

Daily Impact

A small, detailed white line drawing of a dandelion seed head with its seeds blowing away, positioned in the upper right corner of the cover.

Reflecting on Employee Experiences
in Organizational Change

Annemiek van der Schaft

The background of the cover is a vibrant orange-yellow gradient. It is decorated with numerous white line drawings of dandelion seed heads. Some are large and detailed, showing the intricate structure of the seeds, while others are smaller and more delicate. The seed heads are scattered across the cover, with some appearing to be in the foreground and others in the background, creating a sense of depth. The overall aesthetic is clean and modern, with a natural, organic feel.

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Daily Impact

Reflecting on Employee Experiences in
Organizational Change

Annemiek van der Schaft

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Annemiek van der Schaft

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Daily Impact

Reflecting on Employee Experiences in Organizational Change

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Promotor:

Prof. dr. Beatrice I. J. M. van der Heijden

Copromotoren:

Dr. Xander D. Lub

Dr. Omar N. Solinger

Manuscriptcommissie:

Prof. dr. Yvonne W.M. Benschop (Radboud Universiteit)

Prof. dr. Matthijs P. Bal (University of Lincoln)

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Persoonlijk voorwoord

Het was rond 1994, dat er aan de eettafel in Maastricht verhalen werden gedeeld over de veranderingen binnen "Dyneema". Mijn moeder en Harry hadden het over DSM. Een organisatie die zichzelf meerdere keren opnieuw heeft uitgevonden en zich vanaf 1902 heeft ontwikkeld van staatsmijn, naar plasticfabrikant, naar wereldwijde science-based speler in de gezondheid- en voedingsindustrie in 2025. Een wonderbaarlijke transformatie! Het leek me voor hen een aangenaam gespreksonderwerp, want ze konden er uren over praten terwijl de kaarsen brandden en de schalen vooral na het eten nog werden leeg gepikt. Ze hadden gedeelde beelden en het verbond hen met elkaar en met een wereld die belangrijk voor hen was.

Ikzelf, toen 10 jaar oud, was een kind met oneindig veel vragen, nieuwsgierig naar het onbekende en vastberaden om ook het bekende te *blijven* bevragen. Kritisch, analytisch, willen begrijpen van verschillende perspectieven. Vragen stellen, zó veel vragen stellen dat mijn moeder wel eens bezorgd vroeg of ik ooit *niet* nadacht. Ik vroeg haar jaren eerder al hoe ik nou toch zeker kon weten dat ze wel echt mijn moeder was. Wat is de lol van het leven zonder existentiële vragen. Er moesten in mijn ogen wel alternatieven verklaringen zijn naast het antwoord dat ik kreeg. Je zal als lezer aanvoelen dat deze houding me later goed van pas zou komen.

Al luisterend naar de gesprekken over de organisatie, verandering en betekenisgeving binnen DSM, had ik uiteraard nog geen idee dat ik ooit een PhD zou doen. Maar het toeval wil dat dit nou net belangrijke bouwstenen zijn van hetgeen ik afgelopen jaren heb onderzocht. Relevant blijven en jezelf opnieuw uitvinden als organisatie en als individu in een sociale werkcontext. Een klimaat scheppen waarin mensen ruimte voelen en willen bijdragen aan permanente ontwikkeling. Wie weet, is er in Maastricht al een klein zaadje geplant voor mijn interesse in veranderende organisaties.

Mijn pad liep tot voor kort 16 jaar bij Breda University of Applied Sciences; een organisatie vol energie. Gedurende mijn arbeidsrelatie zijn zowel de organisatie als ik zelf gegroeid, volwassen geworden en misschien zijn we beiden wel getransformeerd. Ook ik vertel nu werkverhalen aan de eettafel. En het is nu mijn zoon die mee luistert en zich hardop afvraagt waarom die gesprekken zo lang duren. Die cirkel is rond.

Het verleden is geen fait accompli. Met mijn vader deelde ik een ambitie. Ook die cirkel is rond.

De tijd waarin dit proefschrift tot stand kwam was stormachtig. De Brexit, Covid-19 pandemie, oorlog in de Oekraïne, in Israël, de intensivering van AI en meer, deed de wereld in rap tempo veranderen. En hoewel van een andere orde, het was ook op persoonlijk vlak een stormachtige tijd die ik door ben gekomen met hulp van velen. Er zijn dan ook veel mensen die ik wil bedanken voor hun bijzondere bijdragen aan deze PhD.

Ten eerste mijn begeleidingsteam. Xander Lub, die me kennis, ideeën en een netwerk gaf en me als guppie mee op sleeptouw nam naar congressen. Hij had de meeste obstakels op dag één al aan me voorspeld, maar wist dat ik ze zelf moest ervaren om te groeien. Omar Solinger die me stimuleerde om dieper te denken, creatief te durven zijn en wiens inhoudelijke kracht deze PhD omhoog heeft gestuwd. Beatrice van der Heijden die met haar enorme staat van dienst mij wist te leiden door deze reis. Zoals ze zegt: het is een atypische baan die wij hebben! Jullie zijn als team mijn basis geweest en daarbij ben ik jullie niet alleen als voorbeeld maar ook als academische vrienden gaan beschouwen en hoop ik dat we samen verder werken en de gezellige momenten voortzetten.

Ook wil ik Woody van Olffen bedanken als betrokken coauteur op twee artikelen en voor zijn mentoring, het delen van ideeën en het uitdagen op kwaliteit. En Hermien Wiechers en Yoy Berghs! Die maar al te goed weten wat het combineren van werk, gezin en een PhD inhoudt. Mijn voorbeelden als het gaat om eigen koers varen en mijn maatjes om af en toe ons hart te luchten en te lachen over de frustraties van het leven van een buiten promovenda. Het liefst met een cider of aperol in downtown Chicago.

Ik wil Teun van Beusekom bedanken om het mogelijk te maken dat ik dit heb kunnen doen. Ik dank hem voor het mentorschap, de oneindige kansen en het zelfvertrouwen dat hij me heeft gegeven. Zonder Teun was ik als professional, maar ook als mens, niet wie ik nu ben. Dank ook aan mijn BUAs mede "studies" Jeroen den Boer en Sander van Breugel bij wie ik ideeën kon toetsen en die de liefde voor persoonlijke groei met me delen in werk en privé. Dank aan Celth, Reiswerk en BUAs; aan Jorrit en Ingrid (en Nico), en Aafke de Kok om ruimte te geven om deze PhD ook daadwerkelijk af te ronden. En dank aan alle fijne BUAs collega's voor de steun en gedeelde trots!

Mama (Elly van der Schaft), bedankt om mijn nieuwsgierigheid en eindeloze vragen als kind te doorstaan. Maar ook dank voor de manier waarop je me steunde richting het universitaire pad omdat je zag dat het bij me past. Lieve broer (Gertjan van der Schaft), over verandering gesproken; wat zijn wij in de jaren versterkt als broer en zus en wat ben ik daar blij mee.

Mijn dank gaat uit naar mijn lieve maatje, steun en toeverlaat Robert Viegen. Deze PhD is ook van jou. Je zag hoe ik dit wilde en hebt me onophoudelijk steun en ruimte gegeven om deze reis te maken. Ook als de bestemming onbekend was en de reis lang. "Embrace uncertainty" werd je motto en daar ben ik heel erg trots op.

Mauk! Je bent mama's inspiratie en brengt zo veel energie en vreugde. Je nieuwsgierigheid, je geweldige vermogen om te spelen en leren, je warme knuffels en wijze woorden. Er is geen onderzoek leuker of relevanter dan ons pad samen om te ontdekken hoe het leven werkt. Een ouder en een kind, dat is ons script, we hebben ieder onze rol, maar er is zo veel meer en in onze harten zijn we één.

Tot slot dank aan de betrokken editors en (friendly) reviewers.

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In de laatste fasen van dit onderzoek kwam steeds vaker de vraag bij me op: "Is it okay not to be okay?" Zijn ambivalente gevoelens in verandering voldoende welkom? Niet om stil te blijven staan, maar als erkenning dat, naast hoop en groei, ook onzekerheid, verlies en verwarring bij verandering hoort. Het hoeft niet, maar het mág moeilijk zijn.



Annemiek
van der Schaft

*"Science is one more technique (albeit very useful and powerful)
for coping with the world." (Wicks & Freeman, 1998, p. 126)*

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Chapter 1

Intro: When the Chaos of Change Rains Down on Your Desk

"... and in the meantime, we also changed from well, a 'normal' way of working to something they called Agile. Besides, we started working in teams, then a lot of things changed [laughs] let me put it this way. I suppose we'll talk about that"

This is a fragment from an interview with a 50-year-old employee who had been with the organization for a long time. They used to wholeheartedly consider themselves a frontrunner of several important changes and one of the company's heroes. However, the consequences of ongoing digitalization increasingly challenged them, leading to insecurity, stress, and younger colleagues surpassing them in promotions. By the time we spoke, they felt cynical and burned out due to the numerous changes they had faced. What had happened?

Experiences of organizational change are omnipresent in employees' daily work lives. Consequently, employees continuously develop both individual and collective expectations and interpretations of past, present, and future change events. More importantly, they assess the extent to which these changes impact their interests. Organizational change involves deviation from the status quo and inherently includes movement from one state to another, a process referred to as the change process (Yin et al., 2024). Although change processes are often initiated based on long-term strategic developments (e.g., anticipating industry-level changes), employees' interpretations of change strongly depend on their experiences and expectations at the operational, practical level (Berson et al., 2021). It is at the daily micro-level of local work lives that influential 'grapevine' change stories arise.

Strategic understandings about large-scale changes need to translate into positive daily experiences to foster change adaptation by employees. A better understanding of such employee change experiences and concurrent cognitions is fundamental for advancing the comprehension of employees' varying roles in change (Berson et al., 2021; Oreg et al., 2018). Current literature posits that a better understanding of employee change experiences provides the necessary understanding of why employees behave and respond in certain ways during the implementation of change (Bartunek et al., 2006; Kiefer et al., 2025; Van den Heuvel et al., 2020). To strengthen empirical and theoretical understanding, and to inspire change practice, employees prior- and expected change experiences form the topic of my dissertation and in this introduction, I will address the main concepts that lead to this dissertation its research question.

As employee experiences and their interpretations thereof are dynamic and continuously shared in the organizations' social atmosphere, a fundamental premise of this work is the belief that a true understanding of organizations necessitates a mode of thinking that presumes organizations exist in a state of continual flux, motion, and becoming (Hernes, 2007). Consequently, this dissertation is situated within the field of Organization Development and Change, a domain pioneered by social scientists, which aligns with this presumption and addresses organizational responses to the ever-changing internal and external environments. These responses are enacted by social systems sustained by the individuals within organizations, encompassing all members differentiated by their (constantly evolving) roles. As Reinecke and Lawrence (2023, p. 641) asserted, "all institutions are ever-becoming social processes". This perspective acknowledges that social *interactions and storytelling* between individuals and collectives are significant (Turner, 2025), and that context, along with individual and collective beliefs and 'rules of the game', constitute organizations (Hernes & Maitlis, 2010). This idea is supported by Peter Blau's (1964) Social Exchange Theory which explains that social behavior results from ongoing reciprocal exchange process that shape group formation and powerful social structures in the organization. Despite the idea that change seems to evolve in organizations as a dynamic interpersonal process, it is hardly being studied as such.

In this constructivist epistemology (Creswell & Poth, 2016), people influence, and are influenced by, interactions and their interpretations thereof. When interactions affect individuals in such a way that those individuals feel the need to make sense of what happened, is happening, or might happen, the interactions form an *experience*. An experience that will be remembered and, in turn, influences experiences to come, building relatedness [or 'prehension' (Whitehead 1979)] between what is believed to be the past, present, and future. The chain of related experiences seems to form an underlying logic (referred to as a cognitive schema; Piaget, 1976) for human choices and response patterns over time. Such schema forms a knowledge structure, or framework, that allows individuals to effectively interpret the changing world around them.

1.1 Aim of this Dissertation and Research Question

This dissertation is devoted to the study of interpreted employee change experiences. This is a topic that is underexplored (Bartunek et al., 2006; Kiefer et al., 2025; Oreg et al., 2023) and that is in need for more scholarly attention for (at least) two reasons. First and foremost, there is still meaningful progress to be made in prioritizing employees at the center of change study efforts (Oreg et al., 2011). In a knowledge-based economy, greater emphasis is placed on all organizational actors' "intellectual capabilities" (Powell & Snellman, 2004, p. 201) that create competitive advantage through creativity and collaborative effort (Tripathi, 2010). While some level of prescriptive behavior may be necessary for organizational stability, employee skills of independent thought and action in support of mission goals and objectives has become the norm in knowledge-based organizations seeking greater agility and relevance in their fields (Carsten et al., 2014; Powell & Snellman, 2004; Tripathi, 2010). In short: we need everybody. Hence, understanding employees' individual and collective experiences, as active participants in the change process, has become of even greater importance compared to the past (Rheinhardt & Gioia, 2021; Yin et al., 2024).

Second, extensive high quality prior work has advanced our understanding of employees' behavioral responses (for a review, see Khaw et al., 2023), related emotions (Oreg et al., 2018), and typologies of change recipients (Vakola et al., 2013). However, the change literature on employee concerns remains conceptually siloed, 'decontextualized', and static failing to represent organizational realities (Pettigrew et al., 2001; Yin et al., 2024). Examining change experiences in evolving change processes allows for the inclusion of a) addressing the complex, ambiguous change triggers - often represented in evolving daily events - in context, b) the cognitive mechanisms, such as schema activation and evaluation, that employees' initiate, *and* c) the resulting outcomes of those cognitive efforts. This leads to insights that better resemble and reflect real life change-scenarios (Kamarova et al., 2025) in which people navigate and deal with the high levels of uncertainty and ambiguity associated with change over the course of a change process (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Such focus could help to explain why employees within the same work context may differ in the way they think of the same change (Bartunek et al., 2006; Sonenshein, 2010) and why individuals might change their opinions and interpretations about the change along the way. Moreover, this focus expectedly strengthens

the understanding of (shifting) roles employees play or are willing to play in successful change initiatives from its beginnings to its end.

Research Question. To address the described issues and to strengthen the understanding of employees' contemporary, comprehensive change experiences over the course of change processes, the central question addressed in this thesis is:

What are employees' interpreted change experiences and what implicit mechanisms underly their interpretation formation?

To answer this question, this dissertation focuses on the following sub-questions:

1. How do employees interpret their change experiences in a retrospective sensemaking effort?
2. How are employees' change experiences embedded in a broader system of interaction and social exchange?
3. What could be considered "common sense of a higher order" (Weick, 1979, p. 3), that is, a recipient-based schema of common change experiences?
4. What are employees' prospective interpretations of upcoming change experiences and how do those inform change sensemaking?

Change Recipients. The label used to describe *employees in change* is much debated. I am aware of the fact that the term 'change recipient', which received major attention by (amongst others) the work of Oreg and colleagues (2011) is rejected by other scholars. This label would imply too much of a passive role whereas employees can actively co-create change outcomes (Ford et al., 2008). Although I fully acknowledge the diversity in proactive and reactive roles and behaviors of all individuals involved in change processes, in fact this issue is extensively addressed in this work, I have chosen to use the label of 'recipients' [and 'employee(s)'], to point out my focal group of interest. It is my perception that this label builds on high-quality leadership - and change literature and leaves plenty of interpretive space to include many facets and characterizations of individuals in change *roles*. In my empirical work, I refer to recipients as individuals acting in a role in subordinate ranks in the organizations that I studied. My data is provided by employees who occupied non-managerial and non-change-agent positions and who responded to change that was initiated by organizational others. With this focus on recipients, this work is embedded in a broader community of practice (Yin

et al., 2024) that complements the traditional managerialist view on change management, and provides insights into the polyphonic organization (Syed & Boje, 2011).

1.2 Contribution

In answering the research questions, this thesis addresses the “*what*” (e.g., what happens within this studies’ scope), “*how*” (e.g., how does this happen; exploring explaining mechanisms), and “*why*” (e.g., why does this happen; exploring theoretical underpinnings) of the phenomena under study. This thesis herewith adds to the further development of comprehensive understanding of recipient sensemaking of organizational change experiences. More specifically, there are three opportunities to advance the current body of knowledge and which I consider to be the main contributions of this dissertation. First, current literature provides a limited notion of the social (inter-personal) nature of sensemaking and interpretation processes (Dóci, 2024; Oreg et al., 2018; Solinger, 2019). These issues seem of importance since organizations are, by nature, built on individuals that act in social exchange processes in the context of bounded social networks (Blau, 1964). To understand employee experiences related to organizational change, one should understand processes of *social exchange* (Bandura, 1962). In particular, Social Exchange Theory (SET: Blau, 1964) explains how processes of exchange lead to the development of interaction expectations and experiences, and how those, in turn, form an important part of employees’ daily organizational sense-making in change. This dissertation not only explores how employees experience change processes and events, but also incorporates the effects of consequently altering social structures and - role-taking and how these shifts impact change experiences. This dissertation refers to a definition provided by Vickers (1967) who stated that organizations are “structures of mutual expectation, attached to roles which define what each of its members shall expect from others and from himself” (p. 109-110).

Second, much work on individuals’ interpretations of change considers study participants as a blank slate and with little account of existing schemas in context. The studies that do consider dispositional measures, such as personality, seem to do so one-dimensionally (you are either this or that), without accounting for textured profiles that match people’s nuanced authenticities. Very few studies seem to take into account the many

life experiences and processes of socialization that formed participants contextualized *rich stories* that color their experiences (Pettigrew et al., 2001; Turner, 2025) or even created expectation prototypes (Bartunek et al., 2006). In this dissertation, I will take a different approach and, by the study of stories, do more justice to the fact that we, as change scholars, are studying humans with dynamic retrospective practices and prospective expectations, nested within systems and contexts.

Third, due to the fact that up until now most literature concentrates on interpretation outcomes, instead of on the process itself (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015), current work in this field hardly addresses dynamic perspectives, interpretation shifts and concurrent, periodic, *role shifting* (Navarro et al., 2015). By addressing the dynamic nature of change, in particular, aiming at an understanding of 'what happens', instead of 'what is' (Roe, 2008), employees' expectations and interpretations of the dynamic organizational life could be reflected more reliable. Therefore, inviting participants to reflect on experiences and interpretations of *change processes* allows me to build an understanding of dynamics and shifts that arise over the course of unfolding change (Karlsen, 2023).

By its contributions, this dissertation underlines the complexity of our field of studies and responds to the call for new - social and dynamic - approaches to study organizational change vented by prominent change scholars during the annual Academy of Management Meeting of both 2020 and 2024. By devoting this thesis to the broadening of our scholarly understanding of context, events, and social perspectives that infuse change experiences, this work adds to a comprehensive spectrum within the change literature that is concerned with understanding employees' change experiences. This field is complex as many facets have proven to be of influence and it is probably in the bundling of forces (and insights), that we, as scholars, can bring coherent insights to the benefit of both theory and practice.

1.3 Dissertation Outline

In paragraph 1.4 of this introduction, I will address several theoretical concepts that are related to the stated research question. In the following chapters, four empirical studies are presented that, together, answer the central research questions addressed. In three of the four studies, I used the

Dutch travel industry, which was undergoing digital transformation, as study context. I consider this a suitable context as radical technological change often forms a substantial threat to firm and professional identity and often triggers diverse change sensemaking and - responses (Goto, 2022). Second, as the Dutch travel industry provided a part of the scholarship for this dissertation project, collecting data in this industry allowed me to directly give back to the industry by means of sharing my insights and results in several practitioner sessions and whitepapers (adhering to the 'rigor and relevance' discussion in the academic community). For the study that is not concerned with Dutch Travel Industry, I purposefully chose multiple contexts to explore if results would be generalizable across industry contexts.

Chapter 2 explores the employee change journey as illustrated by themselves and answers the first sub question: How do employees interpret their retrospectively interpreted experiences of change processes? Based on 26 interviews, Construal Level Theory (Trope & Liberman, 2010) is used to detail how employees make retrospective sense of their experiences in both abstract and concrete ways. Although change experiences can be idiosyncratic and individual, there certainly exist recipient-based common mechanisms, regularities or even lawfulness to be further explored (Oreg et al., 2023).

Chapter 3 comprises a qualitative study in which interpreted experiences and expectations are explored within the framework of Psychological Contract Theory (Rousseau, 1989). This chapter aims to answer the second question: How are employees' change experiences embedded in a broader social exchange system? PCT is concerned with the system of unwritten understandings and obligations between an employer and employee. Specifically, the Psychological Contract (PC) forms a mental schema (Rousseau, 2001) that contains considerations of mutual expectations about how to act (Rousseau, 1995). Recent literature addresses the relatedness between organizational change and the PC, however, empirical evidence is limited (Tomprou & Hansen, 2018). This work is aimed at closing this gap. The data analysis is based on the same 26 interviews of Chapter 2 and addresses whether organizational change sensemaking is nested in the social structure of one's work environment in which both vertical (employer - employee) relations as well as horizontal (employee - peers) relations play an important role.

In Chapter 4, narrative sensemaking comprises another lens that is concerned with employees' cognitive schemas on change experiences. In this study, I

answer the third sub question: What could be considered “common sense of a higher order” (Weick, 1979, p. 3), that is, a system of common interpersonal experiences, that creates a consensual, taken-for-granted reality when it comes to interpretations of organizational change? From prior studies, we know that employees use change *leadership* schemes to make sense of “high cognitive load conditions” (Epitropaki et al., 2013, p. 864) that characterize change. Especially, stories dealing with cognitive schemas of employees’ *own* roles in change, are understudied (Alipour et al., 2017). I use a narrative interview technique to close this gap and, based on the analysis of 80 recipient stories, I propose five composite narratives that are used by employees to make sense of their own shifting roles in change contexts.

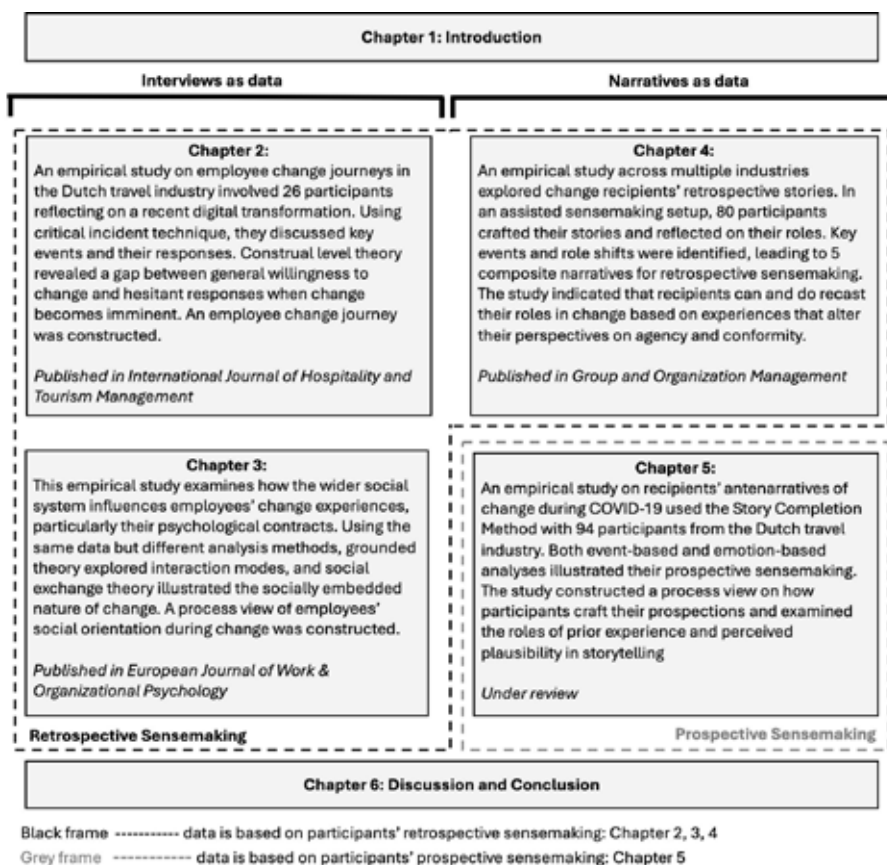


Figure 1: Summary of the chapters in this dissertation

Chapter 5 is considered with prospective sensemaking, as this less familiar territory has the potential to reveal strong insights into people's belief systems that underly the forming of expectations and interpretations. Herewith it answers the fourth sub question: What are employees' prospective interpretations of change experiences and how do those inform change sensemaking? During COVID-19, the airline industry entered a crisis, and this context formed a critical juncture for imagining alternatives (Gumusay & Reinecke, 2024). In this study, I embrace prospection as the cognitive representation and evaluation of possible futures (Laszlo, 2021). By exploring the interpretations of what is *going to happen*, employees seem to rely on a mix of episodic, semantic and emotive future thinking, and blend those into a future script of what is ought to be. This perspective considers the intuitive notions that can be interpreted as a 'mental yardstick' to which the unfolding of reality is evaluated.

In Chapter 6 the results of the studies are discussed and synthesized, and I answer the main research question of this dissertation. For each of the key issues addressed in this thesis, the main findings are reflected on. Subsequently, the theoretical implications of the results, limitations of the research, recommendations for future research and implications for practitioners are all discussed, followed by a general overall conclusion. The thesis ends with a summary. Figure 1 Depicts an overview of the chapters in this dissertation.

1.4 Conceptual Background

The cognitive processes through which organizational members interpret change have been demonstrated to significantly influence their responses to change (e.g., Bartunek, 1984; Bartunek et al., 2006; Kiefer et al., 2025; Lau & Woodman, 1995). I will proceed by providing a more in-depth examination of several elements of cognitive processing starting with sensemaking and its role in organizational change experiences. Moreover, I will introduce the concepts of mental schemas, narrative thinking, and temporality in organizational change. Those are the core concepts on which this dissertation builds. I will address the current state of knowledge on these concepts in relation to organizational change and point out opportunities for advancing our understandings related to this dissertations' research question.

1.4.1 Sensemaking

Organizational change creates a context in which taken-for-granted situations are often interrupted, and conscious attention is drawn to new, unexplored future possibilities. Habitual thoughts might get interrupted as soon as management announces an upcoming disruption of the status quo. This triggers the activation of sensemaking efforts as people seek 'equivocality reduction' (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). Karl Weick and associates (2005), in their Sensemaking Theory, defined sensemaking as "the ongoing retrospective development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing" (p. 409). However, this definition has been a topic of debate (see Brown et al., 2015), and a more general consensus was reached on the following description: "sensemaking refers generally to those processes by which people seek plausibly to understand ambiguous, equivocal or confusing issues or events" (p. 266). The sensemaking process is not about finding the truth or getting it right. Instead, sensemaking allows continuous redrafting of an emerging story based on existing and new information to get a subjective estimate of what is going on (Weick et al., 2005). Thus, sensemaking is an ongoing and iterative process that people use to plausibly understand their situation. People favor plausible explanations over accuracy as in complex situations, the latter is often unattainable.

The study of sensemaking tactics in a context of change has long focused on how change leaders and agents construct meanings that lead to a "preferred redefinition of organizational reality" (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991, p. 442). This means that previous literature was focused on how change leaders crafted a new and desired reality for the future of their organization. However, the field took a major turn to include *employees'* sensemaking of change (e.g., Balogun et al., 2015; Berson et al., 2021; Chreim, 2006; Guette & Vandenbempt, 2017; Stensaker & Falkenberg, 2007; Stensaker et al., 2008) to include employees' point of view on what was happening or had happened in the past, and how these cognitive and affective interpretations provided directions to their change responses. As I will discuss in paragraph 1.4.2, the process of sensemaking in this context involves interpreting change-related cues into change schemas. Analyzing how such cues become integrated into existing or new schemas provides a deeper understanding of the *attribution of meaning* towards change that, when processed, defines the change experience.

Sensemaking practices can be considered a social act in that plausible stories are preserved and shared amongst (groups of) individuals (Maitlis,

2005; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015). Weber and Glynn (2006) identified three mechanisms by which one's social environment influences individual sensemaking. First there is priming, which involves the social environment providing social cues for what is meaningful. This can, for example, be a social macro-script of the organizational repertoire of do's and don'ts. Second there is editing, involving social feedback on what is (non)acceptable and (non)appreciated that directs the individual's attention. And third, there is triggering, which is the social act of posing ambiguity and contradiction in social interactions that trigger the need for sensemaking. While not extensively studied, exploring social mechanisms in change sensemaking potentially bridges an existing gap between studies on change initiators their controlled sensemaking and individual bottom-up sensemaking (Rheinhardt & Gioia, 2021) and might even reveal how social sharing and processes of institutionalization affect change outcomes on those different levels in the organization.

An important note in the context of this dissertation is that most change sensemaking literature has a retrospective outlook. However, employees think as often about their future as they do about their past (Barsics et al., 2017; Cordonnier et al., 2016). This is one of the reasons why definitions were debated and sensemaking scholars called for inclusion of future-oriented approaches and prospective theorizing to complement the sensemaking scope (Gumusay & Reinecke, 2024). A future-focused lens could address the role of hopes, dreams, concerns, or fears, which all have a future time orientation. Hence, researchers have started to explore concepts dealing with this prospective anticipation that could complement retrospective sensemaking insights (e.g., Gephart et al., 2010; Holt & Cornelissen, 2014; Konlechner & Ambrosini, 2019). Prospective sensemaking can be defined as "the conscious and intentional consideration of the probable future impact of certain actions, and especially non-actions, on the meaning constructions processes" (Gioia et al., 1994, p. 378). More research is needed to familiarize ourselves (change scholars) with prospective sensemaking and with the potential overlap of differences from retrospective sensemaking (Gumusay & Reinecke, 2024). This can bring additional sense of structure and predictability to the difficulty of understanding change sensemaking when people think of their *past*, *current*, and *future* change experiences.

1.4.2 Cognitive Schemas

Our exchanges within organizations and the sensemaking thereof have often evolved to become taken-for-granted typifications or repertoires of

interactions that guide our expectations on a daily basis (Steele, 2021). In psychological terms, such a taken-for-granted typification is named a schema (Schema Theory; Piaget, 1976). Schemas were defined as: "the cognitive structures in which an individual's knowledge is retained and organized" (Harris, 1994, p. 309). A schema can be considered a subjective lay theory of how the world operates, providing direction for information processing efforts (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Schemas bring coherence to one's thinking (Labianca et al., 2000) and offer answers to internal dialogue - sensemaking - questions such as "What is this?", "What does this mean?", and "How should I respond to this?". They develop from encountered experiences stored in memory and shape interpretations in new situations (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Consequently, schemas in the minds of employees, organizations, or society are known to drive individual behaviors. This is especially true when faced with unclear situations and uncertainty, as they provide normative templates for appropriate actions (Bartlett, 1932).

Early research in this field identified seven primary functions of schemas (Taylor & Crocker, 1981). Schemas (1) provide a framework for structuring new experiences, (2) direct information processing related to memory activation, (3) enhance the efficiency and speed of information processing, (4) compensate for missing information, (5) guide problem-solving, (6) facilitate evaluation, and (7) shape anticipations of future events. The literature suggests that, because schemas represent general knowledge, "No single example fits the schema perfectly, but most fit well enough" (Fiske & Taylor, 1991, p. 171). Consequently, new experiences often reinforce existing schemas. However, as will be discussed later, this does not imply that schemas are unchangeable (Bartunek & Moch, 1987).

Organization-context specific schemas manifest in various forms. One example is the self-schema, which encompasses an individual's theories about themselves within the organizational context, including their values, roles, and behaviors (e.g., "I am hardworking and loyal, and I maintain a positive attitude towards change"). This self-schema reflects the reactions of others to the individual, conveyed through direct and indirect feedback, and is thus a social construct (Mead, 1934). Another example is the person schema, which pertains to one's perceptions of organizational others and their roles. These schemas consist of organized memories of others' behaviors and preferences, such as those of a boss or more generalized entities like 'the management.' Developing schemas of others enables individuals to make informed

predictions about others' role-related responses (Katz & Kahn, 1978). A third example is provided by event-schemas that store cognitions about common and/or important social contexts, situations, interactions, and events in the organization such as a product launch, celebrations, and crises.

Scripts are the most frequently studied form of event schemas. A script covers the cognitions of expected linear event sequences and the perceived appropriate response. Harris (1994) provided an exemplary script for a staff meeting: "one should arrive on time, greet participants, pleasantly joke until the boss takes charge and starts the meeting, listen to presentations, answer questions, ask polite questions, and pleasantly bid farewell after the boss adjourns the meeting" (p. 313). What is interesting about scripts is that they include subsequent actions surrounding events and thus represent a dynamic perspective to schemas in which things can 'play out' or 'evolve'. In this work, events refer to "observable actions or circumstances that command attention by breaking established routines" (Kiefer et al., 2025, p. 5)

In the context of organizational change, schemas can be examined from various perspectives. First, this context creates a need to modify existing schemas. For organizational change to be successful, it is often necessary to alter the organizational routines that stem from these schemas regarding how tasks are performed. In the trickle-down effect of large organizational change, people often face consequences such as working with a new boss, learning new skills, or working from new locations, and such consequences all impact daily routines. Research indicates that although challenging (by our biological urge to maintain equilibrium), modifying schemas is feasible through the processes of accommodation and assimilation (Piaget, 1976). These processes require the crafting and sharing of a compelling new vision for the future, which encompasses new social expectations and values (Labianca et al., 2000). Such a vision is essential for fostering a new or revised collective mindset within the organization. It enables members to develop innovative approaches to addressing problems and challenges (Rerup & Feldman, 2011).

A second perspective on organizational change pertains to the schemas that individuals hold regarding the process of change, labelled 'change scripts'. Change scripts are specific types of schemas that individuals maintain, encompassing the characteristics of change events, the various roles individuals play in change processes, the valence assigned to changes, and the inferences made regarding the perceived consequences of change (Berson

et al., 2021). Consequently, change schemas constitute the lay theories of change within organizations and shape the ascribed meanings (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991).

From a management point of view, a well-known change schema is the one in which change recipients are expected to portray 'resistance behaviors'. For a long time, change resistance was a taken-for-granted concept and the most common theme in studies that concerned the role of employees as change recipients (Cable & Bartunek, 2024). This perspective seemed to have stigmatized change recipients as being passive, having a lower status, and avoiding risk (Riggio, 2020). This outlook does not do justice to employees as they portray very diverse roles (including for example the role of co-creator) and behaviors (including for example change championing) in change processes (Oreg et al., 2018). Nor does it account for the fact that change can be a positive experience for many individuals (Gover & Duxbury, 2017). I posit that the negative, stigmatic view of recipients in fact troubles opportunities for adaptability and agility, and as such limits a focus on solutions and successful change. Hence, it is time to (re)consider more in-depth knowledge on change experiences from a recipient perspective and to create understandings of their interpretations that direct their responses. Therefore, this dissertation will challenge the future use of 'resistance' as a label for employees' change behaviors.

1.4.3 Narrative Thinking

A means to create, understand, and store structure and predictability of sensemaking outcomes is through the development of narratives (Turner, 2025). A narrative was defined as "the representation of real or fictitious events and situations in a time sequence" (Prince, 1982, p.1). To paraphrase Ziber (2007); narratives form "local 'realities' and 'a potent tool for meaning-making'" (p. 1038). Moreover, to study sensemaking of experiences, a narrative form of thinking is considered very suitable as narratives can provide order to the chaos which organizational change can be (Brown & Humphreys, 2003; Dunford & Jones, 2000; Heracleous & Barrett, 2001; Hernes & Maitlis, 2010; Sonenshein, 2010). Narrative thinking is not concerned with factual truth or causal conditions or outcomes, rather is it welcoming nuances, situations and circumstances that mean something to different actors. What is told in a narrative might be true for one person, while it is not for another (a tragedy for one might mean victory for the other). Of course, narratives contain elements (e.g., places, people, and natural laws) of the 'factual' world, however, in their

narratives people relate to such elements by taking an interpretive stance. As a result, in these narratives subjective truths that include a mix of factual and fictive elements creating 'verisimilitude' are portrayed: narratives that are 'truth-like' (Brokerhof, 2021).

A large part of this dissertation uses narratives as a source of data. Those narratives reflect employees' change sensemaking in their own language and terms (Pentland, 1999). Quite early in the study of narratives and change, Gergen and Gergen (1997) described three dominant narratives in the context of strategic change. A first category was described by progressive narratives that stress the positive sides of change. These narratives are often employed by managers to convince change recipients of improvements and benefit of change. A second category was described by regressive narratives focusing on the "bad" of change. Those are the most common "employee resisting change" narratives. A third dimension was described as stability narratives in which both change agents and change recipients seem to focus on what stays the same. This narrative is known to play an important role in uncertainty reduction. This typology of three common narratives used in strategic change formed an early and important base for additional research in this area (Sonenshein, 2010; Turner, 2025).

