrepreneurs” deploying “legitimate political tactics when the circumstances rendered them necessary, appropriate and defensible” (Buchan and Badham, 1999, p.32). Such a view found further support in his later study of attitudes towards organisational politics amongst a group of 250 UK managers, with most regarding political behaviour as not just common but ethical and necessary too. Based on such empirical challenge to the prevailing orthodoxy, the conceptualisation of

organisational politics as a positive phenomenon has been gaining momentum through the work of a growing cohort of researchers (inter alia Gotsis and Kortezi, 2010; Hochwarter, 2012; Lu et al., 2010; Doldor, Anderson and Vinnicombe, 2012). Two very recent qualitative additions to this body of work have drawn further attention to how managerial attitudes are shifting and the factors instrumental in developing both political will and political skill (Landells and Albrecht, 2016; Doldor, 2017).

The findings from this study, however, would suggest that those in leadership roles may not yet embrace the notion of themselves as political players to the extent that such studies suggest. The analysis of the sensemaking processes embedded in the 168 stories of specific incidents that leaders recounted revealed the use of self-deception and role distancing as both most frequent and widespread. Self-deception refers to the use of often unconvincing but plausible arguments to either justify something that is difficult to accept or make it seem not so bad after all (Brown and Jones, 2000) whilst distancing suggests role resistance in how individuals present the self as being removed or at a distance from the role that is required to be played (Goffman, 1959, 1961, 1968). The primacy of both these sensemaking mechanisms in the interview data suggest a reluctance to embrace this element of a leadership role and that political behaviour remains sufficiently stigmatised in organisational life for those active in its machinations to be discomforted, troubled and embarrassed at the extent of their own participation. Such reluctance is also apparent in the overarching narratives which participants drew upon to position their overall relationship with the phenomenon in question. Of the four identified, three talk of either denial (No Such Thing), involuntary collusion (Weary Endurance) or principled abstinence (Conscientious Objection) with only one speaking to political activity in more functional terms (Pragmatic Engagement). The strength of the Conscientious Objection narrative – strongly or moderately evident in 20 of the 28 interviews – speaks further to a view that whilst leaders may be prepared to acknowledge its existence intellectually, most prefer to spectate than play. Whilst most were ultimately successful in coming to terms with the notion of being more involved on the pitch than they may have liked to believe, equivocality, contradiction and struggle was the norm with the majority see-sawing between conflicting positions in an effort to negotiate a workable position. Out of the entire sample of 28, only Matthew (see 6.4.1 above) and Jean presented themselves unequivocally in Pragmatic Engagement terms, embracing without contradiction their own participation and regarding it as a prerequisite for not only personal success but organisational transformation too.

Juxtaposing the deep-seated reluctance to embrace personal involvement in organisational politics revealed here with the more functional and ethical stance evident in a wider and

growing body of qualitative empirical work provokes speculative thought regarding the reasons for such difference. One answer may lie in the determination of this study to put participant's own personal involvement under the microscope rather than exploring simply how they defined the phenomenon in more abstract or neutral terms, as was more the case in the Landells and Albrecht study (2016), for example. Whilst one may be prepared to recognise the case for a more positive perspective intellectually, openly embracing one's own active involvement in what is still widely regarded as a slippery and controversial arena is another. That said, this research was not unique in exploring managerial experience of political situations and it is unlikely, therefore, that this accounts exclusively for such difference in the findings. A more likely source lies in the method deployed and, in particular, the use of the active interview in facilitating a deeper and more challenging interrogation of leadership behaviour. Other studies that have found a more positive perspective on political involvement have relied upon either self-report questionnaires (Buchanan, 2008) or more traditional qualitative interviewing styles where researchers were careful to avoid locating themselves in the meaning making process (Landells and Albrecht, 2016; Doldor, 2017). As has been argued throughout this thesis, the adoption of the active interview builds on extant approaches by forcing leaders to confront contradictions between their own definitions of the construct and accounts of their own work behaviour and it is arguably the nature of this challenge that uncovered the identity threat inherent in openly acknowledging personal engagement in political activity which other studies, by using more conservative stimulus-response interview styles, may have missed. Either way, what this work suggests is that Buchanan and Badham's longstanding call for managers to "recognise the hypocrisy, shed the innocence, shed the guilt, play the turf game, play to win on one's own terms – and enjoy" (1999, p.231) remains a work in progress.

Building on this point, the second implication lies in the intricacy of how accounting for personal participation in organisational politics involves an entangled mesh of sensemaking processes, narratives and identity work. Successful resolution of ambiguity and ambivalence is possible for most but not all, highlighting the scale and complexity of the challenge presented: interpreting the lived experience of being active in such a slippery arena and emerging unscathed is a demanding affair. This research, therefore, adds weight to recent calls for the development a more sophisticated theoretical framework that utilises different lenses capable of accommodating varying perceptions at different levels of analysis (Landells and Albrecht, 2016). The dissatisfaction with the negative bias inherent in the positivist-based POPS model (see 2.3.1 earlier) is now an established feature in the literature (Buchanan, 2008; Doldor, 2011; Landells and Albrecht, 2016) but simply taking a

more positive position on the nature of the phenomenon risks simply replacing a one-dimensional understanding of the construct with a binary one. The findings of this study imply a more complex and nuanced understanding, with many leaders capable of holding both negative and positive conceptualisations simultaneously rather than seeing their involvement in exclusively negative or positive terms. By putting actors and active agency into the theoretical mix, “interrelationships are more dynamic i.e. messy and lively than often assumed in established rationalistic views of politics in organisations” (Geppert and Dorrenbacher, 2014). This insight also supports other challenges to established thinking, namely that continued efforts from a positivist/quantitative perspective in pursuit of a common definition of organisational politics that can be operationalised into a generalisable model of triggers, nature and outcomes may suffer from a law of diminishing returns in terms of advancing our understanding (Buchanan, 2016). Based on how most leaders in this study oscillated between diametrically opposed positions on the functionality of politics and their role within it, which of these positions are they tapping into when they respond to surveys in any given moment? The position that “while large-n quantitative research may be appropriate in some settings, the more subtle aspects of the nature, processes and implications of organization political behaviour may be more effectively revealed using innovative small-n qualitative methods” (Buchanan, 2008, p.62) offers writers and researchers the opportunity to paint on a relatively blank, more interpretive canvass based on more socially constructed assumptions of how leaders as politically actors “selectively choose the reality they disclose to the various audiences with whom they interact” (Ferris and Treadway, 2012a, p.6). Whilst this study makes an important contribution towards this by taking a sensemaking lens to how leaders interpret their own political activity, it is not the only perspective from which theoretical understanding can be developed. Recent studies have, for example, taken a dynamic, developmental perspective (Doldor, 2017) or have argued the potential of either Kelly’s (1955) Personal Construct Theory for interrogating managerial interpretation of political experience (Landells and Albrecht, 2016) or the use of Job Demands – Resources Theory (Bakker and Demerouti, 2014) as a lens for exploring whether politics is regarded as a resource (opportunity) or demand (threat) depending upon the organisational context (Albrecht and Landells, 2012). Either way, the argument advanced here is that whilst this study has partially addressed the call for “new and insightful approaches that promote richer interpretations of this important phenomenon” (Hochwarter, 2012), future theoretical work would benefit further still from greater flexibility in developing conceptual frameworks that can embrace a wider range of different perspectives regarding how leaders interpret and draw meaning from the political world around them and their involvement in it. This is not to say that some perspectives methods are right and others wrong but instead an argument that answering the questions driven by what we still don’t

know about organisational politics is “more effectively approached through constructivist, processual, qualitative methods” (Buchanan, 2016, p.363).

Located within this general call for a more flexible and multi-dimensional approach to theoretical development is a second, more specific implication for future work to move toward an identity perspective on leader engagement in political activity, given the foregrounding here of the salience of identity work in determining a successful sensemaking outcome. Some relatively isolated studies have argued the inextricability of identity and perceptions of politics (for example, Knights and McCabe, 1998; Mackenzie Davey, 2008) but these have not proved to be a catalyst for more significant theorising. Similarly, whilst the identity work of elite actors has been the subject of empirical study, such extant research has been limited to, inter alia, how elite sportsmen in the world of professional rugby use identity threats as flexible resources for working on favoured identities (Brown and Coupland, 2015), how philanthropic identity narratives empower wealthy entrepreneurs to generate a legacy of the self that is both self- and socially oriented (Maclean et al, 2015), how the continual promotion of an elite identity within a management consulting firm leaves many of the consultants feeling acutely anxious about their status (Gill, 2015) and the importance of insecurity in the identity work of business school academics (Knights and Clarke, 2014). By demonstrating the interaction of identity work with the efforts of those in very senior leadership roles to process their lived experience of organisational politics successfully, the findings of this study imply strong arguments in favour of a convergence of future thinking on both organisational politics and leadership identity. Firstly, the risks presented by organisational politics to reputation and trust, consistently highlighted by large scale meta analyses of employee perceptions that dominate the field (Miller et al, 2008; Chang et al, 2009; Bedi and Schat, 2013), allied to the discomfort revealed here in acknowledging active engagement therein, suggests that involvement in organisational politics conforms with recent conceptualisations of identity threat, namely “discursively constituted thought or feeling that challenges one of an individual or group’s preferred identity narratives” (Brown and Coupland, 2015, p.1318). Against a backdrop of increasingly insecure and fragile work identities (Brown, 2015), prior investigation into the nature of identity threat has also surfaced the influence of work that is “legitimacy contesting” (Brown and Toyoki, 2015) or “dirty” (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999). Alongside physical and social aspects of “taint”, the latter also highlights the moral dimension, that is “occupations generally regarded as somewhat sinful or of dubious virtue or where the worker is thought to employ methods that are deceptive, intrusive, confrontational, or that otherwise defy norms of civility” (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999, p.1999). The way in which leaders grappled with

admissions of their active involvement and the presence throughout the whole sample of a “conscientious objection” narrative, suggests that participation in political activity can be similarly conceptualised as a “de facto” threat to a preferred leadership identity.