1.4.4 Temporality

As a last part of the theoretical frame that backs this dissertation, I note that temporality, or temporal structure, forms an important part of understanding employee experiences. A sense of time is central to human life, and as people have different perceptions of time, it can be considered a social construct (Kartsen, 2023). In this respect, two main considerations are addressed. First, temporal structures provide a description of experienced pacing, rhythm and timing of organizational events (Orlikowski & Yates, 2002). Employees do not experience all that is happening congruent to 'Newtonion' clock time, instead, events that might have lasted minutes might *feel* like an endless forever in employees' experience (e.g., an awkward conversation). Similarly, while routine tasks might be performed without any notion of time, new tasks might be experienced with a strong time awareness of how long it takes to adapt. Second, temporal structures provide an orientation towards the past, present or future in employees experiences (Hernes & Schultz, 2020). Those orientations form important cornerstones in our collective consciousness of time, in understanding chronologic order, and in understanding organizational processes (Hernes & Schultz, 2020; Kartsen, 2023).

Within the temporal framework of organizational life, I am particularly interested in periodization as a concept to address time and temporality (Sadeghi et al., 2025). Periodization, or the division of time, structures processes by recognizing logically ordered thematic time frames, such as the 'implementation phase' in a change process, or 'Quarter 3' in the financial reporting process of an organization. These social constructions of time frames can be referred to as episodes, phases, periods, segments, eras, etc. The strength of periodization not only lies in the structure it provides to the continuous passing of time that helps to navigate, keep track, and coordinate, but also in the enhanced understanding it offers regarding how and why certain actors are centralized in some periods while others are marginalized (Sadeghi et al., 2025). Each period has its own central, contextualized, theme, and the roles, dispositions, and power dynamics of individuals are often linked to this theme, thus confined within a specific period of a process. In other words, periodization helps us to comprehend the temporality of roles, dispositions, and power. Understanding periodization helps us to understand change sensemaking processes (Hampel & Dalpiaz, 2023). In all four studies in this dissertation, the practice of periodization will be recognizable as an expression of temporality used by both the participants, and the researcher(s), to structure employees change experiences.

In this introductory chapter, this dissertation's research questions were presented. Furthermore, the concepts of sensemaking, cognitive schemas, narrative thinking, and temporality were introduced to provide a conceptual background for the empirical studies that are reported in the next four chapters.

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Chapter 2

Change Recipients' Sensemaking of Their Lived Experiences

"Of course we need change"

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2.1 Abstract

The capacity to deal with digital transformation is a valuable asset for established organizations, especially in the light of the current integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in many workplaces. Next to technology, employees play a crucial role in the change processes that underly digital transformation. This study contributes to the understanding of employees' sensemaking of digital transformation in the tour operating industry. Using prior transformation research, construal-level theory (CLT), and dynamic change perspectives, our scholarly work focuses on the complexities of organizational change in a digital transformation context. Although employees generally support digital transformation, our findings show that their perceptions change over time across a range of specific challenges experienced during the employee change journey. Our findings stress the importance of adopting a social exchange lens in digital transformation knowledge as this represents deep structure change that might cause well-designed transformation processes to fail. Implications for hospitality and tourism management are discussed.

2.2 Introduction

Tour operators were long known for their unique knowledge of getaways and for forming important liaisons to make arrangements for prospective tourists. This, however, is generally no longer the case. Although tour operators still focus on selling package holidays to end consumers, rapid digital transformation has changed the industry into an e-commerce business in which information is easily available (Book et al., 2015). A failure to adapt has caused well-established firms to go bankrupt (Collinson, 2019), and digital transformation, including the use of AI, continues to be a high-impact driver for strategic change (Bilgili & Koc, 2021; Vlachopoulou & Fouskas, 2022; Vu & Hartley, 2022).

This implies that employees active in tour operating need to respond to ongoing change stemming from digital transformation and to develop 'digital mindsets' (Solberg et al., 2020). Employees are confronted with the requirement to adapt to technology *and* to cope with changes in organizational values and culture (Karimi & Walter, 2015). Put more simply, employees in this context¹ often have a love for travel that provides them with intrinsic motivation and identity, but their drive is diminished when their business develops a data-driven, e-commerce focus in the wake of digital transformation. Moreover, such a change introduces drastically different organizational goals, processes, and even different jobs.

The current study reveals how this change is received by the individual employee: after all, their acceptance of digital transformation is crucial for success (Ahn & Chen, 2022; Schneider & Sting, 2020). Even when technical specifications of digital transformation are well-designed and rolled out in accordance with best practices (Rousseau & Ten Have, 2022), change might still fail if employees resist the newly imposed deep structure changes that accompany digital transformation (Kellogg et al., 2020; Trenerry et al., 2021). These deep structure changes (change in deeply rooted organizational values and principles) are ill-understood as they are "barely articulated" (Heracleous & Bartunek, 2021, p. 216). By exploring different levels of sensemaking, this work shows why and how successful change at a managerial level (e.g., reaching strategic goals) can still be perceived by employees as a deep structure failure. Up until now, there is limited understanding of employees' ongoing navigation and reorientation efforts in a changing environment. We aim to lift the study of employee perspectives from a mere static categorization

¹ Note: this study focusses on employees who work in tour operating offices, not on employees who work on-site at travel destinations (tour guides etc.).

of different outlooks (Schneider & Sting, 2020) or factors that should be taken into account (Trenerry et al., 2021) to an investigation that reveals an event-based journey which can be visualized and which sheds light on situational (based on context and events) and temporal responses. To understand employees' multi-layered perceptions of digital transformation, we studied their continuous sensemaking of what is going on and how to respond (George, 2021). To this end, our main research question is as follows:

How do employees interpret processes of digital transformation in their day-to-day organizational change experiences?

Digital transformation is defined as "a fundamental change process, enabled by the innovative use of digital technologies accompanied by the strategic leverage of key resources and capabilities, aiming to radically improve an entity and redefine its value proposition for its stakeholders" (Gong & Ribiere, 2021, p. 12). Although transformation in the tour operating business has been taking place for some time (Cave & Dredge, 2018), we see a pressing need to conduct empirical work in this field: tour operators are continuously developing various digital capabilities, implementing new value chains, and facilitating personalization of tourists' experiences, to mention but a few examples (Buijtendijk et al., 2021; Personen, 2020; Vlachopoulou & Fouskas, 2022).

One of the shortcomings of the current literature of digital transformation (Gong & Ribiere, 2021) is that it largely overlooks the fact that this transformation touches upon deeply rooted organizational values and principles, something that may subsequently lead to ambiguous perspectives. For example, digital transformation has the potential to interfere with existing power structures and to lead to a revaluation or devaluation of traditional knowledge (Lanzolla et al., 2020). Such issues are often overlooked but may in fact lead to new and complex organizational challenges (Trittin-Ulbrich et al., 2020). Moreover, most previous literature on digital transformation is concerned with strategy and management (Busulwa et al., 2022; Pesonen, 2020) or technology adaptation (Venkatesh et al., 2003), thus leaving psychological and social employee-related issues understudied (Serenko et al., 2022). This is problematic because employee perceptions play a crucial role for digital transformation to succeed (Ahn & Chen, 2022; Solberg et al., 2020). In addition, employees' feedback on psychological and/or social experiences often fails to reach change managers, either in a clear, or in a timely manner, a development that subsequently frustrates change management practice (Rousseau & Ten Have, 2022).

In response to this shortcoming, pioneering work was done by Schneider and Sting (2020) who studied a sample of manufacturing employees' thoughts on the 'fourth industrial revolution'. They introduced distinct interpretive frames (utilitarian, functional, anthropocentric, traditional, and playful) that serve as dominant logic driving employee perceptions. Although their study was context-specific and small-scale, it can be used to tailor change framing and enhance employee buy-in. Similarly, Solberg et al. (2020) elaborated on employees' different beliefs about technological change by developing different types of digital mindsets (e.g., growth mindset) that impact responses. Additionally, Trenerry et al. (2021) distinguished several factors at employee level that contribute to digital transformation. Regarding perceptions and attitudes, they stressed that job insecurity generally forms an important trigger for employees' negative evaluation of digital transformation. Despite the important initial work on employee perceptions of digital transformation, scholarly work has so far largely ignored the dynamic nature of change: to the best of our knowledge, relevant studies present static characterizations or interpretive frames. This limits our understanding of real-time digital transformation (Hanelt et al., 2021) in which perceptions are expected to shift over time when individuals interact with others in their changing context (Langley et al., 2013).

We contribute in three ways to the recent and growing tradition of studying digital transformation through the eyes of employees and thus complement the dominant technical and/or managerial outlook. First, this paper contributes by showing how digital transformation is positively received when viewed as an abstract and impersonal development but negatively received when viewed as concrete and personal in the social context of work. This illustrates how 'construal-level' phenomena (e.g., concrete versus abstract; Berson et al., 2021) factor in as an additional variable to consider in digital transformation processes (George, 2021). Second, our paper contributes by highlighting how employees dynamically shift their perceptions in a range of specific challenges experienced throughout the employee change journey. Such apparent dynamism reveals how change is fundamentally grounded in action rather than in stability, which challenges the oftentimes static treatments of interpretations of digital transformation reported in the literature to date (e.g., Schneider & Sting, 2020). Finally, this paper contributes by highlighting the impact of digital transformation on hospitality and tourism organizations. While digital transformation impacts any industry, this paper reveals specific challenges – including temporal shifts back to positive perceptions – that are especially relevant to the hospitality and tourism industry. As previously

mentioned, digital transformation implies a radical change in this industry because it disrupts ongoing interactions and changes the specific skill sets that are needed to flourish in the work environment. Specifically, the intrinsic motivation that stems from travel craftsmanship (e.g., excellent knowledge of unique destinations and the competence to sell memories for life) and that forms a solid work identity (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016) is under pressure in a rationalized, e-commerce-driven business model. Following such impoverishment (Selenko et al., 2022), important satisfiers for employees such as autonomy, competence, and connectedness (Meske & Junglas, 2021) are at risk, especially in this hospitality and tourism context.

2.3 Theory

We first consider literature that deals with digital transformation-driven change in organizations. Next, we address scholarly work that deals with employee perspectives on change, and we introduce insights concerning individuals' interpretations of such phenomena.

2.3.1 Digital Transformation-Driven Organizational Change

Various scholars in information technology as well as in hospitality and tourism have investigated effects of technology that leads to organizational change (Li et al., 2019; Orlikowski & Barley, 2001; Poon, 1993). One of the first models on user adaptation to new technology was developed by Davis (Technology Acceptance Model TAM, 1989). Based on the concepts of ease of use and usefulness, Venkatesh and associates (2003) further developed TAM into a Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT). Building on this theory, scholars made efforts to predict technology acceptance and intention to use when implementing new information systems and technology in organizations. This stream of literature was then further developed to include perspectives of digitalization-driven business transformation (Aggarwal et al., 2017). Scholars refer to 'digitization' to explain the technological changes from analog to digital operations and services while keeping the original business processes intact. They refer to 'digitalization' to explain the use of digital technologies and data to redesign and replace traditional business processes (Gong & Ribiere, 2021).

Digital transformation (as defined in the Introduction) is concerned with the effects of technological innovation on organizational systems and their environment, including all stakeholders such as employees, customers,

suppliers, and competitors. Digital transformation deviates from many other changes in several ways. First, the very nature and omnipresence of changes is something that affects the entire organization. More specifically, such changes have the power to shake up long-held assumptions on what is possible or impossible. The technologies involved, such as big data analytics, social media, mobile technology, and cloud computing, are easily accessible, open, and self-learning; as such, they present a need for permanent adjustments and continuous change (Hanelt et al., 2021).

Second, many digital solutions push back the prior boundaries of organizations or industries as the transformation introduces the involvement of a wider ecosystem or platform in which organizations participate. Digital infrastructures are open, flexible, and ready for use: not just by a single organization's members, but by potentially anyone (Tilson et al., 2010). This leads to new and sometimes surprising innovation-driven cooperation such as Marriott using I-label booking technologies provided by Expedia, for example. This also means that where tour operators used to have unique destination and travel knowledge, contacts, and databases, this information now becomes more widely dispersed and transparent. In response, many tour operators are challenged to rethink business models and redefine their added value.

This continuous transformation seems to be recognized as the new normal in the wider hospitality and tourism context and urges organizations to "a shift away from strict hierarchy to flatter organizational structures and individualized jobs" (Ma et al., 2021, p. 2). To swiftly respond to change, organizations are developing designs that enable permanent adaptation (Hanelt et al., 2021; Reiswerk, 2018). Frequently, traditional top-down management fails to succeed in such complex change as successful digital transformation depends on employees' active efforts and engagement in adopting new possibilities (Solberg et al., 2020). Because of its complexity, change triggered by digital transformation requires management to escape from "the rigidity of their own business model" (Buijtendijk et al., 2021, p. 1) and ways of thinking about change. It subsequently requires management to engage employees and to invite them to escape from their set ways as well.

2.3.2 Experiencing Digital Transformation at an Employee Level

Employees' engagement in digital transformation depends on the social cognitive processes they use to make sense of change and to make decisions in this context (Solberg et al., 2020). However, the importance of developing an accurate

understanding of crucial employee interpretations is generally overlooked by change leaders (Schneider & Sting, 2020; Selenko et al., 2022; Trenerry et al., 2021). Leader attempts at sensegiving in the context of digital transformation commonly focus on macro-perspectives on change, such as explaining the global competitive landscape and the need for downsizing human labor. In doing so, leaders talk about strategic issues and corporate actions (Jalonen et al., 2018). However, employees may perceive these issues as abstract or opaque and rather make sense of the (upcoming) situation based on perceived circumstances at the micro-level of the individual or the team (Berson et al., 2021).

Although change can be a source of joy, it is often dominated by negative attitudes, causing a high risk of failure for crucial initiatives (Kellog et al., 2020). Thus, whereas extant literature is focused to a large degree on ways to *persuade* employees to adapt to change (Bouckennooghe, 2010), employees are more likely to question ‘what will happen to me?’ (Ford et al., 2008). They do so by using their own frames of reference. Examples of these are provided by Schneider and Sting (2020) who pointed out that out of the five perspectives mentioned earlier, employees especially adopt the functional (means-end), utilitarian (cost-benefit), and anthropocentric (human-made) frames for interpreting digital transformation-related change.

Employees often face newcomers who have specialized technical knowledge and skills (e.g., on AI, robotization, or cybersecurity), which they themselves do not have, and therefore they may fear to be replaced by these newcomers. A willingness to learn and openness to change are thus needed by everyone (Solberg et al., 2020). Trenerry et al. (2021) summarized the following factors that may influence digital transformation outcomes at an employee level: technology adoption, perceptions and attitudes towards digital transformation, skills and training, workplace resilience, and work-related wellbeing. Such individual-level concerns should be considered in larger organizational entities such as teams (team dynamics) and the organization itself (culture/climate) to better understand the determinants of digital transformation success (Kanitz et al., 2023; Trenerry et al., 2021). The different viewpoints brought forward represent grassroots ideas that add to the (currently incomplete) understanding of employee perceptions of digital transformation (Selenko et al., 2022). Whereas management might see digital transformation as an inevitable and logical form of change for their organization, employees’ buy-in cannot be taken for granted as their perceptions and interpretations vary and may differ from management’s claims.

2.3.3 Different Construal Levels

The perceived distance between management-level digital transformation concerns (for instance related to online market share) and employee-level change concerns (for instance related to joining a new team) and the resulting differences in perceptions can be explained with the help of Construal-Level Theory (CLT: Trope & Liberman, 2010). According to CLT, higher construal-level considerations include an abstract way of thinking that is characterized by using broad, general representations and focusing on the most important characteristics of a phenomenon and its value to the organization. Lower construal-level considerations include more detailed and practical representations and focuses on the 'here and now' observable features of events (Berson et al., 2021).

Different perceptions resulting from high-construal versus low-construal sensemaking are expected to arise not only between management and employees: also at intra-individual level, one can use (and switch between) different construal levels in the change sensemaking process. This outlook touches upon several challenges often faced in change management theory and practice (Berson et al., 2021). For example, a perceived high psychological distance to digital transformation, an example of change that evokes higher 'construal-level' considerations (Trope & Liberman, 2010), increases the risk for change to fail in daily organizational practice as employee involvement in such a change process would seem to be lower. Conversely, when lower construal-level considerations are involved in one and the same change process, compliant (concrete) change behaviors may hide forms of resistance that concern higher construal-level concepts, for instance related to an organization's values and narratives (Heracleous & Bartunek, 2021). In the latter case, for example, daily operations may seem to run smoothly, but the risk of change failure in the long run remains considerably high.

Moreover, although lower construal-level considerations might come across as very 'practical', taking place at surface level, they often reflect dominant logic of what the organization is about. Employees' daily responses reflect what is perceived as appropriate behavior and what is not, and they identify signification (shared meanings), domination (power by resource control), and legitimation (underlying norms), all of which form organizational deeper structures (Heracleous & Bartunek, 2021). Deep structures are conceptualized as "enduring aspects of social systems that operate at a subterranean level of social reality and shape events and actions on the observable, surface level"

(Heracleous & Bartunek, 2021, p. 216). They might be “barely articulated” (ibid., p. 216), but a better understanding of small-scale change interpretations, exposing deep structures, is expected to benefit large-scale transformation (Trenerry et al., 2021). We expect different construal-level considerations to be employed by employees when forming perceptions of digital transformation.

2.4 Method

Because we intended to develop a detailed understanding of employee perceptions, in line with Schneider and Sting (2020), we built on a qualitative, interpretive approach. Such an approach assumes that reality is not singular or objective but is shaped by experiences and contexts (Pratt, 2009). Furthermore, interpretive research pays attention to thoughts and feelings from a participant’s viewpoint as they make sense of a dynamic process that unfolds over time (Bhattacharjee, 2012; Gehman et al., 2017).

By conducting an industry case study (Tasci et al., 2020), multiple sources of information were included to gain an in-depth understanding of the context. In preparation of our study, we held interviews with management and HR professionals to learn about the challenges they faced. To determine which organizations to include in the study, we followed the advice given by the Dutch Association for Tour Operating to approach organizations that were known to be involved in digital transformation-related change. Decisions were made jointly by the authors of this article, and the actual data collection was carried out by the principal researcher who made sure that all research steps were thoroughly discussed within the team.

We conducted 26 in-depth employee interviews with individuals working in operations and experiencing change in their role as recipients. They were facing or had recently faced (< two years ago) consequences of digital transformation-related organizational change (see Table 2.1). Proximity to change was an important precondition, and we used purposive sampling to ensure that participants fitted the study in terms of its nature and purpose (Bhattacharjee, 2012). Beyond the proximity to change criterion, we used a sampling approach to fit the exploratory nature of our study and to reflect the heterogeneity of the industry. Specifically, we made sure that participants varied in terms of their organizational roles, age, and level of education (ranging from vocational training to university degrees). Finally,

we triangulated our data by cross validating the coding process with 15 HR professionals from the tour operating industry (Flick, 2018).

2.4.1 Data Collection

We collected data through intensive in-depth interviews whilst flexibly using an interview protocol (Gioia et al., 2013). We retained a focus on participants' experiences but also allowed room for open-ended inquiry to ask additional questions when this was deemed necessary to reach the appropriate level of detail. We used Critical Incident Technique (CIT) to help participants recall events that they had experienced no more than two years ago. This technique is considered the best approach for collecting temporal data in qualitative research (Langley, 1999) because it elicits recollection of experienced emotions and intensity (Chell, 1998). We opted for an intra-personal approach because of our interest in the psychological, and relational adjustments – over time – made by the individual in the change process (George, 2021). The interviews were held in Dutch (as participants and interviewer were native Dutch). On average, they lasted one hour and took place on-site. All participants received full transcripts and were invited to check for omissions and/or to provide additional information, which led to minor textual remarks.

For triangulation, HR professionals in the industry were invited to discuss themes that they expected to reflect employee interpretations alongside digital transformation-related change (i.e., a real-life case on forming Agile teams). In a second assignment, they were challenged to attribute emotional valence and intensity to anticipated employee interpretations. In small groups, they discussed and marked anticipated events and interpretations using post-it notes and smiley stickers in such a way that the result represented a change journey.

2.4.2 Data Analysis

Interpretive analysis is based on attempts to understand data through the eyes of participants. In our research, we first studied phenomena that were brought up via subjective interpretations of the experienced change. Next, we aimed to understand the meaning of interpretations to create rich and contextualized insights and to explore underlying motivations for participants' responses (Gehman et al., 2017). Two members of the research team analyzed the data through initial and focused coding while conducting constant comparisons between new and previously collected data. This was done to enhance, exclude or form new codes as the research proceeded (Gioia et al., 2013). The coding of our interviews resulted in a thematic overview (see Figure 2.1).

Table 2.1: Participants

#	Age	Tenure	Education	Job Title
1	23	1	Intermediate vocational	Front-office Travel Advisor
2	25	3,5	Bachelor's degree	Back-office Administrator
3	26	5	Bachelor's degree	Team Leader travel advisors
4	26	2	Master's degree	Jr. Mar- Comm. Specialist
5	27	5	Intermediate vocational	Scrum Master
6	27	1	Bachelor's degree	PR Officer
7	28	6	Intermediate vocational	Account Management support
8	28	1	Bachelor's degree	Travel Advisor
9	28	2	Bachelor's degree	Travel Advisor
10	28	1	Bachelor's degree	Team Manager Customer Service
11	30	7	Master's degree	Travel Specialist
12	31	8	Bachelor's degree	Innovation Officer
13	31	10	Intermediate vocational	Customer Service employee
14	32	1	Bachelor's degree	Yield Manager
15	34	7	Bachelor's degree	Programmer
16	34	10	Bachelor's degree	Business Travel Consultant
17	36	18	Bachelor's degree	Cust. Experience Manager
18	37	12	Bachelor's degree	Subject Matter Expert
19	37	14	Bachelor's degree	Purchase Specialist
20	38	4,5	Intermediate vocational	Webmaster
21	39	10	Bachelor's degree	Product Developer
22	41	11	Secondary education	Team Leader
23	43	7	Master's degree	Controller
24	50	14	Intermediate vocational	ICT employee
25	57	25	Bachelor's degree	Manager Tour operating & Dynamic Packaging
26	59	16	Intermediate vocational	Customer Contact Centre

Organizational change according to leadership	Change as described by recipient
Balance off- and online market	Newly employed in organization - onboarding
Technological development	The influx of new colleagues
Technological development	Responsible for technology introduction
Developing e-com + aligning international organization	Experiencing different assignments
Transformation tour operator to e-com business	Taking up new position/ promotion
Developing new business	Entering this organization
Transformation tour operator to e-com business	Being selected for experiment: multi-disciplinary team
Technological development	Introduction of new IT in daily work
Technological development	Implementing new IT for colleagues
Balance off- and online market	Confrontation with high-impact top-down decision
Developing organization agility	Starting in self-organizing team
Developing e-com + aligning international organization	My supervisor role became obsolete
Developing organization agility	Experiencing introduction of new organizational strategy
Developing e-com + aligning international corporation	Adjusting to new organization, trying to adjust to colleagues
Transformation tour operator to e-com business	Starting in agile team
Outsourcing + aligning international corporation	Experiencing announcement of outsourcing to another unit
Developing e-com + aligning international organization	Experiencing announcement of re-organization
Developing e-com + aligning international organization	Experiencing dysfunctional new international cooperation
Balance off- and online market	Starting in new team structure
Digitalization + merge labels	Moving to new building
Developing organization agility	Two top leaders left the organization
Outsourcing + aligning international corporation	Receiving new strategic directions from leadership
Digitalization + merging labels	Loss of management position
Transformation tour operator to e-com business	Involuntary placement in team
Developing e-com + aligning international organization	Individual manoeuvres in organizational politics to retain position
Developing e-com + aligning international organization	Use of new technology in daily work

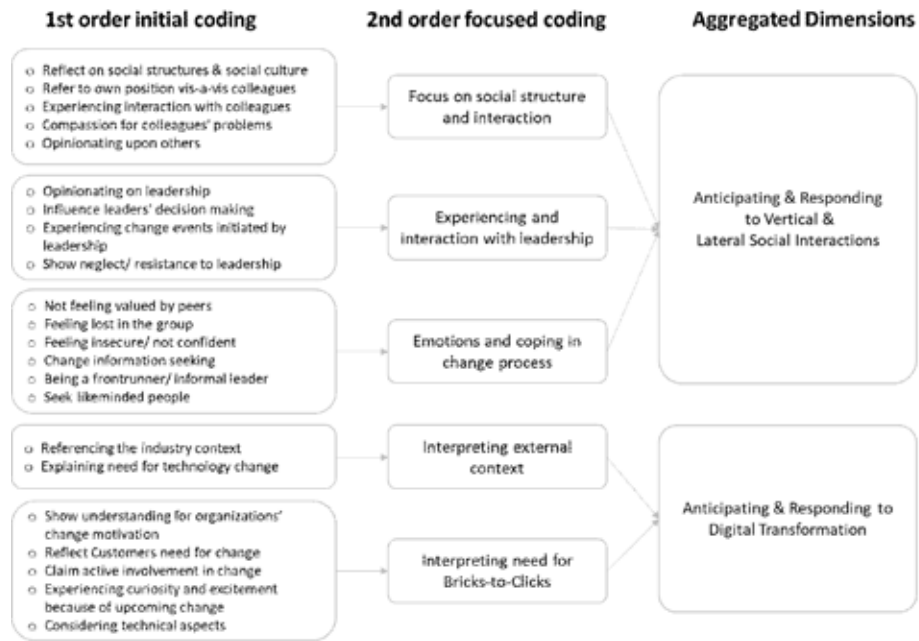


Figure 2.1: Data structure employee interviews

Since our research adopted a journey perspective, we also focused on *when* in the change process events and interactions took place. Fragments were used to create a storyline according to explicit event-in-time indications as reported by the participants (an aspect of Critical Incident Technique; Chell, 1998) or by the researcher's interpretation of the participants' stories. Captured memos were used to enrich the analytical process. This step led to the creation of a storyline detailing the journeys that reflected temporal interpretations of events and interactions. In doing so, the employee change journeys not only showed events, but they also included employees' interactions with their management and peers (Kandampully et al., 2016).

Next, interpretations were labeled in terms of representing positive, neutral, or negative experiences, and in terms of perceived experience intensity (intense – medium – mild). Fragments were categorized according to explicit indications as reported by the participants (e.g., "and this had a *huge negative* emotional impact on me"), but also pauses and silence, changes in the tone of voice, repeated or accentuated formulations, and observed emotions collected in memos were used as indicators. As a result, a dynamic pattern was derived that reflected communalities in change journeys. We compared the interpretations

provided by the HR professionals with our analyses to cross-validate our interpretation and concluded that the HR insights supported our results.

2.5 Findings

2

In this section, we shall first cover themes that characterize participants' interpretation of digital transformation. Second, we shall present our representation of the temporal change journey. We use thick descriptions that reflect the processes through the eyes of our participants (Balogun & Johnson, 2005; Bhattacharjee, 2012; Oreg et al., 2018).

2.5.1 Anticipating and responding to digital transformation

Overall, our participants reported a positive attitude towards digital transformation (illustrated by the quotes below). This might imply that a transformation story has become part of their sensemaking repertoire. The resulting change was initially perceived as a positive challenge (positive stress; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and as employees felt comfortable and secure, they claimed to have strong personal change potential. This notion was illustrated by the participants' recognition of the need for change and their active involvement as well as by the participants' self-confidence in estimating how they generally dealt with change. As one of our participants working in account management support illustrated:

"We are sort of an internet company, and as such, to freeze is to lose. So, for me it is only logical that changes keep coming ... For me working with new tech is fun. Just 'click around' and see how it works. Sometimes I feel like 'there we go again', again a new tool. Yet then I say to myself: just challenge yourself. Adjustment takes a day, it happens overnight." (Participant 7)

Additional exemplary quotes illustrating the initial change optimism are provided below:

"To me it is important to go with the flow and adapt to the market. Do the things that our big competitors do. I want to contribute to growth and success and continue to develop myself. I love the fact that I am working in an environment that survives crises and keeps growing. That is good for you, and good for the organization. Win-win." (Participant 9)

[new IT implementation] "Everyone is very positive about that. We all want it and see the value of it. In the future, when someone calls us, we can see who they are. And when opening a file, I can see where they have travelled before. Love it." (Participant 11)

"It's a long time ago that I wrote my Bachelor thesis on the balance between brick and click. It concerned change towards becoming a digital agency. It is still relevant. Everything is still moving in that direction, digitalization. What will be our raison d'être in 5 years, that is the most interesting question. The landscape is changing, so logically we must change as well. You know, this is what we should be concerned with." (Participant 18)

"We sold our old-style travel agency business. Sure, this had a huge impact on people and operations. But I never felt this was really a big deal since I always considered this a very logical thing to do in the world we are living in." (Participant 17)

Besides the taken-for-granted-ness of industry transformation, several participants did not seem to link their own work to digital transformation. This idea is illustrated by the quotes below:

Interviewer: *"Have digital transformation-related changes had an influence on your work lately?"*

Participant: *"Very little. For operations a lot has changed; for us, not that much. That is because, for our team, change is complicated. Digitalizing administration, creating a happy flow, is rather easy. We, on the other hand, have been working on this for years, we will not change that" (Participant 7)*

[long silence] ... for us, what we do is tailor-made for the customer. That is why they come to us. In my opinion you cannot automate our work. ... I do not expect more real IT-related jobs, no. We are the ones who have been to destinations, working on travel proposals for years, we know the hotels and such. I do not think you can replace that knowledge with technology." (Participant 3)

Interviewer: *"Do you think that your personally experienced events relate to industry developments?"*

Participant: [pauses] *"I do not think that this is something that stems from the travel industry. No other travel organization is doing this [self-managing teams]. I think we are the first. This is something that we learned outside of the industry..."* (Participant 11)

2.5.2 Social Exchange and Rising Complexity

The most pressing topic for our participants was the experience of social exchange with peers, and how change impacted the established social order. In general terms, employees often referred to liking each other, strongly valuing their peers' positive connections, and the supportive atmosphere. There was a strong desire for equality and communion, and employees referred to the organizational 'family' they felt part of.

However, when digital transformation resulted in here-and-now organizational changes, social complexities arose as employees turned against each other and formed negative judgements. Many strongly engaged individuals struggled with the advent of new colleagues who hold new ideas that challenged current routines. Not only were newcomers welcomed with skepticism, but also colleagues who easily took on new roles lost social approval from peers. A product developer (Participant 21) illustrated how social tension evolved. Quote 1 was captured at the beginning of the interview, and quotes 2 and 3 followed and captured the change in the experiences:

Quote 1: "To accomplish things together, to me that is important in my job. Freedom, but also togetherness. Just the cozy and friendly atmosphere. In [name org] we do a lot to achieve that. Good atmosphere, getaways, all fun. [name org] really excels on that point and that is very appealing. People are really working with passion for travel."

Quote 2: "The old crew has more affective commitment. No problem to work extra. The new people are less engaged with the organization and its wellbeing. For them it all works differently."

Quote 3: "Eventually, well, I started to reflect. Then you think of how to safeguard your own status and position. At that time, I was less concerned with everyone else."

As is illustrated in Table 2.2 below, the same pattern was noticed in several interviews.

Table 2.2: Intra-colleague interaction experiences shifting from positive to negative

Sample Quotes (translated)			
Beginning of story: Positive perception of social interaction	Early evolvement of story: Change challenges positive atmosphere	Further evolving story: Increased tensions in the social atmosphere	
Participant 2 "We used to be quite small, and everyone knew each other well. I need that, I am a sensitive 'people person'. ... It used to be so intimate."	"...they all knew I loved to do the task. And I have a degree in marketing you know. But then [name] got hired and she got to do the work. Because she had a marketing degree. That was the argumentation. What about me?? You see."	"It is all changing. We have these 'things' lately, just irritations on mutual sides within teams. The tensions I find difficult to deal with. I often go to the toilet for a while as I cannot stand it. Uncomfortable. I learned to speak up about those things, it matters."	
Participant 7 "When I came in, they had all known each other for a long time already. It was difficult to become one of the girls. But it turned out well. I like working with them. As turnover is low, you exactly know each other's strengths and capabilities. This works well. The social atmosphere was really a relief compared to where I came from [other company]."	"With the change you see, I am full-time employed. The others are all women in their thirties, young mums. And I am more willing to learn, eager. I have ambition. There are also those colleagues who lack ambition. They are all settled and work from 9 to 5. So, to me it was logical that I got promoted over the others."	"What I notice most is the difference between colleagues. I am open to it; I like the new way of working. But my colleague on CS, she hates it. All like: 'I do not want this' and she is not going to change. I find that very difficult. You try to work something out together; she is not helping to reach goals. Now we all work from our own isolated islands."	
Participant 18 "Looking at the past twelve years, you know, the team, super close. We also met outside of work, weekends and so on, just great. We took care of each other."	"In the beginning it was alright. But once more people became involved, it got out of control...frustration started to kick in...they got frustrated every time, and I felt like I was always five steps ahead. To sum it up: it was a permanently frustrating experience."	"In the beginning there was sort of a collectivist thing. Soon after that it just became less and less. After a while it was just me and my one colleague here who shared some of the moments."	

Table 2.2: Continued

Sample Quotes (translated)			
Beginning of story: Positive perception of social interaction	Early evolution of story: Change challenges positive atmosphere	Further evolving story: Increased tensions in the social atmosphere	
Participant 24 "People got assigned to the teams. And they do not have to consult me in everything, but you know, there was a moment in November when the new teams got defined and I was placed in a team in which I just did not want to be in [sigh]."	"Then she came in, and she was promoted just like that. She took on a role, basically she does what I had always done."	"... two years ago, it was just the six of us, now eighteen. I am confronted with direct colleagues that I am just not into. Real disadvantage. New people you must work with, but you just do not match... the older guys, they feel they just do not match with the new ones. This is a company risk."	
Participant 17 "The collegial atmosphere is very positive; I think this is one of the company's important assets. Low hierarchy, you can always openly communicate, and in our culture, everyone says what they have to say."	"Having said those things about positive atmosphere, I see things changing. Changes cause a certain hesitancy for people to speak up. Since last year, people have been worrying because of the intense changes and they have become more careful in social interactions. I think they are just concerned about their positions and jobs as we will need fewer people."		

2.5.3 Employee Change Journeys

Our analytical process resulted in a micro-level representation of the temporal change journey as elaborated below.

“Oh yes, we live in a turbulent world”: abstract interpretations. The journey begins as employees optimistically observe the environment while supporting the need for change. They refer to feeling at home in the organization and feeling strongly connected to their peers. Group status provides confidence towards the future (organization-based self-esteem; Pierce & Gardner, 2004). Change seems an abstract generalized theme (high construal) as is illustrated by the following quotes:

“I am an inquisitive person by nature, so I am always in for a change. Some time ago we started to focus on e-commerce, so interesting, obviously. Especially when considering the market we are in. It is unavoidable, you see. For me, change is positive. You either change or go out of business.” (Participant 5)

“I am an advocate of change [laughs]. Integrating brands creates a powerful position in relation to our competitors. You need this.” (Participant 20)

“Change, for me no problem at all. To me it is just interesting to see how we can do things differently. How to handle it and with what results, my enthusiasm tells me it will always be for the better. A chance to deliver something worthwhile. That is why we are here.” (Participant 3)

“Yes, it is a good and only logical thing to do [change]; stagnation is deterioration.” (Participant 8)

“Change is coming, of course it is”: a chat with a colleague. The journey continues as employees informally find out that change is coming. A trigger for interpretive processes could be a chat with a colleague in which the change is mentioned.

“Of course, ... I know who is working on it. I saw a roadmap on his desk, so I brought it up and you just chit-chat and get the information rolling. Come on, we are all inquisitive people, right? Before they communicate, you find out. But you have to let them tell you.” (Participant 15)

Employees hold a positive attitude. They are 'warming up' for the change to come and try to get in touch with decision makers at the individual level.

"I must say, I have been working here for quite some time ... and by now, I just know what is going on and what the consequences will be. I belong to the group of people who can easily estimate who will end up where, and what the upcoming change will mean to me. You learn to interpret upcoming change as it happens all the time." (Participant 17)

Employees first identify a wait-and-see period as part of their journey. Many chats amongst peers lead to collective sensemaking of what could happen. Through a process of deduction (Golden-Biddle, 2020), colleagues form heterogeneous interpretations of the little information available to them. Based on bits and pieces of information and conjecture from rumors (Lawrence & Callan, 2011), early change narratives are developed.

"We all knew through the grapevine. It is a family business, so people talk. It was kind of secret, but many people knew. This caused friction. ... By then, everyone had had the time to make up their minds about it all and decided for themselves how 'open' they would approach it all." (Participant 7)

The uncertainty is not easy to deal with for all employees as stories, gossip, and jokes that are shared might be confusing:

"... you find out through the grapevine instead of a proper e-mail or so. I get it, you cannot tell your employees everything. But this non-communication can have a huge influence on people. I feel uncomfortable with the non-communication period. It only causes 'wild stories' and you do not exactly know what is true." (Participant 4)

"Did not see that coming": the townhall meeting. Employees experience official communication and reflect on it. For example, the event is a town hall meeting in which the CEO announces change. Communication is often disappointing (not enough info or decision making is different from what was informally known). Employees turn their attention to leadership acts. They evaluate their possibly changing position that could affect status and social structures. A first temporal shift from higher to lower construal-level sensemaking was observed in participants' responses.

"I felt totally confused. I assumed, oh well, you see. They had talked to supervisors, some of them are my friends. But now they were told that their role just no longer existed. This was really a big thing. They came back from their talks one by one with tears in their eyes. I had heard some rumours before, but when finally it all became clear, I realized this had severe negative consequences." (Participant 11)

"It turned out they had bought software that was truly unsuitable. We were side-lined (again!) in the decision making. The deal had already been done. ... It turned out this was unstoppable once we heard of it. They gave commitment without our consultation. That is the time to act. You know, I go and get more details. Then I find likeminded 'warriors'. Internally we speak of 'collective stupidity' portrayed by leadership." (Participant 15).

"Wait and see again": doing business as usual. After experiencing the formal message, employees continue their existing routines and wait for the change to come (reclaiming a certain psychological distance from the change). This 'relaxed' wait-and-see attitude seems to be an implicit behavioral convention. In contrast, employees who vent their insecurity feel isolated as their attitude is not appreciated by the group. Additionally, for some employees these moments are difficult because old routines are still in place while new ways of working are foreseen.

"Difficult time. Beginning of June, I was appointed in the new job, but I had to stay in my old job for months to come. So difficult. You see, because of the long wait in between. I had to learn a lot, yet also work a lot. I really struggled at that time." (Participant 5)

"... a lot of time passed by, months. And we knew the changes would come our way, but it became blurry and vague. The supervisors knew they were leaving, so they did not care that much, and we were just overwhelmed by our workloads and thought, well, what will this change be anyway." (Participant 11)

"They introduced a new idea ... An initiative that had been going on for some years. Yet they just do not manage to hold on to their ideas. I am waiting for the moment that they will hold on. ... They never do." (Participant 24)

"On the move": change implementation. Employees are confronted with concrete change implementation: people leaving, individuals taking up their position, new procedures coming into effect, etc. For a second time, perceptions shift to lower construal levels. This time, it seems to be a tipping point in the journey, a negative imbalance will prevail. As disagreements occur frequently, the group climate seems to change. Employees actively consider their position, status, and influence. Numerous experiences are 'problematic', 'intense', or 'severe'.

"... at that time, my colleagues' jealousy was most severe. I could not handle it. Once I really started doing the work, the others felt regret I guess, as they then realized that they had wanted to do it too." (Participant 5)

"... there was no one. We had to figure it out all by ourselves. When we were in need of advice, managers responded indifferently like 'do not bother me, you take care of it'. And it was unclear who was leading who, we all had different managers. And the managers started to manipulate. As in, wanting us to do work for them. It was impossible for us to prioritize." (Participant 7)

"... what I remember most is the actual leaving of several supervisors. They had worked with us for so long and we used to have so much fun. And when they left, there was no real appreciation for all their efforts. My team was problematic, it just did not work. We all felt stressed, time-pressured, communication went wrong, everyone felt irritated and responded harshly towards one another. Too busy, too busy, no time, no time, always like that. it was a real energy drain." (Participant 11)

The implementation process continues. Most often, this forms a negative experience in which work friends become enemies and leadership is perceived to make crucial mistakes. The chaos caused by the social complexity of interactions shifts the attention away from considering why change was needed in the first place.

"We tried to do the best we could, yet she didn't. Not helping. That is just not working, an attitude like that. I confronted her. I said to her that if she kept spreading her negativity and kept bashing my role in the team, that I would start bashing hers. You really must speak up in a team, you cannot let it slip. It turned out we all received different information. Just little details that came out differently. This created misalignment amongst us." (Participant 7)

"All the talking. Especially people who experienced strong feelings of resistance. We felt remorse. It was turbulent, while work was continuing of course. We had to come up with new solutions. Especially this time was a difficult time in the process for me personally. I felt resistance and did not know exactly what was happening. I was in a temporary team. I had to make sure that I would end up in a team that I liked." (Participant 11)

"... what was difficult was the fact that [corporate brand] was having a hard time to let us in. They felt they were doing okay, so there was no intention to help us out. They were taking care of themselves. In the end we are all one. But that is not how it was perceived by them at that time. I never understood their way of thinking, but it sure made things complicated." (Participant 20)

"Like it or leave it": trying to cope during the evaluation meeting. Whether they like it or not, employees start adjusting. Accommodation experiences are represented in the data. Coping-characterized mechanisms dominate many interpretations, and employees actively engage in voicing behaviors, showing opposition, or asking for help. This is illustrated by our participants:

"... the effect is that I am inclined to attract more work as I do not know my new colleagues very well. Can I depend on them? I am hesitant to let them handle things. I am the kind of person who prefers to do things myself in such a situation. I first have to see what they are worth. What I do to manage it all? Well, every day at 11 AM I go outside for a cigarette. And in my breaks, I also go outside. For me it is a must to go and get some fresh air. And luckily there are some friends from [name division] who join me." (Participant 7)

"It is taking its toll. You need to gain some experience and skill. Learn how to become more confident. And learn to fail and deal with criticism from colleagues. Learn to accept." (Participant 11)

"... what helps is that I always find someone who helps me put things in perspective. One of my colleagues, she is really good at developing more of a helicopter view. And the others, close to me, we talk about it. And in the end, we hope they [leadership] will learn something from it all [laughs]. Actually, it is not funny. Those experiences are quite costly, as in it costs a lot, lessons for us all." (Participant 13)

The change is implemented, both leaders and employees create opportunities for evaluation. These moments indicate a peak in negative interpretations; the situation is perceived as an ultimate 'low'. Whereas leaders perceive the change to be completed, employees are in the midst of processing what has happened. As the change is no longer a daily topic in communication, employees will not easily express their mourning/recovery process.

"I am far less involved now. We used to have smaller teams. Now, when there is change, you get an e-mail from Poland or something. It is like 'here is the change, deal with it ...'. It is a shame, it used to be different... I have learned to be less involved, mentally. At 6 PM it is done." (Participant 16)

"At first, I was 100% in love [with organization]. Now it is a business agreement. It seems everything is possible, but it is not. So, then I am like OK, no more giving my everything. Love has to run both ways." (Participant 21)

"After a while I felt like, what is it that I do. I am still in the middle of this process. I am here, but I have no clue how to contribute. [silence]. I am not over it. Still in shock maybe. I just do what they ask me to do. It is not that different from what I did before. But the things that gave me pleasure in the job are taken away from me." (Participant 24)

"Heading for the future": rebuilding social order. After everything has been said and done, employees seem concerned with their new positions in the social structures of the organization.

"In my current team we are well aligned. We all have our roles, and everyone is happy. It is a team effort and that is how we experience it all. New initiatives from team members are welcomed enthusiastically. With every new idea, we are like, let us move forward! (Participant 11)

Most likely, this stage turns into a situation like the one described for the journey's beginnings, as change trajectories are expected to be ongoing in the light of the industry's still unfinished digital transformation.

Based on data labeling, participants' emotional pathways are reflected in terms of valence and intensity and could be summarized as follows (see Figure 2.2). Emotional valence (positive – negative) and intensity (mild –

intense) show a corresponding pattern: simply stated, when intensity is high, valence is negative. The journey seems to lack *intense* positive experiences. Moreover, it seems apparent that a first negative experience is perceived throughout the event, which we labelled as “did not see *that* coming”. This is the first lower-level construal point in the journey where change consequences initially become clear. Additional negative and most intense experiences are recognized in the events that we named “on the move” and “like it or leave it”. Our data also show that these moments include concrete change experiences (compared to abstract reflections). Possible implications are further addressed in the discussion section.

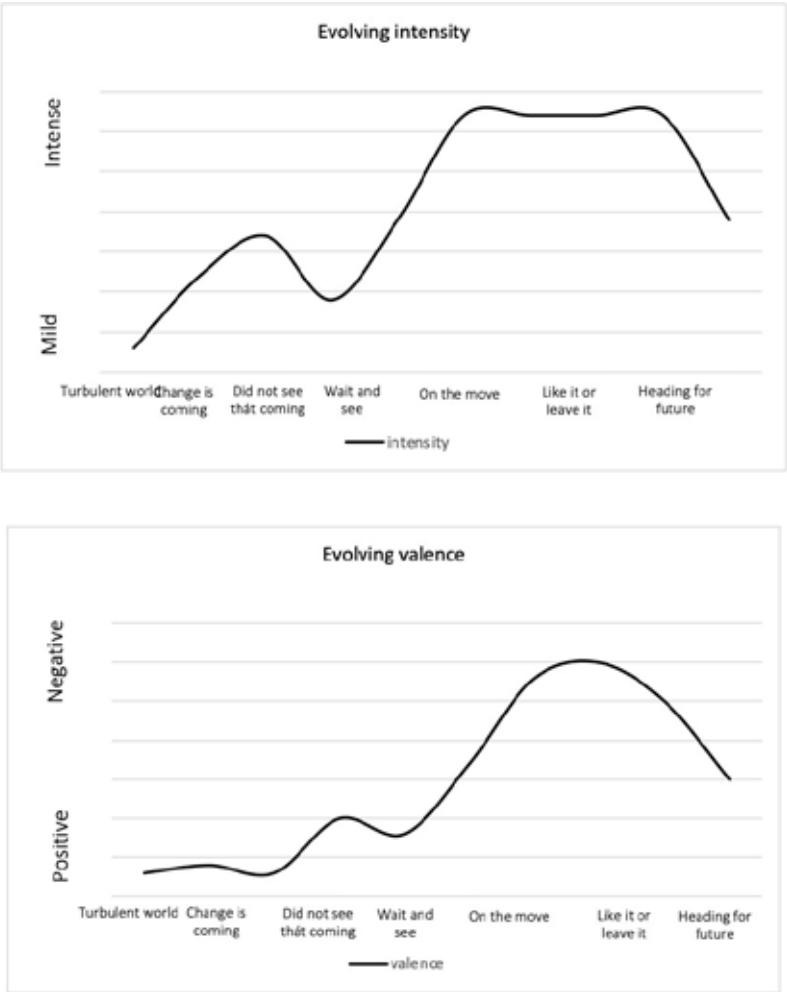


Figure 2.2: Evolving emotional intensity and -valence throughout the Employee Change Journey

2.6 Discussion

The objective of this work was to contribute to the digital transformation literature in the hospitality and tourism industry by revealing employees' temporal perspectives of digital transformation-related change in a tour operating industry case. We aimed to obtain a better understanding of employees' dynamic responses to abstract level changes as well as to concrete (here-and-now) organizational changes that would have an irreversible impact on the nature of their work.

2.6.1 Event-based Journeys

The outcomes of this empirical study show employees' ongoing navigation and reorientation efforts in a changing environment. This lifts the study of employee perspectives from a mere categorization of different outlooks (Schneider & Sting, 2020) or factors that should be considered (Trenerry et al., 2021) to an investigation that reveals an event-based journey which can be visualized and which sheds light on situational (based on context and events) and temporal responses. In line with Trittin-Ulbrich et al. (2021), one of the conclusions that can be drawn from our work is that perceptions of digital transformation are nuanced and textured. They are rarely fully negative or fully positive for employees. Our findings are aptly summarized by the following quote from one of our participants:

"To change is easy, really. To work and live with one another, that's something completely different." (Participant 15)

Altogether, the outcomes of our study raise several issues that deserve our consideration. First, we elaborate on insights on dynamic differentiation between construal levels and discuss employees' sensemaking of digital transformation-related change. Second, we elaborate on the theoretical implications of our work.

Shifting perceptions over time: different construal levels. Based on our results, we argue that employee perceptions of digital transformation should be regarded as dynamic and multi-layered sensemaking efforts that shift over time. In particular, our empirical work indicates that employees' higher construal-level beliefs and expectations about digital transformation do not seem to frighten or worry them. The emotional valence is positive and emotional intensity is low. This is not a surprise as in society at large (Trittin-

Ulbrich et al., 2021), the tour operating industry narrative focuses on the commercially favorable implications of digital transformation whilst ignoring possible dark sides (Trittin-Ulbrich et al., 2021). While considering the future of the tour operating industry, employees are aware of the idea (and convinced of the need) to work in a modern, transforming industry with competitors that raise excitement and fuel curiosity. To illustrate the point: industry newcomer SPRS.me was perceived as an attractive brand to work for by young people in the industry. This creates an abstract collective desirability that would seem to be a good starting point for change (Rousseau & Ten Have, 2022).

However, as time moves on, a latent and often overlooked risk related to this positive image of digital transformation (Trittin-Ulbrich et al., 2021) becomes apparent. Our data show that in the everyday reality of change (shifting from a higher to a lower construal-level), most participants felt confronted with unexpected and unpleasant experiences that they had *neither* thought of *nor* had been informed about upfront. The results of our empirical work indicate that the moments of first formal communication and the start of implementations triggered strong shifts in the emotional valence and intensity of perceptions. Over the course of change, the positively perceived macro-level discourse led to unjustified overconfidence and induced a false sense of being in control (Guette & Vandenbempt, 2017).

2.6.2 Social complexity in digital transformation

The temporal shift from higher to lower construal-level sensemaking revealed insights on covert social and psychological dimensions [e.g., power conflicts, informal hierarchies (Trittin-Ulbrich et al., 2021)] of digital transformation. Our data indicate that, in a non-change setting, employees experience a strong shared sense of community of which membership is very important (cf. Social Identity Theory; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Digital transformation interrupts this sense of community as people face internal competition from newcomers and frontrunners (Solberg et al., 2020) and taps into the social/collective identity of organizations (Westerman, 2016). This ultimately leads to different perceived fairness of the situation, in turn potentially harming change motivation (perceptions of unfairness reduce change motivation; Bataille & Vough, 2022). Under these circumstances, employees find themselves in a battle for a new distribution of power once the rules are changed (Wagner & Newell, 2006). On top of technological advancements, this social concern contrasts with the desire for equality and community, and our research indicates that it is in fact the disruption of social order that might form the real change for employees.

2.6.3 Theoretical implications

Construal-level considerations in digital transformation theory. Our data show that construal-level differentiation (Berson et al., 2021) should be considered as an additional temporal factor because it affects emotional shifts in employee perceptions in digital transformation processes (George, 2021). Our study also provides further empirical backup for CLT and explains that *higher-construal* levels enable people to orient themselves to a somewhat undefined future, which in turn enables them to think of a new reality without feeling threatened. This level of sensemaking is extremely useful to 'broaden one's horizon' (Berson et al., 2021; Trope & Liberman, 2010).

Additionally, our findings on employee perceptions on *lower-construal* level bring forward insights on social exchange and group dynamics (Blau, 1968) that are considered crucial to the success of digital transformation. Although social structures have been addressed in prior literature (Trenerry et al., 2021), we add a more thorough consideration of the psychological and social effects of employees' deprived knowledge, relations, and status. This includes the consideration of polarization between groups of employees and its impact on the success and pace of transformation, as this phenomenon seems to be more intense than was previously recognized. We have seen that digital transformation triggers a renegotiation of the often-implicit expectations related to vertical (leader – employee) as well as horizontal (employee – employee) reciprocity. In other words, it triggers potential breaches of the *psychological contracts* (Rousseau et al., 2018). This is risky as dynamic, reciprocal relationships are crucial for cooperation and fundamental enablers of change (Van der Schaft et al., 2020). They need careful repair in case of breach (Wiechers et al., 2022) for the common goal, digital transformation, to be reached. We challenge traditional digital transformation frames [such as Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT), Venkatesh et al., 2003] to shift from technology adoption approaches to the consideration of social systems in the work environment.

Dynamic approach to the study of perspectives. Developing digital transformation insights by adopting the perspective of the employee journey seems an admissible approach for mapping different events and their temporal effect on employees' responses. This temporal perspective complements the oftentimes static treatments of interpretations reported in the literature to date (e.g., Schneider & Sting, 2020). Furthermore, this approach accounts for the idea that employees do not perceive change events as isolated units

for sensemaking (Nikolava & De Jong, 2020), rather they are more likely to view change as a sequence of events. For example, an employee who gained 'hope' from early conversations will respond with initial positive expectations to affective events that follow. Moreover, distinct responses arise (e.g., strong disappointment) when new events do not match their expectations, leading to significant 'shock effects' (Frijda, 2008). Accumulation effects of experiences over time are brought forward as systematic element in understanding employee perceptions in digital transformation.

Furthermore, digital transformation related change can be considered an emotional episode (Oreg et al., 2018). In modelling the evolving employee emotions (intensity and valance) over the course of events, our data included several trend breaks indicating that emotional engagement has its own course of action throughout change processes. This idea is confirmed by emotion literature explaining that emotions, by nature, occur, peak, and change over time (Frijda, 2008). Interestingly, the temporal pattern of emotional engagement presented in our results (Figure 2) seemed coherent with changes in the degree of abstraction at which change was represented (its level of construal; Trope & Liberman, 2010). A contribution to the literature on employee perceptions of digital transformation is provided by a) adopting an inherently dynamic approach, that b) accounts for differences in how abstractly or concretely employees perceive change as events occur and organizational members interact over time.

The changing nature of work. Digital transformation triggers further thinking on the future of work in hospitality and tourism. Our results confirm the idea that digital transformation-related change can elicit psychological harm because of potential job losses or degrading work quality (Selenko, 2022). As explained earlier, the intrinsic motivation stemming from travel craftsmanship is under pressure in the wake of a more rationalized, e-commerce-driven business model. Following such impoverishment, important satisfiers for employees such as autonomy, competence, and connectedness (Meske & Junglas, 2021) are at risk, especially in the tour operating context where the workforce is mainly represented by experienced travelers. As we think of the future, this development might be seen as step towards contemporary, highly digitally transformed workplaces. An extreme example is Uber, whose platform workers are independent sub-contractors who are subject to algorithmic control when receiving work assignments. This phenomenon is also known as the 'Uberization' (Davis, 2016) of work. Another example, closer to home for

tour operating sector, is formed by the digitally native, technology-focused travel agencies such as the Dutch company Booking.com.

However, while the shift to e-commerce is profound, we argue that the tour operating sector first and foremost remains a service industry. This industry is still characterized by delivering emotionally laden (often personalized) experiences that require collaborative efforts in customer interaction, interactions within the organization itself as well as between the organization and travel destination services (Schmidt et al., 2017). The available industry-specific craftsmanship is an asset that differentiates tour operators from other digital businesses. Therefore, expectedly, successful tour operators are the ones to find a balance between tech-centered and human-centered services. With this outlook, we underline the need to balance 'high-tech and high-touch' as brought forward in hospitality and tourism literature (Brochado et al., 2016; Zeng et al., 2020).

2.6.4 Limitations and Related Future Research Suggestions

As is the case for all empirical work, this study has some limitations. Although the use of Critical Incident Technique (CIT) is known to be a valid approach for reconstructing sequences of past events (Langley, 1999), employees' responses might still suffer from recollection bias and social interaction effects. Furthermore, although we checked all transcripts together with our participants and used memo techniques (Bhattacharjee, 2012) as well as textual and non-textual cues to complete labeling, the outcome is still interpretive and subjective in nature. This process could be enhanced in future work by involving participants in focus groups. Second, we know that not all change processes follow a linear route (By, 2005), and therefore our work could be further enhanced by including iterations in our depictions of the change processes, as employees go back and forth in their interpretations. The same holds for including more variations that might lead to different or multiple journeys. In the current investigation, we combined all experiences to create a unified journey, but exploring interpersonal and organizational differences could lead to additional insights.

The journey presented in this study could be a starting point for further research. One specific suggestion for future work is to use additional methods for capturing employees' temporal emotions as both our data and the literature confirm digital transformation to encompass emotional episodes. For example, future research could include measuring real-time emotional responses

through experience sampling (Csikszentmihalyi & Hunter, 2003) and collecting data with the help of emotional response measures (Bastiaansen et al., 2020; Oreg et al., 2018). Moreover, it would be wise to replicate this study in different cultural settings as Sun and colleagues (2020) pointed out that this is an important factor in technology-related studies in the hospitality and tourism industry. Overall, we believe that we are still in the early days of understanding employees' experiences in digital transformation contexts; more work is needed to create new normative theory in hospitality and tourism that incorporates the perspectives discussed in this work.

2.6.5 Practical Implications

Digital transformation has become crucial to virtually every type of hospitality or tourism organization (Ma et al., 2021; Personen, 2020; Vlachopoulou & Fouskas, 2022). We advise managers who strive to involve employees in this process to focus their practices on two concepts, agile approaches and job crafting, as driving forces for change management (Al Nuaimi et al., 2022; Reiswerk, 2018). First, agile change practices balance higher and lower construal goals by reaping early benefits while moving quickly in short 'sprints' (Franklin, 2021). With these practices, challenges as well as opportunities become clear to employees much sooner, employees do not have to go through lengthy trajectories, and they do not have to engage in ongoing discussions taking place in a boardroom that can be perceived as a big black box. Investing in an agile industry workforce not only benefits the heavily challenged employee sense of well-being and resilience (Senbeto & Hon, 2021; Trenerry et al., 2021), but it is also known to enhance motivation and to stimulate the internal exchange of ideas (Franco & Landini, 2022). Furthermore, agile approaches are expected to diminish polarization between the traditionally minded and digitally minded employees as it stimulates teams to integrate the complementary use of *all* available expertise. Instead of developing top-level digital skills on the part of everyone, *task agility* stimulates the switching of tasks among co-workers in response to organizational changes and transition (Franco & Landini, 2022).

Second, we suggest making use of job crafting: enabling employees to shape their role in the change process is one of the tools that can be used to create an agile industry workforce. Job crafting means that employees actively design their jobs by negotiating tasks, building new relationships, and assigning (new) meaning to their activities (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). This can help employees to redefine their work identity in a changed situation and to

assert control over their jobs with the aim of avoiding alienation in a changing environment. In the new jobs that will be crafted by employees, tacit industry knowledge that is often tied to individuals and difficult to codify (Personen, 2020) will blend with digital skills. Allowing and coaching employees to do so will likely lead to enhanced feelings of change engagement.

2.7 Conclusion

Employees' buy-in is a crucial condition for successful digital transformation in our operating industry. Digital transformation is positively perceived at an abstract and impersonal (higher construal) level. However, employee perceptions are dynamic and shift over the course of evolving change. Optimistic perspectives concerning new horizons become challenged when change causes unforeseen here-and-now (lower construal level) implications. At this level, change becomes an emotional episode as employees experience disruption of the social order, something which represents a deep structure change that is difficult to deal with. The insights gained from this work challenge and hopefully stimulate managers to develop new, timely, and targeted change interventions accordingly.

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Chapter 3

Embedding Social Exchange Experiences in Change Context

"We are in this together"

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3.1 Abstract

This paper takes a process perspective in exploring the influence of social interaction on the dynamics of psychological contracting throughout organizational change. Although social interaction is a key focus in social exchange theory, this aspect is largely overlooked in the current psychological contract literature. In this qualitative study, we adopt a retrospective design, asking change recipients to recollect events over time in the context of digital transformation in Dutch travel organizations. Our data reveal a sequence of different kinds of social interactions over the course of a change process, from collective-focused interactions (i.e., kindness and sharing) in stable contracts to transactional interactions (i.e., 'what is in it for me') following psychological contract disruption, to relational interactions (i.e., vigilance about equity in social exchange) in psychological contract repair, and to a final return to resonance and alignment with others and a return to psychological contract maintenance. Our results suggest that social interactions play a more potent role in the dynamics of psychological contracting than is currently recognized in the literature. Finally, we discuss a number of implications for dynamic models of psychological contracting.

3.2 Introduction

Dynamic, reciprocal relationships are fundamental to organizations and to organizing (Barnard, 1938; Heaphy, Byron, Ballinger, Hoffer Gittel, Leana, & Sluss, 2018), and the patterns of social interaction on which relationships are formed (Blau, 1964) are a key mechanism to understand how employees deal with large-scale business transformation on a day-to-day basis. Employee perceptions concerning the terms of the individual-organization exchange relationship are consensually captured by means of the psychological contract (henceforth: PC). A PC is referred to as a system of unwritten understandings and obligations between an employer and his/her employees. It contains understandings of mutual expectations and obligations of how both parties are to act (Rousseau, 1995). Although social relations play a key role in seminal works in this area (Argyris, 1960; Blau, 1964; Rousseau, 1995), most literature provides an '*undersocialized picture*' (Akkermans, De Jong, De Jong, & Bal, 2019; Solinger, 2019).

In view of the above, this study highlights the socially embedded nature of change in PCs and contributes to the body of knowledge in this field in three ways. First, since PC development is dynamic by nature and is built upon continuous exchange (Griep & Vantilborgh, 2018), our approach adds to the recent growth in PC dynamics literature (Bankins, 2015) through an empirical exploration of the dynamic phase model of PC (Rousseau, Tomprou, & Hansen, 2018). Second, we contribute to current knowledge by detailing specific social interaction mechanisms that have distinct impacts on the currently known temporal features of psychological contracting (e.g., PC maintenance, renegotiation, and repair). This offers additional insights into the structure of PC dynamics; such theorizing is much needed in a body of literature characterized by person-centric assumptions (Griep et al., 2019; Solinger, 2019). Third, we consider a business context which reflects a digitally transforming organization as perceived by employees, thus adding to the understanding of how the changing nature of work impacts on PCs (Griep et al., 2019; Tomprou & Hansen, 2018).

3.3 Theory

3.3.1 Dynamic Psychological Contracting

PCs are fundamentally dynamic in nature such that interaction partners – based on their experiences over a course of interactions that unfold over

time – change their perceptions regarding inducements that can be expected, and which investments should be done in return. Recent theory developed by Rousseau et al. (2018) explained this dynamic nature of the PC. In particular, they proposed a dynamic model that details a number of phases in the psychological contracting process, namely creation, maintenance, disruption, renegotiate/repair, and a return back to maintenance or ending in dissolution. *Creation*, also referred to as ‘socialization’, refers to establishing a person-organization exchange relationship and, concomitantly, a PC based on employees’ pre-employment expectations and organizational information. *Maintenance* refers to a process where a mental schema about a give-and-take balance (or ‘equilibrium’) is acted out, largely unconsciously and for as long as balance is not perturbed. Throughout episodes of organizational change – a context in which organizations have a difficult time in keeping their commitments such that “promises and deals made in good faith one day may be broken the next” (Guest, 2004, p. 543) – *disruption* of this balance could lead to experiences of PC breach. In such circumstances, “employees are unable to rely on their PC as they did before” (Tomprou, Rousseau, & Hansen, 2015, p. 561) and “individuals are typically motivated to reduce the negative affect caused by the experienced discrepancies between expectations and actual experiences” (p. 564). In a process to *renegotiate and repair* the contract, employees might either renegotiate the contract towards a more favorable fulfilment ratio (known as PC thriving), repair the contract to a previous level of fulfilment (reactivation), or have it deteriorate to a lower level of fulfilment than before (impairment) before *returning back to maintenance* or working towards a complete *dissolution* of the contract (e.g., leaving the organization) (Solinger, Hofmans, Bal, & Jansen, 2016; Tomprou et al., 2015). According to Rousseau et al. (2018), personal goal attainment and velocity feedback (i.e., the speed with which the individual receives the desired information on the degree to which his/her goals in the PC will be attained) form important drivers for the dynamic PC process to evolve from one stage to the next.

3.3.2 Organizational Change and the PC

Rapid and transformational technological and societal disruptions drive changes in ways of working that challenge existing mental schemas and drive individuals to re-evaluate their implicit employment relationship (De Ruiter, Schalk, Schaveling, & Van Gelder, 2017; Schalk & Roe, 2007). Therefore, as a consequence of these ‘transformational’ change events (Rousseau, 1995), management and employees experience a radical shift in the nature of their relationships (Van der Smissen, Schalk, & Freese, 2013).

'Change', however, is a broad notion, and different events and process characteristics (e.g., 'novelty': Chaudhry, Coyle-Shapiro, & Wayne, 2011; Morgeson, Mitchell, & Liu, 2015) trigger different employee responses (Van der Smissen et al., 2013). Although change is often initiated based on developments at the strategic level (e.g., anticipating on industry-level changes, such as the so-called 'bricks-to-clicks' revolution in the travel industry), we argue that employee change experiences might be more concerned with their local repercussions on an operational level, such as the entrance of a new manager, the loss of a colleague, the announcement of frozen budgets for development, and so on. Morgeson et al. (2015) explain that "the greater the distance between two organizational levels, the less likely entities affiliated with one level will access information and be influenced by events arising at the other" (p. 526). To explain the relation between organizational change and PC change, our study initially focused on the trickling down of strategic, tactical to operational change events that employees are confronted with and that trigger them to consciously evaluate the PC and possibly activate coping responses (Wiechers, Lub, Coyle-Shapiro, & Ten Have, 2017). A better understanding of this response is needed to prevent low trust and cynicism and to strengthen employees' contributions to positive change outcomes (Pate, Martin, & Staines, 2000; Tomprou & Hansen, 2018).

3.3.3 Individual, Team, and Collective Psychological Contracting

Rousseau et al. (2018) and Tomprou et al. (2015) based their theorizing on a self-regulation framework (Carver & Scheier, 1981). This framework builds on the notion that the individual him/herself is the major anchor point in achieving reciprocal balance with the organization. Yet, rather than viewing employees as relatively sovereign individuals, referring to anchor points that are engaged in navigation efforts, one could also expand the range of possible anchor points to forces outside of the individual. The recent focus on social context within PC literature suggests that an exploration of higher levels of analysis (e.g., teams or the collective) brings a new understanding of PC processes (e.g., Akkermans et al., 2019; De Vos & Tekleab, 2014; Gibbard et al., 2017; Ho, 2005; Ho & Levesque, 2005; Laulié & Tekleab, 2016; Tekleab, Laulié, De Vos, De Jong, & Coyle-Shapiro, 2019; Tomprou & Hansen, 2018). Laulié and Tekleab (2016, p. 660) state: "through social learning and social information processing, groups of employees may create (in time) homogeneous perceptions about the way employers fulfil their promises". Their multi-level theory of PC fulfilment in teams differentiates between the fulfilment of individual expectations shared amongst colleagues and the fulfilment of team expectations (promises made to

the team). Furthermore, Akkermans et al. (2019) contemplate the influence of social interaction on PC development, leading to three levels of PC existence: the individual level, as we know it from a majority of PC literature, the level of direct consensus between colleagues, being an aggregate of individual perceptions, and a collective level as a shared mental model.

An equilibrium, as experienced in stable PCs, can thus be shared in social space; this is something Rousseau (1995) named the 'normative contract'. The recent focus of PC scholars on higher-level constructs suggests that the processes involved in maintaining an 'equilibrium', discussed in process theories of the PC (Rousseau et al., 2018; Tomprou et al., 2015), will involve mechanisms that are possibly social in nature (e.g., changes in activities and group membership or changes in hierarchical structures) (Tomprou & Hansen, 2018). To capture the mechanisms in social exchange that lead to individual, team, and collective dynamic psychological contracting in more detail, we elaborate on Solinger's normative-contextual framework for psychological contracting (2019).

3.3.4 Solinger's 'Normative-Contextual' Framework for Psychological Contracting

The normative-contextual framework for psychological contracting that is proposed by Solinger (2019) aims to build bridges between PC and institutional theory. It considers institutions as typified social interaction patterns and self-policed conventions, and thus, in their very essence, they are considered to be made from social interactions (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Hallett & Ventresca, 2006). Solinger's framework introduces a multi-layered system of factors affecting the PC (see also Heaphy et al., 2018; Ho & Levesque, 2005), varying in different degrees of institutionalization. In particular, the framework lists normative-contextual influences on psychological contracting in a manner that is similar but not identical to what is proposed by Akkermans et al. (2019), ranging from low institutionalization (i.e., PC as an idiosyncratic, individual agreement) to high institutionalization (with taken-for-granted and self-policed conventions of contracting which operate as institutions at a societal and organizational level), with peer-to-peer interactions in a crucial intermediate position. This perspective broadens the scope of PC literature by enriching the dominant individual-to-organization bond with the notions of typical modes of exchange at the group, organizational, and societal levels of analysis.

While in the eyes of organizational behavior scholars 'institutions' are intuitively seen as distal macro-level bodies that are far removed from the individual

mechanisms of interest, institutions are in fact extremely pervasive, even at the individual level of analysis. That is to say, institutions operate as dominant realities and taken-for-granted templates for evaluating a PC. As such, institutions give different precedence to what criteria of evaluation “deserve attention (selective orientation), and the meaning we attach to these perceptions (encoding) are formed by gradual internalization of prevailing cultural patterns” (Thomas, Ravlin, Liao, Morrell, & Au, 2016, p. 259). When it comes to employees’ experiences of the PC, the degrees of institutionalization refer to socially sanctioned ratios of investments and rewards vis-à-vis the organization that are perceived as ‘natural’ (i.e., taken-for-granted as ‘the way we do things around here’), as objective (i.e., as a matter of fact, rather than a subjective or idiosyncratic assessment), and as exterior (i.e., as if the socially sanctioned contract exists independent of the ones who produce them). With social sanctioning, we mean that a PC is experienced and policed upon as ‘the rules of game’ where the criterion for what makes a ‘good’ contract is not personally but socially determined (e.g., via collective beliefs: Akkermans et al., 2019). Thus, while at low levels of institutionalization psychological contracting results from personal exchange (“*I agree to...*”), through normative exchange over peer-to-peer interactions (“*We agree to...*”), it will gradually evolve into a dominant social reality, that is, an institution (“*It is...*”: Ashforth & Rogers, 2012; Solinger, 2019). An illustration of the accompanying processes is presented in Figure 3.1.

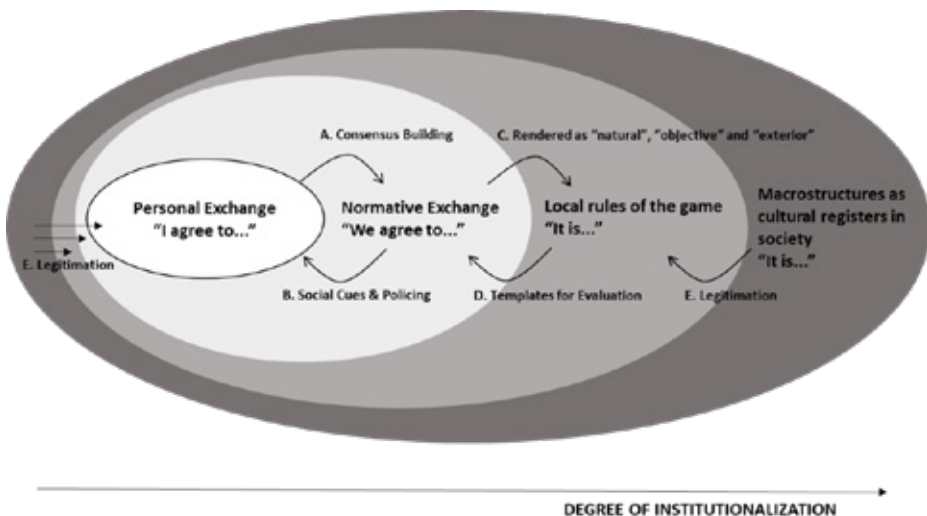


Figure 3.1: Degrees of institutionalization in the PC process, reprinted from Solinger (2019)

Despite this theorizing on the socially oriented nature of the dynamic PC, corresponding empirical work is limited. As Griep et al. (2019) propose, future research on PC processes should consider how social context determines workplace interactions and in what way these interactions evolve. To do so, an interactional approach in studying the PC is needed (Coyle-Shapiro & Neuman, 2004).

3.3.5 An Interactional Approach: Fiske's (1992) Unified Theory of Social Relations

Interactions are defining mechanisms of social exchange (Blau, 1964) and form cornerstones of the employment relationship (Coyle-Shapiro & Conway, 2005). Moreover, interactions are critical for the emergence of shared constructs (Laulié & Tekleab, 2016). Therefore, we build upon fundamental forms of social interaction (Fiske, 1992) to see whether and how the way people interact could relate to the patterns of individual, team, and collective psychological contracting discussed above. Relational models, as described by Fiske in his Unified Theory of Social Relations (Fiske, 1992), form a fundamental basis for understanding how humans interact and for understanding the underlying mental schemas that reflect implicit rules of social exchange. Fiske (1992) describes four elementary forms of sociality by which (groups of) people shape interaction in social life. He states: "The relational models theory explains social life as a process of seeking, making, sustaining, repairing, adjusting, judging, construing, and sanctioning relationships. It postulates that people are oriented to relationships as such, that people generally want to relate to each other, feel committed to the basic types of relationships, regard themselves as obliged to abide by them, and impose them to other people." (Fiske, 1992, p. 689). This theory explains individuals' interpretation of interactions (Bartlett, 1995; Fiske & Taylor, 1991), and these interpretations influence the PC – more than the actual message sent (Rousseau, 1995). Analogously, Fiske's (1992) Unified Theory of Social Relations includes four forms for interaction and underlying motives for evaluating exchange; these include Market Pricing, Equality Matching, Authority Ranking, and Communal Sharing.