Secondly, the sense of struggle, revealed here, in resolving the dilemmas and ambiguities associated with political involvement speaks to prior theorising (see Chapter 4 above) about the dialogical self (Hermans, 1996, 2001, 2002; Hermans and Kempen, 1993; Hermans et al, 1992) and the nature and influence of identity work (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). The dialogic perspective, with voices that “function like interacting characters in a story, involved in a process of questions and answers, agreement and disagreement, each of them having a story to tell about their experiences from their standpoint” (Smith and Sparkes, 2008, p.22), resonates with the ambivalence of political engagement that leaders in this study grappled with in an attempt to carve out a workable position, reinforcing the view of leaders as “parliaments of selves” (Mead, 1934) and that what determines success in dealing with the political element of their role is a capacity to dialogically hammer out a coherent sense of a self. Other aspects of how leaders in this study processed their political experience also bear hallmarks of prior conceptualisation and exploration of identity work. For example, the salience of the efficacy motive (Vignoles et al, 2006), the role of negative or anti identity which concerns the “not in my name” positions invoked in relationship to work situations and role expectations (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003), the feature of it being “more necessary, frequent and intense in situations where strains, tensions and surprises are prevalent” (Brown, 2015, p.25) and also that it is characterised by multiple antagonistic discourses (Clarke et al, 2009).

If involvement in politics can be construed as a threat to identity, then the strategies deployed by those in this study who were successful in its repudiation also resemble those drawn out in prior research into how managers in different contexts deal with the challenge to a preferred self-concept. The use of self-deception and role distancing as sensemaking processes chime with the ideological techniques of reframing, recalibrating and refocusing identified by Ashforth and Kreiner (1999 - see 4.3 above) in how those engaged in “dirty work” either transformed its stigmatized properties or magnified its redeeming qualities. In a more contemporary study that offers a potentially fruitful line of future enquiry, Brown and Coupland (2015) identified “appropriation strategies” through which, in this case, elite sports professionals made threats their own in order to develop and reinforce desired occupational identities. The argument that threats are a resource for identity work rather than being merely rebutted, ameliorated or neutralized implies that identities can be “reasonably

regarded not as responses to threat but as constituted by them.” (Brown and Coupland, 2015, p.1328). This plays to the idea that the direction of identity influence may be two way, in other words, how leaders experience and deal with organisational politics is not something that is merely influenced by a stable and static sense of self but is instead the means by which such identity is shaped and reinforced and whilst this study can make no definitive claims about such direction of influence, it represents nonetheless an intriguing thought for theorists of the antecedents and consequences of political involvement to ponder. All these arguments build to a position that sees theorising about the lived experience of organisational politics as, by implication, theorising about identity; how it is threatened, negotiated, repaired or even, based on this last point, constructed and it is the argument of this thesis that future thinking about both constructs would benefit from a more integrated approach rather than continuing to progress along parallel tracks.

The final implication of this study for the future development of theory relating to organisational politics concerns the conceptualisation of political skill. As analysed in 2.2.2 above, the notion of political skill as a distinct competency is grounded in the original work of Pfeffer (1981) and Mintzberg (1983) and owes much of its subsequent development to the work of Ferris, Perrewe and collaborators (Ferris et al 2000, 2002b, 2005b, 2007; Perrewe et al, 2000,2004,2005). It has been variously defined as the ability to understand and influence others and an interpersonal style that combines social astuteness with behavioural flexibility (Ferris et al 2007). Much of the empirical work surrounding political skill has been concerned with assessing its impact and Kimura’s recent review of the construct (2015) confirmed the positive correlations with outcomes such as career success, performance and leadership effectiveness reported by successive comprehensive reviews and meta analyses (Bing et al, 2011; Ferris et al, 2012; Munyon et al, 2014). Rather less attention has been paid to its antecedents and that which has been given, points to the role of dispositional factors (for example perceptiveness and affability) and contextual variables such as development experience (Ferris et al, 2007). The work of Doldor (2011, 2017; Doldor, Anderson & Vinnicombe, 2012) on the issue of political will can be viewed in such antecedent terms when it comes to understanding the issue of skill more deeply. The dimensions of political will are argued to include an affective component by positing that managers ask themselves “is it functional, is it ethical and how do I feel about it?”. Her most recent work which focuses more on the issue of maturation, argues an additional role of “deep structure changes in mindsets and cognitive scripts regarding engagement in organisational politics” (2017, p.666). Whilst endorsing the cognitive component by taking a sensemaking perspective, this research places greater emphasis on identity work rather than emotion in analysing how

leaders internalise their willingness to engage in political activity. It is possible to argue of course that the two are not mutually exclusive; how one feels about it may well be influenced by how that aligns with one's preferred self-concept. Either way, issues of both emotion and identity seem worthy of greater consideration by future scholarship on political skill.

Building further on this aspect, this also research has demonstrated how active involvement in organisational politics inevitably presents most leaders with dilemmas, contradictions and ambiguities associated with deploying behaviours and tactics that are increasingly essential for performance and career success yet at the same time parlous for trust, reputation and their own preferred self-concept. Those leaders that achieved a successful outcome regarding their relationship with politics demonstrated the capacity to deal with such ambivalence and still retain the ability to function, underlining how the conceptualisation of political skill may benefit from being extended beyond a purely behavioural domain where the emphasis is upon understanding and influencing others to include a cognitive element that goes beyond basic self-awareness, an aspect of emotional intelligence with which political skill is sometimes equated, into the capacity to cope with ambiguity and the competing pressures of a complex arena. Secondly, the significance of a belief in efficacy, revealed here as critical to achieving a successful outcome in relation to political engagement, suggests an additional factor worthy of consideration as an antecedent of political skill. Whilst this research has been careful to avoid making any claims as to how skilled any of the participating leaders are in actual terms, it is nevertheless reasonable to argue that efficacy beliefs are more likely to motivate the development of the interpersonal repertoire inherent in political skill. Conversely, an absence thereof can be argued to be suggestive of leaders perceiving themselves as being "done to" by a range of cynically driven stakeholders and thereby disempowered from being able to exert any influence upon the people or events that surround them. Earlier work has touched on this by emphasising the importance of "a sense of mastery over their environment" (Ferris, 2007, p.297) as an antecedent of an individual's political skill and support for this broader stance was certainly evident here.

7.2.2 Theoretical implications – sensemaking

Although the main construct under investigation in this research is that of organisational politics, the use of sensemaking as a lens through which the personal involvement of leaders can be explored is a novel feature of the study and the findings revealed therefrom also have three primary implications for the future development of the wider sensemaking perspective.

The first implication lies in the nature and direction of influence associated with identity work within the overall sensemaking process. Chapter 3 of the earlier literature review analysed three recent and substantive reviews of the sensemaking perspective (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015; Brown et al, 2015) and, together with a similar review of identity work in Chapter 4 (Brown, 2015), all acknowledge the fundamental importance of identity work within sensemaking. It is also generally agreed that identity threat is a powerful prompt or trigger for sensemaking (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014) and that when individuals make sense of their selves and their external worlds, their sensemaking in both cases is interdependent and dynamic (Brown et al, 2015) – “Whenever I define self, I define ‘it’, but to define it is also to define self. Once I know who I am then I know what is out there. But the direction of causality flows just as often from the situation to a definition of self as it does the other way” (Weick, 1995, p.20). Beyond this, though, lies much ambiguity and uncertainty. Although trauma researchers have addressed the individual sensemaking that follows challenges to self, less is known about this process in a work or organizational context (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014, p.73), studies seem to have focused more on how sensemaking is implicated in identity work rather than on how identities influence sensemaking” (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015, p.S16) and there is much, therefore, that still needs to be done to understand in-depth how sensemaking connects to identities and the role of identity work in processes of external interpretation and meaning making” (Brown, 2015, p.32). The implications from this research are twofold. Firstly, that identity work is not just triggered by the threat posed by active involvement in organisational politics but is also the determining factor in achieving a successful outcome and secondly, that within such identity work, belief of efficacy may be particularly important. Presenting themselves as having the capacity and capability to engage positively and constructively in the political arena was crucial here for leaders being able to negotiate the multiplicity of narratives and different positions that the active exploration of their experience forced them to confront. Whilst some other prior studies of identity work share this research’s speculation regarding the role of self-efficacy (Vignoles et al, 2006, Brown and Coupland, 2015), others see it in more peripheral terms (Ashforth and Schinoff, 2016) and its absence in recent and comprehensive reviews of the overall sensemaking perspective, suggest that it is a factor worthy of closer consideration in how future theoretical work evolves.

A second theoretical implication for the future development of the sensemaking perspective lies in the ubiquity of politics, endorsed here, in leadership roles and wider organisational life. Section 4.5 of the earlier literature review established how organisational politics represents one of the areas of organisational study that is under represented in the application of the

sensemaking perspective, given that only 4% of the studies in Sandberg and Tsoukas' (2015) extensive review "explicitly investigated how politics may influence sensemaking" (p.S17). Such as it exists, enquiry into the relationship between the two constructs has taken the form of studying either the politics of sensemaking, namely the influence of power and politics upon the process of sensemaking (for example Maitlis and Sonenschein, 2010; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014) or how managers interpret and account for the collective political dynamics around them, particularly in multi-national companies and/ or large corporate conglomerates with subsidiary interests and relationships (Geppert, 2003; Dorrenbacher & Geppert, 2006, 2011; Geppert & Dorrenbacher, 2011; Clark & Geppert, 2011; Whittle et al, 2016). This study argues a useful extension to this arena by applying sensemaking as a lens for examining how leaders account not just for the political machinations around them but their own personal engagement in such activity. As well as making a novel contribution to a generally under represented aspect of sensemaking enquiry, the findings therefrom add weight to the arguments made elsewhere for future theoretical development to incorporate notions of "immanent sensemaking" (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015, p. S25) and "absorbed coping" (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2011, p.344). The argument for sensemaking as "immanent" is based on the limitation of confining sensemaking to specific episodes when ongoing activity is subject to interruption and in need of being restored, a constraint that is problematic as "such specific episodes form only one part of organising, not necessarily the most central" (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015, S25). The authors argue how routine action, rather than interruptive episodes, is overlooked in how sensemaking is currently conceptualised and highlight the importance of "absorbed coping" – a mode of engagement "whereby actors are immersed in practice without being aware of their involvement: they spontaneously respond to the developing situation at hand." (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2011, p.344). Just because actors are absorbed in their ongoing activity, the argument follows, does not mean that they are sense-less and, therefore, sensemaking does "not only take place in episodes when ongoing activities have been interrupted but is immanent in absorbed coping" (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015, p. S25). The ubiquity of organisational politics for those in leadership roles has already been established in the literature – see section 2.4 of the literature review above – and the accounts, stories and narratives related by participants in this study substantiate a view of the inseparability of organisational politics from leadership and that, therefore, the lived experience thereof is, arguably, a type of the absorbed coping to which Sandberg and Tsoukas refer. If the understanding of how leaders interpret and resolve the dilemmas inherent in such a pervasive aspect of their role is to be deepened still further from the findings revealed here, it suggests the need to go beyond just actively creating interviews as specific sensemaking episodes and to instead understand sensemaking activity in such immanent terms, the

possibility of which would extend the perspective significantly and “open up a whole new range of application areas for sensemaking” (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015, p.S25. See also suggestions for future empirical work in section 7.4 below).