Market Pricing interaction is considered to be the most rational form of exchange since, in this form, interaction is based on exchanging money and/or commodities with proportional value motivated by (economic) self-interest. Under this calculating form of interaction, mutual moral commitment differs strongly from that of other models as all conditions and outcomes are explicated clearly, focused on the individual, and can be evaluated easily.

Equality Matching is characterized by egalitarian reciprocity. Through the principles of equality, this form is based on 'I do something for you, you do something for me'. Fairness in interaction and gains is considered to lead evaluation. In particular, reciprocal matters are defined by equality in status, and perceived fairness is the leading mechanism. In a work context, this aspect is often manifest in simple matters, such as carpooling, but also in more serious situations, such as providing feedback. Both parties know 'who owes who' without explicit bargaining (expressions of equity sensitivity; Restubog, Bordia, & Tang, 2007).

In *Authority Ranking*, "relationships are based on a model of asymmetry among people" (Fiske, 1992, p. 691). Status and linear rankings form fundamentals for interaction, and the identity of individuals is based on "knowing one's place in the hierarchy" (Fiske, 1992, p. 701). People seem to identify either as a leader or as a follower in a specific context. This implies a strong relational orientation, including role appropriate behaviour (Flynn, 2005), underlined by the French expression "noblesse oblige" as used by Fiske (p. 700).

Finally, in *Communal Sharing* interactions, entities belonging to a group are considered equivalent and undifferentiated, and as such the collective consciousness trumps perceived individual identity, a phenomenon which equates to "generalized reciprocity" (Fiske, 1992, p. 693). Group interests prevail with everyone being expected to contribute according to their ability. The absence of a 'scorecard' requires high levels of trust as well as mutual unwritten expectations and obligations. Fiske notes that "communal sharing engenders a loss of separate personal identity" (Fiske, 1992, p. 699).

Concluding, Fiske (1992) noted that the four forms go hand in hand with "schemata that people use to construct and construe relationships" (p. 689). The four forms deal with what is perceived to be fair exchange. Related concepts include 'reciprocal exchange ideology' (Coyle-Shapiro & Neuman, 2004) and 'interactional justice' (Bies & Moag, 1986).

3.3.6 Solinger's (2019) and Fiske's (1992) Perspectives as Complementary Frameworks

While there are important distinctions, the normative-contextual perspective (Solinger, 2019) and the social relations perspective (Fiske, 1992) are complementary as they address similar features of social interaction. These features include personal, relational, and collective orientations as alternative

underpinning orientations in contracting (see Table 1). With regard to the individual level, Solinger's (2019) 'personal exchange' – including personal preferences, interests, and biases as a basis for contracting – parallels with Fiske's (1992) 'market pricing exchange' in the sense that giving and receiving benefits is explicit in both notions and exchange occurs within a single person-organization dyad, with personal gain as an important driver. The frameworks are complementary in that, in Solinger's (2019) terms, market pricing can be seen as a particular macrostructure (namely, market logic) that is imported as a cultural register in order to strengthen and legitimate idiosyncratic, personal exchanges with the organization. A combination of personal exchange and market pricing is, for instance, at work when individuals bargain idiosyncratic deals (Rousseau, 2015); an individual is only in the position to strike such a deal when (s)he believes to have considerable bargaining power associated with an employment market (e.g., unique skills that are highly sought after and/or the threat associated with the individual leaving the firm). The considered time frame for personal exchange with the organization seems to be based on short-term or even immediate reciprocation.

Second, on the relational level (see also Flynn, 2005), both frameworks distinguish immediate peer-to-peer interactions happening at the local level (team/subunit), while assuming that these interactions are decisive for forming a PC. Akin to the notion of social cues in normative exchange in Solinger's (2019) framework, the orientation in Fiske's (1992) forms of Authority Ranking and Equality Matching is fundamentally local and other-focused. That is, individuals define themselves on the basis of a *local* pattern of social exchange, where one's type of reciprocation is decisive for one's status and position within a social group. Typically, social conflict is minimized when asymmetries and equity imbalances are kept to a minimum; this introduces the value of alignment and consensus building around a particular PC as an important complementary we-focused mechanism, which is central to the related chapter in Solinger's work (2019). Thus, the two frameworks are complementary, emphasizing either differentiation (Authority Ranking, Equality Matching; Fiske, 1992) or integration of identities and statuses within groups and in peer-to-peer interactions (alignment and peer policing; Solinger, 2019).

Finally, on the collective level, Fiske's (1992) communal sharing interactions seem complementary to Solinger's (2019) organization-wide rules of the game ("It is..."). Both scholars describe a shift in the locus of accountability from

interior to exterior, with exchange being focused on long-term relationships and continuous interactions, and with individual contributions dispersing or transforming into a shared notion of collective gain. There is a collective orientation on group norm fulfilment, and in this sense both Solinger and Fiske describe interactions driven by collectivistic value orientations.

Table 3.1: Relatedness in two complementary theoretical frames shaping social interaction

SCHOLAR	FISKE (1992)	SOLINGER (2019)
ORIENTATION		
Personal, "I-focused"	Market Pricing	Personal Exchange
Relational, "we-focused"	Equality Matching	Normative Exchange
	Authority Ranking	
Collective, "it-focused"	Communal Sharing	Local rules of the game
		Macro structures

This theoretical outline deals with an explanation of the dynamic phase model of psychological contracting and its relation to organizational change, and it discusses additional socially oriented influences on dynamic PC sensemaking. More specifically, we look at two theoretical models that explain the personal, relational, and collective interactions that define the individual's social exchange. Based on this outline, the following research questions are formulated:

1. *How does the dynamic phase model of psychological contracting reflect in employees' perceptions of organizational change?*
2. *How do specific social interaction mechanisms affect the currently known phases of psychological contracting?*
3. *How do these social interaction mechanisms evolve over time throughout dynamic PC processes in organizational change?*

3.4 Method

3.4.1 Research Context

This empirical study is focused on the Dutch travel industry, a context that reflects the high pace and change-intensive nature of contemporary organizations. Facilitated by technological advancements, the sector has evolved into a growing e-commerce industry, selling commodity-like, intangible, and generally well-understood products (Serenko &

Stach, 2009). Rapid and disruptive innovations have strongly impacted organizational processes in travel agencies and the work of their employees. From the management interviews conducted in preparation for this study, we learned that at the strategic level, all organizations face digital industry transformation. However, the way in which this digitalization movement is translated on the tactical level can be quite different. Some agencies have started to introduce new technologies, others have changed their structures, downsized/outsourced personnel, and initiated culture change programmes. At the operational level, there has been yet another set of critical events that resulted from these strategic and tactical changes (see Figure 3.2); what we studied is the impact of this trickling-down of change events on employees' changing PC perceptions. Management in the Dutch travel industry perceives the sector to be able to offer only limited financial incentives for employees. Instead, motivation is expected to spring from employees' love for travel's ideals and, again in the words of management, the strongly valued collective atmosphere in which colleagues often become friends.

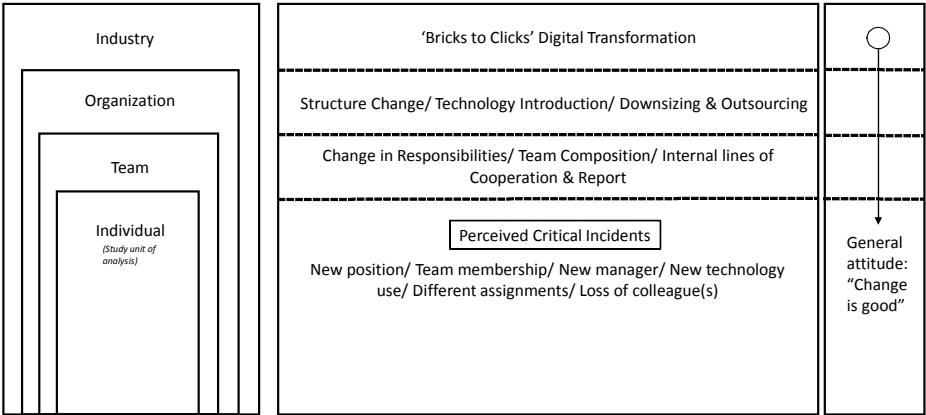


Figure 3.2: Trickle-down effects of digital transformation through different levels of analysis

3.4.2 Procedure

We adopted a qualitative research approach by using in-depth interviews to “form an understanding of the world from the perspective of those studied ... and for examining and articulating processes” (Pratt, 2009, p. 856). To theorize the process of PC evaluation and to explore social interaction influences on three distinct levels (i.e., personal, relational, and collective), one important selection criterion was that the participating organizations were of a size in which these distinguished levels of interest could be clearly identified. In

addition, the participating organizations had to have comparable structures in the sense that people have an opportunity to relate to themselves, to a team with co-workers, and to the organization as a whole. Furthermore, the selected organizations had to have existed for a period of at least ten years, since start-up and scale-up companies were expected to have very different challenges in terms of patterns of, and responses to, organizational change and the institutionalization of PC elements. Initially, eleven interviews with a management representative were conducted to identify organizational change and to understand management's change intentions. Subsequently, the responsible HR officers in the participating organizations provided us with a pool of potential interviewees. Ultimately, 26 interviews were conducted, and after twenty interviews saturation was reached. As depicted in Table 3.2, the sample was heterogeneous in terms of age ($M_{\text{age}} = 34$, $SD = 9$, range: 23-59 years), tenure ($M_{\text{tenure}} = 8$, $SD = 6$, range: 1-25 years), and level of education, which ranged from vocational to university degrees. Participants held diverse positions, varying from more traditional positions in sales or customer services (front-office) to more emerging positions in experience management and scrum mastery (back-office).

Table 3.2: Participants

#	Age	Tenure within org.	Education	Job Title	Critical Incident
1	23	1	Intermediate vocational	Front-office Travel Advisor	Newly employed in organization
2	25	3,5	Bachelor's degree	Back-office Administrator	The influx of new colleagues
3	26	5	Bachelor's degree	Team Leader travel advisors	Personally responsible for tech. introduction
4	26	2	Master's degree	Jr. Mar- Comm. Specialist	Experiencing different assignments
5	27	5	Intermediate vocational	Scrum Master	Taking up new position/ promotion
6	27	1	Bachelor's degree	PR Officer	Entering this organisation
7	28	6	Intermediate vocational	Account Management support	Being selected for new experiment: multi-disciplinary team
8	28	1	Bachelor's degree	Travel Advisor	Introduction of new IT in daily work
9	28	2	Bachelor's degree	Travel Advisor	Implementing new technology for colleagues

Table 3.2: Continued

#	Age	Tenure within org.	Education	Job Title	Critical Incident
10	28	1	Bachelor's degree	Team Manager Customer Service	Confrontation with high-impact top-down decision
11	30	7	Master's degree	Travel Specialist	Starting in self-organizing team
12	31	8	Bachelor's degree	Innovation Officer	Supervisor's role became obsolete
13	31	10	Intermediate vocational	Customer Service employee	Experiencing presentation of new organizational strategy
14	32	1	Bachelor's degree	Yield Manager	Adjusting to new organization, trying to adjust to colleagues
15	34	7	Bachelor's degree	Programmer	Starting in agile team
16	34	10	Bachelor's degree	Business Travel Consultant	Experiencing announcement of outsourcing to another unit
17	36	18	Bachelor's degree	Experience Manager	Experiencing the announcement of re-organization
18	37	12	Bachelor's degree	Subject Matter Expert	Experiencing dysfunctional new international cooperation
19	37	14	Bachelor's degree	Purchase Specialist	Starting in new team structure
20	38	4,5	Intermediate vocational	Webmaster	Moving to new building
21	39	10	Bachelor's degree	Product Developer	Two top leaders left the organization
22	41	11	Secondary education	Team Leader	Receiving new strategic directions from upper-level management
23	43	7	Master's degree	Controller	Loss of management position
24	50	14	Intermediate vocational	ICT employee	Involuntary placement in team
25	57	25	Bachelor's degree	Manager Tour Operating & Dynamic Packaging	Individual manoeuvres in organizational politics to retain position
26	59	16	Intermediate vocational	Customer Contact Centre	Use of new technology in daily work

Interviews. In line with Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton (2012), data were collected through intensive in-depth interviews whilst flexibly using an interview protocol, combining a focus on the topic of study and an open-ended inquiry to understand how individuals experienced the process and identified important moments in the process. Questions were asked in order to capture the trickle-down structure of change as depicted in Figure 2. These questions included notions of individual perceptions ('what do you think...') and perceptions driven by shared consensus ('what do you [as a team] think...') as well as overall team and/or organizational perceptions ('how does this organization...') (Akkermans et al., 2019). Critical Incident Technique (CIT) was used to capture personal recollection and responses to events in change processes and to establish an appropriate level of depth needed to capture employees' evaluation and re-evaluation processes. CIT was selected for this empirical work as it is considered the best suited technique for qualitatively investigating processes as experienced by respondents (Chell, 1998; Langley, 1999). Each interview lasted for approximately one hour and took place in a meeting room at the employees' site. All interviewees were assured of confidentiality. Interviews were conducted in Dutch by a native speaker of Dutch. The quotations selected for analysis were later translated into English and checked by another researcher on accuracy of the translations (Hambleton, 1993). The interviewer followed an emergence interviewing approach in which early analyses of responses led to alterations in questions in the succeeding interviews (Murphy, Klotz, & Kreiner 2017). The term 'emergence' points to the fact that in this approach researchers stay open to new developments during data collection and analysis and follow these towards "most theoretically promising leads", (p. 294). After the interviews, respondents received the full transcript in order to correct omissions and/or to provide additional information. Only minor textual remarks were received regarding this request.

3.4.3 Data Analysis

Inspired by the work of Parzefall and Coyle-Shapiro (2011) on sensemaking of PC breach, data analysis followed a *Template Analysis* approach. This approach combines grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) and content analysis (King, 1998; Schreier, 2012). The grounded theory process yielded fragments that included initial information concerning the perceived interactions throughout critical events. On the basis of template analysis, we drafted codes building on our theoretical framework, and this provided information on the preferred modes of interaction [Fiske (1992): Market Pricing, Equality Matching,

Authority Ranking, Communal Sharing] and institutionalization (individual, relational, collective orientation) specifically throughout the phases of psychological contracting (maintenance, disruption, renegotiate/repair, restored maintenance/dissolution). For this, we focused on precisely when, in the process of the critical incident, particular fragments were witnessed and related this information to the stages of the dynamic PC contract model. Fragments were categorized according to either explicit indications as reported by participants or according to the researchers' interpretation based on the participants' storyline. Figure 3.3 shows the eventual coding on which our inquiry was built. Three researchers were involved in the process of coding, discussing, and adjusting the codes as we proceeded. Two additional scholars provided a thorough sample check by randomly checking several fragments regarding their consistency and the logic of coding. Captured memos, as well as the industry knowledge gained, were used to enrich the analytical process.

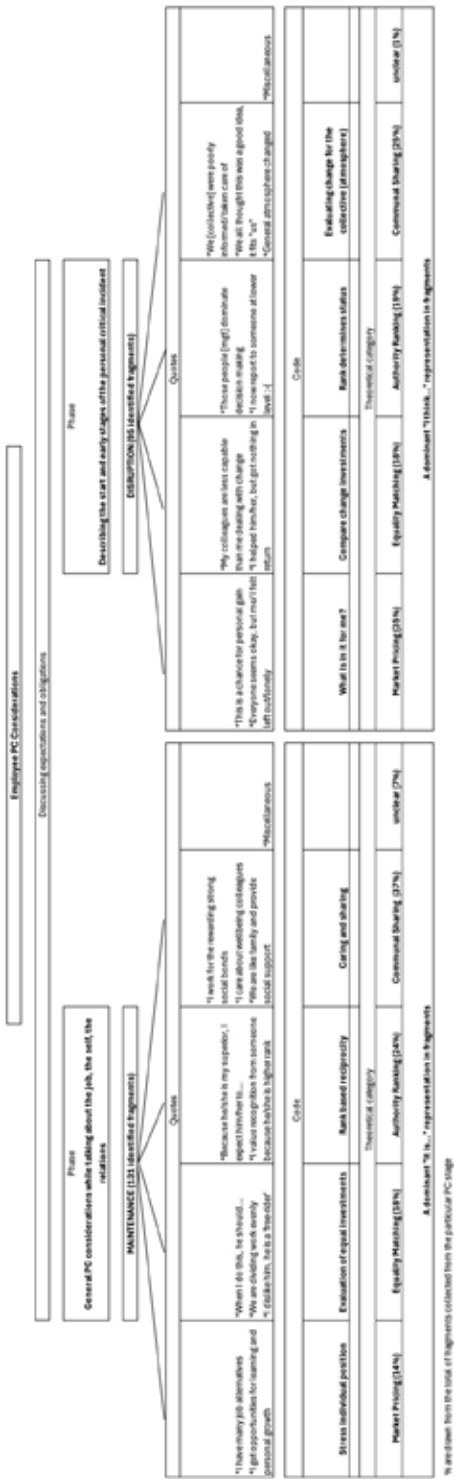


Figure 3.3: Coding frame for analysis of phases maintenance and disruption

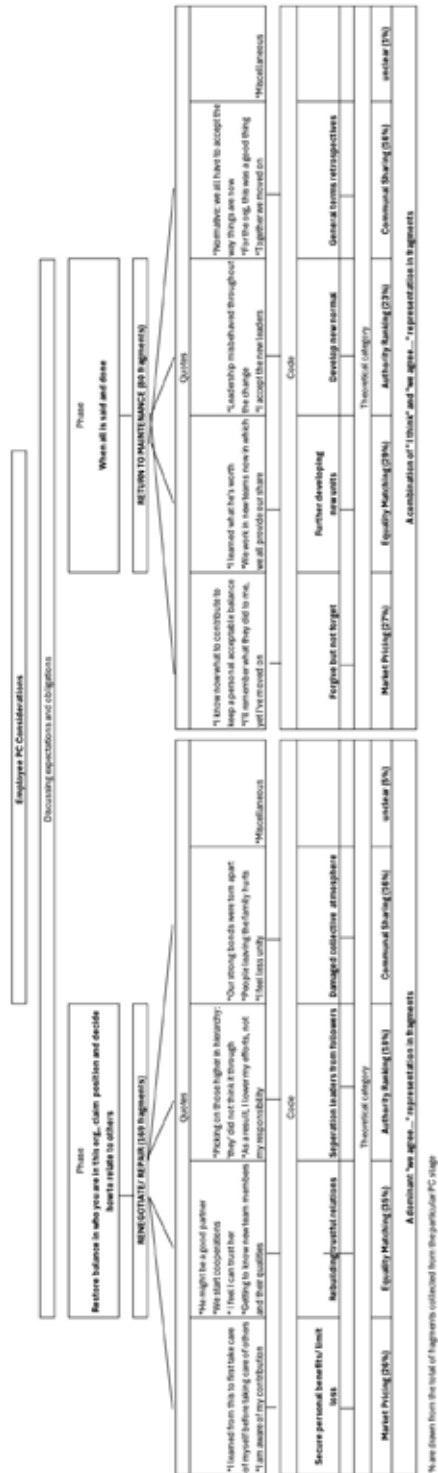


Figure 3.3 continued: Coding frame for analysis of phases renegotiation/repair and return to maintenance

3.5 Findings

We followed employees' change stories to understand how the dynamic phase model of psychological contracting is reflected in employees' experiences of organizational change. First, we report on how our empirical data map onto the phases of psychological contracting. Second, we add social interaction mechanisms that appear to affect PC evaluations throughout this process. Last, we consider the sequence in which social exchange seems to evolve over time.

3.5.1 Dynamic phase model of PC reflected in employee experiences of change (RQ1)

Experiences reflecting PC maintenance phase. In the absence of major disruptions, we noted a positively experienced communal atmosphere (often referred to as family culture) characterizing much of the participants' work experience. Respondents talked about this in a taken-for-granted, symbolic referral to 'the way things are'. It seems that the higher-level industry context of digital disruption directly impacts the lower-level beliefs, since change was perceived as 'part of the deal' of working in the travel industry. This strategic level change (abstract and originated outside the organization) did not seem to interrupt with routine thinking, nor did it attract attention to the individual PC. Employees' experiences of this phase are illustrated in Table 3.3a.

Table 3.3a: Experiences reflecting PC maintenance (total: 163 fragments)

<i>Can you tell me what it is like to work here?</i>	
Observation	Sample Quotes
Interviewees stress collective atmosphere & balanced relationships	• "Personal matters, opinions, frustrations, we share everything around here. In good times this is a positive thing, but it also strengthens some negative sentiments. We sometimes really know how to collectively turn to negative vibes. Since opinions get spread, we infect each other so easily." (Participant 10) • "We all share the same passion; I like that I feel we are in it together.... in times of stress, we really form a solid unit." (Participant 11) • "The atmosphere is really good. We call it the living-room atmosphere. We are like family. This year we went to the seaside, with the whole gang. You know, doing things together, that is what typifies us." (Participant 20)

Table 3.3a Continued

<i>Would you say, in general, that there is a lot of change going on?</i>	
Observation	Sample Quotes
Change is considered a normal aspect of the business	• "We are sort of an internet company, and as such, to freeze is to lose. For me it is only logical that changes keep coming." (Participant 7) • "Yes, it is the good and only logical thing to do [change]; stagnation is deterioration." (Participant 8) • "We have to change; if we don't, we cannot succeed. It all moves so fast. We are a large organization. and it is difficult for us to respond fast. The landscape is changing, so how do we create our right to exist, that's the one thing on our mind." (Participant 18) • "People just know. It is a fact that you must change, so it is just like that." (Participant 22) • "Some 'fresh air' that comes with change is always good." (Participant 23)

The data indicate (both positive and negative) affective responses to disruptions in the exchange relation represented by the employee experience. Employees' experiences of this phase are illustrated in Table 3.3b. On the positive side, disruptions contributing to goal attainment, as outlined by Rousseau et al. (2018), resulted in positive, optimistic change attitudes and PC *renegotiation*. Employees reflected on expected future benefits that were not part of their existing PC. On the other hand, disruptions causing negative affect were found to lead to fearful future expectations, and employees cognitively and behaviorally anticipated on such a situation by lowering their contributive efforts (illustrative for *repair*). Employees took previous change experiences into account and applied intra-individual self-regulatory tactics of 'not letting it happen again' [also known as 'reciprocation wariness' (Eisenberger, Cotterell, & Marvel, 1987)]. Additionally, corroborating Rousseau et al.'s (2018) explanation of the dynamic phase model, we found examples of *velocity feedback* (i.e., the speed with which the individual receives the desired information on the degree to which his/her goals in the PC will be attained) influencing employees' evaluations.

Table 3.3b: Experiences reflecting PC disruption, renegotiation, repair (total: 343 fragments)

Can you tell me about you experiences when change was announced?	
Observation	Sample Quotes
People evaluate PC elements when faced with early signs of change	• "When the group announces we go left, I am like, what does this mean for us..., and for my free space for maneuver." (Participant 18) • "You must know that when they present their plans, I can estimate the consequences for me personally. I am like, wait a minute, this will result in this and that, and soon I realize for me personally this is beneficial (or not)." (Participant 17) • "I knew this was the moment to rethink my deal. If I wanted to grow, this change meant an opportunity to become partner. That was wat I was heading for." (Participant 21)
PC perceptions interact with change attitudes	• "I like working here, so I know this means I have to go along with change." (Participant 16) • "I don't like it that resources have been so limited for quite some time now, but this does not change my relationship with my employer, as long as I find something to do that adds to the collective...I was also there when there were still good times, that helps." (Participant 18)
What is in it for me: chances	• "There might be chances. Since we merge, there will also be more opportunity to, how to say, when we are on our own, we are quite vulnerable, and in future times, I might be able to delegate more work to the team and free up time to do things I like." (Participant 23) • "My direct supervisor left the organization just yesterday; you see, people leaving creates opportunities. I drew a new profile for myself and immediately presented it to the Director. I told her: this is what I do, where I want to grow into." (Participant 20) • "I feel excitement. We are going to do something different! Something new is about to happen. For me it is a good thing." (Participant 12)
What is in it for me: Threats	• "When they presented those plans, I thought hmm, what does this imply for me, what if they put me, as a mini-entity, in the basement of this organization? I was afraid to become less valued and appreciated." (Participant 25) • "I was very committed; it had cost me a huge load of energy last time. That is why I now, when asked again, consider minimal effort to get the job done. It is much easier if I just do not worry about it. I let them know that I will not take on the same troubles." (Participant 4) • "I didn't see the use of it, was afraid it would slow me down. I understand that we need to play by the rules, but sometimes I just ignore the new system and continue doing it my way." (Participant 16)
Velocity of organizational response matters	• "They announced working in new teams. Followed by 2 months of silence. That's far from OK, right? Colleagues question what is going to happen to them. I told them [mgt.], listen you cannot just say nothing, come to clear communication." (Participant 15) • "You can mention it 30 times, but if they never respond, well, what can you do? Higher management, I don't think they know what is happening, they are involved in politics." (Participant 18) • "If you ask for a meeting, it takes a month for it to actually take place. A total no go. If something is on your mind, you just want to discuss it and get a response within a week." (Participant 12)

Restoring maintenance (thriving, reactivation, impairment). To reach PC restoration and return to the maintenance phase (unfortunately, we do not have data on ‘exit or dissolution’ as outcome), the above-mentioned trust and relationship management, including management’s responsiveness to the employee’s needs, are crucial employer efforts. We found that especially the *feeling of being heard* had a positive influence on restoration of trust – and thus on PC restoration. This implies that managerial failure to respond to this feeling hinders the return to a healthy relationship. Employees’ experiences of this phase are illustrated in Table 3.3c.

Table 3.3c: Experiences reflecting restoration of maintenance (total: 97 fragments)

Can you tell me about your experiences as the change process proceeded?	
19 interviewees talked about the end of the process/a return to maintenance. Others had not yet reached this phase yet	
Observation	Sample Quotes
Interviewees expressed positive PC outcomes after the change	• “Now it is my responsibility, and when we were at the airport, I got a text from [CEO] saying she appreciated that we were doing this. Good luck and safe travels... It is those small things that matter the most to me.” (Participant 14) • “Now it is my responsibility, and when we were at the airport, I got a text from [CEO] saying she appreciated that we were doing this. Good luck and safe travels... It is those small things that matter the most to me.” (Participant 14) • “Now it is my responsibility, and when we were at the airport, I got a text from [CEO] saying she appreciated that we were doing this. Good luck and safe travels... It is those small things that matter the most to me.” (Participant 14) • “Apparently, they trust me doing this. Otherwise, they would have told me. The guidance was really good, training and everything. Yes, I have great trust in my employer.” (Participant 26)
Interviewees expressed negative PC outcomes after the change	• -“I feel like only a small player in a really large and political game. I therefore feel less ownership for results than I used to.” (Participant 6) • “At first, I was 100% in love [with the organization]. Now I would say it is a business agreement. So, then I am like OK, no more giving my everything. It must run both ways.” (Participant 21) • “It appeared to me like ‘how nice of you to provide feedback, but we will not take it into account’. And indeed, they didn’t. I could be of much more value for the company. But you know, it is the way it is, I will have to accommodate...” (Participant 24) • “I am far less involved now. We used to have smaller teams. Now, when there is change, you get an e-mail from Poland or something. Now it is more like: here is the change, deal with it. It is a shame. I have learned to be less involved, mentally. At 6 PM it is done.” (Participant 16) • “You sort of turn to another mode. First, I was proactive, but now I am like, sure, just let me know when you do know what you are going to do.” (Participant 18)

Summarizing, as a start for our exploration, we provided empirical footholds supporting recent theorizing on the dynamics of psychological contracting by showing that employees - based on their experiences over a course of interactions that unfold over time - changed their perceptions regarding inducements that could be expected, and which investments should be made in return. We used Rousseau et al.'s (2018) dynamic phase model as a frame of reference that was mapped upon participants' change stories. Next, we explored how specific social interaction mechanisms might expand the range of navigation anchors that employees build on in interactions within their social context.

3.5.2 Social Interaction Mechanisms Affecting Psychological Contracting (RQ2)

Different from the dominant dyadic (employer - employee) view on PC processing, we found strong socially oriented PC evaluations of daily experiences. People valued and evaluated the social interactions they were involved in throughout the change processes. It seemed very important for individuals to better understand what others invest and receive, in order to make sense of their own experiences and the perceived fairness of the accompanying personal gains and losses. In the following section, we repeat the phases maintenance, disruption, renegotiation/repair, and restored maintenance, yet now focus on indicated forms of social interaction defining individuals' PC re-evaluation. In doing so, we refer to the Unified Theory of Social Relations (Fiske, 1992) and normative-contextual framework (Solinger, 2019) as our frames of reference in the understanding of social exchange. Illustrations of social interaction effects throughout dynamic psychological contracting are included in Tables 3.4a, b, and c.

Social interaction throughout maintenance. As outlined above, the experience of a strong social atmosphere characterized the maintenance phase throughout employees' change stories. Additionally, it was noted that the corresponding interactions with their peers seemed to be important drivers for this situational evaluation. Furthermore, employees tried to resolve social dissonance when inconsistencies in their re-evaluation occurred. People copied each other's attitudes towards certain situations and were not (just like that) willing to risk the good atmosphere and inter-collegial relationship. A strong shared consensus was noted on the desired equilibrium state (kindness and sharing) with normative connotations of 'this is who we are'. Personal goals remained conspicuously absent in participants' reports of the situation and their evaluative processes.

Table 3.4a: Social interactions in maintenance (Total: 163 fragments)

Can you tell me what it is like to work here?	
Observation	Sample Quotes
Interviewees talked about social interaction to express positive atmosphere	• “We are all very social and enthusiastic colleagues... I have made many friends here in the organization and value the fact that we really stand for it together...” (Participant 11) • “Looking back at 12 years, most important relations are with my team, we are super close. We help each other out. We also meet outside of work, go on weekends, etc.” (Participant 18) • “The collegial atmosphere, people amongst each other, those ties are really strong, I think that is a strength of the organization. You can go to everyone and communicate openly.” (Participant 17) • “In our department it is swell. We form a close unit.” (Participant 13) • “It is a sociable environment, there is a lot of collegial consultation. You can always ask for help; I like that a lot”. (Participant 8) • “I like working here mostly because of my direct colleagues. You know, with all the changes, they are the ones giving me positive energy.” (Participant 16)
Colleagues were like family	• “We are like family... You know, if one person makes a lot of noise, you will always see the others align with his/her ideas. Even if it is a bad idea. If everyone is happy, I will not be the one to say no.” (Participant 15) • “The atmosphere is really good. We call it the living-room atmosphere. We are like family. This year, we went to the seaside, with the whole gang. You know, doing things together, that is what typifies us.” (Participant 20) • “It is nice to be happy to go to work. It is a bit of a family atmosphere around here.” (Participant 5)

Social interaction throughout disruption, renegotiation, and repair. Notwithstanding the few stories in which disruption triggered PC maintenance into renegotiation, the majority of employees’ recalled experiences emphasized PC repair. Especially throughout repair, the exchange process focused on the local internal environment (team level), and *colleagues* seemed to be the most frequently considered interaction partners. Interactions referred to equity in the investment in change. Employees’ attention was directed to the (lack of) actions from co-workers, while they formed personal opinions upon each other’s capacity to adapt. In maintenance, employees often reported to value their positive egalitarian connection to colleagues (calling them friends); in repair, this social atmosphere was under pressure as polarization evolved.

Respondents developed negative prejudice that overruled the previously reported strong social bonding. Relationship management as an *employer*-effort did not seem to be a priority in employees' experienced needs. Instead, our data indicated that the lack of *collegial* cooperation and *collegial* trust seemed to drive employees' responses in repair.

Table 3.4b: Social interaction in disruption, renegotiation, and repair (total: 343 fragments)

Can you tell me about you experiences when change was announced?	
Observation	Sample Quotes
Institutionalized group norms deteriorate / polarization	• [Employee has a new role resulting from the change] "My colleagues did not respond so well. There was gossip and jealousy. I never experienced this before, and it made me sad and insecure." (Participant 5) • "My colleagues are just short-sighted. Everyone immediately dislikes it [change]. It is not the infrastructure; the whining people got a new laptop and then all of a sudden, they thought everything was great. So short-sighted. I cannot even blame them; they are just like that when something changes." (Participant 20) • "I have always been successful by cooperating. But if the other party responds in a hesitant or reserved manner, I am like OK, don't bother, then it is everyone for him/herself now. It is quite competitive ... The lack of reciprocity is contagious." (Participant 6) • "In the end, I think I sort of made sure my own position was secured, so to say (laughs). At that moment I am less concerned with others' feeling and whether they are comfortable with the situation." (Participant 21) • "Change tears families apart, that's drama. It results in so much tension. 'Oh no, he is going there, and she is going there', you know." (Participant 12)
People start comparing own investments to those of colleagues	• "It is really disturbing; the others are just doing gymnastics at the office. I think to myself: how do we divide the work around here. It is just not fair. The one team is drowning in loads of work, while the others are just goofing around." (Participant 7) • "It was my idea, and then someone else introduced it and suddenly everyone is in favor. It is not always fair. Nowadays, I make a cynical remark like 'well, how nice something gets done with my idea'. It seems to work that way." (Participant 2) • "I was so busy comparing myself to what my colleague did. I always felt he was given priority/better treatment by our manager. He got more opportunities. And since I was so caught up by this comparison, I thought I had to deliver the same results." (Participant 14)

Table 3.4b Continued

Can you tell me about your experiences when change was announced?	
Observation	Sample Quotes
Influenced by how others are treated	• [sniffs] "This hurts me a lot. Someone left, and this matter was not correct. I thought, well if this is the way we deal with people, then I do not want to work here. He was one of my best work friends, and from one day to another, he was transferred to the central department. I was not involved, but this whole matter really harmed my trust." (Participant 23) • "We think, there we go again, yet another department outsourced. People who have worked here for years have to leave. That is really disturbing. It triggers a negative attitude for me." Participant 16) • "For me, the most painful was that some old supervisors left. They were dismissed. They had always given their best. [slows down] And the team never gave them true recognition and appreciation. They felt undervalued. This whole thing had a big impact on me personally." (Participant 11)

Social interaction throughout restoring maintenance. When we examined the attempts to restore the PC, we noted the surprising prevalence of social comparison, information sharing, and alliance formation. The social calibration of outcomes led to new alliances between people who felt that they came out of disruption as ‘winners’ from successful renegotiation and thriving psychological contracts, alliances between those who came out with a restored positive relation, and alliances of ‘victims’, who experienced PC impairment. The development of new social ties while transitioning from renegotiation/repair back to maintenance is illustrated in Table 3.4c.

Table 3.4c: Social interaction in restoring maintenance (Total: 97 fragments)

Can you tell me about your experiences as the change process proceeded?	
19 interviewees talked about the end of the process/a return to maintenance. Others had not yet reached this phase yet	
Observation	Sample Quotes
New social structures to be built, leading to new team PCs	• “And now it is really a team effort. My colleague on Thailand is very talented in writing, she really loves it. We decided to give her less sales, so she can also write for America. My colleague on America is like ‘Hallelujah!’. We are very happy in our team.” (Participant 11) • “First, we were a group of people accidentally together. And now, past few weeks, we have started to become a team. Well, the five of us. There are still those two who only work for themselves and not for the team goals and vision that we have shared.” (Participant 7) • “I was a [name subgroup] employee, but since I started as the Chair of the ‘residents’ committee for the new building, a team of people organizing social events, I have started to become, and feel, a [corporate group] employee.” (Participant 20) • “We now have team days, and I have to travel for 2.5 hours to get there. But if we are there, all together, that’s what it is all about. That makes why I still enjoy work.” (Participant 16) • “It is always nice to have a buddy to share the experience with, so that is what I also do now. I have found someone to exchange thoughts. Preferably someone likeminded.” (Participant 18) • “We went to Disney with the whole team, we are one team now. We got rid of ‘you are Sales’ or ‘Purchase’. That’s behind us. It is just a matter of finetuning now.” (Participant 19)
Social group is still (re)building after change has ended	• “The old gang just has different commitment, more emotional involvement. And if we are asked to work overtime it is no problem. Whereas you see with the new people, they care less for the organization.” (Participant 21) • “Sales & Purchase, we go quite well together. It is the admin team that still causes trouble. They are like ‘not my responsibility, you deal with it.’” (Participant 19) • “The old gang still refers to the good old days and tells us they always worked until late at night. But I think to myself, well, when I really need you, you are never there.” (Participant 23)

Summarizing, in this section, we provided empirical indications that social interactions and external validation interfered with the individual’s dynamic PC re-evaluation process. The results not only support the theory of the dynamic model of psychological contracting, but they also suggest that, PC re-evaluation involves an interesting mix of individual *and* social processes, characterized by individual-level considerations, consensus between colleagues, and shared mental models.

3.5.3 Social Interaction Evolving Throughout PC Processes in Change (RQ 3)

After mapping the social interaction elements onto the dynamic model of psychological contracting, suggesting that social exchange elements should be considered more prominently in empirical work, this section places the issue of social interaction at center stage. To this end, we elaborated on the interaction patterns throughout time as reported by employees' change stories. A process view is presented in Figure 3.4 to illustrate the dominant forms of interaction over time.

For the sake of illustrating the sequence, the figure depicts fluid lines whereas our analysis only included a categorization of 'maintenance', 'disruption' (critical event), 'repair or renegotiate' and 'restoring maintenance'.

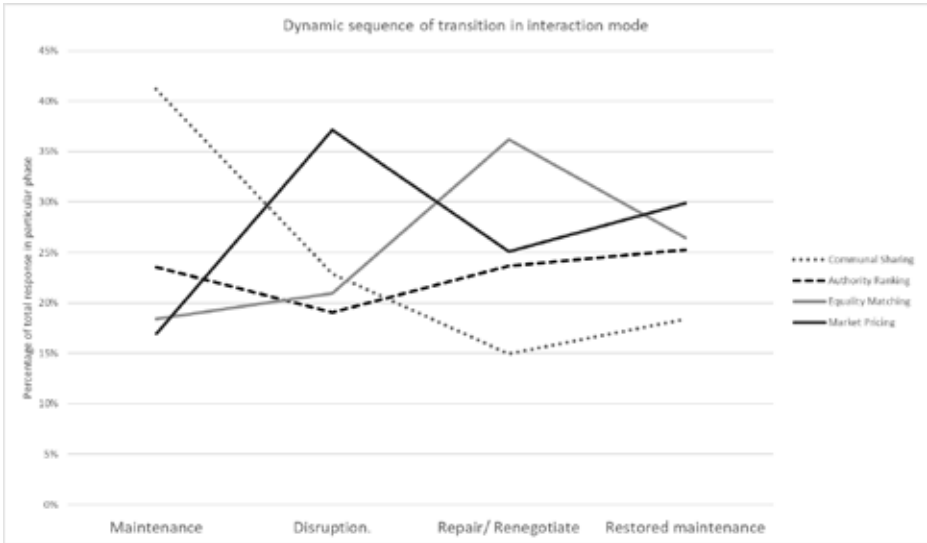


Figure 3.4: Dynamic sequence in preferred interaction mode throughout psychological contracting

When combining insights from Fiske (1992), Solinger (2019), and our data, we propose a model that summarizes our interpretation of participants' common change interaction orientation pattern in Figure 3.5. As will be explained, this pattern evolves from a collective orientation (*"it is..."*) in stable contracts to individual orientation (*"I think..."*) following disruption and to relational orientation (*"we think..."*) during renegotiation/repair and restoration of maintenance.

Collective orientation. In a state of equilibrium, employees logically relied on institutionalized interaction patterns of *'the way things always are'*. Employees were most certainly aware of the changing industry; however, as long as it did not directly impact on their own local concerns, they held shared beliefs concerning the future implications of change on their often-normative PC expectations. Institutionalized contract norms entailed stability in the social environment and assured group norm fulfilment (*"it is..."*). Communal Sharing provided the dominant form of interactions at this time.

Individual orientation. Following a sense of early disruptive warning signs, employees seemed to (almost immediately) turn towards personal exchange (see Figure 3.4), trying to calibrate implications of the organizational change primarily for themselves. As disruptive information reached the individual, it appeared that personal goals, preferences, and interests were evaluated before tuning in with colleagues for confirmation or aligning interpretations. *'What does this change ahead of us imply for me?'* characterized the dominantly present Market Pricing interactions at this time (*"I think..." - self focused*).

Individual and relational orientation. After moments of disruption, when consequences became clear, relational Equality Matching interactions (i.e., vigilance about equity in social exchange) took up a prominent place in the socially oriented re-evaluation. Since this was combined with a continued strong individualization of norms, we sensed an *'everyone against everyone'* situation in the interviews. The perceived lack of contributions by colleagues to the greater (organizational) cause easily disturbed peer relations, thus disrupting cohesive ties. At this point, to make use of somewhat more objective information in an insecure situation, scorecards and ratios of inducements and investments mattered a great deal. Interestingly, although it seemed that everyone had just previously been involved in assessing the disruption in terms of individual goal alignment, it appeared that the lack of community-focused orientations now nursed the development of negative collegial perceptions of each other, hence transforming the interactions from being individual to becoming relationally oriented.

When transitioning back to maintenance, people appeared to build up new team-based relational norms and form social bonds, with new, albeit fragile, shared perceptions (*'getting back together'*). At the end of the processes, there was an increase in Authority Ranking (relational) interactions, and employees formulated their expectations from their leaders in the new

situation. Perceptions shared within the team strengthened the individual's bargaining power. However, logically, perceptions had not reached the level of institutionalization known from equilibrium state (meaning there were shared individual contracts, but no shared team contracts). Interactions were characterized by Market Pricing and Equality Matching references, pointing out a strong individual awareness in the exchange. People started to develop new relationships in which trust was (re)built at local team level (*"we think..."*). This pattern is portrayed in Figure 3.5 and is enriched with exemplary quotes from our participants.

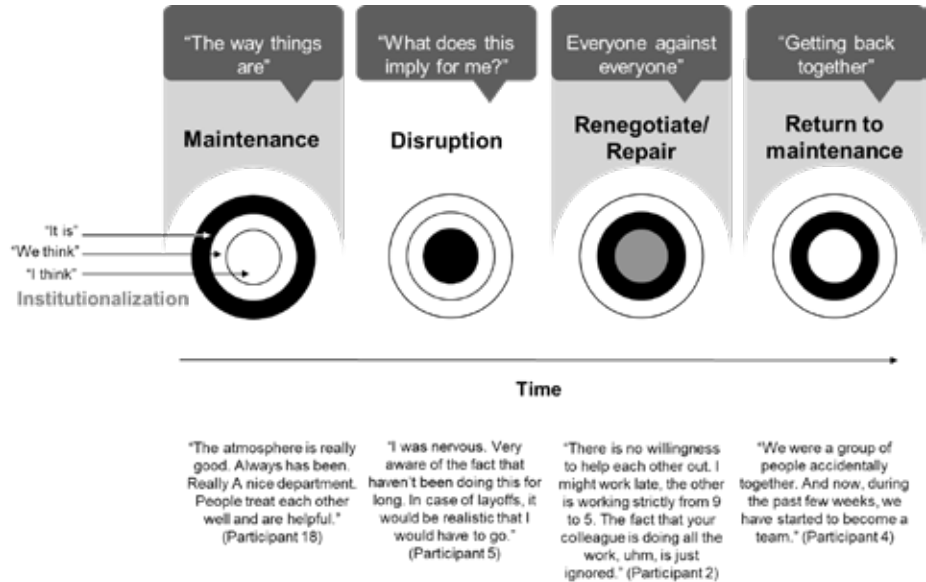


Figure 3.5: Summary of findings on the sequence of interaction orientation throughout dynamic psychological contracting: from collective "It is" (outer circle) to individual "I think" (inner circle) and relational "We think" (middle circle)

3.6 Discussion

In this paper, by means of an interactional approach, we sought to investigate the socially embedded nature of change in the PC alongside an episode of organizational change. Our results confirm the notion that the temporal features of psychological contracting - PC maintenance, disruption, repair/renegotiation, and returning back to maintenance or ending in dissolution (Rousseau et al., 2018) - do indeed map quite well on change recipients' recalled

experiences of organizational change. What is new is that our data confirm the idea that individuals, via interactions with their peers. As individuals come to a consensus and individual psychological become shared and normative, these psychological contracts are no longer of a strictly individual nature (Ho, 2005; Laulié & Tekleab, 2016; Solinger, 2019). We noticed that employees adjust reciprocal expectations to their social environments and use social referents and subjective information differently in consecutive phases of psychological contracting. That is, our data further showed a temporally consistent pattern of social interactions, starting from Collective Orientation (*"it is..."*) for PC maintenance, followed by a transition to individual orientation (*"I think..."*) in reaction to PC disruption, and then Relational Orientation (*"we think..."*) during renegotiation/repair and transitions back into the maintenance of the PC. Complementary to these findings, we found a consistent pattern of social interactions when examining Fiske's (1992) forms of social referencing. That is, for PC maintenance, Communal Sharing was found to be the dominant form of interaction, but this sharply declined following an organizational change, giving way to Market Pricing after disruption and Equality Matching during renegotiation/repair. These findings both confirm and provoke the present state of theorization, which will be discussed in further detail below.

3.6.1 Dynamic PC Phase Model Reflected in Experiences of Organizational Change

With their dynamic phase model of PC processes, Rousseau et al. (2018) meaningfully expanded the scholarly knowledge of the PC as a dynamic construct. Two additional insights that corroborate this earlier work are drawn from our current contribution. As changes in the PC are closely related to organizational change (Tomprou & Hansen, 2018), we consider several understandings from the organizational change literature to interpret employees' responses to changing situations. First, the temporal features of PC as forwarded by Rousseau et al. (2018) show similarities with a well-established sequence of unfreezing, movement, and refreezing in organizational change (Fugate, Kinicki, & Scheck, 2002; Isabella, 1990; Kanter, Stein, & Jick, 1992; Lewin, 1947). This particular sequence of organizational change phases rests on the assumption of *episodic* change, where change is viewed as an occasional interruption or divergence from an equilibrium (Weick & Quinn, 1999). The fact that we found support for this mode of experiencing organizational change rather than, for instance, a model of constant, continuous change (Weick & Quinn, 1999) is theoretically interesting. It confirms the idea

that while the psychological contracting phenomenon is inherently dynamic by nature, it is also an inertial, equilibrium-seeking phenomenon.

Second, our data partially support the self-regulatory mechanisms as stressed by Rousseau et al. (2018) throughout specific phases of psychological contracting. In particular, we found that individuals' personal goals and the recognition of opportunities for goal attainment in the change process are important drivers of change in the PC. For instance, goal attainment mechanisms explained the emergence of those groups of employees whose PC thrived following an organizational change; by being able to seize opportunities for goal attainment that were not there before, those employees ended up with a restored PC. Others ended up with a deteriorated PC (fewer opportunities for goal attainment than before). Furthermore, our data confirm the importance of speedy feedback from the organization. Rousseau et al. (2018), for instance, discuss that it is the employers' timely and adequate response to employees' "hot feelings and sense of loss" (p. 12) that triggers the transition in PC restoration to previous levels rather than a transition to PC deterioration.

Apart from the above-mentioned validating observations, we will highlight below how our findings can possibly expose a number of potential blind spots in the present literature by discussing theoretical implications related to our second and third research questions. Below, we shall elaborate on the contribution of this study in greater detail by explaining how the dynamic phase model could potentially be extended by the inclusion of social influences.

3.6.2 Social Interaction and Collective -, Individual -, Relational Interaction Sequence

By building on insights from institutional theory (Cardinale, 2018) and the use of an interactional approach (Coyle-Shapiro & Neuman, 2004), this study exposes the social nature of psychological contracting, thus adding to the recent focus on social context within PC literature (Akkermans et al., 2019; Gibbard et al., 2017; Lauhié & Tekleab, 2016) and on PC in organizational change (Tomprou & Hansen, 2018). Below we discuss the implications of these our findings in light of these previous studies and social exchange theory (SET: Blau, 1964).

Although we await future studies to confirm the robustness of our findings in other settings, our empirical work suggests that the PC maintenance phase is

markedly *social* in nature (cf. Tomprou & Hansen, 2018), which is consistent with SET's original emphasis on group solidarity, consensus and social norms (Blau, 1964). To illustrate: for PC maintenance, Communal Sharing was found to be the dominant form of interaction mentioned in the interviews in our study.

"It is so good that you always have the feeling of doing it together, we are all in it together. Also in busy times, it is really hard work, but it is truly a collective unity doing the work (Participant 11)"

Further, in the dynamic phase model, it is argued that mild, low arousal positive affect is associated with PC maintenance; this, in turn, is sustained by goal-consistent inducement from the organization (Rousseau et al., 2018). While these assumptions hold true when strictly related to personal exchange, we found goal-consistent inducements (and the related I-focused orientation) to be conspicuously *absent* in PC maintenance, while employees strongly emphasized a collective orientation (Communal Sharing) as the main type of interaction.

"Evaluating the human factor, I think everyone wants the best for us. And on issues like providing continuity, salary pay, the way things are taken care of, you know, it is just handled very well around here. On the other hand, we all know that the workload is heavy, they challenge us a lot in that sense (Participant 17)"

Apparently, stable perceptions of inducements and obligations seem to occur, yet *not* in a 'closed' dyadic system of strictly personal exchanges with an organization. Rather, employees experience them as shared within the broader social space of the organization. In the terminology of Blau's original SET, the balance of social exchange has become a 'social arrangement'.

This corroborates Solinger's (2019) normative-contextual view, where the 'standard' against which a PC is weighted is not necessarily personal (e.g., a goal attainment motive). Consistent with institutional theory, the automaticity that is characteristic of PC maintenance does not only result from goal-relevant inducements, but also from a continuous re-enactment and the policing of social patterns (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Hallett & Ventresca, 2006; Thornton et al., 2012). In that sense, the role of social context (i.e., the individual nesting in teams and organizations) is not just a factor in the prediction of the PC, but a shaper of the very meaning of the contract. This supports the understanding PC as shared mental model (Akkermans et al., 2019).

Interestingly, PC disruption was marked by a shift from a collective to a self-focused orientation and a concomitant peak in Market Pricing referents. Since violation occurred after a period of strong and collectively experienced stability, employees plausibly experienced 'collective violation' and, as a result, simultaneously felt to be "less able to offer support and advice to colleagues" (Tomprou et al., 2015, p. 574). In fact, Fiske (1992) notes that after the social fabric is disturbed, Market Pricing is left as the only reliable form of interaction.

"My colleagues who have been working here for a long time, they have been through a lot. They can be quite cynical. And what I see is that when they work extra for example, they immediately want some sort of reward. Whereas I would say it is just part of the job. (Participant 10)

This is fully consistent with the perspective of SET, which would predict that violations of trust reduce the time horizons of interaction partners and expose potential conflicts of interest, which implies more self-focused exchanges and the expectation of more immediate returns (Blau, 1964; Balliet & Van Lange, 2013). Further, more recent advances on SET find that events that remind individuals of resource scarcity, spur more competitive, self-focused, and thus Market Pricing types of interactions (Roux et al., 2015). The advent of I-focused interactions is consistent with our finding that the PC disruption stage was followed by a period of *relational* discord (Equality Matching) in the repair stage, which is consistent with SET's emphasis on the role of competition for status and social recognition through gossip (Blau, 1964; Wu et al., 2016a). Our findings revealed that social dispute was a major process during PC renegotiation/repair, which implies that at least in the context of organizational change, the restoration of one's personal PC is inextricably tied to that of others.

"At this point I confronted her [colleague]. I told her she needed to quit her act on repeatedly sharing all that is negative about my role here... upon our confrontation she was all like 'oh oh sorry, I didn't mean it'. So I learned it is also about power and having the guts to say things out loud." (Participant 7)

Blau (1964) argued on this point that in the absence of clarity about everyone's position and status, contrasting dynamic forces arise in the group. According to SET, this process is accompanied by individuals competing for social

recognition and establishing new (informal) leadership; gossip is an important retaliatory mechanism in this regard, which may in a later phase, even promote social integration (Wu et al., 2016b). Ultimately, relational discord transitioned into constructive modes of resonance and alignment with others, which from a SET perspective can be seen as an increase of forms of indirect reciprocity and social integration (Blau, 1964) while returning back to PC maintenance.

Finally, this study adds to the PC literature by studying contexts that reflect contemporary challenges such as digitalization and technological disruption, both of which are considered truly game-changing developments for entire industries, and by providing insights into the way in which employees factually cope with such environments. Interestingly, while the 'bricks-to-clicks' revolution has become a clear societal trend in travel industries across the globe, individual change recipients have paid conspicuously *little* attention to it and have shown remarkably little overt concern about this societal trend as such. It seems as if such trends are generally experienced in a neutrally positive way. However, change recipients have shown concern about more 'local' affairs, such as their shattered communal orientations, personal goals, and fairness in the distribution of new PCs as a result of the digital disruption. This, in itself, shows that PCs are often experienced very locally and that the 'changing world of work' and disruptive innovations impact on individuals only indirectly, namely when such developments lead to new teams, new hierarchical structures, or foreseen lay-offs; such incidents *did* trigger people to enter the state of 'contract awareness', something which may perhaps be equivalent to a more general "*not in my back yard*" type of effect. It supports the intuition that "for the individual, organizational life is experienced locally" (Ashforth & Rogers, 2012, p. 25). Along these lines, we support the notion that carefully managing "small local changes [is] an important aspect of implementing more complex higher-level changes" (Stouten et al., 2018, p. 771).

3.6.3 Limitations and Related Future Research Suggestions

Since our study concerns qualitative research, the generalizability of its results is limited. Moreover, the accuracy of the interactional processes identified would have been improved by studying cognitive responses in real time. Although the use of CIT is considered to be the method of choice for reconstructing past events and qualitatively studying processes (Langley, 1999), responses might still suffer from recollection bias. Furthermore, the process of coding responses could be enhanced by involving participants by means of focus groups. Although the researchers involved carefully validated

all the transcripts with the participants and used all textual and non-textual cues to complete the coding, the outcome of this process remains based on interpretation, and thus subjective in nature. Next to this, our data did not include the creation phase of the dynamic model of psychological contracting (see Alcover, Ric, Turnley, & Bolino [2017] on social influence in the creation phase), and our sample did not include participants who left the changing organization (dissolution as PC outcome). This is a limitation in our data collection, and we recommend that future research includes employees that have left the organization. Finally, we know that dispositional employee characteristics and circumstances (such as dispositional resistance and self-efficacy, but also tenure, career stage, and perceived successfulness of past change) influence psychological contracting (Bal et al., 2008; Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010; Coyle-Shapiro & Neuman, 2004; Robinson, et al., 1994). We did not account for individual factors influencing idiosyncratic evaluations, and therefore further investigation of these factors is important to understand why some people go through the PC transitions more easily than others.

Based on the outline given above, several future research directions can be proposed. More in-depth empirical evidence could be gathered that distinguishes the difference between individual versus normative influences on social exchange, especially in the process of socialization. Also, a better understanding could be developed of why employees seem to be more involved in social comparison throughout repair, compared to renegotiation. The same holds for the unanswered question why strong social ties seem to deteriorate so easily upon disruption, since strong ties might aid coping responses and uncertainty reduction throughout the entire process. In addition, more research is needed to explore the value of small social networks (e.g., cliques) in comparison with larger groups that range from loose to tight coupling, to enrich our understanding the multiple ways in which peers influence one another within the context of 'tribes'. To strengthen understanding from a change point of view, and more specifically, concerning the process of change and its relation to psychological contracting, further research could explore potential differential effects of different levels of leadership involved (e.g., CEO, middle management, line manager), as well as potential differences caused by different types of organizational change (both strategic-level and local-level changes). Last, to extend its generalizability, we welcome studies that would gauge the robustness of our findings in other change settings (e.g., other grounds for change, other industrial contexts, and other countries).

3.6.4 Practical Implications

Our study demonstrates that to align change implementation with the concerns of employees (impacting their motivation to change), individual, team, and collective level PCs need to be managed throughout the change process in time. The degree to which mental schemas forming the PC are idiosyncratic or shared seems to depend on the unfolding of the change process. An idiosyncratic focus, which seems the most important immediately after PC disruption, highlights the importance of individual-level approaches and coaching to assist new PC deal making. However, possibly a few days later, employees start sharing and comparing their deals, transforming the matter into a higher-level construct and implying a focus on team expectations which might yield most positive employee returns, for instance in terms of team motivation (Hu & Liden, 2015). This strengthens the idea that mere individual-level change management tactics will not suffice, and tactics that touch upon the group level (e.g., training, focus groups, group-level interventions such as World Café's), might be more effective at this point. As we already know, it is important to carefully manage the PC during change (Tomprou & Hansen, 2018), and the explored pattern of results from this empirical contribution additionally calls for *timely* and *differentiated* responsiveness in managing employment relationships at different levels. Social awareness and sensitivity to understand not only group processes in managing the PC but also the organizational climate is suggested to be important additions to a manager's basic toolbox in order to succeed in ever-changing organizational settings.

3.7 Conclusion

This study demonstrated the temporal nature of psychological contracting through stages of PC maintenance, disruption, repair/renegotiation, and a return back to maintenance. Additionally, our data provided insights into the socially embedded nature of PC re-evaluation and have shown a pattern of interactions across the different phases of dynamic psychological contracting consistent with Fiske's (1992) basic forms of interaction in social life. More specifically, our data suggested that PC *maintenance* is strongly social in nature and that employees experience shared PC notions within the broader social network. Transition from this collective orientation to a self-focused orientation was triggered by PC *disruption*, to be subsequently followed by a period of relational discord in the *renegotiation and repair* stage. Finally, a return to constructive resonance and alignment with others was noted while

returning back to PC *maintenance*. Summarizing, we conclude that social interactions play a more prominent role in employees' re-evaluation processes than was previously theorized in most PC literature. Last, this study showed that social interaction, forming and shaping work relationships, is an important mechanism to understand how employees deal with contemporary large-scale organizational challenges on a day-to-day micro level.

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Chapter 4

Interpreted Role-taking Dynamics of Change Recipients

"I changed my mind"

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4.1 Abstract

Successful organizational change requires substantial efforts from both the leaders and recipients of change. After a long tradition of focusing on change leaders, academics now increasingly focus on the role of change recipients. The current literature on recipients, however, offers mostly binary categorizations of their roles in change (e.g., supportive vs unsupportive) obtained from questionnaires. Such an approach does not reveal how events can cause shifts in recipients' role-taking during a change initiative. Actors' roles change *and are changed by* change events. We adopted an assisted sensemaking approach using a narrative methodology to study recipients' various storylines by which they construct and reconstruct their own *multiple* roles throughout change. Eighty participants were asked to tell the retrospective story of their experience of, and role-taking in, a top-down change initiative as if they were crafting chapters of a book. Analysis and classification of these individual stories yielded five underlying composite narratives, each representing typical shifts in perceived role-taking by recipients during a change initiative. This study highlights and illustrates how recipients' role-taking is a complex, adaptive, and social process.

4.2 Introduction

This study focusses on change recipients' perceived role-taking throughout processes of organizational change. It is well-known that mobilizing people for change requires leaders to craft visions that immerse organizational members in a compelling change story (Gabriel, 2015; Garud et al., 2011; Vaara et al., 2016). In this context, change leaders' articulated visions to create a sense of meaning, order, and predictability in what is otherwise a chaotic flux of experiences (Brown et al., 2009; Moen, 2006). However, much less is known about the flipside of this phenomenon; whether employees are willing to follow suit with supportive behaviors in their role of change recipient (Bartunek et al., 2006; Sonenshein & Dholakia, 2012; Stensaker et al., 2020). We refer to change leaders as the senior-level management initiators of change processes (Seo et al., 2012) in "which an organizational entity alters its form, state, or function over time" (Stevenson & Greenberg, 1998, p. 742). Recipients are those organizational members who did not initiate yet are affected in their daily work by a change initiative. Their response behaviors to change result from a complex combination of factors, messages, and actions (Oreg et al., 2018). This is especially true as leaders' messages are often interpreted in recipients' own ways (Reissner, 2011). For instance, Dawson and McLean (2013) illustrated how the perceived incompetence of managers led coal miners to resist change and become emboldened by their resistor roles. This unpredictability of recipients' interpretations of their experiences, role conceptions, and behaviors poses a substantial risk to the potential success of change (Beigi et al., 2019). Research indicated that the importance of recipients' interpretations in change is still underestimated (Ferrari, 2023; Seo et al., 2012).

In change stories such as the one mentioned above (Dawson & McLean, 2013), one can recognize how recipients take on a *diverse* set of roles (Biddle, 2013; Reissner, 2011). However, most literature on recipient roles takes an individual-psychological stance (Bouckennooghe, 2010), where roles are portrayed in accordance with stable personal attributes (i.e., demographics, characteristics, and coping styles) (Stouten et al., 2018). Such disposition-based conceptualizations fall short in explaining the more agentic and flexible notion that employees can (and do) cast and re-cast their own roles in reaction to changing circumstances (Langley et al., 2013; Oreg & Sverdlik, 2011; Shipp & Jansen, 2011; Sonenshein, 2010). Therefore, Reissner (2011, p. 605) suggested, new research should consider "the different stages of the sensemaking process in line with different phases of change" to better understand recipients' roles in change.

Assuming that role-behaviors are best understood by considering both the person *and* the situation (Jansen et al., 2016; Seo et al., 2012), it stands to reason that the current literature is incomplete if it emphasizes either the person, or the change process only. Personal stories of change experiences are potentially valuable in this respect, as they typically include both the person (as the protagonist and 'role taker') and the situation (Langley et al., 2013; Reissner, 2011; Shipp & Jansen, 2011). When people make retrospective sense of change experiences, they use various storylines to construct and reconstruct *their own* roles through storied accounts (Hay et al., 2021; Van Hulst & Tsoukas, 2023). Therefore, our studies' research question is:

How do storied accounts of recipients' personal change experiences reflect variations in their change role-taking?

Our main contribution lies in showing that a personal narrative approach enriches the present theorizing of recipient experiences, such that it moves from one-dimensional and deterministic characterizations ('flat characters' in narratological terms) to a richer and more realistic appreciation of organizational nuances and dynamics. Charting the twists and turns of event-based narratives allows us to comprehend and describe the *multiple* roles (e.g., from victim to champion) throughout change experiences while still retaining a sense of personal coherence. Another theoretical contribution is that we detail how this variety of change roles and role shifting can be accounted for by two straightforward tensions around conformity ('standing out vs blending in') and agency ('stepping in vs standing back') in role-taking.

The paper is organized as follows. First, we set the conceptual stage by reviewing and discussing the role of recipients in organizational change and by connecting this to their ongoing sensemaking processes. Secondly, we explain our methods. Thirdly, we derive, describe, and analyze five composite narratives. We identify what events and dilemmas recipients face in each composite narrative that might lead them to shift roles. Finally, we discuss our findings in light of broader themes concerning dynamics of recipients' role-taking.

4.3 Theory

4.3.1 Recipients' Roles in Organizational Change

As mentioned by Boje (2008), organizations can be considered the “theatre of everyday life” (p. 4). Organizational Role Theory (Biddle, 2013; Katz & Kahn, 1978) indeed views organizations as social systems in which different actors occupy different formal and informal roles. These roles are considered ‘scripts’ that set expectations for patterned behaviors that are deemed acceptable within a certain social structure. *Role-taking* is the informal process of interpreting, internalizing and enacting a particular role. In organizational change contexts, it is often clear who is formally assigned the role of change agent and who is the intended recipient. However, understanding informal role-taking is more difficult as role perceptions are not defined by the formal structures and descriptions in an organization but rather exist implicitly in the minds of individuals and peer groups (Stouten et al., 2018). In practice, informal change leaders in a team might even become more influential than the formally assigned change agents, making the issue of who is leading and who is following dependent on the interactive positioning of the actors involved (Grønvaad et al., 2023).

To strengthen the understanding of the different roles in change processes, scholars ‘reversed the lens’ (Shamir, 2007) and shifted focus from the role of managers/agents to that of the recipients. For a long time, recipients were regarded as passive in their response to change, yet more recent work has shown that recipients can play a central and active role in organizational change success (Oreg et al., 2018). It also identified important factors affecting recipients’ roles and behaviors and the overcoming of resistance (Ferrari, 2023; Stouten et al., 2018; Van Dam et al., 2008). However, empirical studies in this vein tended to reduce the inherent complexity of role-taking to the binary distinction between ‘supporting’ versus ‘resisting’ or ‘deviant’ roles (Ferrari, 2023; Oreg et al., 2018). This obfuscated a rich palette of relevant nuances in recipients’ dynamic experiences and role-taking (Bartunek et al., 2006; Oreg & Berson, 2019). Role-taking in this paper refers to the process in which individuals a) position themselves within their change contexts based on their own characteristics and on their interaction with change events and other actors involved, and b) behave according to their estimation of what is deemed appropriate in their position (Biddle, 2013).

Our focus on role-taking is in line with the growing exploration of dynamic aspects of workplace phenomena (Jansen & Shipp, 2019; Langley et al., 2013;

Van Olffen et al., 2016). In this vein, change scholars have started to focus more on the *process* of the reciprocal influences between the active roles that recipients (choose to) play and the evolution of the change process itself (Jansen et al., 2016; Langley et al., 2013; Oreg et al., 2011). For instance, Oreg et al. (2018) described recipients' responses not only by categorizing their *valence* toward the change (i.e., holding a positive or negative attitude), but also their level of *activation* (i.e., taking a passive or active stance). Both can shift as recipients face different events. Combining these dimensions of valence and activation, Oreg and colleagues (2018) developed a circumplex model of 'resistance', 'proactivity', 'disengagement', and 'acceptance' as recipient' responses. While this classification is compelling, it solidifies recipients' reactions into a singular category of role-taking. An alternative is to assume that recipients can take *different* roles over the course of a change episode. To wit, Jansen et al. (2016) focused on shifting recipient responses over the course of change. In their work on change-based momentum, they showed how 30% of their participants experienced shifting personal valence and change commitment and hence shifted in their perceptions of change momentum (i.e., their energy to pursue a new course of action). They proposed four perceptual role patterns (champions, doubters, converts, and defectors), of which the latter two clearly reflect shifting change roles over time.

4.3.2 Recipients' Sensemaking of Their Roles in Change

Ongoing sensemaking processes. To better understand the driving mechanisms that lead to shifting in-role behaviors, it seems worthwhile to explore recipients' lived change experiences. One way to do so is by spotlighting their own sensemaking processes in day-to-day change contexts (Stouten et al., 2018). In the context of organizational change, individuals' sensemaking has been defined as "the meaning construction and reconstruction by the involved parties as they attempt to develop a meaningful framework for understanding the nature of the intended strategic change" (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991, p. 442). As such, sensemaking enables recipients to bring order in their experiences and direct their future actions accordingly (Weick et al., 2005). Such interactive and reflexive practices are an ongoing activity throughout organizational change processes as employees attempt to maintain, modify, or contest the status quo (Reay et al., 2019). One might expect varying but similar 'storylines' in recipients' retrospective sensemaking efforts, that in turn might be used by recipients to reflect on one's own role (Lord et al., 2020). In this narrative view, organizations are "composed of events and experiences" (Langley et al., 2013, p. 5) that come and pass by, demanding continuous sensemaking efforts that assist their role-taking.

Stories as sensemaking devices. Organizational change typically represents an unstable context in which stories can reflect assumptions and expectations about change and change roles at the work floor. In this paper, we adopt Boje's (1991) definition of a story: "an exchange between two or more persons during which a past or anticipated experience [is] being referenced, recounted, interpreted or challenged" (p. 8). Additionally, narratives' are coherent contextual stories used to shape events into coherent wholes to achieve believability (Boje, 2008). In uncertain times, stories told by recipients can lend them a sense of cognitive control, community, and continuity (Brown & Humphreys, 2003). They are also used by recipients to share and strengthen, as well as contest, leaders' sensegiving of change (Gabriel, 2015). Different change stories that are told and shared by different organizational actors in the same context, reflect the apparent complexity of roles across change processes, and together form a "pool of interpretations" (Reissner 2011, p. 4). The study of this variety fosters insights into *implicit assumptions* and normative notions held by the storyteller (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Van Ooijen et al., 2020; Stensaker et al., 2020). Stories are used to form significant group memberships, and to find approval from peers. Individuals make salient in their stories their group's values and beliefs and, hence, sharing those stories makes them 'fit right in' (Bryant & Wolfram Cox, 2004). Moreover, crafting and sharing stories about change, fully accounts for the inherent temporal character of change (Sonenshein, 2010) and can be used to change viewpoints as the organization transitions from the old to the new (Conversion stories: Bryant & Wolfram Cox, 2004). Specifically, stories can be used as fluent sensemaking devices for individuals who lived through experiences of change (Boje, 2008).

However, while all organizational actors supposedly craft stories of change (Reissner, 2011) and change is considered multi-vocal (Buchanan & Dawson, 2007), *recipient* stories often remain unheard or get marginalized by (heroic stories of) change leaders that are holding on to their own well-constructed stories (Boje, 2008; Hay et al., 2021). Recipients might have different opinions on who is responsible and what the 'true' change goals are as they account for their experiences. Such accounts must be heard to prevent the privileging of a one-sided, manager-centric view of change (Beigi et al., 2019; Buchanan & Dawson, 2007). Moreover, the interests of recipients (such as need for influence and social control) that lead to certain responses is ill understood (Reissner, 2011). As we proceed, we will explore recipients' subjective stories of their lived experiences illustrating recipients' perceived roles over the course of change.

4.4 Method

4.4.1 Research Philosophy and Design

We followed a qualitative narrative research approach (Vaara et al., 2016) embedded in an interpretivist paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). This involved seeking to understand people's lived experiences in how they *interpret* their own worlds (Buchanan & Dawson, 2007; Josselson, 2007; Ketoviki & Mantere, 2010). Interpretivist research commonly makes use of personal and shared stories as those provide participants' *interpretation* of reality (Humphreys & Brown, 2017). It is in these interpretations that participants lend meaning to what they perceive to be happening, which inspires their behavior. An interpretivist approach is perceived to be well suited to explore and reveal possible hidden symbolism, cognitive structures, and social realities upon which we act, rather than to find objective truths (Rosile et al., 2013).

As is common in narrative analysis, we have assumed that individual sensemaking of one's role is partly unique and partly adopted from scripted expectations in a cultural environment (Colyvas & Maroulis, 2015; Garud et al., 2011; Jung, 2014). From this vantage point, our analysis has been aimed at finding out what the individual accounts tell us, *and* which scripted role interpretations arise by sampling across a broad range of situations. In this way, we privileged the generic nature of stories over the contextual uniqueness in which they were told, as we hoped to get insight into prevalent, widely shared stories.

To explore the multivocality of recipients' sensemaking, *and* to explore whether generic stories of recipient roles exist at all, we have sampled a large number (N = 80) of recipients from diverse planned change contexts (Bryman, 2004). As can be seen in Table 4.1, participants' employers were eight Dutch organizations from different sectors. The following sectors and change processes have been involved: retail (one drugstore introducing more alignment between central policies and decentral operations and culture development program, and a retail clothing store introducing a new management style), health care (two public hospitals involved in merger and restructuring of departments), government (a municipality involved in restructuring and downsizing), financial services (a bank involved in the merger of two institutions), and professional services such as ICT (implementing new vision, new strategy, and restructuring), security (cost cutting by downsizing), and logistics (more efficiency by adjusting terms

of employment of all staff). The composition of the final context sample is a result of our efforts to include heterogeneous change processes while also depending on organizations' willingness to engage in a rather time-consuming data collection process. Because of their variety, the eight Dutch profit and non-profit study contexts were deemed suitable for our study's purpose. We have made sure that participants held different operational positions, which included different hierarchical positions as there might be differences in opportunities for participation and autonomous decision making in for those higher versus lower in the corporate hierarchy (see Table 4.2 for more details). While not limiting ourselves to a particular type of process (e.g., restructuring), we have upheld the strict requirement that change initiatives, according to management and HR, were introduced in a top-down manner so that the employees involved could be validly construed as *recipients*.