The third implication for the sensemaking perspective arising from the contribution of this research relates less to how sensemaking is conceptualised and more to the methodology and design of studies that seek to advance our understanding of the construct. As set out in detail in 5.3.3 below, a novel feature of this study is the departure from conventional research interviewing practice through the adoption of an active interview approach which embraces the notion of both respondent and researcher being necessarily and unavoidably involved in meaning work (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Silverman, 2004). Rather than being merely elicited by apt questioning or simply transported through respondent replies, meaning here, therefore, was instead actively assembled in the interview encounter. The analysis of the data gathered in this way demonstrates how this active approach allowed apparent contradictions in the accounts constructed by participants to be highlighted, replayed and explored so that the sensemaking process could then be played out in full rather than stunted or rendered inoperative by sticking to rigidly to a set of sequential questions. As well as enabling the discussion to push beyond any well-rehearsed “press releases” (Wiersma, 1988), this element of challenge, therefore, enhanced the richness of the data and the contribution of the study as a whole.

The value of this active approach to exploring individual sensemaking is strengthened by recognising how it taps into an underdeveloped aspect of Weick’s original doctrine, namely that which sees “arguing as a crucial source of sensemaking” (1995, p.145). Weick’s position on the centrality of arguing in sensemaking is grounded in the connection between an individual meaning of the word argument (any piece of reasoned discourse) and a social one (a dispute between people rather than a chain of reasoning) (Billig, 1989, pp44-45). Individual reasoning is “embedded in social controversy and the unfolding is what we mean by arguing as a vehicle for sensemaking” (Weick, 1995, p.137). Such social argument need not imply anger or loss of temper but is instead “the debate that expresses the contradiction implicit in any position that is articulated” (ibid). Building on this, Weick cites Brockriede’s argument: non-argument spectrum (1974) as a way of showing how “of more help for sensemaking are people who provide explanations rather than appreciations, descriptions or classifications” (Weick, 1995, p.139). Explanations create sense by connecting concrete experience and more general concepts and “in the process of developing and criticising explanation, people often discover new explanations, which is why argument can produce adaptive sensemaking” (Brockriede, 1974, p.174). Developing this, Brockriede argues that

“when a person advances an explanation that qualifies as an argument, the listener can confront” and that “the product of the process of confrontation by argument and counter argument is a more dependable understanding” (ibid).

Whilst Weick is quick to point out that there are processes of sensemaking that rely on dynamics other than those of argument, the richness of the output from the type of interactions between reader and critic assumed by Brockriede offers the potential for a deeper and broader understanding of sensemaking machinations and outcomes and it is surprising therefore that, aside from this study, it does not appear to be reflected in how mainstream studies of sensemaking construct their enquiry, reflecting, arguably, a wider view within the qualitative field that such interaction represents more contaminant than augmentation to research credibility. Analysis of relatively contemporary sensemaking empirical work (for example, Maitlis, 2005; Hope, 2010, Maclean et al, 2012; Whittle et al, 2016) reveals the use of more conventional semi structured interviewing technique and, whilst it is always advisable to be cautious in advancing such a claim, it would seem to be the case that this study is novel in using “argument” (i.e. active exploration of participant accounts) as a method of sensemaking enquiry. Although “sensemaking processes that unfold toward the non-argument end of his (Brockriede’s) continuum, processes for example that rely on narratives, are no less powerful as tools of sensemaking” (Weick, 1995, p.140), the use of the type of active exploration adopted here appears to offer a fresh canvass on which future studies of sensemaking can paint a richer and more vivid picture of the meaning individuals derive from their experience.

7.3 Implications for practice.

This research suggests that those in leadership roles can negotiate the ambivalence surrounding engagement in organisational politics either by adopting a fixed and singular position on their involvement or through a pragmatic centred identity which facilitates the resolution of different competing positions. In the practical arena, attention intuitively falls initially on those leaders who are unable to do so and who, via the strength of a Weary Endurance narrative running through their experiences, present themselves as either disempowered or even helpless in the face of pervasive and dysfunctional forces beyond their control. Given that the focus is on a very senior level of leadership, the most appropriate way in which organisations can support such individuals may be through 1:1 Executive coaching that can help individuals think differently about this aspect of their role and improve their confidence in being able to influence effectively in politically charged environments. Such an intervention may help those similar to Lucy channel their frustration

and anger into more constructive forms of influence tactics or those like Mary develop alternative strategies for gaining access to decision making environments that they are less likely to be excluded from. Similarly, for the Amy's of this world, developing a way of standing back and taking a more detached way of processing events around them may reduce the likelihood of making emotional knee jerk decisions that might be regretted in leisure whilst those similar to Ruth may be able to build on the fragile confidence by accessing such 1:1 support. The lack of agency inherent in narratives was not the reason for sensemaking failure for everyone in this group though, the one exception being John who could not overcome the disruptive ambiguity associated with his awareness of adopting behaviours and tactics that he had avowed to eradicate from his organisation. In cases such as these, although painful and troubling, such raising of awareness regarding the nature and impact of their own behaviour may – again, with the right coaching support – lead to the development of a more open and transparent leadership style.

Just as the collapse of sensemaking may be the catalyst for leaders being able to make positive changes to their behaviour, it may be unwise to assume that being resolved about the nature of personal involvement in political activity means that no changes to practice are required. For example, individuals who, like a small number in this study, maintain a sense of resolution through the singular strength and clarity of a No Such Thing narrative risk turning an understandable desire for simplicity into an approach that may be damagingly simplistic. For the Jane's of this world, making sense of the organisation in purely meritocratic terms and believing in on the job performance as the sole predictor of career success, risks being outmanoeuvred by others more adept at impression management and working the informal side of organisational life. Similarly, for leaders like Mark, positioning the business or team they lead as apolitical in nature implies seeing only the piece of the iceberg sitting above the waterline and such a “what you see is what you get” style of leadership may underestimate the hidden dynamics of what is really going on in the organisation with all the threats that carries for effective judgement and decision making.

Similarly, a more nuanced assessment of the practical implications of this research may also be called for regarding leaders who, like most here, reconciled competing narratives successfully through an overriding sense of pragmatism in their approach to political situations. On the one hand, a successful sensemaking outcome implies a positive affirmation of identity and, just as a narrative of powerlessness undermined the efforts of those for whom sense collapsed in this study, the opposite is clearly helpful in enabling this group to function amidst all the caveats, contradictions and ambiguities that an increasingly politicised organisational environment presents. This said, it cannot be assumed that the

stories individuals told of their constructive and legitimate use of positive political behaviour necessarily reflect what they actually do in practice. The interpretive ontological assumptions on which this study is based dictate that it is the subjective accounts of the individuals themselves that matter most when trying to understand how leaders deal with politics rather than the apparently objective assessment of a neutral researcher. Therefore, this research makes no claims about the “truth” of participant accounts or of how politically willing or able individuals actually are in practice, seeing reality instead as “mental constructions, socially and experientially based, local and specific in nature and dependent for their form and content on the individual persons or groups holding the constructions” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Given firstly the importance of impression management in creating legitimacy for political behaviour (see 2.2.2 above), secondly, that successful sensemaking relies more on plausibility than accuracy (see 3.1 above) and thirdly, the significance revealed in this study of the use of self-deception as a sensemaking process, the way in which leaders presented themselves in the active interview may not be reflected in how others around them interpret their actions, reminding us of Weick’s oft quoted assertion that “sense may be in the eye of the beholder, but beholders vote and the majority rules” (1995, p.6). The need analysis regarding the development of positive forms of influence and political skill should not, therefore, be restricted to simply those who feel helpless or disempowered but all leaders, irrespective of how pragmatically engaging they consider themselves to be. Previous writers have drawn attention to the lack of training in this arena (Buchanan, 2008) and this research adds weight to the arguments of others who highlight the potential utility of helping individuals to reframe their perspective on organisational politics and the impact of their own actions and behaviour (Landells and Albrecht, 2016).

Finally, the strength of the Conscientious Objection narrative running through the sensemaking activity of the majority of leaders in this research suggests that, despite a turn in the literature for defining the construct in positive as well as negative terms, active involvement in organisational politics remains stigmatised in the eyes of many leaders who experience it in practice (of the sample of 28, only Mathew and Jean embraced it unequivocally as a legitimate and necessary skill set crucial for performance and career success). This suggests that organisations should consider ways in which they can reduce some of the root causes of negative forms of politics as well as addressing the symptoms of their behavioural manifestation. Whilst some of the structural and contextual antecedents analysed in 2.4.2 below (for example strategic uncertainty, pace of change, resource scarcity & blurred organisational boundaries) may be beyond direct influence, greater transparency of key processes such as performance assessment, pay management and, selection & assessment may attenuate the incidence of dysfunctional behaviour and covert

manipulation. Moving beyond this, organisations may wish to consider the work of Gotsis and Kortezi (2010) who argue that a stronger focus on virtue ethics, organizational justice, and procedural fairness is needed to address negative manifestations of political behaviour. By redoubling efforts to build a culture of inclusiveness, participation, responsibility and workplace equity, organisations may be able to reduce the emotional wear and tear of the sensemaking struggle evident in this research and allow leaders to see participation in political activity as less of a threat to their identity and instead a more straight forward means to legitimate organisational and individual ends.

7.4 Limitations and, therefore, suggestions for future research.

Having discussed the implications for theory and practice, this section strengthens the case for future empirical work by firstly identifying the limitations of this study and secondly arguing how such suggestions would address them.

As with any interpretivist / qualitative research, the study is not without some of the limitations often associated with work of such nature. Firstly, the sample size is relatively small and the focus on leaders in very senior organisational roles at a particular moment in time. This acknowledged, the size and nature of the sample was not meant to enable statistical generalisation and, instead, conforms with recent authoritative guidance for qualitative research design (Saunders and Townsend, 2016, 13-14). Similarly, whilst the sensemaking processes and narratives identified here are not claimed to be exhaustive nor the only ones that might be used by different leaders at a different moment, their incidence in prior empirical work strengthens their credibility as part of leader sensemaking responses to ambiguity or unwelcome surprise. Secondly, it could be argued that because of the way in which participants agreed to take part voluntarily meant that they had a disproportionately strong and perhaps untypical view of organisational politics or that they responded in a socially desirable way when in discussion with a perceived expert in the field. This latter point also taps into a criticism of sensemaking as “too subjectivistic” (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015, p.20) in its claims of how organisational members enact their environment to their own wishes. Rather than a limitation, however, such subjectivity has been embraced openly by the study’s central interest in how leaders construct their own accounts in an effort to make sense of their own experience. Claims of objectivity, accuracy or how actually willing or skilled participants are in the political arena have been carefully avoided given the assumption that, if further advances in understanding are to be made, they lie in the accounts, stories and narratives of those who experience the phenomenon first hand, however implausible or unlikely they may sometimes appear to a so called neutral ear. A

related challenge could also be made to the use of the active interview meaning that interview data was in some way contaminated through the co-construction of meaning. Again, however, as has been argued in 7.2.2 above, the contention here is that the use of such an approach is a strength of the research, rather than a limitation, by enabling the interview to push beyond the uncontested and well-rehearsed “press release” narratives of participating leaders and, by drawing upon Weick’s underdeveloped principle of the power of argument in sensemaking (1995, p.135), thereby produce far richer accounts and insights than would otherwise have been possible. This said, despite the rigour of the method, data analysis and the continuing use of reflexivity employed throughout (see Chapter 5 above), it is always possible in studies such as this, that the biases of the researcher influenced the interpretations and that other researchers would draw different conclusions, determine different themes and propose different findings and implications. There are two points, though, that can be made about this. Firstly, the transferability or generalisability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) of its findings has never been the purpose or claim of this research and it is argued instead that the study provides a credible response to the contemporary call for more innovative studies and richer insights into the fields of both organisational politics and sensemaking (Hochwarter, 2012; Ferris and Treadway, 2012a; McFarland et al, 2012; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015; Landells and Albrecht, 2016; Buchanan, 2016). Secondly, the typical criticism of positivist researchers that research of this nature lacks generalisability has been argued to have been “overtaken by developments in the epistemology of the singular” (Buchanan, 2016, p.359). Although referring specifically to the use of case studies as a research method, Buchanan argues that with regard to a constructivist-processual understanding of organisational politics, other modes of generalisation (for example, Naturalistic Generalisation, Analytical Refinement and Isomorphic Learning) “are more appropriate and more powerful than statistical generalization, with regard to both theory development and contribution to practice. The ‘problem’ of statistical generalization is thus irrelevant” (ibid, p.360).

Some associated limitations may be addressed in future empirical work. For example, in discussing the implications for practice (see 7.3 above), the observation has already been made that, by limiting the study of sensemaking in action to the episodic confines of an active research interview, one cannot assume that the tactics and behaviours which individuals describe therein, accurately capture what they actually do in practice or how others perceive such activity, especially so given the prominence revealed here of self-deception as a sensemaking device. Similarly, this study has not been able to shed any light on the impact that the awareness raising active interview has on leaders in terms of making any changes to their influencing repertoire, given that the scope of the research has

necessarily been limited to the sensemaking that takes place only in the interview rather than including how leaders operate either before or after. To address these issues, future empirical work could build on the general call (for example, Doldor, 2017, p.680) for more qualitative study through the design of a longitudinal and ethnographical case study of how leaders within a particular organisation, or perhaps two or three organisations, deal with ambivalence in organisational politics as well as make sense of such involvement. This would entail the researcher(s) having access to each organisation, its internal machinations and to observe the interactions of leaders over an extended period of time rather than just allowed in to conduct private, semi structured interviews. It has been argued that “researching power and politics in organisations is best done through case study” (Clegg, 2009, p.157) and the powerful combination of this with such embedded participant observation offers an alternative standpoint from which to “explore the creative dynamics of political processes unfolding in particular organisational contexts” (Buchanan, 2016, p.350). In particular, this has the potential to advance understanding of how leaders deal with the lived experience of organisational politics in three ways. Firstly, the gathering of observational data by academic researchers would augment the subjective stories and narratives constructed by individuals with “the fine grained contextual detail” (Clegg, 2009, p.157) of the events and interactions that leaders subsequently account for in their sensemaking activity. This study has been careful to avoid any claims of objective truth in the accounts of participant leaders or how willing and / or politically skilled they actually are in organisational life; indeed, this has been a very deliberate design feature based on the assumption adopted throughout that the accounts which matter most in the slippery arena of politics are those of the actors themselves rather than those of any apparently detached observer. This said the ability to directly observe the situations which leaders subsequently account for their involvement therein would allow an examination of how Weick’s principle of sensemaking being driven by plausibility rather than accuracy (1995, p.55) plays out in the cut and thrust of organisational life. Moreover, it would facilitate an additional dimension to the active exploration of leader sensemaking, given that the researcher would have been a “silent witness” to the events and behaviours which leaders retrospectively interpret and account for, and by doing so, offer additional insights into the type of impression management, self-deceptive and role distancing sensemaking mechanisms deployed in this study. Secondly, the longitudinal element would allow an examination of the type of progression or maturation that other empirical studies have suggested, for example, Mainiero (1994), Doldor (2011; 2017) and, Landells and Albrecht (2016). Although this study has shown how being forced to confront their active involvement in the political arena triggered, for most, an intense sensemaking struggle that was not always resolved successfully, one unanswered question this leaves is how such confrontation and awareness

raising influences future attitudes towards organisational politics and engagement therein. However resolved individuals were or were not when they left the interview, was there any legacy attitudinally in their future willingness to engage or behaviourally in the manner in which they do so? Several of the leaders interviewed here talked of the catharsis associated with the experience and how they had never really been forced to confront this aspect of their role before, which suggests that being able to examine how sensemaking of political experience plays out on an ongoing rather than episodic basis would offer insights beyond which have been gained here. Thirdly, as argued in Sveningsson and Alvesson's (2003) influential research into identity work, "thick" analyses such as single case studies (in the case proposed here, leaders within a single, or perhaps two organisations) avoid the premature linkages made by "thin" enquiries with standard categories such as age, ethnicity, occupation etc and instead allow us to deepen our understanding of ambivalent and complex phenomena by "listening carefully to the stories of those we claim to understand and to study their interactions, the discourses and roles they are constituted by or resist – and to do so with sensitivity for context" (p.1190). This last point about context further emphasises how studies of such a "thick" nature would similarly allow for an understanding of the influence of factors such as organisational culture in how leaders account for their experience, thereby heeding Weick's warning that "those who forget that sensemaking is a social process miss a constant substrate that shapes interpretations and interpreting" (1995, p.39).

From a sensemaking perspective, such longitudinal and ethnographic enquiry has two attractions. Firstly, it would facilitate an examination of "immanent" sensemaking as described in 7.3.2. above (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015, pS25). If one takes a view of the lived experience of organisational politics as "absorbed coping" (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2011) then it rather suggests that any method of investigation should reflect its routine and ongoing nature, that is, where sensemaking takes place simultaneously with actors' responses to a situation as it unfolds, a form of sensemaking argued to be "more basic and more common than the various forms of retrospective sensemaking traditionally focused on" (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015, pS25). Secondly, building on the notion of direct observation, it responds to the call that other recent reviews of the perspective have made for methods of study to capture the increasing nuance and complexity in how we think about sensemaking (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014, p.106). The authors argue the value of "less commonly used methods that produce even more fine-grained process data for studying sensemaking" positing that "researchers who engage in participant observation are able to provide first-hand accounts of their own sensemaking experiences as well as the observed sensemaking of others" and how "the insider-outsider approach combines the insight of a knowledgeable

participant-observer within the organization with the fresh perspective of an outside researcher” (ibid). This extends to the notion of recording sensemaking as it is accomplished in real time, possibly through methods such as conversation analysis, discourse analysis, and microethnography which could then be used to “reveal how participants make sense from moment to moment, exploring both hidden qualities of the unfolding process and how it relates to team work, coordination, and strategizing processes” (ibid).

Another limitation of the study that could be argued is represented by the unanswered question posed by the findings regarding the role of gender in how leaders interpret their political experience. It will not have been lost on the reader that, whilst the sample for this study had an equal gender split, four of the five leaders for whom sense broke down regarding their involvement in politics were women. The interest in gender here was purely a peripheral one of whether it was as used a sensemaking device by men or women (generally speaking it wasn't) but this face value observation does nevertheless naturally pose the question about what else, if anything, is going on here from a gender perspective which future empirical study could usefully address. A view persists that gender is a “neglected topic in organisational politics scholarship” (Doldor, 2017, p.681) and a relatively brief pass of the literature at headline level reveals that the relationship between the two constructs is riddled with complexity, contradiction and ambiguity. On the one hand, there is much to suggest that politics is inherently a man's game played out in a man's world. Women, either through a lack of competence and confidence, or through attitudes shaped by a wide variety of contextual and cultural factors, choose not to engage, seeing the whole issue as either irrelevant or altogether distasteful (Arroba and James, 1988; Mann, 1995). Even women who have broken through the glass ceiling seem to refute the notion that political awareness and acumen has had anything to do with that (Mainiero, 1994). Other more contemporary sources of data paint a rather different picture. Women are just as able and willing to deploy political tactics and behaviour (Doldor, 2011) and their associated perceptions and moral judgements mirror those of their male counterparts (Buchanan, 2008). Differences, such as they exist, centre instead around organisational context and “gender specific hurdles” (Doldor, 2011).