Table 4.1: Study Cases

Case	Organization	Type of Organization	Level of Professionalism	Change Process	N Interviews
1	Municipality	Public Service	Medium	Restructuring & Downsizing	11
2	Two Public Hospitals	Professional Public Service	High	Merger	11
3	ICT Service Company	Professional Service	Medium	Strategy & Leadership Change	10
4	Bank	Professional Service	High	Centralizing Operations	12
5	Retail - Clothing	Service	Low	Improving Central Alignment	10
6	Security Service Company	Professional Service	Low	Downsizing	11
7	Automotive Distributor	Industrial	Low	Adjustment Terms of Employment	6
8	Retail - Drugstore	Service	Low	Operations Change	9

Table 4.2: Participants

#	Position	Case	Organization	Type of org.	Change	Story
1	Support engineer access	3	ICT service company	Professional service firm	Strategy and Leadership change	2
2	Senior project manager	3	ICT service company	Professional service firm	Strategy and Leadership change	5
3	Technical consultant	3	ICT service company	Professional service firm	Strategy and Leadership change	2
4	Architect	3	ICT service company	Professional service firm	Strategy and Leadership change	5
5	PMO in project mgt	3	ICT service company	Professional service firm	Strategy and Leadership change	6
6	Project Manager	3	ICT service company	Professional service firm	Strategy and Leadership change	6
7	Sales representative	5	Retail - clothing	Service firm	Improving central alignment	2
8	1st Sales rep	5	Retail - clothing	Service firm	Improving central alignment	2
9	Sales representative	5	Retail - clothing	Service firm	Improving central alignment	2
10	Law officer	1	A municipality	Public service organization	Restructuring & downsizing	4
11	Taxes charge and claims officer	1	A municipality	Public service organization	Restructuring & downsizing	6
12	Teamlead taxes charge & claims	1	A municipality	Public service organization	Restructuring & downsizing	5
13	Sales representative	8	Retail - drugstore	Service firm	Operations change	1
14	Sales representative	8	Retail - drugstore	Service firm	Operations change	1
15	Sales representative	8	Retail - drugstore	Service firm	Operations change	1
16	Controller	4	Bank	Professional service firm	Centralizing operations	5
17	Controller	4	Bank	Professional service firm	Centralizing operations	3
18	Nurse	2	Two public hospitals	Professional public service	Merger	2
19	Nurse	2	Two public hospitals	Professional public service	Merger	4
20	Mobile surveillance officer	6	Security service company	Professional service firm	Downsizing	6
21	Security officer	6	Security service company	Professional service firm	Downsizing	1
22	Logistic operations officer	7	Automotive distributor	Industrial firm	Adjusting terms of employment	6
23	Logistic operations officer	7	Automotive distributor	Industrial firm	Adjusting terms of employment	6
24	Customer service officer	7	Automotive distributor	Industrial firm	Adjusting terms of employment	4
25	Controller	4	Bank	Professional service firm	Centralizing operations	3
26	Nurse	2	Two public hospitals	Professional public service	Merger	4
27	Nurse	2	Two public hospitals	Professional public service	Merger	5
28	Taxes charge and claims officer	1	A municipality	Public service organization	Restructuring & downsizing	4
29	Taxes charge and claims officer	1	A municipality	Public service organization	Restructuring & downsizing	?
30	Quality reassurance officer	4	Bank	Professional service firm	Centralizing operations	3
31	Compliance officer	4	Bank	Professional service firm	Centralizing operations	4
32	Sales representative	5	Retail - clothing	Service firm	Improving central alignment	6
33	Sales representative	5	Retail - clothing	Service firm	Improving central alignment	2
34	Security officer	6	Security service company	Professional service firm	Downsizing	4
35	Mobile surveillance officer	6	Security service company	Professional service firm	Downsizing	1
36	Logistic operations officer	7	Automotive distributor	Industrial firm	Adjusting terms of employment	3
37	Logistic operations officer	7	Automotive distributor	Industrial firm	Adjusting terms of employment	3
38	Sales representative	8	Retail - drugstore	Service firm	Operations change	4
39	Administrative service officer	1	A municipality	Public service organization	Restructuring & downsizing	4
40	Nurse	2	Two public hospitals	Professional public service	Merger	3
41	Surveillance officer	6	Security service company	Professional service firm	Downsizing	6
42	Teamlead security officer	6	Security service company	Professional service firm	Downsizing	1
43	Teamlead project management	3	ICT service company	Professional service firm	Strategy and Leadership change	5
44	Sales representative	8	Retail - drugstore	Service firm	Operations change	4
45	Sales representative	8	Retail - drugstore	Service firm	Operations change	1
46	Nurse	2	Two public hospitals	Professional public service	Merger	4
47	Sales representative	5	Retail - clothing	Service firm	Improving central alignment	2
48	Quality reassurance officer	4	Bank	Professional service firm	Centralizing operations	?
49	Taxes charge and claims officer	1	A municipality	Public service organization	Restructuring & downsizing	4
50	Taxes charge and claims officer	1	A municipality	Public service organization	Restructuring & downsizing	2
51	Mobile surveillance officer	6	Security service company	Professional service firm	Downsizing	1
52	Nurse	2	Two public hospitals	Professional public service	Merger	2
53	Controller	4	Bank	Professional service firm	Centralizing operations	3
54	Quality reassurance officer	4	Bank	Professional service firm	Centralizing operations	?
55	Sales representative	8	Retail - drugstore	Service firm	Operations change	4
56	Teamlead sales	5	Retail - clothing	Service firm	Improving central alignment	2
57	Nurse	2	Two public hospitals	Professional public service	Merger	2
58	Teamlead general services	3	ICT service company	Professional service firm	Strategy and Leadership change	3
59	Sales representative	5	Retail - clothing	Service firm	Improving central alignment	?
60	Security officer	6	Security service company	Professional service firm	Downsizing	1
61	Sales representative	8	Retail - drugstore	Service firm	Operations change	1
62	Sales representative	8	Retail - drugstore	Service firm	Operations change	1
63	Security officer	6	Security service company	Professional service firm	Downsizing	4
64	Teamlead sales	5	Retail - clothing	Service firm	Improving central alignment	2
65	Controller	4	Bank	Professional service firm	Centralizing operations	3
66	Storage engineer	3	ICT service company	Professional service firm	Strategy and Leadership change	3
67	Nurse	2	Two public hospitals	Professional public service	Merger	4
68	Taxes charge and claims officer	1	A municipality	Public service organization	Restructuring & downsizing	?
69	Teamlead HR	3	ICT service company	Professional service firm	Strategy and Leadership change	2
70	Nurse	2	Two public hospitals	Professional public service	Merger	2
71	Taxes charge and claims officer	1	A municipality	Public service organization	Restructuring & downsizing	1
72	Controller	4	Bank	Professional service firm	Centralizing operations	3
73	Shop manager	5	Retail - clothing	Service firm	Improving central alignment	2
74	Teamlead	6	Security service company	Professional service firm	Downsizing	2
75	Taxes charge and claims officer	1	A municipality	Public service organization	Restructuring & downsizing	3
76	Logistic operations officer	7	Automotive distributor	Industrial firm	Adjusting terms of employment	3
77	Surveillance officer	6	Security service company	Professional service firm	Downsizing	3
78	Controller	4	Bank	Professional service firm	Centralizing operations	?
79	Credit Risk Analyst	4	Bank	Professional service firm	Centralizing operations	4
80	Nurse	2	Two public hospitals	Professional public service	Merger	2

4.4.2 Procedure for Data Collection: Assisted Sensemaking

Eighty in-depth interviews have been performed by seven research assistants to involve our participants in assisted retrospective sensemaking of change. The assistants have been trained to perform the interviews, to ensure confidentiality and prevent questions that evoked social desirability (Furnham, 1986). We have used an open question interviewing technique and semi-structured guideline (see Appendix A) borrowed from oral history research (Charlton et al., 2006; Jansen & Shipp, 2019). In several steps, interviewees have been assisted in (re)constructing different episodes of their retrospective accounts of the change as if they were chapters of a fictitious book. They have been invited to name/label every chapter of their story to capture each episode's essence from their viewpoint. The interview guideline has been developed to assist participants in recounting their stories on a moment-by-moment basis, including prompting for narrative elements such as time, place, turning points (critical incidents/ unexpected changes), and plots (choice moments that lead to the stories' progression and resolution - Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). These story-oriented prompts have assisted participants in telling and reliving their experiences in rich detail (Saunders et al., 2012). After interviewees' stories had been reconstructed on a timeline of 'book chapters', we once more revisited their accounts to coalesce it with the role they personally played in each chapter. In particular, participants have been asked to describe their role, in terms of the behavioral anchors provided by Herscovitch & Meyer (2002). These are: active resistance, passive resistance, compliance, cooperation, and championing change. In doing so, participants have been assisted in making sense of their own role development, anchored by chapters (on an x-axis) and concrete behaviors over their own story timeline (on a concomitant y-axis). This is how the procedure assisted them in making (first) sense of the various change episodes and their role within it. We have referred to participants' input as their accounts of sensemaking, in short, their *accounts*. The individual interviews were intensive and have lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. All have been electronically recorded, transcribed verbatim and made available to all authors.

4.4.3 Analytical procedure and data analysis

As can be seen in Figure 4.1, the analytical process involved multiple steps and has started with reading and re-reading the individual stories. We have carefully read every chapter title of every story that had been provided by the participants and we have considered the roles they had assigned to themselves per chapter. We have then coded the chapters based on our interpretation of

what was most important to the recipient in that moment of the change process and have collected quotes that illustrated our reasoning. An early observation upon doing this first analysis has been that story elements within individual accounts were highly comparable in terms of themes that reflected what it is like to be a recipient (e.g., you can be a hero, a vassal, a victim, etc.). We have also recognized similar main events (e.g., ‘the corporate announcement of change’) taking place in many of the individual accounts. In terms of initial events that had come up, it appeared that several ‘families’ of stories could be recognized. As an illustration of our procedure of coding the chapters, Figure 4.2 includes the coding outcome for what eventually led to composite narrative one. The Figure illustrates how we have moved from the outcomes of chapter coding, to the main events per chapter, and to sequences of those events in story order.

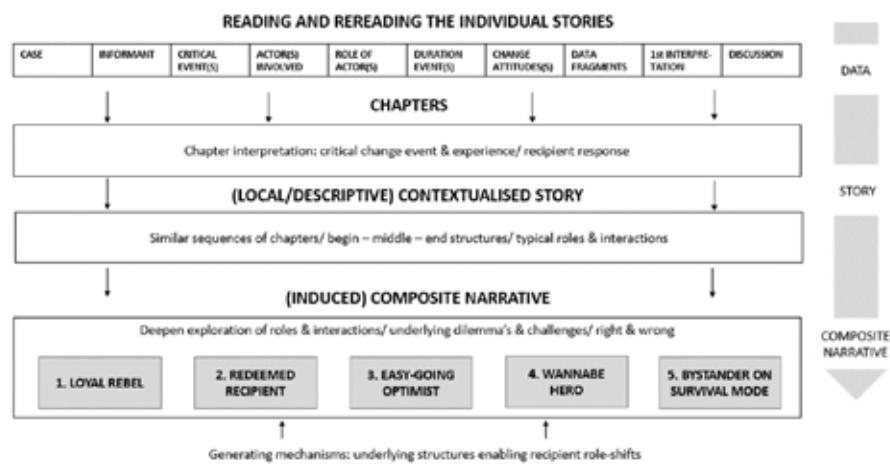


Figure 4.1: Story analyses leading to composite narratives

Note: Moving from chapter accounts to the analysis of sets of (similar) stories, to induced narrative scripts (based on Pentland 1999).

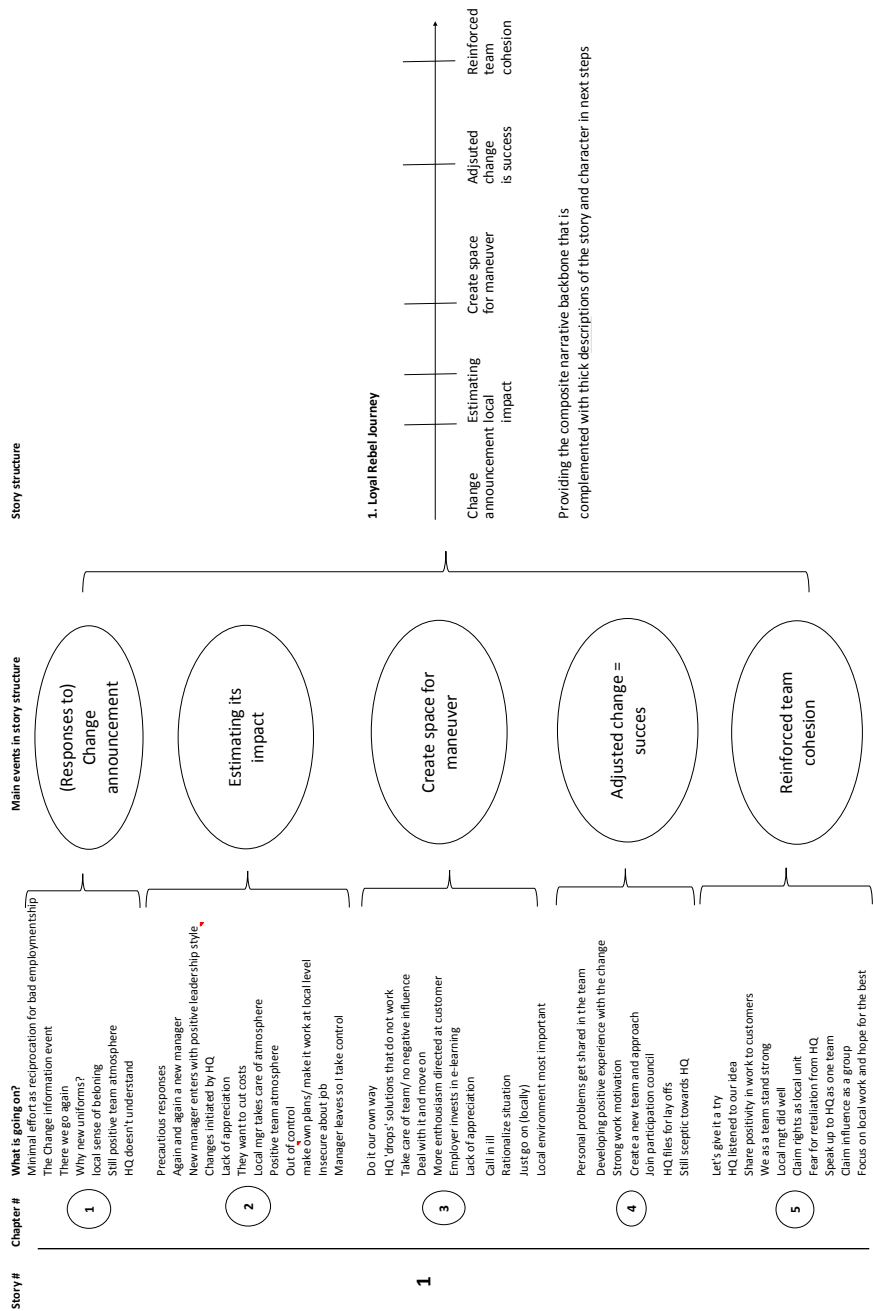


Figure 4.2: Moving from chapters to story structure (Example of Composite Narrative 1)

The fact that we had found several similar storylines has made us decide to direct our analysis to constructing *composite narratives*. Composite narratives use data from several individual interviews to tell a single story (Vaara et al., 2016; Willis, 2019). An important advantage of composite narratives is that the use of single accounts can represent more general accounts of experiences of multiple individuals. With this, the researchers use *their* interpretations to create narratives that capture the essence of (in our case) recipients' experiences and perspectives and their emotional truth (Orbach, 2000) that function as "an authentic representation of feeling states rather than a strict adherence to narrative truth" (Orbach, 2000, 197). Whilst this use of composite narratives is a compelling way of presenting qualitative research, to make convincing arguments, the link between the original data and the final interpretations must be made very clear by intensive use of quotes to strengthen validity of the researchers' interpretations (Moen, 2006). To minimize possible disadvantages to this method, we have worked with a large number of interviews to see if our interpretations were robust and have worked together with a team of six researchers with diverse backgrounds to broaden our view and to prevent too much influence from our own experiences. Throughout this process, we have used memos and discussion sessions in the team of authors to refine and reflect on our analyses.

Subsequently to our initial analysis, we have turned to Pentland's (1999) work on building dynamic narratives to explore in more detail how idiosyncratic individual stories reflected more common, sequenced events. It has allowed us to explore the stories' surface features (such as daily interactions mentioned) that are useful for description, but also to gain a better understanding of what this interaction *meant* to the participant (i.e., was it perceived a 'moment of truth' that triggered a turning point in the journey?). Subsequently, we have combined the insights from all previous steps and produced five "thick" (Geertz, 1973) - that is: rich and textured - descriptions in composite narratives. The analyses led to five, instead of the initial six, composite narratives as two of the earlier composite narratives included overlap and have eventually been combined into one. Thereafter we have explored the commonalities in different sets of similar stories. Inspired by the work of Van Ooijen et al. (2020), we have explored common notions on roles and interactions, underlying dilemmas, and challenges, as well as beliefs of right and wrong, and of appropriate and inappropriate behaviors that had been found to exemplify narratives and shifts within them. Pentland (1999) described this step as moving from surface to deep structure.

To summarize the analytical process (see Figure 4.1): we have considered our data as subjective, *in situ* individual samplings of underlying latent categories of narratives. By studying and comparing the stories in our sample, we have been able to (re)construct five composite narratives. During the analysis, we have gone back and forth between stories (the data) and narratives (Sonenshein, 2010). In doing so, we have noted in some cases that we had been too specific on certain topics in a composite narrative (details that had not or not often been found in similar stories), or that we had overlooked important details that strengthen the characterization of a certain narrative (i.e., we had come to recognize new similarities). Iterative adjustments of clarifying the underlying narrative have continued throughout the entire process of coding the total of 80 interviews in our study. Finally, we have examined whether the final composite narratives reflected observations across different participating organizations, which was indeed the case. To strengthen the validity of our findings, we have invited a 'friendly reviewer' who was not familiar with the study to provide feedback on our analyses and outcomes and, additionally have presented the outcomes to several professionals (not participants) in different fields from whom we received feedback on the different role-taking journeys.

4.5 Findings

4.5.1 Recipients' Role-taking Reflected in Five Composite Narratives

Our analysis yielded five composite narratives depicting different recipient role-taking journeys: *Loyal Rebel*, *Redeemed Recipient*, *Easy-Going Optimist*, *Wannabe Hero* and *Bystander*. These titles reflect the authors' interpretation of 'What is this a case of?' (summarized in Table 4.3a). Second, change events are described from the perspective of the recipients in which their cognitive, affective, and/or behavioral responses are dealt with. We reflect on the chapter transitions (moving from one participant's fictitious book chapter to the next) and how these reflect different recipient role-taking along the way. As we will illustrate below, the narratives often seem to include initial tensions or dilemmas experienced by the focal actor; it is then the resolution of this tension that allows the journey to continue. To illustrate this, we refer to several examples that are illustrative of this mechanism. We use individual story fragments to illustrate each composite narrative. To explain the descriptions even further, in Table 4.3b we include additional quotes from different stories that fit a certain composite narrative.

Change Is...	Recipient behaviors over the course of the story	Tensions of Recipient Roles 1: blending in/standing out	Tensions of Recipient Roles 2: stepping in/standing back
1. Loyal Rebel Journey	Protecting what is yours and making it work	Standing out as local leader while blending in from a system point-of-view	Initially standing back to corporate level, stepping in by local action
2. Redeemed Recipient Journey	Overcome obstacles and build new worlds	Initially fully blending in in the team, eventually daring to stand out as individual	Initially standing back, eventually stepping in
3. Easy-Going Optimist Journey	See chances and bright sides	Preference to blend in, however goal-driven willing to stand out	Modus operandi: stepping in
4. Wannabe Hero Journey	A chance to shine, but beware...	Strong desire to stand out, end of journey blending in	Moving from stepping – to (forced to) stand back – to stepping in again
5. Bystander Journey	Keeping your head down	Concerning the change journey this follower blends in. Simultaneously, unintendedly, stands out by their exceptional condition	Passively stepping in

Figure 4.3a: Summary of 5 Recipient-Based Composite Narratives

COMPOSITE NARRATIVE	LOYAL REBEL JOURNEY	REDEEMED RECIPIENT JOURNEY	EASY-GOING OPTIMIST JOURNEY	WANNABE HERO JOURNEY	BYSTANDER JOURNEY
<i>Illustrative Quotes</i> (B)eginning (M)iddle (E)nd (informant #)	"Imagine you had to work with those people [working for headquarters]. They just do not understand what they are doing ... those blokes, nut heads ... [they] do not know how life works" (B- #35). "Yes, but we kind of give it our own spin. Of course, that might not be good, but we make our own plans, our own version of the [name org]'s plans. We are really actively involved in that and do the best we can." (M- #14). "In my local environment, I work with way more people, and I like it there. That means more to me than my relationship with the organisation." (E- #21).	"We knew that people needed to be divided over the separate teams, but we didn't know [pause] because everybody was in [teamlead 1]'s team, so some people had to go to the other team, to [teamlead 2]'s team. Some volunteered but the volunteers weren't enough. So, they were about to assign people to go. That was tense, a stressful time ... Luckily, I stayed in the [teamlead 1] team." (B- #1) "... You start off with prejudice, when you do not know the person ... but when you start working together and you see they take care of things, you immediately think like ok they add value. In the beginning I was hesitant, yet again a new manager. But then I got to know her, and I was satisfied and happy that there was change." (M- #50) "It used to be more chaotic, and in this chaos, you do not feel like initiating new things. Now there is ease and overview and ideas come to me more easily. I used to just do what I was told, now I am more willing to cooperate and be proactive to improve things." (E- #7).	"It is in the same place where I live, that is an advantage, work became closer to home. I saw this as a positive spin/turn." (B- #17). "Ehm, I come back to the point of my colleagues. Some of my female colleagues, how they were treated. First, they were on the list to let go, and then they said go ahead and apply, you'll be fine. But in the end, they weren't fine and now they are gone... I was really irritated by this. Not for myself, but for them." (M- # 25) "In the end I look at my own situation and see it as a positive thing. I found more challenges. So, I evaluate all this as positive." (E- #40).	"So, I provided answers that the departments could use in their stories. For me that meant a lot of one-on-one meetings with the managers in which they told me about their progress. I was sparring partner for them. Trigger them to reflect. I told them to talk with their people, involve them and such..." (B- #12) "I explain my ideas ... but found out quite soon that [name director] was also driven by the same things that [previous director] was driven by ... numbers [said voice]." (M- #4). "It had been too much. I discussed it with [teamlead]. They advised me to take a break, take some rest... I came back with positive energy. Things are better now, now I have the time to focus on my own work again... previously, I didn't have the time for my own work due to all the extra tasks. We are on the way up." (E- #27)	"I was hospitalized several times in 2013, so I missed out on a lot of things." (B- #23). "You just do what needs to be done, not really a lot of emotion or anything ... and when things really changed, I decided just to work along and perform the tasks they expected me to do." (M- #22). "Tell me your idea and I am in; I will embrace it and support it." (E- #5).

Figure 4.3b: Summary of 5 Recipient-Based Composite Narratives

Composite Narrative 1. The Journey of the Loyal Rebel. Stories that fit this narrative have a dominant leader¹- recipient “dialectic” outlook (dealing with contradictions: see Boje, 2008, p. 19). The narrative tells how physical distance allows Recipients to construct Leadership as a powerful outgroup, even within an organization (Stensaker et al., 2020). This is illustrated by the story of a sales representative working in a franchise drugstore (Participant #13). The composite narrative begins with corporate communication about an upcoming change as the event that triggers sensemaking. Recipients establish an understanding that the distant originators of this change clearly have no knowledge and competence, as, in their belief, the plans are not going to work on the work floor. The change announcement of Leadership seems to cause Recipients to exert a combative, subversive role.

“And of course, at time x, we received a new corporate vision ... all kinds of rules that we had to follow. It is really nice of headquarters to come up with new things [irony], but some of those things just aren't doable. I think they just let the interns take care of it, they know theory. On shop floor, things work totally different.” (Participant 13)

Recipients believe that Leadership, more often than not, appears as devious force that creates obstacles for transforming plans into practice and that misunderstands local realities. Herein, Recipients perceive that disidentifying with Leaders is what they should do. As described:

“We operate in a different region, there are culture differences ... the expectations from headquarters, they frustrate us.” (Participant 13)

The question “What can you tell me about the change program?” was answered as follows:

“Actually ... not much (laughs)! We did think of it, yet I do not feel it ... yeah it might have had some minor impact. But actually, we did not implement it, nor do we use it in any way ... no”. (Participant 13)

¹. The terms Leader and Leadership (with capitals) are used throughout the composite narratives to refer to the ones in the role of change leader, change agent, or manager/management. The same capital convention is used for the other roles (e.g., Recipient).

To prevent disastrous consequences from overt defiance of Leadership, Recipients and their peers decide to make the change a success in their local context, despite the challenges that it entails. After all, they feel loyal to their local environment and its success. Their role changes as they (perhaps unwittingly) shift towards becoming actively engaged as translators of a change idea. Recipients actively adapt the change plans to local contingencies (proactivity-as-frustration, Bindl, 2019). The sales representative continued to describe this event:

"We just alter our actions. Headquarters doesn't approve, but in the end, this is the way we do get the customers in and become successful ..." ...
"Headquarters just does not know how operations run here; we do. We know when our customers receive their money (salary) and that is how we decide on promotion timing. We do it almost as taken-for-granted intervention: the adjustment of corporate actions." (Participant 13)

Despite perceiving Leadership with a sense of animosity, Recipients are strongly motivated to make the change a success in the local context. To this end, they actively take up the role of informal leader, dare to stand out, and convince others that plans need to be altered by them. After 'cleaning up Leadership's mess', they make change a local success by their active engagement in finding alternative pathways.

"[Change is] a learning process. Always. There is always ... you know, when change is announced, there is a response. You have to think about it, cool down a bit, and then you are like 'OK, let's do this [our way] and see what results we could achieve'." (Participant 13)

The question "Do you feel the change was a success" was answered as follows:

"Yes, we still meet our targets. I think that is important. And also, a 'straight A' for the customer. Customer centricity is most important here. For me, that is the number one priority." (Participant 13)

Recipients continue their loyalty to nearby actors, while holding on to a negative attitude towards the (central) Leadership.

"We have always been involved in the team. You can tell we have a strong bond. We fill in for each ... never a hassle. We do the best we can

here, and I tell my colleagues we are here for our customers, and we know what they are like ... We hope it will get better, but I still think headquarters is not listening to us ..." (Participant 13)

"There are also the local stores that do exactly as headquarter commands, resulting in stock problems that we do not have. We are kind of cocky, that shows how much we care." (Participant 13)

In summary, we considered the Loyal Rebel who, with continuous active engagement, initially feels the urge to combatively stand out. They could be considered a "rebel with a cause" (Jordan et al., 2022, p. 2). Despite their defiant initial response, by acting together with their local peers, they ultimately step in and make the change a success. This shift is also illustrated by Participant #14:

"Let's start this story with [name project]. A headquarters thing, yet the local stores were the ones dealing with all the troubles you see, and we wanted to resist ... Yes, but then we kind of give it our own spin. Of course, that might not be good, but we make our own plans, our own version of the [name org]'s plans. But we are actively involved in that and do the best we can. It is here (locally) that we have a super team. You can complain you know, but in the end, that does not solve anything. It is in our team that we just fix things together." (Participant 14)

Composite Narrative 2. The Journey of the Redeemed Recipient. This narrative tells a classic 'redemption story' (breakthrough from shadow into light: Booker, 2004). Recipients strongly value social harmony and build their experience of working life upon the social atmosphere ('nice colleagues, that is what work is about'). At first, Recipients perceive their role as passive players with little responsibility and little room for independent thinking. The Leader plays the role of decision maker who endangers this beloved status quo and, subsequently, Recipients adopt a skeptical stance. Stories that fit this composite narrative begin with Recipients describing early change announcements that in their sensemaking is perceived to be a threat to the team's cohesion and stability. Early announcements are accompanied by negative rumors spread through the organizational grapevine. This narrative is illustrated by the story of a nurse working in a public hospital that had recently undergone a merger (Participant #18). She talked about being confronted with an upcoming merger:

"Rumors were spread about an upcoming merger... The biggest impact factor of the change is: The Team... who and what am I about to lose? You know what you have [people in the team], looking at it in a sense that I trust them completely and well, the ones you will get to work with in the new situation, you don't know yet, it is unpredictable. So, you worry about the fact that they will come in and cooperate ..." (Participant 18)

"We knew nothing. We just heard this is your team. End of story ... there was not much for me to do, just to blend in with the rest and read the messages, that's it ..." (Participant 18)

"The moment they communicate the teams, I responded quite selfishly. [My only concern was] in which team will I work, and with whom?" (Participant 18)

Given the relatively long period in which Recipients experienced insecurity and negativity, one might intuitively expect a tragic ending (Brown & Humphreys, 2003). However, despite Recipients' initial skepticism and fear in the period between change communication and the actual implementation, they soon feel relieved after the change becomes a reality.

"In the first meeting we all came together. I felt happy with the composition of the team. Leadership really managed to bring together matching characters ... You just start, scan, getting used to each other, and from there you start building." (Participant 18)

It turns out that initial worries are disproven and that this event might be a starting point for more positive changes to come. Recipients are satisfied with early change results, and the new (social) situation marks a positive turn in the overall atmosphere [a shift from a regressive to a progressive story (Gergen and Gergen, 1997)]. Recipients shift towards more contributing roles in accordance with their Leader's goals. By going through these positive spins, Recipients and Peers experience a strengthened self-confidence. Consequently, their role became more proactive, and they took responsibility for positive outcomes ('proactivity-as-growth', Bindl, 2019).

"You start experiencing things together and explore how things got better. It all just turned out really well... I started championing, in the sense, you try and coach and stimulate colleagues and show them around, and help them to get accustomed in a short period of time ... By actively helping them and discussing cases like this or that, I created a guiding document for new colleagues." (Participant 18)

The social order becomes realigned in the next episode:

[About the 'getting used' phase] "It is difficult. You try to coach others, but at the same time, you want to lay low a bit. It is a bit of both ... you also want to give colleagues enough space, they are all qualified, so you do not want to overrule or show yourself too dominantly ... I was active, but also waiting. Now I know them better, and I know, as an equivalent colleague, when I can have the upper hand." (Participant 18)

Change events create a cumulating positive effect for the team and Recipients foresee a bright future towards the end of this narrative. As stated by our participant:

"Long story short, we are now 6 months in, and we have a strong team that knows each other's strengths. Everyone has their points for improvement, but we help each other out. We try to help each other to reach new levels, that was not the case before. The merge really accomplished this. This is a strong team." (Participant 18)

Throughout the narrative, recipients' independent thinking strengthen and their in-role focus on both the collective and the self becomes more balanced.

"I became more positive and firmer. I developed as a person. I got a lot of new colleagues in this situation. It made me stronger and active as I coach people nowadays." (Participant 18)

In summary, we refer to the journey of the Redeemed Recipient, who carefully shifts from an insecure skeptic to an active contributor. Such a journey includes a tension between a desire to stay safe ('holding back') and simultaneously an excitement to receive recognition for one's potential contributions ('stepping in'). The eventual resolution of this tension drives the narrative forward and allows the recipient to adjust their behavior regarding (their level of) active

engagement. This point can best be illustrated by considering two co-workers (Participant #7 and #8) who reflected on a 'breakthrough' moment in their change journey (note the shift from narrating in terms of "we" towards using the term "I"). Participant #7:

"There was a time we did not want to go to work. Two people were asked to keep an eye on us, it made us feel very bad. We were mistrusted and therefore felt insecure ... But when she left, everything changed. I did not expect it to turn out this positively. Now that she has left, the atmosphere is much better, and I even made some changes in the store by myself. Now, I just see things that need to be solved and I fix them. The new atmosphere makes for me that I enjoy coming to work now." (Participant 7)

This illustration is continued by a complementary account provided by co-worker Participant #8:

"My confidence strengthened because I felt heard, and I received compliments. This never happened. It motivated me to show interest in what I am doing, I felt motivated to set an example of good behavior to the rest of the team ... the change made that she left and the three new people that came fit our team very well." (Participant 8)

Composite Narrative 3. The Journey of the Easy-Going Optimist. This narrative tells the story of Recipients who tend to interpret their leaders' messages as ideas that make sense according to their own worldview and that might have substantial benefits. Recipients perceive themselves as relational team players and sociable, easy-going types. They are prone to be transactionally supportive of whatever is happening as long as this fits personal benefit. The Leader plays the role of change decision maker. The composite narrative is illustrated by the story of a quality officer working in a bank office that had recently undergone a merger and centralization of operations to headquarters (Participant #30). This story describes how Recipients, upon receiving corporate change communication, reason in a rather easy-going manner:

"Oh well, I expected the change. There were signals and rumors, you know, those things always come to you quite gently. To me, it was obvious that this was coming ... It is a good change, we are in a business of change, based on government policies and corporate office of course, logically, there are many changes." (Participant 30)

As an event-response, Recipients evaluate what could be the personal gain resulting from this change. Based on the evaluation outcome of perceived personal benefit, they feel optimistic, and behave somewhat opportunistic. In their search for personal benefits (e.g., career advancement), transactional cooperation is a suited employed tactic.

"I recognized opportunities. I wanted to work in credit rating, as I was already active there during my flexible day ... I thought, well, I see chances ahead. But when it became clear that this was not going to work out, that was not a problem, oh well, you see, I understood it would be difficult for the bank to give me that position. My work as an assistant phased out, so then I became a quality control officer, and I liked that even so. I am always involved in self-development." (Participant 30)

However, soon after this early sensemaking, Recipients feel ambivalent when they are confronted with negative change consequences for well-respected Peers who, worst-case, might even lose their jobs. For a short time, it seems impossible to decide whose side to choose. On the one hand, Recipients want to actively engage in change and thereby maintain a good relationship with their Leader. Alternatively, they feel an urge to empathize with their Peers and join them in their resistance roles.

*"I never experienced negativity in this change, although, there was one thing. My new role, it was in the same month that my colleagues heard they couldn't stay. That tempered my joy obviously ... Of course, it was great for me, but at the same time it is tough ... Colleagues having their last day, you hug them and then it is difficult, with tears in your eyes and you think ****! Why does it have to be this way?" (Participant 30)*

This issue troubles Recipients as they rather avoid conflicts on both sides. A response aimed at maximal personal gain typically resolves this situation. Their role shifts from abiding social norms to displaying autonomous, self-enhancement focused behavior. In this narrative, utility is maximized by going along with the change.

"For me it ended well. My manager told me that I immediately fitted in. He said that I quickly adapted to my new role, as from day one, I felt like a fish in the water ... I started working four days [instead of three] ... For me it was all a positive result." (Participant 30)

Once the change is implemented, Recipients reflect positively on the consequences while easily moving on. All of this is played out in a no-drama, easy-going, style.

"I discussed the situation with a colleague ... we go for a walk and of course we talked about it. The procedure and consequences and all. But it is not like that I continue to think of it, no it is more that I just 'turn the switch' ... It concerns their feelings mostly, you see, it is not that I would be, for example, less joyful just because they will no longer be around."
(Participant 30)

In summary, the Easy-going Optimist tends to blend in as they appear agreeable to the needs and wants of the people around them. However, this is not their only driver as they even so appear optimistically (or even opportunistically) goal driven or opting for behaviors that are causing least trouble. Those different, and in this narrative conflicting, considerations cause tension that results in altering their level of individual thinking throughout the story. This tension triggers this protagonist to develop their position from a 'blend in' position in the beginning to a 'standing out' position near the end. As is illustrated by Participant #17 below, there does not seem to be a clear change-event that introduces a solution or triggers the resolution of tension. It appears to be more like a mindset of this focal actor to 'just move on' and not hold back.

"I thought it was only logical, my thoughts were positive rather than negative ... But then Leadership abandoned and sidelined some colleagues, personally I really struggled to deal with this ... yet you move on you know, and start to seek for new opportunities, what's next? How will we do this? You know, you must stand out, make yourself known and strengthen your visibility." (Participant 17)

Composite Narrative 4. The Journey of the Wannabe Hero. This narrative illustrates quite turbulent shifts on the part of Recipients and tells the story of a change journey that begins with Recipients proudly reflecting on their status as (co-)inventors of change. Together with their Leader, they enjoy the status of 'initiator', feel responsible for events aimed at implementation of great ideas, and engage in discretionary, extra-role behaviors. Self-enhancement seems a likely motive. Seemingly, this focal actor is a member of the 'guiding coalition' discussed in many classic change models (Stouten et al., 2018).

The composite narrative is illustrated by a controller working in a local bank office that had recently undergone a merger while several operations had been centralized to headquarters (Participant #16).

"I was invited as project leader. So, therefore, the whole change intensified in terms of my engagement. As you become actively involved, you react pro-actively. All that happens is initiated by you ... I really joined the change team at the early start of it all. Literally sitting down with top management. So that is where it all started, and we really took the lead to decide this is what we will do. I really enjoyed that part ... It all starts with the Executives talking to each other. There was a regional director, some corporate director, and me. At that point, no one else knew about this." (Participant 16)

"This early stage, oh I really liked that. It was so interesting, like, how does this work, those banks coming together, the fact that you are involved makes that you don't find yourself negatively overwhelmed by it all. This role completely alters the experience of change." (Participant 16)

In this role, Recipients show understanding for their Leader's choices on, for example, change communications, which (as we noticed in other composites) have the potential to trigger negative evaluations of the experience for other Recipients.