This ambivalence, also evident in the quantitative POPS studies inspired by the Ferris et al (1989) and Ferris and Kacmar (1992) research, becomes more ambiguous still upon closer examination of the few extant qualitative studies referred to above, where the stereotypical presentation of politics as destructive, masculine game playing, appears to break down into something more complex. The Mainiero (1994) study is useful in its focus firstly on elite actors and secondly on the retrospective accounts of political experience but is open to

challenge in its tendency to accept without active exploration the (often self-aggrandising) narratives and claims of leaders regarding their own political will and skill. Mainiero accounts for the contradiction between participant claims that politics had nothing to do with their success and her own view that they had all demonstrated behaviours widely accepted as characteristically political by pointing to a “subtle maturation process” in which women unconsciously acquire political skills through four separate stages, starting with “political naivety” in their early career through to “shouldering responsibility” at leadership level. Interestingly, subjects seemed to be no readier to see themselves as political players at stage four, when this maturation journey is theorised to be complete, than they were at the outset of their careers. Subsequent work on maturation has suggested a sense of inauthenticity being a potential barrier and that, given how authenticity is challenging for female leaders, this might disproportionately obstruct women’s development of political skill (Doldor, 2017, p.681).

The complexity associated with this position is more explicitly exposed in Mackenzie Davey’s (2008) analysis of UK female graduates in male dominated manufacturing organisations. Subjects in this study claimed not to be limited by explicit discrimination but constructed politics as being masculine in character as well as irrational, aggressive and competitive, leading to individual, not collective success. Claiming to be rational and rejecting politics, while acknowledging its role in career success, presents a dichotomy for ambitious women, who “risk sabotaging their own position by appearing too sensitive to engage in the less savour aspects of organisational life” (ibid, p.660). Furthermore, participants faced difficulty when justifying their desire for extrinsic markers of success. The machinations of political processes can always be used to explain one’s lack of success in a career (Knights and Murray, 1994) but “resisting patriarchal process by remaining on the high moral ground makes it harder for women to maintain a positive identity and justify acting on their career ambitions without laying themselves open to accusations of selling out in engaging in the activities that they condemn” (Mackenzie Davey, 2008, p.665). Is it plausible for ambitious women to claim on the one hand to be “aware of how power operates within organisations and at the same time present themselves as unwilling and unable to engage in the processes necessary to achieve it”? (ibid, p.666). The conclusion of Doldor’s original qualitative study (2011), namely that there is no lack of appetite and skill amongst women managers and that, instead, the issue is about “gender-specific hurdles” presented by contextual factors that force women to opt out of the political game, adds yet more complexity into an already ambiguous arena. The inconsistent and conflicting perceptions of both the extent and nature of female engagement in political activity presented by all this rather supports the view that the role of gender is insufficiently understood here (Buchanan,

2008; Doldor, 2017) and with the ambiguity of such issues too subtle and complex to be accessed by quantitative research design, further qualitative inquiry into the interaction of gender with the lived experience of organisational politics at leadership level is warranted to advance understanding and aid future theoretical development.

The focus on gender would also be valuable from a sensemaking perspective. The earlier analysis of the literature (see Chapter 3 above) and the discussion in this chapter regarding the theoretical implications of this study's findings have both drawn heavily on three recent and comprehensive reviews of the sensemaking perspective (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Brown et al, 2015; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015). Each of these reviews conduct wide ranging and critical analyses of how both sensemaking theory and empirical research has developed and intensified since the founding work of Weick twenty years previously. Each similarly identify a number of different influences upon sensemaking processes and conclude by arguing opportunities for further development or by offering "potentially generative topics for further empirical and theory-building research" (Brown et al, 2015, p.265). What is striking in all of this is the absence of any discussion of or reference to the issue of gender. Brown et al (2015, p.272) note that "discourses centred on sensemaking have begun to broaden to consider issues of mood/emotion (Holt & Cornelissen, 2014; Maitlis, Vogus, & Lawrence,2013), metaphor (Cornelissen et. al., 2008; Patriotta & Brown, 2011), moral awareness (Parmar, 2014) and its embodied nature (Cunliffe & Coupland, 2012; Harquail & King, 2010)" but make no mention of gender throughout, either as an influence upon sensemaking previously analysed in the literature or as one of their "generative topics" for the future. Sandberg and Tsoukas' critical review of 147 articles across 9 leading journals identifies contexts, language, identity, cognitive frames, emotion, politics and technology as influences upon sensemaking (2015, p. S12) but not gender whilst Maitlis and Christianson (2014, p.99) make a strong argument for the theoretical opportunity presented by conceptualising sensemaking as an emotional process without identifying how, by implication, this naturally opens up the perspective to considering the role and influence of gender. It does seem surprising that, given the burgeoning interest in the various factors at play in sensemaking activity, identity and emotion especially, the field is so silent on the issue of gender, both theoretically and empirically, and the role of gender in making sense of personal involvement in politics, with all that carries in terms of career development and glass ceiling implications, presents a particularly attractive stimulus for additional enquiry and fresh insight.

Having argued the contribution of this study and its implication for theory and practice, together with how limitations may be addressed in future empirical work, the final chapter offers some concluding thoughts and draws the thesis to a close.

8.0 Conclusion

In making the case for the need and value of this study, the analysis of both the literature and prior research in the field of organisational politics revealed the structural and contextual factors which accentuate the inevitability and importance of political awareness, participation and skill for those in leadership roles but also how such involvement presents both threat and opportunity in equal measure. That so little is known about how leaders handle such ambivalence and interpret the lived experience of such an ambiguous and slippery arena, has become a growing source of dissatisfaction with contemporary writers and commentators highlighting gaps in understanding, slow progress and a dominance of narrow paradigms and models. Singled out for particular criticism has been the dearth of sound qualitative investigation, despite the construct being one that lends itself naturally to such enquiry, and this has in turn facilitated a more general call for new insights, eclectic models and richer interpretations of the complexity inherent in negotiating the identity, reputational and moral hazards presented by active personal involvement. As a construct through which individuals confront and resolve ambiguity, equivocality or unwelcome surprise through the retrospective creation and use of plausible accounts and narratives, sensemaking was argued to be a particularly useful lens through which to interrogate such lived experience.

The empirical study assumed an interpretivist ontological position and adopted a qualitative research design consisting of 28 semi-structured interviews with senior leaders occupying Director level roles in a wide spread of different organisations and sectors (equal gender split). Broadly speaking, the interviews explored how participant leaders defined organizational politics and accounted for their own personal involvement therein. A novel feature of this method was the departure from conventional research interviewing practice and the adoption of an active interview approach which pushed beyond well-rehearsed “press release” responses to get under the skin of how leaders resolved the contradictions between their definitions of the construct and accounts of their own work behaviour.

The research findings demonstrate the ambiguity and complexity associated with the lived experience of organisational politics and the complex mix of sensemaking processes, narratives and identity work involved in efforts to resolve participation in such an ambiguous arena successfully. When considered against the specific research questions adopted in the study, they show firstly how sensemaking was triggered by confronting opposing or contradictory cognitions surfaced through an active exploration of definitions and personal

involvement. Secondly, once triggered, a wide variety of different processes were deployed as a response, self-deception and role distancing the most prominent among them. Use of these processes was equally prominent in the stories of leaders who were both successful and unsuccessful in ultimately resolving the dilemmas encountered, suggesting that, although an important element, they are not of themselves predictive of the sensemaking outcome. Thirdly, leaders built on these processes by constructing four overarching narratives: *No such thing*, *Weary endurance*, *Conscientious objection* and *Pragmatic engagement*. For most, use of these narratives contributed to a successful sensemaking outcome. Within this majority group, whilst a small number were resolved through unequivocality and defensive sensemaking, most achieved success despite drawing on conflicting positions, the most common combination being that of *Conscientious objection* with *Pragmatic engagement*. A further small group, despite also drawing upon multiple narratives, were less successful in resolving the ambiguity they encountered, suggesting that, just as with the processes in use, narrative equivocality is not necessarily predictive of either sensemaking success or failure. Within this smaller unresolved group, all maintained a strong position of *Conscientious objection* but combined instead with a narrative of *Weary endurance* rather than the strong pragmatic approach of the more resolved. Taken as a whole, such findings demonstrate how leaders can resolve ambivalence and contradiction through a belief in their capacity to act pragmatically in the political arena but that, if they experience it as a phenomenon to be endured and over which they have little control, their position may be undermined.

The study makes a number of important contributions to both the field of organisational politics and sensemaking as a perspective. In terms of organisational politics, the research highlights firstly the complexity involved in how leaders experience their own personal involvement, thereby challenging the binary, positive versus negative categorisation of rationalistic perspectives and demonstrating how leaders make sense of such ambiguity successfully despite holding multiple and conflicting positions simultaneously. The struggle to resolve ambiguities, contradictions and dilemmas, the use of self-deception and distancing as sensemaking processes of choice, and the inherently negative nature of three of the four narratives identified, suggest that whilst the literature may be taking a “positive turn” regarding the nature and impact of organisational politics, active engagement is sufficiently stigmatised in organisational life as to represent a reputational hazard to those in leadership roles however intellectually compelling the benefits may be. Such ambiguity implies the need for a more nuanced understanding of engagement in politics and greater flexibility in developing theoretical frameworks that can embrace a wider range of different perspectives regarding how leaders interpret and draw meaning from the political world

around them and their involvement in it. Secondly, by showing how participation in political activity represents a threat to fragile leadership identities and that agentic centred identity work, particularly in the capacity to engage pragmatically, is crucial to resolving dilemmas and contradictions positively, the research makes a case for a convergence of future thinking regarding organisational politics and leadership identity. The way in which leaders experience and deal with organisational politics may not be just something that is influenced by a pragmatic self-concept but also the means by which such identity is shaped and reinforced. Whatever the direction or strength of influence, this study suggests that theorising about the relationship between leaders and organisational politics is, by implication, theorising about identity; how it is threatened, negotiated, repaired or even constructed and future thinking about both constructs may benefit from a more integrated approach. Finally, the successful outcome achieved by many despite the presence of contradictory narratives suggests that the conceptualisation of political skill may benefit from being extended beyond a purely behavioural domain to include a cognitive element that bequeaths a capacity to cope with ambiguity and the competing pressures of a complex arena. Such an extension further implies that efficacy beliefs may themselves be an antecedent of political skill and whilst this research has been careful to avoid making any claims as to how skilled any of the participating leaders are in actual terms, it is nevertheless reasonable to argue that such pragmatism is more likely to enable the development of the interpersonal repertoire which underpins political skill. From a sensemaking perspective, the study contributes firstly by illuminating the specific role played by stories, narratives and, especially, identity work in the process of sensemaking and the outcome generated therefrom. Secondly, by unearthing a specific mechanism – role distancing – not previously identified in the literature and thirdly, by showing the value of an active interviewing approach to extracting richer sensemaking material thereby building on Weick's underexplored idea (1995, p.135) of how argument produces more dependable understandings.

Based on such contribution, further research is recommended in two areas. Firstly, an extension of the "qualitative turn" in studying organisational politics by adopting a longitudinal and ethnographical research design for a study of leader sensemaking within one or two case study organisations would add an additional observational dimension to the active exploration of lived experience and, by doing so, offer additional insights into the fine grained, contextual detail of political engagement. Such enquiry would also be valuable in addressing the unanswered question from this research regarding how the awareness raising impact of the active interview influences future attitudes towards organisational politics and engagement therein. From a sensemaking perspective, research of this nature

would facilitate a novel examination of immanent sensemaking by aligning the method of investigation with the “absorbed coping” routine of organisational politics and capturing the increasing nuance and complexity associated with sensemaking activity. Opening up, as this would, the possibility of recording sensemaking as it is accomplished in real time practice thereby revealing how participants make sense from moment to moment, may excavate hidden qualities of the unfolding process and how it relates to team work, performance and other important outcomes. Secondly, given the predominance of women in the small group for whom sense broke down, more specific enquiry into the extent to which leader sensemaking of political experience may be gendered is warranted. As well as shedding light into a still underdeveloped aspect of organisational politics where extant research, such as it exists, points to considerable complexity and contradiction, such a study would also be instructive regarding the gender influences upon sensemaking processes and outcomes, a relationship on which the existing sensemaking field is strangely silent.

Given that the presentation of this thesis represents the culmination of many years work, some brief comments from a personal learning perspective are appropriate. Completing this research has been an immense challenge but also hugely developmental and intellectually stimulating. As set out in the original introduction to the thesis, much of my interest in the subject relates to my work as a professional consultant and Executive coach in supporting leaders in similar roles to the participants of this study and for whom dealing with the political element of their role is consistently stated as the most challenging aspect. The insights I have gained from conducting this research have without doubt strengthened my ability to empathise with the clients I support and also enhanced my practice in enabling them to make sense of their experiences and still be able to meet the demands expected of them by an ever more complex and demanding set of stakeholders. From an academic point of view, the study has shown me that whilst quantitative research of course has its own merits, purpose and value, it cannot reach the parts of complex and ambiguous phenomena like organisational politics in quite the way that qualitative enquiry can. It may be a messy, unpredictable and an often overwhelming process, but it is also one that produces rich insights and intense intellectual fascination and challenge. Finally, in presenting this thesis, I hope I have conveyed this same stimulation and interest to the reader and that my findings and contributions prove to be a springboard for others to take the implications raised that one step further. It was a privilege to speak to the 28 leaders interviewed and to be given access to their often intensely personal experiences in a sensitive arena. The interest in their accounts was certainly not only an intellectual one and I hope that the comments made consistently at the end of the discussions about how the experience was cathartic,

illuminating and beneficial have proved ultimately to be a helpful sensemaking mechanism for them all.

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Appendix i – Letter and Project Overview

Dear xxxx

PhD Research Project: Making Sense of Organisational Politics

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this research which is concerned with examining how leaders make sense of their relationship with organisational politics. Past research has positioned the phenomenon both as a necessary skill and as a negative impact on organisations. Given such ambivalence, my study focuses on how successful leaders interpret their personal involvement in political activity.

Your participation in this research will take the form of a semi structured interview lasting circa. 45-60 minutes in which your experiences of organisational politics will be sought and explored. Organisational politics is a sensitive area and, as such, issues of ethics and confidentiality are important. This study is part of my own personal development rather than any commercially sponsored initiative and your participation is entirely voluntary. Whilst the nature of the research process dictates that our interview will be recorded, this data will be kept strictly confidential at all times. Equally, if, having agreed to participate, you change your mind at any stage, you are free to withdraw, and any data gathered will be destroyed. The final dissertation will not include details of who has participated and will be shared with you should you wish. By way of additional reassurance, my project will be supervised at all times by experienced academic staff within the Organisational Psychology department of Birkbeck College.

I look forward to meeting you.

Yours Sincerely

Adrian Ward

Appendix ii - CONSENT FORM

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my doctoral research project into how leaders make sense of their experiences of organisational politics. Before we start I would just like to confirm that you can request at any time for the tape to be stopped, or for the interview to terminate. This is my own personal PhD project and my role as researcher is totally independent to any organisation. In terms of ethical and confidentiality issues, any information that you share with me will be gathered on the basis that it will not be possible to identify anyone who has participated and will remain strictly confidential to me, my supervisor at Birkbeck and an external academic examiner. Everything that is taped is held in confidential storage and anything transcribed will not be passed on to anyone other than those people outlined above. If you are happy to go ahead with the interview, please read through the statements below and sign and date this form prior to commencement of the interview.

- I have read the note inviting me to participate in this research which explained the details of this study. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.
- I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the study at any time and to decline to answer any particular questions.
- I agree to provide information to the researcher on the understanding that my name will not be used without my permission.
- I agree to the interview being taped.
- I understand that I have the right to ask for the audio tape to be turned off at any time during the interview.
- I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out above.

Participant Date

Researcher Date

Appendix iii - SENSEMAKING ANALYSIS : JOHN

PARTICIPANT : JOHN		SENSEMAKING	
SENSEMAKING “TRIGGERS” : CONTRADICTORY/OPPOSING COGNITIONS		SENSEMAKING STRATEGIES	IDENTITY WORK
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Politics is a dysfunctional force in my experience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I have engaged in political activity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It’s been positive in that it’s actually equipped me to be a leader who can recognise stuff a lot quicker & model positive behaviour to stamp it out. • We’ve formed a gang of like-minded senior people who are role modelling positive behaviour. • My political tactics are justified because other interventions (e.g. coaching) haven’t worked. • I do it responsibly, ethically and soundly. • That’s how we are right now in the org (i.e. need to be political sometimes). This is our dance floor and we’ve got to dance in that sort of way. • It’s challenging rather than personally troubling (dealing with dilemmas). A healthy challenge you need as part of your job. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I see myself as being responsible for good conduct in the organisation. • It doesn’t feel nice when I act in a Machiavellian way. I don’t skip home from work on those days. • I very much see myself as the holder of the values. • My experiences have made me more determined to be the role model who stamps this out.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political behaviour is destructive and narcissistic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • My role legitimises me being on this battlefield and able to play a bit. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I use politics responsibly, ethically and soundly. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I’ve used it to take someone out by using the dark arts. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I see myself as the person responsible for good conduct. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you know the person being responsible for good conduct is being responsible? Where are the checks and balances? 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I’ve led forming a gang who model constructive anti political behaviour to drive out politics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is our dance floor and we have to dance this way. I’d love to change the dance floor but that’s not going to happen this year or next. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I’ve never felt any dilemmas around my own personal involvement. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This discussion is making me realise its say one thing and do another here. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You have to accept that it’s there and necessary sometimes to get things done or move the org forward 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You shouldn’t accept the dark arts that aren’t in the org interest. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I role model positive, responsible and ethical behaviour. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acting in a Machiavellian way doesn’t make me feel good. I don’t skip home from work. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I am more determined than ever to stamp this out. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The dance floor isn’t changing any time soon so I’ll still have to dance this way. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I don’t find this troubling. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I do find it troubling because it could be people’s livelihoods at stake. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I very much see myself as the holder of the values 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I only thought of that about 4 or 5 minutes ago. 		

Appendix iv - SENSEMAKING ANALYSIS: ALEX

PARTICIPANT : ALEX		SENSEMAKING	
SENSEMAKING “TRIGGERS” : CONTRADICTORY/OPPOSING COGNITIONS		SENSEMAKING STRATEGIES	IDENTITY WORK
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I don't see myself as playing politics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowing who to include or exclude in correspondence is an important skill in influencing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It's not Machiavellian, just people having differing views on what to do or different personalities. • I haven't been undermined or manipulated, I just haven't been able to make my case strong enough sometimes. • If I am being political, it's just “par for the course” and the same wherever I've worked. • You're not actually telling an untruth, you're simply choosing things to say and not to say. • These are the sort of things you have to do to get your viewpoint taken forward. • Even if I have been more political than I thought, I'm still not as politically “astute” as others. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I play to my strength which is doing things quickly and delivering well. • I have never regarded myself as someone playing politics. • I'm more analytical than emotional. • I have a high level of personal integrity and am open & honest with people. • At this stage of my career, I'm much more relaxed about what people are doing and am not trying to prove myself. • I am friendly and supportive and trusting of people. • I'm more political than I thought I was and have absorbed political skills & behaviours.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • My personal values and beliefs are around a high level of personal integrity and being open/honest 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Often I say different things to different people depending on what I want out of them. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I'm not a political person. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I act politically in how I influence stakeholders and my boss. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I don't see myself as manipulative & saying something very different to different people in order to influence them. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I say different things to different people in order to influence them. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I see myself as being open & honest. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I have used deliberate exclusion or restricted use of information to influence my agenda. So, I have been slightly dishonest or certainly not open. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I influence by getting things done or through power of argument / logic. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I am more political than I thought and have absorbed & deployed political behaviours and tactics. 		

Appendix v - SENSEMAKING ANALYSIS: MARK

PARTICIPANT : Mark		SENSEMAKING	
SENSEMAKING “TRIGGERS” : CONTRADICTORY/OPPOSING COGNITIONS		SENSEMAKING STRATEGIES	IDENTITY WORK
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People should look after themselves 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual goals must be aligned with company goals. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I don't spend time thinking about it. • Its an organisational issue for leaders to deal with and stamp out. • You have to expect people to look after themselves • At senior level you don't see it happening. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anyone can come and see me and say anything. • I'm not a particularly political person • If I come across a problem, I deal with it and move on. • I just get on with my job and be as objective as possible.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organisations should be about objective accountability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It can often be subjective and people will promote their favourites 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It's (OP) not something I have heard of or spend time thinking about. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Politics is a negative misalignment of personal and organisational goals. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Politics only happens in static “dead men's shoes” situations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I've experienced political behaviour in a growing business. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People should look after themselves 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This often leads to unproductive effort and wasted energy. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Competition in an organisation is good. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pitting people against each other is unproductive. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It's (OP) not something I've heard of or thought about. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “It's” negative, unproductive and “obviously does go on”. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I'm not political – I say what I mean. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I contrive situations to get people to “come up with the right answer”. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Its down to leaders to control politics. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You can't stop people looking after themselves. Human beings will be human beings. 		