[About work floor colleagues not knowing more details] "The alternative would be that you do not share with your people. The disadvantage then is that you are way ahead in the process, while employees know nothing. You give them less time to get used to the basic idea that something is about to change. And IF info 'leaks', you have a lot of explaining to do. No, I really think this [announcement without details] is the best solution." Participant (16)

The rosy start is followed by a reality shock after Recipients feel sidelined. What follows is a moment of disorientation or (in some cases even) subversion as Recipients cannot keep up with their Leaders. We observe Leaders overruling the informal leadership position of Recipients, and/or Recipients becoming exhausted and overwhelmed, and hence feeling forced to slow down. Whereas Recipients and Leaders used to be partners, Leaders take over and make decisions based on different motives.

"So, it turned out it was not my role to influence or decide on who was going to end up in what position. I did encourage them to make a choice, but it was not up to me ... Both directors are rather strong willed, or dominant, so to say. It was not up to me to interfere." (Participant 16)

Having a role of change partner becomes especially complicated when implementation moves from strategic levels to tactical and operational levels, and impacts Recipients' own organizational position:

"Once you move past the strategic level, you start discussing consequences for the departments and such. And then my own functional role was part of the conversation so to say. When the impact for Control was on the agenda, I felt like 'what will this imply for me personally?' ... (Participant 16)

It is nice to be involved in the change right now, but what happens after that? Will my role still exist? That was complicated and I felt tension ... they did not treat me any different from other employees. I was only informed on my position at the moment everyone had their placement talks." (Participant 16)

After a period in which Recipients experience disappointment and disconfirmation, they show resilience. Triggered by the event of a 'good conversation' with their Leader, they regain energy and are willing to actively re-engage for the good cause. This event marks another shift. Another quote from the interview with a controller in a bank illustrates this:

"It was a good conversation, got real good feedback. It resulted in the fact that they told me that they rather saw me in business control, more than in a project lead role. A bit disappointed ... but I felt OK." (Participant 16)

Their role as loyalist to their Leader regains potency as Recipients' need for their Leader's attention and recognition is gratified. This recognition clearly motivates Recipients to continue their active efforts, yet presently as second-in-command. In the end, it seems plausible that acknowledgement and wanting to contribute to the organizations' success constitutes their real needs, and by satisfying those, Recipients are modestly happy to be part of this change.

"I think the change is a success ... Yet I was not the initiator, it was not my idea that eventually worked, so in that sense I do not feel responsible for the success. But in certain parts, I obviously took some actions that added to change realization, so yeah, I helped [silence], I did not initiate it ... If you look at the quality and intensity of our work, well, you can conclude that we have become a real good bank ..." (Participant 16)

As the controller reflects on the created story timeline:

"I started neutral, then the announcement came, and I entered the change arena. That is when you score high [on championing]. Then we managed to get approval from the participation council [still high]. After that, my role changed, and I noticed I was less involved. So, change enthusiasm drops. You become more wait-and-see. If you do not know what is coming, and do not know the context, you endure the experience. Whereas in the new bank [post change], I was always actively helping again, you can say I was championing the change." (Participant 16)

We refer to Participant #2 to showcase once more the in-story role shift of the Wannabe Hero who, in their need for recognition and wanting to contribute, start fully and actively engaged to the change (step in), have a setback (and hold back), and then manage to step back in again and continue their active engagement for the good cause. Participant #2 applied for a position as change ambassador, stepping in in:

"Applying for that position was good, I was looking for a new opportunity for a change." (Participant 2)

However, this active engagement gets heavily challenged along the way, this results in holding back:

"Out of the blue, Elisabeth mentioned that she wanted to try 'a different route' with some 'new stuff', and on top of that: a new guy (!), so I said OK FINE (!), if that's what you want then you must go for it. I have doubts if they made a good decision. When P. got the job at that moment of time of course I was angry because how stupid could they be to choose him ..." (Participant 2)

In the end they shift back into an active and contributing role, stepping in (again):

"After we discussed it, I was like, if it's not available or possible to join the team, I will go down one step, still cooperating though ... Depends on what is going on if it affects you and your team a lot I will championing more to move forward." (Participant 2)

Composite Narrative 5. The Journey of the Bystander. This last, rather short, narrative describes a journey in which Recipients keep their composure as they watch the change unfold from a distance. Whilst most colleagues become emotionally caught up in change events, these Recipients seem pragmatically fine whatever happens. The narrative begins with Recipients interpreting the change as positive development; they describe their Leader as usually doing a good job. This composite narrative is illustrated by a participant working in the internal revenue service department of a municipality (Participant #11):

"My story is short. The changes are just called for. And the assignments that people get are just executed and implemented. You can agree or disagree, but at the end of day, it must be done ... Restructuring was announced way in advance. Plans and goals were clearly stated ... published online and we received info at home. Just honest, open, transparent ... in my view all goes well." (Participant 11)

Then Recipients continued by revealing that their pragmatic labelling is not due to moral callousness but explained by specific personal circumstances that put them in 'survival mode'. They are not deliberately indifferent; adverse personal circumstances (e.g., health or family matters) prevent them from being actively involved. As the participant working in the internal revenue service department illustrates, the Recipient takes a cooperative attitude in response to change events at work:

"For me, 'cooperation' over the whole course of events. Just one straight line. You see, this is business; in private life, my wife's health isn't good, and I cannot fight multiple battles at the same time." (Participant 11)

In summary, this is a story with little role shifting. On the one hand, this emotionally 'distant' recipient role-taking might stem from limited cognitive space in the presence of more pressing matters. On the other hand, it is a form

of reciprocity to their Leader's empathy with Recipients' circumstances. Leader showing empathy and understanding towards their personal circumstances. In return, Recipients perceive an indebtedness towards the 'warm-hearted employer'. As a logistics operator in the automotive firm illustrated (Participant #23), this type of Recipient seems to respond with cooperative change behavior without very strong emotional involvement in the change process.

"I basically continued doing what I always did. I always want to cooperate. My mind was set to surviving, had to get back into the work and just focus. I had been ill, so just focus on recovery When I was ill, they treated me well, everyone in the organisation, also HRM and leadership, and colleagues. You know, if you received this level of cooperation, then you do not resist their actions. I did not want to be a 'bogeyman'." (Participant 23)

4.5.2 Tensions and Ambivalence in Recipients' Perceived Experiences

We recognize commonalities in recipients' contradicting needs that seem to drive behavioral choices when confronted with change. In four out of the five composite narratives (the Bystander excluded) these contradicting needs, or tensions, trigger in-story role shifts in perceived recipient behaviors. First, our interpreted observation is that a common tension is felt between fulfilling one's need to preserve individuality and being recognized as individual by their management and/or peers ('standing out'), versus the need to immerse oneself in collective action ('blending in'). We use a quote reflecting the inner dialogue of participant 17, classified as an Easy-Going Optimist journey, as an illustration of navigating such tension:

"So, then I thought, should I indeed pull myself together now and go all the way to get noticed or should I just be happy that I still have a job and that I can fulfill the same function here... I was also thinking to myself, on the one hand yes, I should be happy that I still have a job, but on the other, should I rather have that annoying conversation to stand out? I even felt a bit burdened.... I thought well [own name] come on, join the club as you still have a job and a nice job. [Adjusting to] That segment, that will be fine too." (Participant 17).

Second, our interpreted observation is that recipients often struggle to balance their need for recognition as being an actively supporting recipient ('stepping in'), versus a need to stay safe and avoid change and/or voice skeptical concerns and doubts concerning their leaders' calls to action. The latter (avoid change

and/or voice sceptic) are associated with respectively hesitant and/or resistant cognitions and both seem to result in 'lean back' behaviors ('holding back'). Participant 3, classified as Redeemed Recipient journey, provided an example of what, in their story, resolved this tension and made them decide to step in.

"Well, I had some good conversations with [name colleague] and my teamlead, I am now a bit more into the meetings. And I was a bit more involved in what was happening and what they are planning to do. And if you get more involved and plans are stated more clearly then of course you either cooperate or you go into resistance. I thought it was a good idea, to do it like this. And it felt good to be involved of course." (Participant 3).

Such dynamics were found in many different forms. Some were easy to observe, as was the case in the above illustration of participant 17, some were more of an implicit nature. As for example the focal actor in the Loyal Rebel narrative shows a strong need for autonomy that relates to what we referred to as 'standing out'. This autonomy is gained by perceiving Leadership in a role of distant actor that limits the autonomy of the protagonist. For example, Participant #35 opens their story with:

"Imagine you had to work with those people [working for headquarters]. They just do not understand what they are doing ... those blokes, nut heads ... [they] do not know how life works". (Participant 35)

As a defender of autonomy, the Loyal Rebel seems to play out as a taken-for-granted position of protector of in-group interests. However, when we would *only* observe recipients' need for autonomy as we just argued, we would miss the fact that belongingness (blending in) might be evenly important to this focal actor as well. This is illustrated in the narrative as the Loyal Rebel not only stresses a strong sense of belongingness to the local team ("*it's family*", #35), but they also use the system of 'headquarters versus local operations' to have a distant power to relate to. Otherwise stated: it is useful to have a headquarters to disagree with, as a familiar and 'safe game' to play for this actor. One might argue that if their need for autonomy had full hegemony over other needs, this actor might have never chosen to work in a subdepartment of a large organization in the first place. This reasoning underlines the ambivalence of change experiences and relevance of context into the understanding of recipients' responses that is captured in the composed narratives. Column 3

to 5 of Table 3 include our notions on the role shifts related to the 'blending in versus standing out' and 'stepping in versus holding back' tensions.

Our results show that in their attempts to satisfy diverse needs, recipients end up taking roles and making role shifts as a result (e.g., from 'standing out' to 'blending in'). When considering the navigation throughout these tensions and dilemmas all together, we illustrate how composite narratives allow recipients sensemaking of their own roles in change to move beyond flat characters (i.e., deterministic, person-based theories) and rather induce in-role content that is more textured, flexible, and ambivalent (Ketoviki & Mantere, 2010).

4.6 Discussion

In this work, we explored recipients perceived role-taking, by analyzing their storied experiences over the course of actual change processes. We provided empirical insights in the subjective interpretations that account for the sheer variety of change reactions. Second, we showed how narrative inflection points, that is, points of distinct change in role-taking, can happen following certain events. This shows how recipients' perceived role-taking is not just based on personality differences but also depends on the different interpretations of the change contexts that they face. We identified five composite narratives that represent recipients' role-taking journeys: *Loyal Rebel* (combative at first, cooperating in the end), *Redeemed Recipient* (insecure and powerless, becoming a champion), *Easy-going Optimist* (easy experience despite short-term loyalty conflict), *Wannabe Hero* (change initiator, heavily disappointed, reestablished commitment), and *Bystander* (uneventful cooperative out of private concerns) (Table 3). The composite narratives are constructed from subjective lived experiences and include in-story role shifts that seem to relate to dilemmas that arise in interaction and occurring events as change unfolds. With this approach, we build on the common idea of recipient role-taking as a social construct (Bandura, 1986) that is dependent on situational events, interactions, and context (Grønvad et al., 2023). From the start, we proposed that culturally scripted recipient stories could be shared across organizational settings (Jung, 2014; Garud et al., 2011). While our inductive data do not necessarily provide support for this presumption, our empirical results do show that recipients do not enter a change initiative as a tabula rasa. Instead, recipients craft similar stories as they reflect on their experiences, even across different contexts. These can be seen as autonomous stories that recipients

use to reflect on their roles, as opposed to the much more prevalent stories that change leaders profess. More generally, this insight shows the varied and dynamic nature of role-taking processes during organizational change episodes (Beigi et al., 2019). Several issues are worth discussing in more detail.

4.6.1 Common Characterizations of Recipients' Perceived Role-taking

The composite narratives show common characterizations of recipients' perceived role-taking which are reflective of underlying sense making activities about how to fulfill one's role upon experiencing certain change events. This notion goes beyond the common view of a locally shared understanding of change that stems from social and conversational aspects *within* organizations (Stigliani & Ravasi, 2012), and it challenges conclusions drawn in previous research that physical boundaries between employees lead to fundamentally different change stories (Stensaker et al., 2020). The fact that we found five role-taking descriptions in the stories *across* organizational settings and industries can be explained in two fundamentally different ways. First, starting from a strict *realist* assumption that composite narratives are based – at least in part – on a real unfolding of events (Vaara et al., 2016), one might argue that there is apparently a typical set of 'clusterings' of events that shows similarity between contexts. This would mean that there are simply a limited number of ways in which organizational change factually 'plays out' for a recipient. Alternatively, in an *interpretivist* interpretation the composite narratives found here may be reflective of a deeper cultural repertoire, of implicitly shared recipient role-taking scripts that are recognizable across contexts, rather than specific to any one particular organization. Both the realist and the interpretivist explanations are consistent with the composite approach to narratives, in that they are, at least in part, composed from institutionalized story repertoires (Colyvas & Maroulis 2015). They differ in the presumed origin of the observed inter-context regularity. Moreover, there is no need for an either-or explanation here, as both may be – and probably are – operative at the same time.

We do not argue that the five composite narratives composed in this scholarly work would be the only role templates available for recipients in their retrospective sensemaking processes. Different, or variations of, the narratives that we have found, might arise in similar studies (Ketoviki & Mantere, 2010). However, based on our results, we now know that this small set of five narratives commonly exists across change contexts and scenarios, and are likely to be found in other contexts as well, especially if stories are

repeatedly shared. Moreover, based on storytelling theory, it might be that those composite narratives might have become more readily available than the actual individual change memories (Boje, 2008). Ideas on how to take up a role in organizational change are then composed from storied repertoires that might function as the basis for deriving theory or templates on 'how to be a recipient'. Moreover, we recognize that some of the composite narratives' deep structures seem to reflect prototypical roles that are seen in a broader cultural context that has nothing to do with organizational change but is expressed in art, (management) literature, and folk wisdom. For instance, the fate of rebels and redeemers are recognized in a much broader sense of cultural memes reflected in books, movies, plays, etcetera. The idea that stories transcend organizational change contexts would make sense as it may be very difficult to make sense of a role that is not somehow recognizable in one's cultural context.

4.6.2 Navigating Paradoxical Dilemmas: Explaining Variety and Role Shifts

Whereas it was long thought that change behaviors stem from individual characteristics or traits rooted in one's personality (Goldberg, 1990), we align with more current work that showed that change sensemaking occurs from a temporally informed position in which one considers current, and anticipates on, future needs (Hay et al., 2021; Reissner, 2011; Shipp & Jansen, 2011). Herewith, the composite narratives illustrate and highlight elements of 'recipient-ship' that cannot easily be captured by an approach that would focus on personality/traits or behavioral responses only. Further, our approach adds to the growing exploration of dynamic aspects of workplace phenomena (Jansen & Shipp, 2019; Langley et al., 2013; Van Olffen et al., 2016). Not only can and do recipients alter opinions and beliefs and concurrent responses *within* their roles, but the narratives also offer an opportunity to justify or explain a change of mind or opinion leading to such role shift that would otherwise conflict with prior behaviors ('I used to be against the change, but then event X happened and that changed my mind'). Herewith, the composite narratives allow change and inflection to become a natural and only logical part of role-taking. As included in the results, we found role shifts in recipients' responses in four out of the five composite narratives (exception: the Bystander narrative) and were able to capture recipients' interpretations of the *action or circumstance* that led to those changes. This provided detail and nuance to recipients' lived experiences' sensemaking/ storying process [compared to capturing a remembered outcome (i.e., 'it was all bad')]. Our approach helped to unify all experienced stimuli into a coherent batch, while remaining close to

episodic events, and affective elements (Lord et al., 2020) in the experiences of our participants that formed our studied role-taking journeys of change.

In accounting for the form of composite narratives, we induced two dimensions that describe change-related internal tensions (see Table 3). The tensions we described as agency ('stepping in versus holding back'), and conformity ('blending in versus standing out') are in line with Kelley's (1992) foundational work on followership (adjacent to change recipient-ship). In this work, Kelley described how levels of agency and conformity differentiate individuals' role orientations (Goswami et al., 2022). The aspect of agency resonates with the dimension of activation in Oreg and colleagues' (2018) circumplex model of recipient behaviors. The composite narratives provide additional notions of the contextual events and interactions that lead to alternating levels of agency. Our observations of conformity as dimension in recipients' perceived role-taking might provide additional insight to the understanding of recipient behaviors. As Van der Schaft et al. (2020) noted, an iterative flow from collective-focused to individual-focused interactions is considered common in employee experiences of change. Dynamics of social exchange (Blau, 1964) and the extent to which people feel the need to think independently or conform during social interactions seems to be an interesting avenue in advancing the understanding of recipient roles as much of the current change research represents an under-socialized picture (Solinger, 2019).

The fact that recipients experience tensions throughout their change journeys aligns with the acknowledgement of recipients' ambivalence (Oreg and Sverdluk, 2011). Our data shows that recipients – regardless of their 'role type' – regularly encounter inflection points as they navigate these tensions, shifting, for instance, their levels of agency and conformity as soon as they recognize a certain 'momentum for change' (see also Jansen et al., 2016). In the light of our study, the role perception of change recipients thus is dynamic in nature and seems to be the result of continuous navigation of these tensions. Given that there are such tensions, we concur that "it may be unreasonable to expect that change perceptions remain stable over the course of change" (Jansen et al., 2016, p. 674). It is similarly unlikely that behaviors that fit static typifications would remain stable over the course of change. While recipients' initial positions toward their leader may be influenced by their traits, our results show that the *changing* of roles is ultimately driven by the combination of needs endogenous to changes in contextual conditions (i.e., event-based tensions) that serve as triggers for such shifts as these tensions are resolved.

This makes recipients' role-taking ultimately a complex, adaptive, and social process. Our data are witness of this, as their role-taking is captured in five multifaceted and textured composite narratives.

4.6.3 Limitations and Related Future Research Suggestions

Our narrative interpretivist approach helped us to show how storied accounts of recipients' personal change experiences reflect variations in their role-taking. However, there are some limitations and follow-up questions that are worthwhile pursuing in future. While the composite narratives show very different behaviors at the starting phase of the change process, many journeys navigated towards supportive endings. This finding corroborates with what Bryant and Wolfram Cox (2004, p. 579) labelled the "optimism of the new", it might be worthwhile to further investigate this thought. Furthermore, while the five composite narratives were found across cases, they were not found to be evenly present within the different participating organizations. As a new research aim, future research could investigate more specifically the contexts used and might identify factors of influence on the stories' unfolding. Prior literature suggested for example that recipient roles could also result from differences in endorsement of certain behaviors or attributes by leadership (e.g., by setting norms and standards for specific behaviors) (Oreg & Berson, 2019). Future research could further examine the commitment of recipients towards a composite narrative and determine under which circumstances they would be able and willing to 'switch' or deviate from their prevailing composite narrative, for instance because of social learning and script development (Fiske & Dyer, 1985; Jansen & Shipp, 2019). Furthermore, by sampling 80 stories and by involving six researchers in the process we attempted to solidify our results, however, one must note that it is still a reflection of how change recipients "may" behave as Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 191) stated. To extend generalizability, comparable studies in other countries could complement our insights, as in different societies, different (cultural) narrative templates may prevail (Oreg & Sverdlik, 2018). Furthermore, answering recent calls for the incorporation of 'forward-looking' awareness into organization theories (Patvardhan et al., 2018), future studies could focus on prospective change stories and develop hypotheses on the way in which employees might use the composite narratives to shape future expectations.

4.6.4 Practical Implications

This study hopefully challenges leaders to develop their understanding of diverse behaviors and become curious to the meanings and origins of

behaviors, instead of misinterpreting or condemning them too easily as, for instance, mere resistance (Goswami et al., 2022). It provides insights into common tensions arising in experiences that, arguably, impact implementation intentions and future behavior (Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2006). Looking at a change project from the perspective of recipient engagement-opportunities may well hold pointers for more successful implementations. Our study identified two aspects of such engagement: the opportunity to take an active versus passive stance and the opportunity for independent versus 'socialized' thinking. Clearly, depending on the needs of the project and the individuals involved, such needs can be consciously catered for in the change implementation approach. For instance: should we offer opportunities 'along the way' for recipients to step in more actively? What does that look like and how can we foster it? Or do we want to actively dissuade recipients from doing so? The same goes for how much room we need to provide for independent, individual creativity versus (social) rule-following. Posing such questions early on in the change process may create more effective and more flexible implementation journeys. Such understanding might benefit change implementation success and long-term relationships between change leaders and their recipients.

4.7 Conclusion

Employees in their role as change recipients cast and recast their roles over the course of a change initiative. Much can be gained from a deeper understanding of how employees utilize storied experiences as personal information processing mechanisms to respond to events and accordingly shape their own role in organizational change contexts. The current study illustrates implicit assumptions held by recipients about the way in which they ought to act during organizational change and suggests that individuals seem to refer to narrative templates when making sense of their experiences. Five composite narratives are proposed to explicate hitherto uncharted pathways of change recipients' role-taking in which changing conditions and events can lead to in-story role shifts as the scripted change journey unfolds. The implications of this study could help leaders of organizational change processes to anticipate their recipients' varied responses.

4.8 References

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

(shortened version)

A. Introduction

B. General Information

C. Story of the interviewee

Explain the procedure. First of all, I would like to listen to your story about the change that has taken place in the organization. I will not interrupt you and may take some notes. In the second part of the interview, I will ask you some questions.

Please feel free to tell your story about the process of change from the beginning to the end. What happened, who participated in the events, how did it affect you and how did you have to change your behavior?

Storytelling. Let the interviewee talk, listen actively and try not to interrupt.

D. Extend story (ASK MORE QUESTIONS)

When the interviewee mentions important events, people, or other interesting aspects, now ask about that particular aspect. Anything that did not receive enough attention during the interviewee's initial storyline can be expanded upon with the follow-through questioning. In this way, the personal story can be portrayed in more detail (including the interviewee's behavior and his/her commitment in behavior).

E. Chapters

Imagine that your story is a book with chapters. Can you divide your story into different chapters? What titles would you give the chapters? Briefly characterize each chapter.

F. Timeline

Thank you for telling us your story. Now we are going to map out the important events that took place during your story on a timeline including your response to those events. (Show the interviewee a blank timeline and explain the four behavioral roles).

G. Indicating highs, lows, and tipping points

- Why did you behave this way during the various events?
- How did this behavior express itself specifically? For example, what were you doing?
- What factors influenced your behavior during the events?



Chapter 5

Prospective Sensemaking of Future Change Experiences

"I Saw That Coming"

This chapter is based on a manuscript co-authored with Omar Solinger, Woody van Olffen, Xander Lub, and Beatrice van der Heijden, which is currently in preparation.

5.1 Abstract

We all develop cognitively formed 'process expectancies' over time, based on our experience in both life and work. In forming predictions, we tend to generalize what we have personally experienced across time and space. These process expectancies are "sticky" and co-determine how we approach new yet seemingly similar events. By prospective sensemaking, expectancies are used to come to terms with an uncertain future, or even proactively shape this future. Empirically, we intend to access process expectancies in organizational change context by analyzing 94 prospective stories of how a given starting change scenario is most likely to play out. Based on narrative analysis we discuss emerging expectancy patterns and propose a triad model of episodic-, semantic-, and emotive anchoring in participants' prospective sensemaking efforts. Our insights add to conceptualizing the often implicitly held anticipations that may legitimize or resist change, and answer to recent calls for the incorporation of forward-looking awareness into organization theories.

Keywords:

Organizational Change, Process Expectancies, Prospective Sensemaking

5.2 Introduction

"Once upon a time, a mother asked her little girl to bring her old grandmother some food. Don't stop along the way. Go straight to your grandma's house and back. Don't talk to strangers and watch out for the wolf in the woods!". This fragment of folk tale 'Little Red Riding Hood' provides obvious clues that hint at future events and outcomes, as if the mother already knew what was about to happen to the little girl. Would we listen to the organizational folk tales that are told about the practice of organizational change, could we then similarly gain insights into the expectations employees hold upon their upcoming change experiences? And what could be the unique value of such insights for our understanding of recipients' anticipative responses to organizational change?

Change recipients' behavior is partly controlled by their experiences in similar environments in the past and on experiences expected in similar environments in the future (Cowie & Davison, 2020). While employees think of their futures as frequently as they reflect on their pasts (Barsics et al., 2016; Cordonnier et al., 2016), they often create temporal ranges of future orientations (Klein, 2013) or 'process expectancies'. This prospective thinking enables them to anticipate a future that is continuously approaching. Moreover, the forming of process expectancies helps alleviate the discomfort of uncertainty in daily practice (Szpunar et al., 2014). However, in the realm of employee-focused organizational change studies, there is a significant gap in understanding the process and content of such prospective thought processes. Current literature inadequately addresses the role of hopes, dreams, concerns, and fears – all of which are future-oriented – in comprehending employees' daily change experiences.

This is a problem as it seems only logical that the past *and* the future play an equally important role in employee change sensemaking. To illustrate the latter, think of the potential influence of early-formed expectations of employees on change attitudes and behaviors: a strong positive expectation for success might lead to high initial levels of ambiguity tolerance in case of setbacks – as positivity enables one to keep faith and buffer negative emotions (*it will turn out alright*) (Fredrickson, 2005). However, in the case of a low expectation for positive outcomes, setbacks might have less influence as they match initial expectations (*I already had a bad feeling about this, so it is no surprise*), presumably triggering indifference instead of strong disappointment. Additionally, it seems plausible that expectations lead to

expectation-compliant enactment, triggering the effect known as self-fulfilling prophecies (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). The central argument here is that expectations are likely to significantly influence employees' experiences during periods of change, affecting their anticipative responses (Konlechner et al., 2019). The importance of expectations that result from prospective change sensemaking forms an important part of the puzzle of understanding anticipative employee behaviors that direct the outcomes of change.

Researchers have critiqued a lack of insight into future beliefs and expectations (Bolander & Sandberg, 2013; Gioia et al., 2002; Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013; Mackay, 2009; Rosness et al., 2016; Stigliani & Ravasi, 2012). They proposed that future studies should adopt a sensemaking lens to explore concepts related to prospective anticipation, which could complement the predominantly studied retrospective interpretations in understanding employee change behaviors (Gephart et al., 2010; Holt & Cornelissen, 2014; Konlechner et al., 2019). Similarly, and receiving increasingly scholarly support (Gümüşay & Reinecke, 2024; Välikangas et al., 2024) recently, Lord and colleagues (2013) challenged scholars to “mentally reverse the arrow of time” (p. 4) by focusing on expected futures to understand the present.

In responding to this call, we explore how employees cognitively anticipate the future as we study their recipient-based process expectancies comprising their intuition of the continuation of unfolding change. Based on our extensive qualitative data set, we provide an interpreted dynamic view on what participants story as ‘expected to happen’ throughout the anticipated change process (string of events). Their stories provide cognitive and emotional accounts in which reproduction of actual prior experiences and generalized beliefs can be used in combination to form a coherent story. Herewith, we add to the upcoming literature on prospective change sensemaking by providing empirical data, proposing complementary perspectives to prospecting, and by adding recipient-based process expectancies to change literature.

The paper is organized as follows. First, we review and discuss current literature on prospective sensemaking, conceptualize the phenomenon, and address its importance in processes of organizational change. In this section, we also formulate our research questions. Second, we explain our Story Completion Method that we have used to obtain empirical data. Third, we present our findings and propose an employee-based process overview comprising their intuition of evolving change. Finally, we discuss our findings in the light of broader themes

concerning dynamics of prospective sensemaking in organizational change literature and end with practical management takeaways.

5.3 Theory

5.3.1 Prospective Sensemaking

For individuals to cognitively create expectancies (Atlas et al., 2013), prospective sensemaking mechanisms apply. Prospective sensemaking can be defined as “the conscious and intentional consideration of the probable future impact of certain actions, and especially non-actions, on the meaning constructions processes” (Gioia et al., 1994, p. 378). Additionally, Gioia and Mehra (1996) defined the concept as: “structuring the future by imagining some desirable (albeit ill-defined) state” (p. 1229). Prospective sensemaking is argued to develop schemas for action by selective reconstruction and creative elaboration of prior experiences and by the prediction of new ones (Gephart et al., 2010). This can bring a sense of structure and predictability to an otherwise uncertain future and shape anticipative action accordingly.

Prospective sensemaking has been explored mostly from a sociological perspective in which social aspects of interaction direct expectation setting for the future. Previous studies in organizational contexts focused on management discussing an organization’s future plans, framing of plans, and agenda setting to convince employees to change (Gephart et al., 2010). Additionally, Stigliani and Ravasi (2012) brought forward that management’s prospective sensemaking is often based on material practices and artifacts (such as visuals). In an organizational change context, prospective practices are thus mostly used by change leaders for meaning construction and prescribing what ‘the story’ of a certain change is (Sonnenshein, 2010). This form of sensegiving (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991) can be seen as a ‘bet on the future’ (Boje, 2001) and is aimed at influencing employees’ expectations on the future implications of change.

Our focus, however, is devoted to employees’ prospective sensemaking in their role as change recipients as this involves more than adopting leaders’ claims of future states. Current theoretical explanations of prospective sensemaking clearly imply a multifaceted, complex nature to the cognitive processes involved, yet empirical work in this field remains limited (Stigliani & Ravasi, 2012; Välikangas et al., 2024). The fact that limited academic attention has been paid to the idea of employee-based prospective sensemaking is possibly

due to Weick's (1995) influential argument that most people can only assign meaning to something that has already transpired. In this line of thinking, prospective cognitive efforts can only be directed to "future perfect thinking" (Weick, 1979, p. 199). This means that people envision and make sense of a possible future as if it already happened, an idea that was originally introduced by Alfred Schütz (1967).

Despite those challenges, scholars concerned with envisioning the future proposed additional lenses to understand how employees could get involved in active prospection and the formation of expectations. A growing body of theoretical and empirical research insists on pushing the boundaries of Weick's notion (Bruskin & Mikkelsen, 2020). A first addition to the future perfect thinking view is the concept of **episodic future thinking** (Klein, 2013; Miloyan & Suddendorf, 2015). This stems from the idea of episodic memory which is the mental 'travelling back in time' and involves the recollection of specific individual experiences that occurred at specific times and places that defined a particular episode. Episodic memory focusses on important events such as your first day at work or a special celebration. *Episodic future thinking, as a derivative of episodic memory*, refers to "the projection of the self into the future to pre-experience an event" (Atance & O'Neill, 2001, p. 533) and focusses on the imagination of important, time-specific and place-specific, future events that expectedly elicits a certain response. Developing episodic foresight is known to be very helpful in adaptive activities such as to plan, prepare, and manage risks (Miloyna & Suddendorf, 2015).

Second, a complementary outlook named "**semantic future thinking**" (p. 533) was proposed by Atance and O'Neill (2001). In this story-like form of prospective sensemaking, individuals foresee the future colored by their more general knowledge of the world. In this semantic view, socially shared assumptions dominate future expectations. Although a common critique is that semantic prospection would lack episodic specificity as it contains less details, it does provide valuable meaning and structure to the framing of future events (Carton & Lucas, 2018; Cordonnier et al, 2016). An example of this could be the cognitions formed by employees on how their organization will embrace the future use of Artificial Intelligence. In their semantic future thinking, they would use the general knowledge of digital transformation in organizations to form their view on the future. Moreover, a combination of semantic- and episodic- future thinking presents itself in the form of generalizations of own experience (Cowie & Davison, 2020).

Third, although the episodic – semantic categorization is most discussed in literature on prospection (Szpunar et al., 2014), thoughts about the future frequently evoke strong feelings, and emotions are a crucial component of prospective sensemaking (Barsics et al., 2016; Frijda, 2007; Wilson & Gilbert, 2003). Therefore, **emotive future thinking** is considered an important, additional, category, or mode of future thinking, to highlight (Bruskin & Mikkelsen, 2020; Szpunar et al., 2014). In this context, Barsics and colleagues (2016) introduced the concept of emotional future-oriented thoughts, abbreviated as “EmoFT” (p. 9), and highlighted that such thoughts come up frequently and play significant roles in emotion regulation and goal setting. Previous research indicated that up to 60% of all future thoughts (about specific events, or more abstract issues) are emotionally laden (D’Argembeau et al., 2011). EmoFTs can be positive, such as hope, optimism, and excitement, or negative, such as fear, pessimism, and dread. Although not extensively studied (Barsics et al., 2016), we do know that EmoFTs have a positivity bias as *positive* future thoughts occurring more frequently and being imagined more vividly than *negative* ones (D’Argembeau et al., 2011). Next to this positivity bias (Szpunar et al., 2014), EmoFTs often involve impact bias by an overestimation of the intensity and duration of feelings. As an example of this, Miloyan and Suddendorf (2015) referred to people that mistakenly think that taking revenge will make them happier than it actually does.

We discussed episodic-, semantic-, and emotive future thinking as different ways in which people develop expectancies towards the future. When combining those views, a ‘script-form’ of prospective sensemaking presents itself (Cordonnier et al., 2016). Scripts are then defined as “a structure that describes appropriate sequences of events in a particular context” (Schank & Abelson, 1977, p. 210). Prospection in script-form allows for the incorporation of strings of events that can include the discussed *episodic details*, *conceptual semantics*, as well as constructed meanings and the expression of *emotions*. This approach is especially insightful in unfamiliar contexts in which individuals cannot (solely) rely on personal experience. The development of future scripts provides the script-holder with apparent benefits for coping with stressful events, such as emotion regulation and problem solving (Taylor & Schneider, 1989).

This script-form of prospective sensemaking is especially interesting when studying employees’ sensemaking efforts upon confrontation with organizational change. In this context, employees are triggered to be involved in continuous

cognitive interaction between forming expectations about the specific change, receiving cues, and undergoing evolving experiences. As employees navigate this cognitive turmoil, there is often a form of prior knowledge and experience ('priors') available to tap from, yet this might not be sufficient to create stories that help them to maintain coherence and clear perspectives in the changing environment. Therefore, in addition to their own experiences, employees' general knowledge of the world is used by them to create future expectations. This script-form of prospective thinking relies on intuitions and emotions (*I have a good feeling about this*) rather than on data, logic, and constructive reasoning (Oliveira Santos de Souza & Chimenti, 2024).

5.3.2 Prospective Sensemaking Captured in Stories

As mentioned above, employees tend to think narratively rather than argumentatively in their continuous change sensemaking efforts (Weick, 1995). Storytelling is a way in which employees express their expectations and give voice to their (often) marginalized perspectives in relation to the managerialist stories of upcoming change (Syed & Boje, 2011). To explore how employees use storytelling to anticipate the future, we adopted a prospective narrative paradigm in which new events and characters can be staged (Boje, 2011). Prospective stories consist of forward-looking elements that bring together episodic details, semantics that represent long-lived grand organizational narratives, as well as local speculations (bets' in Boje's terminology) on many futures (Boje, 2008). These prospectations have the power to direct stakeholders' interests and emotions and herewith influence the actual development of organizational futures. Or as Boje (2008, p. 14) stated, they "jump-start the future". In stories one can find future interests, existing ideologies, and cultural stereotypes held by the storyteller (Vaara & Tienari, 2011) and such stories can be employed to legitimize or resist a particular change. Future stories are expected to be emotionally laden to counterbalance logico-scientific thinking in complex processes of change (Boje et al., 2016).

Boje and colleagues (2016) provided one of the scant examples of how prospected stories were used as sensemaking resources in processes of organizational change. In their study, they explored storytelling at Burger King Corporate and found several ante-narratives (fragmented speculations) such as the "Romance Adventure", and the "Chivalric Adventure". The authors used the fragmented speculations of managers and other stakeholders that were observed across different spaces and time, to understand organizational sensemaking and the success and/or failure of strategic change. Their work showed that individuals

hold event-based expectations of organizational change (what will happen?) *and* underlined that emotional aspects of organizational change sensemaking can be interpretation catalysts (Maitlis et al., 2013; Santos de Souza & Chimenti, 2024).

The concepts introduced in this above-given literature overview highlight the inherent human ability to envision various plausible futures, organize information, and plan and act accordingly (Wright, 2005). Furthermore, previous research underscores the power of prospection in guiding behaviors and shaping the unfolding of reality. In this context, we anticipate that employees will engage in prospective change sensemaking in more diverse ways than merely as a “derivative from retrospective sensemaking” (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015, p. 18). However, empirical evidence in this field remains limited. This necessitates a deeper understanding of the practice and impact of employees’ prospective sensemaking efforts in an organizational change context. Therefore, our central research questions are:

What are individuals’ subjective change expectations as reflected in the prospective stories that they tell? And second, what characterizes or anchors the prospective sensemaking efforts of individuals in change contexts?