Appendix vi: Sensemaking processes: interview by interview analysis

Participant	Length of interview	No. of Micro Stories / Incidents	Total Incidence of Processes	Incidence of Sensemaking Processes (Number (& %) embedded in stories)								
				Locating	Meaning Making	Becoming	Impression Management	Attributional Egotism	Self Deception	Hypocrisy	Scapegoating	Distancing
Lucy	50 mins	13	27	3 (23)	4(31)	1 (8)	4 (31)	1 (8)	8 (62)	2 (15)	0 (0)	4 (31)
Jack	47 mins	8	25	3(38)	4(50)	0(0)	2 (25)	2(25)	7 (88)	4 (50)	0(0)	3 (38)
Tina	51 mins	4	14	2(50)	2 (50)	0(0)	3(75)	0(0)	3(75)	1(25)	0(0)	3(75)
Jane	30 mins	3	5	1(33)	1 (33)	0(0)	0(0)	0(0)	1 (33)	0(0)	0(0)	2(66)
Mary	59 mins	8	16	1(12)	3(37)	2(25)	0(0)	0(0)	3(37)	2(25)	0(0)	5(62)
Jean	53 mins	4	12	1 (25)	2 (50)	1 (25)	3 (75)	1 (25)	1 (25)	1 (25)	0 (0)	2 (50)
Dawn	56 mins	5	8	1 (20)	1(20)	0(0)	0(0)	0(0)	4 (80)	0(0)	0(0)	2 (50)
Grace	58 mins	6	13	1 (17)	3 (50)	0 (0)	3 (50)	0 (0)	4 (66)	0 (0)	0 (0)	2 (33)
Bill	53 mins	5	11	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	3 (60)	0 (0)	4 (80)	1 (20)	0 (0)	3 (60)
Holly	52 mins (only 10 recorded & transcribed)	1	2	1 (100)	0 (0)	0(0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (100)
Diane	48 mins	10	19	1 (10)	0 (0)	0 (0)	7 (70)	4 (40)	5 (50)	0 (0)	0 (0)	2 (20)
Emma	46 mins	9	10	0 (0)	1 (11)	0 (0)	5 (55)	0 (0)	4 (44)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Amy	45 mins.	4	11	0 (0)	3 (75)	0 (0)	3 (75)	0 (0)	2 (50)	0 (0)	0 (0)	3 (75)
Ruth	58 mins	7	11	0 (0)	3 (43)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	5 (71%)	0 (0)	0(0)	3 (43)
Brian	54 mins	7	16	0 (0)	0(0)	0 (0)	2 (28)	1 (14)	6 (86)	2 (28)	0 (0)	5 (71)
Mark	48 mins	5	10	1 (20)	2 (40)	0 (0)	2 (40)	0 (0)	1 (20)	0 (0)	0 (0)	4 (80)
Roy	54 mins	9	24	2 (22)	6 (66)	0 (0)	2 (22)	1 (11)	5 (55)	2 (22)	0 (0)	6 (66)
Gary	58 mins	5	12	1 (20)	3 (60)	0 (0)	2 (40)	3 (60)	1 (20)	0 (0)	0 (0)	2 (40)
Louise	43 mins	4	7	1 (25)	2 (50)	0 (0)	0 (0)	1 (25)	1 (25)	0 (0)	0 (0)	2 (50)
Tom	59 mins	8	22	0 (0)	2 (24)	0 (0)	5 (62)	4 (50)	7 (88)	0 (0)	0 (0)	4 (50)
David	54 mins	7	22	1 (14)	1 (14)	1 (14)	6 (85)	2 (28)	5 (71)	1 (14)	1 (14)	4 (57)
Alex	46 mins	6	13	1 (17)	0 (0)	1 (17)	1 (17)	0 (0)	4 (66)	1 (17)	0 (0)	5 (84)
Derek	53 mins	5	14	0 (0)	1 (20)	0 (0)	3 (60)	1 (20)	4 (80)	1 (20)	1 (20)	3 (60)
John	65 mins	5	9	1 (20)	1 (20)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	2 (40)	2 (40)	1 (20)	2 (40)
Richard	49 mins	6	12	2 (33)	4 (66)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	2 (33)	0 (0)	(0)	4 (66)
Mathew	55 mins	4	9	2 (50)	1 (25)	0 (0)	2 (50)	2 (50)	0 (0)	1 (25)	0 (0)	1 (25)
Laura	43 mins	5	11	1 (20)	1 (20)	1 (20)	1 (20)	1 (20)	1(20)	1 (20)	1 (20)	3 (60)
Chris	61 mins	5	10	0 (0)	1 (20)	0 (0)	2 (40)	2 (40)	2 (40)	1 (20)	0 (0)	2 (40)
Total	1,448 mins	168	375	28 (17)	52 (31)	7 (4)	61 (36)	26 (15)	92 (55)	23 (14)	4 (2)	82 (49)

Appendix vii: Sensemaking processes : grouped by outcome

	Overall (n = 28)	Group 1 (n = 4) (Singular narrative/ successful outcome)	Group 2 (n = 19) (Multiple narratives/ successful outcome)	Group 3 (n = 5) (Multiple narratives / unsuccessful outcome)
Process (Source)	Incidence (# People)	Incidence (# People)	Incidence (# People)	Incidence (# People)
Self Deception (Brown & Jones, 2000)	92 (26)	3 (3)	69 (18)	20 (5)
Distancing (Emerged from the data)	82 (27)	9 (4)	56 (18)	17 (5)
Impression Management (Brown et al, 2008)	61 (20)	7 (3)	47 (15)	7 (2)
Meaning Making (Maclean et al, 2012)	52 (23)	6 (4)	32 (14)	14 (5)
Locating (Maclean et al, 2012)	28 (20)	5 (4)	18 (6)	5 (3)
Attributional Egotism (Brown et al, 2008)	26 (14)	3 (2)	22 (11)	1 (1)
Hypocrisy (Brown & Jones, 2000)	23 (15)	2 (2)	15 (10)	6 (3)
Becoming (Maclean et al, 2012)	7 (6)	1 (1)	3 (3)	3 (2)
Scapegoating (Brown & Jones, 2000)	4 (4)	0 (0)	3 (3)	1 (1)
TOTAL	375 (28)	36 (4)	265 (19)	74 (5)

Appendix viii - SENSEMAKING ANALYSIS: LUCY

PARTICIPANT : Lucy		SENSEMAKING	
SENSEMAKING “TRIGGERS” : CONTRADICTIONARY/OPPOSING COGNITIONS		STRATEGIES	IDENTITY WORK
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Politics is necessary and shouldn't be seen as negative. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Politics is dysfunctional, distasteful and damaging to the business. behaviour 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Every big organisation is the same. • If you take the cheque, you have to play the game. • I never actually lie to anyone. • You have no choice but to be involved unless you go work for yourself. • You can't fight or stop it, those that do are naïve or get their heads chopped off. • You can't have everything i.e. role, status, pay and no politics. • You have to do it to build a career. • I can go out running at lunch time to get rid of frustration and not go home cross. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At least I am still open and honest with my team. • I am a mentor & teacher - helping others cope/survive etc. • I am a capable and positive person, it's just the politics that's making me an angry cynic. • I have a strong sense of justice. Injustice makes me furious.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Playing politics is annoying and frustrating. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I have to engage in political activity to get anything done. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I retain my authenticity and integrity at work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I use political behaviour to exclude or marginalise others. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I have a strong sense of justice and get angry when things go on that aren't right. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you stand up for what is right, you get your head chopped off so you have to play the game. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I am open and honest in my dealings with colleagues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I am not always open and honest in my dealings with colleagues. 		

Appendix ix - SENSEMAKING ANALYSIS: JACK

PARTICIPANT : Jack		SENSEMAKING	
SENSEMAKING “TRIGGERS” : CONTRADICTION/OPPOSING COGNITIONS		STRATEGIES	IDENTITY WORK
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Politics is negative because it is manipulation in pursuit of hidden agendas. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I have engaged in covert tactics towards concealed ends. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I’m not as political as others. I’ve been here long enough and done enough for the organisation to justify being political. It’s all a game. No one gets hurt. The world keeps on spinning. When I am political, I do it in a nice way. Not arrogant. When I try and exploit situations , it’s because I want to be stretched & developed rather than for shallow, financial ends. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I’m low key, not in your face. I get things done quietly, stealthily. I do the right thing and admit to my mistakes. I have a clear conscience. I like affirmations from important people. I am good at bringing people together, mediating etc. I don’t want people to think I’ve been underhand. I am quiet, thoughtful & reflective. Like to think things through, hate to be put on the spot.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Politics is about the pursuit of self interest. That’s not in me. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I have used relationships to my own advantage. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Politics is just a game. The world will keep turning whatever happens, nothing really matters 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The consequences of politics are sometimes scary and can keep me awake at night. 		

Appendix x - SENSEMAKING ANALYSIS: BRIAN

PARTICIPANT : Brian		SENSEMAKING	
SENSEMAKING “TRIGGERS” : CONTRADICTORY/OPPOSING COGNITIONS		STRATEGIES	IDENTITY WORK
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I am a person of high integrity & honesty 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I am working in an environment where I have to say and do things that I do not think are right or true. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is not how I would act if I wasn't in this role. • I disassociate myself from the culture that surrounds me. These people are stupid and lack sophistication. • I have to be on the inside to change the culture (“judo” vs “karate” story). • Everywhere else would be the same if I left. • Politics only actually takes up a small part of my work. • That's the world we live in. It's not the organisation, just individuals – therefore I can live with staying here. • Maybe they know what they're doing and it's me that's got it wrong?! 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Doing the right thing and challenging what is wrong causes embarrassment to the leadership group and I derive some satisfaction from that. • At least I'm in the right and have been true to myself. • I have sacrificed career ambition in order to do and show “what is right”. • I'm smarter than those around me. • I might only be a small grain of sand on the beach but I will be an irritant. I have a responsibility to do what is right so I am going to try and make sure I do that. • I'll never be part of the inner circle because I won't kick butt or psychobabble. I get on best with a-political people, who are straight , like me.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I am a capable and experienced Executive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I am not part of the leadership elite. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I love my job and the industry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I work for egotistical liars and bullies. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I am good at what I do. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I am not working in a meritocracy. Doing a good job is not the most important criteria for progression / survival. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I am a rational person and behave/ make decisions rationally 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The culture of the business is aggressive macho, kick butt behaviour and decision making is irrational. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I feel part of the organisation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I am on the outside of the tent. 		

Appendix xi - SENSEMAKING ANALYSIS: ROY

PARTICIPANT : Roy		SENSEMAKING	
SENSEMAKING "TRIGGERS" : CONTRADICTORY/OPPOSING COGNITIONS		STRATEGIES	IDENTITY WORK
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Politics is a way of moving things forward. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Politics can be very damaging to the organisation and its customers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You have to be political to get the best out of people & teams. I have to be skilled or else my earning capacity and career will be capped. Using relationships to achieve objectives is legitimate influencing. When I'm political it's in pursuit of legitimate organisational goals. I did the right thing and didn't "cross the line" I've not colluded with politics to protect my self-interest where others would have done. When my values have been tested, I've done the right thing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I have a blind spot...if I think somethings wrong, it's wrong. I'm not one of those righteous people, I'll play close to the line. I've got more integrity than I thought I had. I'm an out and out capitalist, making a buck here , there and everywhere.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I am politically skilful in building relationships and alliances. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The politics turned against me and left me isolated. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> People playing politics for career & economic advancement can be negative. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I have manipulated situations politically to further my economic interest. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Politics is about poor process, structure and a lack of data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Politics is about personal self-interest. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I feel cynical about how others use relationships to impression manage for their own ends 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I have used relationships to pursue my objectives & get things done. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If something is wrong, its wrong. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I'm not one of those righteous people, I'll play it very close to the line. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I'm an out and out capitalist and economically driven 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I do the right thing irrespective of the financial consequences. 		

Appendix xii - SENSEMAKING ANALYSIS: JANE

PARTICIPANT : Jane		SENSEMAKING	
SENSEMAKING “TRIGGERS” : CONTRADICTION/OPPOSING COGNITIONS		STRATEGIES	IDENTITY WORK
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organisations are straight forward meritocracies. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People don't get jobs because they don't network or have right relationships. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There's no such thing as politics, people are just blaming negative outcomes on own shortcomings. • If you just work out what you need to do pragmatically, everything will be fine. • If I don't make it, it will be through luck or wrong place, wrong time. • People trying to be political won't succeed. They'll get found out. • It's just differences in cultural norms not politics. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I succeed through my own hard work and ability. • I don't manage upwards, I'm just not scared of senior people. • I'm good at managing a team because I'm a kid at heart and have fun. • I'm a-political because I can't be anyone but myself. • I just break things down rationally and work on what I can control.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whether you get the top job is about stats & numbers & luck 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People who get jobs promote people they trust and have worked with in the past. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This org places weight on openness & honesty. Getting things done doesn't depend on kissing up or playing game 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You have to learn how to do drinks, golf , rugby club stuff to build your influence. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This org places weight on openness & honesty. Getting things done doesn't depend on kissing up or playing game 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Politics is keeping your mouth shut and not saying what you think. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I'm a-political. Lack of genuineness is annoying. You gotta be you. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You have to work out your strengths and weaknesses and strengthen the muscles you don't have.. You have to learn to do things the “old way” (clubs, drinks) 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young people are at the top because they are good. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You work for someone who is going places and go with them (slipstream). 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It's not about changing perceptions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It's about recognising what those perceptions are and what you need to do to counter them. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most things are controllable if you break them down. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It's about chance and statistics. 		

Appendix xiii - SENSEMAKING ANALYSIS: MATTHEW

PARTICIPANT : Mathew		SENSEMAKING	
SENSEMAKING “TRIGGERS” : CONTRADICTION/OPPOSING COGNITIONS		STRATEGIES	IDENTITY WORK
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political tactics are a way of achieving far more than you can through personal delivery 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not all tactics are legitimate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You have to be good at this stuff or your career will stagnate, delivery skills alone are not enough. • Being skilled politically means you can sell ideas and make transformational change happen. • Not all political behaviour is backstage – it’s better to be open and clear with people. Lock them in a warm embrace. • If you are seen as Machiavellian it will hurt you in the long run. • It’s a way of being influential way beyond what you can achieve by yourself. • You just have to shrug your shoulders a bit, say “Nobody’s died” and get on with it. • It’s down to leaders to spot difference between legitimate and non-legitimate politicking. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • My instinct is to be helpful & positive but not naive. • I’m resilient, when things don’t go the way I want I can shrug it off. • I’m a practical person who likes to get on with doing things and deliver. • I never want to be seen as Machiavellian – I’m not very good at it anyway.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Politics is a way of projecting ideas into a system 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Politics can be dysfunctional and destructive. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I have a good track record regarding delivery 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delivery skills aren’t enough. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • My instinct is always to be helpful & positive, relationship focussed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It’s not always possible to achieve win:win outcomes. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You have to be good at this stuff to further your career 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I am straight forward and open in getting things done. 		

Appendix xiv - SENSEMAKING ANALYSIS: EMMA

PARTICIPANT : Emma		SENSEMAKING	
SENSEMAKING “TRIGGERS” : CONTRADICTION/OPPOSING COGNITIONS		STRATEGIES	IDENTITY WORK
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The business is open and inclusive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Those who have not been here for a long time feel excluded from decision making and find it hard to influence. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • OP is just an inevitable consequence of a core group of people working together for a long time. • It’s much less negative than it used to be and improving all the time. • OP causes problems simply because unwritten rules haven’t been written down and communicated. • There will always be a minority of people who behave badly. • Our new values and behaviours are “outing” destructive politicking. • Human behaviour is not logical or rational. • Changing culture takes a long time. • You have to be on the inside working with something in order to change it. • My influencing is more central to the business agenda than it used to be. I still get the decisions I want from senior stakeholders. • People will always chose to interpret things in ways that don’t exist in reality • Op is not about gender bias just naturally different communication styles between men and women. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I always protect the anonymity of those who highlight examples of negative politics. • I am trusted above and below. • I am a deep pragmatist, the world is never perfect. • I’m a massive optimist. Try and crowd out problems with good stuff. If I wasn’t, I’d be permanently angst ridden, exhausted, miserable & depressed. • I’m not a victim of politics – you can always find a reason as to why you feel someone has stabbed you in back. • I love my job, can’t believe I get paid for it. Excited by challenge and progress being made.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I am a key influencer and decision maker at Board level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I and my work is not taken seriously and there is resistance to change. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The business is a rational meritocracy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Influence, power & decision making is not transparent. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I challenge senior leaders to be more constructive and transparent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The longevity and closeness of my stakeholder relationships prevents me from being open and honest. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I am optimistic and pragmatic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Change is taking a long time and we may never get there. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I am on the inside of a powerful group 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As the only senior woman I am excluded from an all male club 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are no victims from OP 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Covert behaviour and decision making will advance some causes and undermine others. 		

Appendix xv - SENSEMAKING ANALYSIS: RUTH

PARTICIPANT: Ruth		SENSEMAKING	
SENSEMAKING “TRIGGERS” : CONTRADICTORY/OPPOSING COGNITIONS		STRATEGIES	IDENTITY WORK
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Doing a good job and being good at what I do is important to me. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Those who are skilled politically achieve “20 x “ more than those just doing a good job. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I’ll just settle for what I’m good at without the pressure. • The reason for my lack of political effectiveness is my unwillingness to be mobile as others. • Working flexibly disadvantages me by damaging my reputation and standing in the eyes of significant others. • Developments in the business disadvantage those like me who focus on doing their job well rather than promoting themselves insincerely. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I’m ok if people want to perceive me in a certain way. • I can be happier just being good at what I do. • I’m not going to kill myself through ambition like others have to. I can focus on developing my tech know how instead. • I can be proud of my role as mother and not have to avoid talking about my kids. • Perhaps it’s good to have to learn new skills and challenge myself to broaden my network. • And now I have a mentor who is helping me feel more confident in this arena. • I am not prepared to “prostitute” myself to be someone I am not.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building networks is central to my getting things done. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building networks is tiring, emotionally draining and insincere. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • xxx is a great company to work for and I really enjoy it here. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I have to develop skills and behaviours that I don’t want to do or are not good at. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I am an independent person capable of standing on my own two feet 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I have relied on others to promote my skills & reputation to others. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • My best times have been when I have been sponsored & supported politically. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • My current boss can’t do this. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I have to be skilled at OP if I am to get things done and build my reputation / career 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I just want to be known for being good at what I do. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I need to develop new relationships and influence the perceptions others have of me. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I hate schmoosing insincerely with people I don’t either like or respect. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I work hard and am passionately committed to my work. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Others who work less hard or who are less able are more successful than me. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I am really good at what I do. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I can’t achieve superior performance ratings because my peers have better profile/ relationships. 		

Appendix xvi - SENSEMAKING ANALYSIS: AMY

PARTICIPANT : Amy		SENSEMAKING	
SENSEMAKING “TRIGGERS” : CONTRADICTORY/OPPOSING COGNITIONS		STRATEGIES	IDENTITY WORK
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I am a rational person, capable of taking an objective and detached view 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • My decision to quit because of negative OP was driven by emotion, I didn't think “strategically”. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is not significant or important compared to the real tragedies in my life. • That's what OP does to people, forces you to react emotionally, not rationally. • There is no backstabbing in my home or in my office now that I work for myself. • I don't have to play games in meetings anymore. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I have preserved my integrity. • I gave other people courage to resist unacceptable behaviour and gain strength / courage. • I couldn't live with selling my soul and compromising myself. I had no choice but to leave • My emotion is an Achilles heel, a weakness. If I was more rational, I could have dealt with it and been as successful as others around me (of lesser ability).
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I quit because I couldn't deal with the politics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People that can deal with politics are successful and can progress their careers. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I am a capable and ambitious person who wants to be successful 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leaving my job has damaged my career and others who have stayed “in the game” have prospered even though I am better than them. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • OP is manipulative social interaction for personal gain 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I have participated in political behaviour. 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I have high standards and want to be respected. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In my work, I was expected to behave inappropriately towards male clients and colleagues. 		