5.4 Methods

To address our research questions, we employed a qualitative research design which allowed us to delve into the minds of our participants, yielding rich, detailed insights into their subjective prospective sensemaking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

5.4.1 Data Collection

We utilized a future-focused narrative approach that provides internal coherence to our study (Boje, 2001) and that aligns well with the research questions and theme of this scholarly work (Howard-Grenville et al., 2021). In a digital research set-up, 94 participants working in the Dutch travel industry were guided to write a narrative that resembles a biographical account about a fictive colleague (named Jim) who is about to undergo a process of organizational change. Participants were introduced to the task by a video message from this *fictive focal actor Jim* and a video announcement of upcoming change by a *fictive CEO* in a Zoom call for the entire organization (see Appendix B for the story-stem scripts). We worked with this focal actor,

Jim, as a form of experience-taking which is defined as “the imaginative process of spontaneously assuming the identity of a character in a narrative and simulating that character’s thoughts, emotions, behaviors, goals, and traits” (Kaufman & Libby, 2012, p. 1). We brought it forward here since it provides a means to explore employee’s third person perspectives that not only reveal personal experiences or idealized responses, but that would rather include more normative notions on how change would unfold and how people generally are believed to act upon occurring events (*it is not me we are talking about, it is Jim*) (Parker & Axtell, 2001).

By means of the Story Completion Method (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Clarke et al., 2017), our participants were asked “how does the story end?”. First, they were invited to lay out a story structure by providing provisional chapter titles that would characterize the periodization of the upcoming change process. Next, the participants were invited to write the subsequent chapters on how they expected this story to continue for Jim, and how the roles and responses of the different actors in their story would unfold along the way. In between the writing of Chapters one and two, participants received a nudge to increase exercise involvement in the form of a WhatsApp group message of Jim’s work team in which it became clear that the change really was the ‘talk of the day’.

The writing assignment occurred in a guided session chaired by four well-trained research assistants. We asked participants to write what was top of their mind and gave them some time pressure to prevent them from (too) elaborate sensemaking, overthinking or rationalizing before writing. For the research set-up we used advice from an expert scholar colleague professor in storytelling as well as one in Gamification.

To capture the participants’ prospected emotions for Jim, we included both an extensive and a one-item emotion measure based on the Lebedner Emoticon PANA matrix (LE-PANA-M) (Schreiber & Jenny, 2020). The extensive measure that was used at the beginning and the end of the participants’ writing exercise included a five-point rating scale aimed to answer the question “How does Jim feel at the moment?” Item A represented a 5-item scale from listless (= 1) to full of energy (= 5), B. from relaxed (= 1) to angry (= 5), C. from bored (= 1) to enthusiastic (= 5), D. from calm (= 1) to nervous (= 5), and E. from unhappy (= 1) to happy (= 5). To ensure that respondents were paying attention to the content of each question the items A, C, and E shift from a negative to a positive emotion and items B and D vice versa. The one-item measure per

chapter had four answering options representing different levels of activation and valence: 'angry' (representing active/negative), 'energetic' (representing active/positive), 'listless' (representing passive /negative), and 'relaxed' (representing passive/positive).

Last, to explore *how* our participants engaged in prospective sensemaking, they filled out a short questionnaire to check whether they could rely on recollection of own past experiences, and how they estimated the plausibility of their own crafted story.

5.4.2 Context

The research context was provided by the Dutch travel industry in which organizations, at the time of collecting the data (summer of 2021), was dealing with serious consequences of the COVID19 pandemic. As from early 2020, business life was significantly impacted by this pandemic. Travel industry faced a sudden and prolonged decline in valuation, and operations were reduced by almost 90% in the first half of 2020 (Nižetić, 2020; Sharma & Nicolau, 2020). Effects of travel restrictions triggered major cost reductions and layoffs (Donthu & Gustafsson, 2020). Consequently, many companies were forced to swiftly implement unforeseen organizational change (Amis & Janz, 2020). This resulted in uncertainty among travel industry employees (Sobieralski, 2020).

Given the COVID 19 situation, we had to be flexible to comply with the conditions at that time, as many informants were working from home and only allowed at the organizations' premises for important meetings. Besides the practical considerations, this approach had the advantage of less social desirability bias, and it provided the informants with a chance to participate at our study at time that was convenient for them.

5.4.3 Data Analysis

We analyzed our data following an abductive qualitative approach in which several discussion sessions took place between the researchers involved. An overview of our analytical process is provided in Figure 5.1. We labelled the three elements of our data: "Chapter Titles" (1), "Emotions" (2), and "Story Content" (3) and will discuss the analytical process and the outcomes by using those same labels. An additional fourth step (4) was the analysis of the short questionnaire wherein people were engaged with an episodic recollection of own past experiences, and with the plausibility of their own crafted story. Below we elaborate on the analyses.

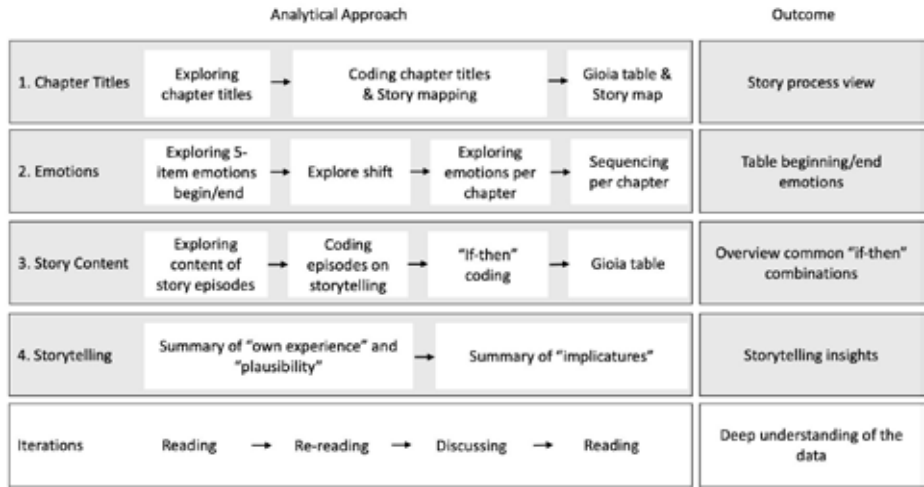


Figure 5.1: Summarizing the analytical approach in chronological order from step 1 to 4

1. Chapter Titles. We analyzed chapter titles that were used by participants to structure their story. All titles were provided by our participants at the beginning of the writing exercise, so before an actual story was constructed. Those sensemaking snippets come most close to representing expectations on how this process unfolds in pure form. As can be seen in Table 5.1, we used the Gioia Method to code the chapter titles (Gehman et al., 2018). The first (using literal text fragments) – and the second-order (interpretation) codes illustrate what Jim expectedly would experience in that story chapter. In constructing aggregated dimensions for the Gioia Table, we took a high construal-level, abstract view to reflect on and further interpret the second order codes.

2. Emotions. The second element of the prospective stories that we analyzed, were the emotional pathways prospected for Jim. As described above, we investigated the prospected *emotions* of the focal actor that had been indicated via the LE-PANA-M scale (Schreiber & Jenny, 2020). These explorations gave us more explicit insights in the dynamic emotional valence included in the evolving stories that were crafted. This analytical step led to better insights in the emotion-based process as expected by our participants. For every participant, we examined the differences between the measures that participants were asked to provide at the start and at the end of the story. More specific, we looked at what score was provided in the two measurement moments and how this emotion changed over time. We did this for all item scales listed above. Additionally, we looked at emotion that was indicated per chapter (Listless, Relaxed, Energetic, Relaxed). To illustrate this analytical step, Table 5.2 portrays the outcome for Participant 1.

Table 5.1: Gioia Table as outcome of chapter title coding

	First order codes	Second order codes	Aggregate dimensions
Chapter 1 Titles	Ghost tales Fear & insecurity @ work Scare Shock	Emotionally experiencing disrupted status quo Face insecurity	Negative anticipatory emotions
	The letter The announcement The cause Cutbacks	Formal communication Change process events Organization context	Factual (rational) change descriptions
Chapter 2 Titles	Help. What is happening? Now what? Restless	Experiencing disorientation Not knowing	Passive emotional response
	Confirmation seeking Jim's colleagues Colleague reactions Atmosphere	Informal communication Interaction with colleagues Seek emotional support	Social/ shared sensemaking
	Preparation Plan of action	Proactivity Formal change process	Factual (rational) change descriptions
Chapter 3 Titles	Screwed The black letter It never stops	Perceived negative impact Experiencing pessimism	Perceived impact triggers anticipatory emotion
	Clarity Solution thinking Chances	Perceived positive impact Experiencing optimism	
	The implementation Restructuring Concrete steps New situation	Change implementation Concrete actions taking place	Factual (rational) change descriptions
Chapter 4 Titles	How does he see the future Understanding the future (Career) opportunities'	Looking ahead Create a positive turn	Positive anticipatory emotions
	Strong together Win-win Growth'	Focusing on the positive Joint celebrating	Social/ shared positive sensegiving
	Final score Evaluation The execution	Evaluating the outcome Evaluating the process	Factual (rational) change descriptions
Chapter 5 Titles	Long term Future perspectives New chances I am ready	Looking ahead Strong optimism	Positive anticipatory emotions

Table 5.2: Emotion measurement outcomes for Participant 1 (exemplary snapshot of data)

Emotions reported at Beginning vs End of story																
		A. Listless - Full of energy			B. Bored - Enthusiastic			C. Unhappy - Happy			D. Relaxed - Angry (rev.)			E. Calm - Nervous (rev.)		
Nr.	Part.	A.Start	A.End	A.Diff	B.Start	B.End	B.Diff	C.Start	C.End	C.Diff	D.Start	D.End	D.Diff	E.Start	E.End	E.Diff
1	1	3	5	2	3	5	2	3	4	1	3	1	-2	4	1	-3

Emotion reported per chapter						
		Chapter 1	Chapter 2	Chapter 3	Chapter 4	Chapter 5
Nr.	Part.	listless	relaxed	relaxed	energetic	energetic
1	1	3	4	4	2	2

3. Story Content. Third, we explored the content of the stories that had been written. We read the stories and explored how participants used several storytelling elements [exposition/opening scene, rising tension/complicating actions, climax/critical event, resolution, and end of story (Sanders & Van Krieken, 2018)] to structure their stories and to illustrate their evolving nature. Our intention of exploring the story content was to get more insights in what drove the storyline forward; what *conditions/events* formed the anchors in the process and/or led to differences in Jim's prospected *cognitive* and *emotional response*? To deepen our understanding, we turned our analyses to develop our coding in 'IF' representing a condition or event, and 'THEN' interpretations, representing a response to this condition or event. Those if-then dyads are names implementation intentions (Gollwitzer, 1999) and link critical conditions/events to goal-directed cognitive and emotional responses. In other words, they signal situations in which event X occurs and 'automatically' a person will respond with response Y (Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2006).

Simultaneously, we explored all IFs that we used in the if-then combinations and created codes to create more overview in our analysis. We did the same for the THENs, hereby we made use of the labels of the circumplex by Oreg and colleagues (2018): Active Positive, Passive Positive, Active Negative, Passive Negative (see Appendix C for the coding of the IFs and THENs categories). After coding, we summarized the if-then dyads in a matrix structure which is presented in Table 5.3 in the findings section below.

5.5 Findings

Our analysis yielded several insights in employees' prospective change sensemaking. We present our findings in the same order as when we discussed the analytical process: (1) chapter titles; (2) prospected emotions; and (3) story content. Additionally, we present the insights in how people approached the prospective sensemaking exercise (4).

5.5.1 Chapter Titles (as early story fragments)

'The shock of change' (Participant 1)

Based on the aggregate dimensions in the Gioia table above (see Table 5.1), it had appeared to us that many of the chapter titles could be divided in *either* a more rational/objective approach of describing the steps and events of a change process, *or* an approach of subjective description of emotion and meaning that could be directed to the past, present or future, *or* a combination of the latter. We explain those findings in more detail and elaborate on how those details, taken together, led us to the construction of Figure 5.2.

Concerning the rational/objective approach of prospecting change participants had described the upcoming process by the following discernible change events/activities: 1: Announcement, 2: Plan of action, 3: Implementation, 4: Evaluation, 5: Look ahead. Concerning the subjective approach (the participants who focused on emotion and meaning), we noted that participants had chosen a specific sensemaking focus or theme per chapter characterized by some dramatic metaphors conveying strong emotions. Our interpretation of what was prospected to be going on throughout those chapters can be summarized as: 1: Negative anticipatory emotions (e.g. Ghost Stories), 2: Passive response *and* Social sensemaking (e.g. Atmosphere), 3: Perceived impact (e.g. Screwed), 4: Positive *and* Social sensegiving (e.g. Strong Together), 5: Positive emotions (Future Perspectives).

Furthermore, it is our interpretation that the rational/objective labels were organized in a time-linear orientation that headed from a certain 'present' towards a certain 'future'. However, the subjective emotional, meaning-driven sensemaking was less straightforwardly organized timewise. Jim had been expected to be focusing on the future in Chapter 1 (focusing on *what is going to happen?*). This seems to shift towards a focus on the here and now in Chapters 2 and 3 (focusing on *what is happening*). In Chapter 4, we found more retrospective sensegiving titles (*claim the success*), yet also several future orientations, while towards the endings of the antenarrative cycle (Chapter 5 titles) the stories appeared to turn to the future in which Jim engaged in prospective sensemaking (*what will this future bring?*).

All these observations and interpretations of our data, in the form of chapter titles, led to what we consider a representation of participants' first hunch of what will happen throughout change, and are summarized in Figure 5.2.

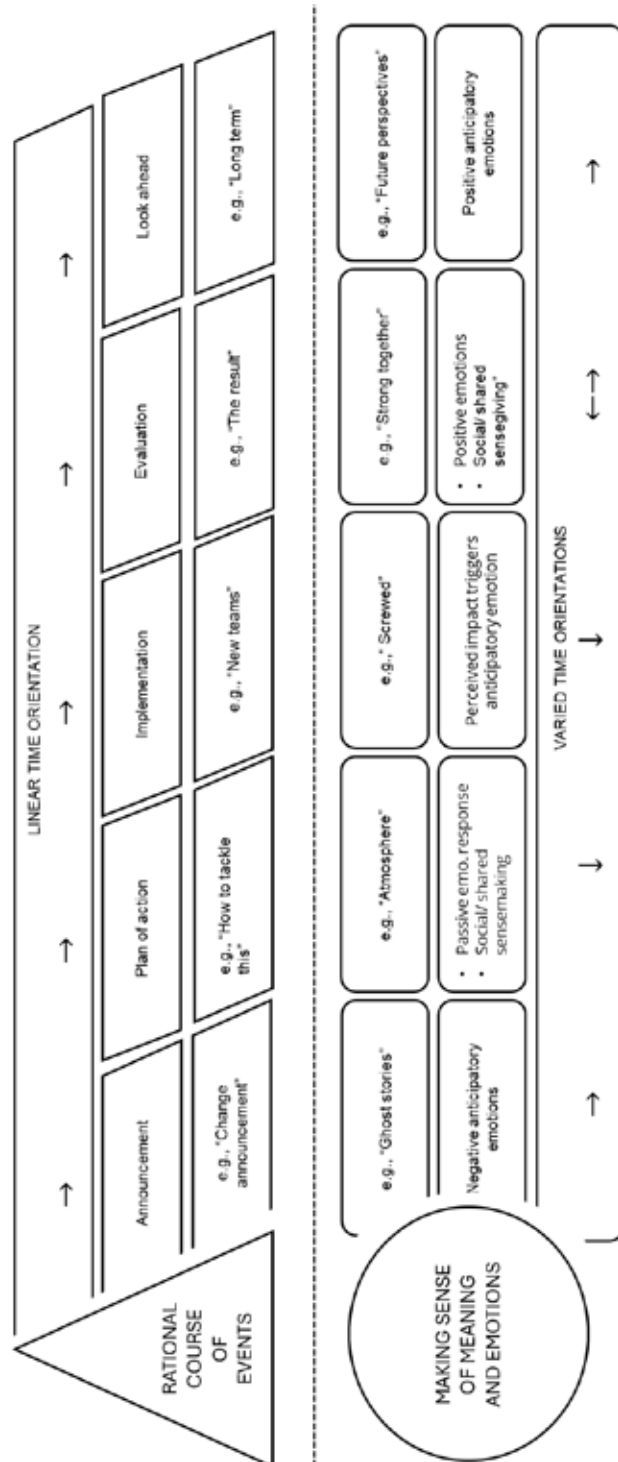


Figure 5.2: Recipient prospected change experiences/ process expectancies in tableau vivant

Additional to this interpreted summary provided in Figure 5.2, we detail our insights in the first intuitive responses that our participants provided as chapter titles, and address common observations from us, as research team, for each chapter.

Chapter 1 titles. First chapter titles mainly concerned notions of either anticipated emotions or anticipated change process. Signposts of anticipated change emotions were titles such as:

*'Anxiety in the workplace due to insecurity' (#18);
'Insecurity' (#49);
'Scare' (#21); 'Astonishment' (#10).*

The insecurity that was prospected for Jim was concerned with what was going to happen soon. The more rational/objective process-based title *'Announcement'* was also commonly used to label Chapter 1. Other examples of change process notions were expressed by titles such as:

*'Immediately following management's announcement' (#37);
'First meeting' (#5).*

Some participants used specific mention of the type of change to label the first chapter:

*'Cutbacks raise questions!' (#12);
'Restructuring overview' (#48); 'Downsizing' (#15).*

Chapter 2 titles. The titles that were provided for the second chapter mainly concerned Jim's change-related disorientation by the absence of a status quo. Examples of this are:

*'The new organization - how will it be colored?' (#20);
'Help. What is going to happen?' (#9);
'Is the change concrete or not?' (#2); 'Now what?' (#78).*

Participants had specifically anticipated Jim's here-and-now interactions with colleagues:

'Discussion with colleagues' (#8); 'Seeking confirmation' (#2);

*'Colleague reactions to Jim's sentiment' (#36);
'Confusion among colleagues' (#22).*

Others had used objective references to the change approach such as:

'Preparation' (#4); 'Plan of action' (#7).

Chapter 3 titles. These titles mainly concerned implementation and impact. Examples of rational/objective implementation related titles were:

*'Concretize the steps and effect on the department' (#18);
'Actual resignation letter 300 employees' (#51);
'The implementation' (#39); 'Restructuring' (#13).*

Examples of subjective titles that related to implementation impact were:

*'Overlook implications for own situation
(private, financial, etc.)' (#29);
'Screwed' (#65); 'The impact' (#20).*

Chapter 4 titles. Many fourth chapter titles concerned career perspectives. Examples are:

*'Career opportunities' (#46); 'The new position' (#22);
'Clarity and a new challenge' (#45).*

Additionally, there were subjective emotive titles such as:

*'Impact is intense, but happy with my work' (#30);
'Happiness and success go hand in hand' (#71).*

Moreover, titles referred to looking ahead and future perspectives:

*How does it continue?' (#13);
'On to the future!' (#20); '2025' (#31).*

And to more objective change (outcome) evaluations:

'The results' (#27); 'Final score' (#94).

What stood out to us was that with titles such as 'Growth' (#40), and 'Win-Win' (#70), participants seem to use the opportunity for positive labelling and claiming that the change would be a success.

Chapter 5 titles. Finally, as writing Chapter five was optional, only 16 respondents provided this chapter title. Those titles mainly represented an optimistic future outlook:

*'Window of opportunity' (#13); 'New chances' (#3);
'Ready for the future' (#15).*

5.5.2 Prospected emotional pathway of focal actor Jim.

*"Jim feels a bit helpless, out of his own control, a lot
of uncertainties.
Also worried about the future" (Participant 91)*

Based on the data collected with the Lebender Emoticon PANA matrix (LE-PANA-M) scale (Schreiber & Jenny, 2020), we were able to indicate two main findings. The first finding considers the outcomes based on the extensive LE-PANA-M measure that was filled out by participants at the beginning and end of the storytelling exercise (see Figure 5.3). When comparing those outcomes, we found that most participants expected Jim to experience more positive emotions at the end of the story compared to at its start. Figure 5.3 Graph A represents the emotions that were measured on a scale shifting from negative emotions to positive ones (Listless = 1 - Full of Energy = 5; Bored = 1 - Enthusiastic = 5; Unhappy = 1 - Happy = 5). Because the positive emotions are indicated with a higher number, a +1, +2, etc. in Graph A below indicates a shift towards more positive emotions. To illustrate this, a participant reporting a "2" at the beginning of the story on the scale bored = 1 - enthusiastic = 5, and a "4" on the same scale at the end of the story; this results in a +2 (starting from 2, ending in 4 = +2). Figure 5.3 Graph B includes the emotions for which the scale was reversed (Relaxed = 5 - Angry = 1; Calm = 5 - Nervous = 1), hence here the -1, -2, etc. indicates a shift towards positive emotions.

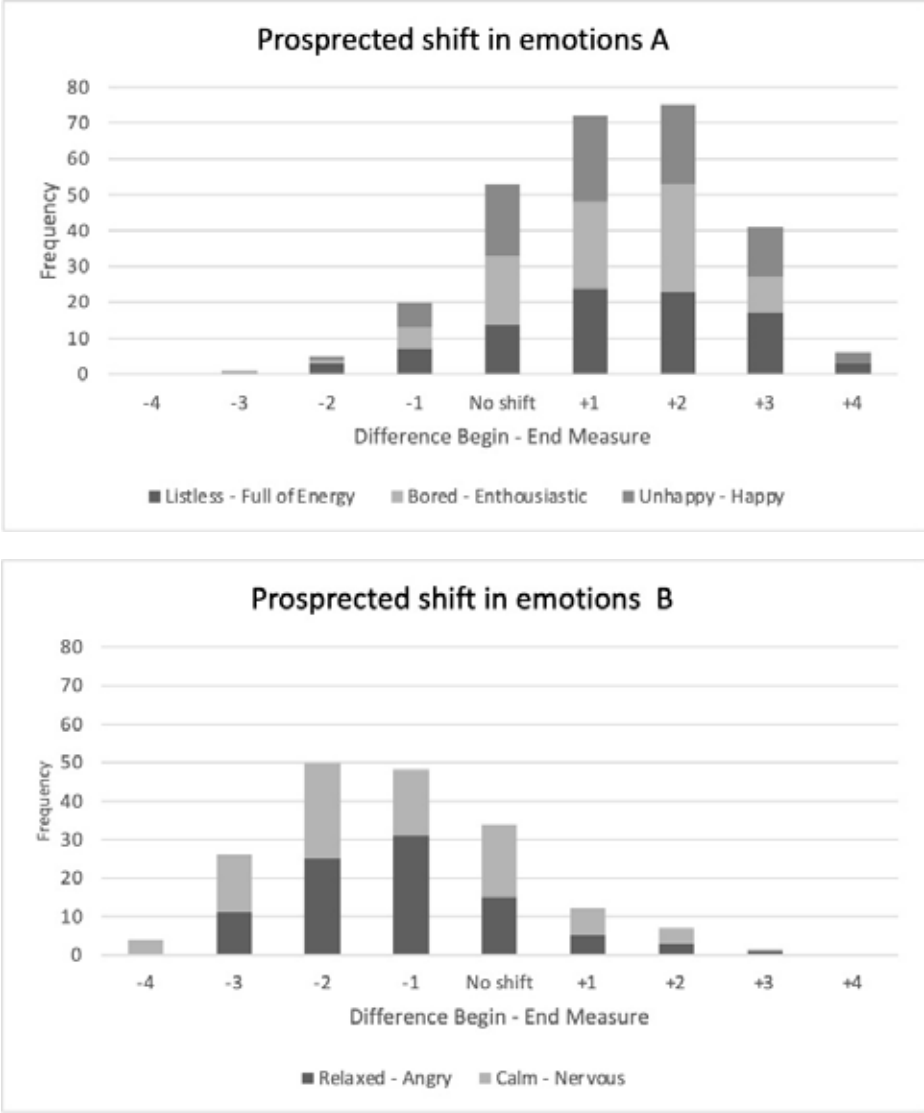


Figure 5.3: Difference LE-PANA-M scores at the start and at the end of the storytelling exercise
Graph A: + scores indicate shift from negative to positive when comparing beginning to end
Graph B: - scores indicate shift from negative to positive when comparing beginning to end

First, for most participants a shift can be observed from listless to (more) full of energy, from bored to (more) enthusiastic, from less happy to (more) happy, from angry to (more) relaxed, and from nervous to (more) calm. Second, there were also quite some cases in which an emotion shift was not anticipated, which is indicated as the two “no shift” areas in Graphs A and B. This comprises

cases in which, for example, low energy in the beginning and in the end of the process was prospected for Jim. Third, we did find outliers in which Jim was expected to end up with more negative emotions compared to the start. Upon rereading those cases, we noted that some participants had ended their story without resolution. Those stories came to an (abrupt) ending while the process was unfinished. In other cases, Jim had underestimated the change and was heavily negatively affected by its events.

The second main finding considers the prospected emotion per chapter that was measured with the shortened version of LE-PANA-M (Figure 5.4). If we would draw a line connecting the data points, one could note a course in the development of prospected emotions. This course - albeit quite rough as we did not include shifting emotions within chapter - indicates that the apparent negative emotions [anger (active) and listlessness (passive)] that participants expected Jim to feel right after the change announcement gradually decrease, whereas positive emotions of feeling energetic (active) and relaxed (passive) appear to rise.

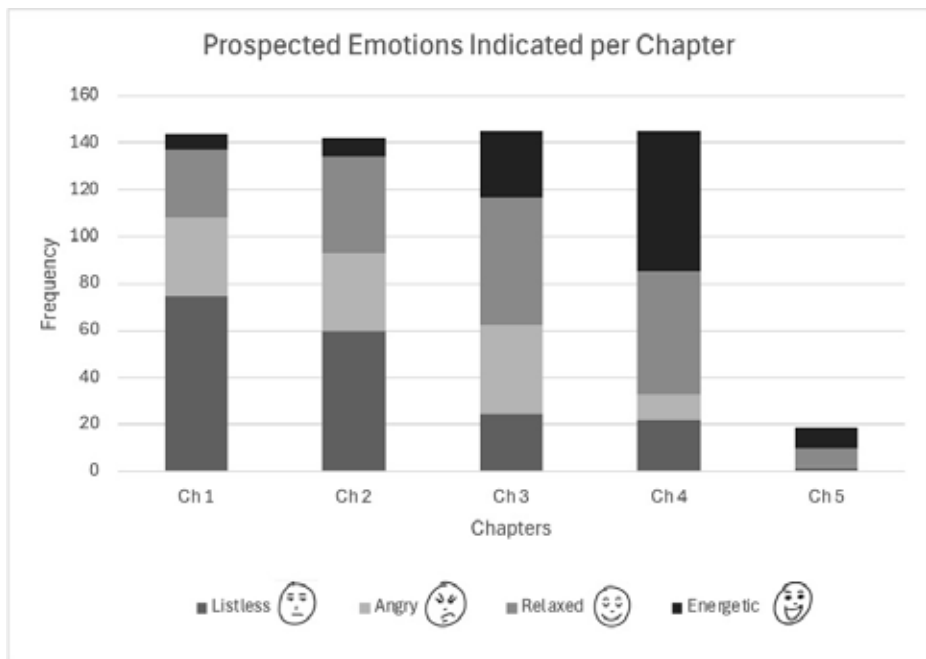


Figure 5.4: Frequency count indicating the course of emotions development over the 5 chapters

Shifts in storylines explained by if-then structures

"My mindset changed, and I try to assume that there will be a positive element in each negative one".
(Participant 84)

How come Jim is prospected to change his mind? To answer this question, we explored what factors or events triggered the evolvement of the prospective stories and shifts in prospected cognitions and/or emotions. We did this by further examining the 'if-then' dyads in the storylines. A number of 231 of such dyads ('IF X happens, THEN Y occurs') were identified (Table 5.3). We illustrate several of the 231 if-then dyads on which Table 5.3 is built:

Illustration if-then dyad 1:

"... I notice that they do have an ear for that and that makes me feel good ... It seems to be falling well so it feels nice to be heard."
(Participant 56)

Coding IF: Feel heard – belongs to Participation & Consideration (positive)

Coding THEN: Makes me feel good – belongs to Passive Positive response

Illustration if-then dyad 2:

"Together they went to the highest executive to start contributing to the change. The highest executive responded extremely positively ... He has now been given more responsibility to bring other teams along to work agile as well. He has been asked a few times to give a talk (sometimes through teams, sometimes in live meetings) at the intro of the new teams to explain about change." (Participant 1)

Coding IF: Positive response from highest executive – belongs to Participation & Consideration (positive)

Coding THEN: Seize new opportunities in work – belongs to Active Positive response

Illustration if-then dyad 3:

"After the announcement, things go wild in the group app. Colleagues are furious, argue and point fingers at each other. Why do I have to hand in money and the other doesn't?"
(Participant 14)

Coding IF: Becoming aware of salary cuts – belongs to Impact and Consequences (personal + negative)

Coding THEN: Active disagreements, jealousy, social disorder – belongs to Active Negative response

Table 5.3 provides a summary of our coding outcomes that suggests several if-then regularities in the organizational change context. The results also illustrate that the same input in terms of change events can lead to different prospected recipient responses. We note that the passive (positive, neutral, and negative) responses outweigh the active ones, and that the positive (passive and active) responses outweigh the negative ones. Receiving information is considered a major driver for response, so is the becoming aware of social and/or personal impact and consequences. Especially active negative responses seem underrepresented in the data.

5

Table 5.3: Matrix of if-then dyads

	THEN ->										
	= Active				Total Active	= Passive				Total Passive	Endtotal
EXPERIENCES (IF)	- Negative	Neutral	Positive			- Negative	Neutral	Positive			
= Experience interaction with colleagues	5	3	7	15		1	1	6	8		23
Negative	4	1	5	10		1		4	5		15
Neutral	1	2	2	5			1	2	3		8
= Experience the end of change			1	1				4	4		5
Neutral			1	1				4	4		5
Become aware of impact & consequences (social and/or personal)	1		15	16		15	6	10	31		47
Negative	1		5	6		15	3	4	22		28
Neutral			7	7			3		3		10
Positive			3	3				6	6		9
Become aware of impact & consequences (technical)	1		6	7		8			8		15
Negative	1		4	5		2			2		7
Neutral			2	2		6			6		8
= Receive information & communication	1	10	20	31		13	9	15	37		68
Negative	1	5	12	18		11	4	3	18		36
Neutral		4	7	11		2	5	4	11		22
Positive		1	1	2				8	8		10
Experience participation & consideration (as individual and/or group)	2	1	4	7		6	2	11	19		26
Negative	2	1	1	4		6	1		7		11
Neutral								1	1		1
Positive			3	3			1	10	11		14
= Experience positive aspects & opportunities	1		12	13			1	18	19		32
Neutral			2	2				1	1		3
Positive	1		10	11			1	17	18		29
= Uncertainty	2	4	5	11		2	2		4		15
Negative	2	4	5	11		2	2		4		15
Endtotal	13	18	70	101		45	21	64	130		231

Reflecting on the storytelling exercise

We end this findings section by reporting what our data teaches us about peoples' prospective sensemaking processes, or: *how* participants came to their stories. Table 5.4 portrays to what extent people had tapped from their own experience to craft this future story *and* to what extent their story was plausible to happen soon in their own organization.

Table 5.4: Participants’ reflection on whether their story was based on own experience, and whether they considered it plausible to play out in near future

OWN EXPERIENCE	PLAUSIBLE			
	Plausible (score 4 or 5)	Not Plausible (score 1 or 2)	Neutral on plausible (score 3)	Missing data on plausible
Based on own experience (score 4 or 5)	57%	2%	13%	3%
Not based on own experience (score 1 or 2)	4%	2%	0%	0%
Neutral on own experience (score 3)	12%	1%	2%	1%
Missing data on own experience	0%	0%	0%	1%

Most participants crafted a story in which they made use of their own experience and that was plausible to them (57%). Upon inspection of the outliers in our data (stories that were not crafted based on participants’ own experience and/or that were not considered plausible), we noted some remarkable insights. Some of the participants that had crafted a story that they perceived not plausible, and that was not based on own experience, had very little experience to tap from as they both were relatively young (23 to 25 years old). Other participants had devoted the storytelling exercise to elaborate on a wise life lesson. For example, one participant’s story line was:

“After experiencing anxiety and a negative atmosphere, Jim talks to a friend who helps him to reframe his experience. Upon reflecting, Jim realizes that the situation has not changed, that only his cognitive framing has changed, and he realizes that it is not what happens in life that defines how you feel, it is your thinking that does, and that positivity is considered a choice in life” (Participant 25).

A third characteristic of the outlier stories were the more exotic stories, for example a story in which Jim’s lay-off turned into a perfect opportunity to realize a long-held dream of immigrating to a tropical island.

In this result section we illustrated the findings of our data analyses. First, we proposed a composed process overview of how participants expect change experience to unfold. This, in our view, reflects peoples’ intuition of unfolding

change and is based on the chapter titles of participants' prospective stories. Second, we discussed the data that was collected on prospected emotions by the Lebender Emoticon PANA matrix (LE-PANA-M) scale (Schreiber & Jenny, 2020). Third, we detailed the outcomes of analyzing the chapter content in the form of if-then dyads. Fourth, and last, we shared data on participants' perceptions of using own experience to craft the prospective story and on the plausibility of their story. In the discussion section we elaborate on possible implications of these results.

5.6 Discussion

In this work, we explored individuals' process expectations on evolving organizational change by analyzing their prospective stories crafted for focal actor Jim. In doing so, we provided empirical insights into the subjective interpretations of how change would play out and explored what anchors the prospective sensemaking efforts that lead to change expectancies (generalized expectations). Stemming from idiosyncratic input, we proposed a composed process view comprising participants' process expectancies (Figure 5.2). This process view is based on stories' dominant commonalities and similarities and presents common projections that function as cognitive 'priors' that help one to assess new, perceived similar, situations. We noted that individuals reasoned towards several projected factuality's in change processes (e.g., it starts with an announcement) and combined this with plausible responses. Our work generates forward-looking awareness which renders several insights that we discuss more in-depth below.

5.6.1 The application of prospective sensemaking

Similar to the story of *'Little Red Riding Hood'* mentioned in the introduction of this paper, individuals appear to hold an understanding of the progression of a change story. Since most individuals reported they had drawn from their prior experiences and had narrated a story that seemed plausible to them, it is assumed that people find it challenging to use their imagination to envision a future different from their past. Even the unprecedented context of COVID-19 did not prompt participants to consider alternative, novel, projections compared to their previous experiences. In that sense, it might be that Weick was right when he claimed people can only assign meaning to something that has already transpired (Weick, 1995). However, we assume additional explanations that seem to describe the content and outcomes of

our participants' prospective sensemaking efforts. In line with the emerging research in this field we elaborate on our recognition of emotive-, episodic -, and semantic approaches to prospection in our studied story scripts.

5.6.2 Episodic-, Semantic-, and Emotive Anchoring

Emotive Anchoring in Prospective Sensemaking. Our findings underscore the crucial role that emotions play in prospective sensemaking (Barsics et al., 2016) as a dominant emotive pattern emerged from our analyses. Next to the explicitly solicited reports on emotions, many chapter titles and narrative accounts were imbued with emotional content that seem to function as interpretation catalysts (Maitlis et al., 2013; Santos de Souza & Chimenti, 2024). Overall, our findings align with what Frijda (2007), in their book *The Laws of Emotion*, termed the Law of Appeal. According to this 'law', events that are important to one's interests or motives lead to interpretations that logically and likely evoke associated emotions (e.g., personal loss is associated with sorrow; success with joy). We found support for this in our study as, for instance, Jim was prospected to face an episode of new beginnings, and participants typically reported that this would elicit positive emotions. Our findings also support the positivity- and impact bias in emotive future thinking, addressed in the introduction of this work, as we found an overestimation of success probabilities and optimistic change outcomes with magnified titles in Chapters 4 and 5 representing the positive impact for Jim.

Building on insights from *The Laws of Emotion* (Frijda, 2007), our analysis aligns with the notion that prospected emotions are shaped by the narrator's expectations regarding the *appropriate* emotional response to a given event. The assessment of what constitutes a suitable emotion appears to be informed by subjective prior experiences of change and/or lay theories about the general functioning of emotions. We posit that emotive anchoring in prospective sensemaking is strongly associative and follows a certain lawfulness that inherently guides and influences cognition. For instance, once hope enters an individual's sensemaking framework, this anticipated emotion shapes the subsequent development of the sensemaking narrative. Likewise, when fear is anticipated, the sensemaking process becomes centered on events that either validate this fear or demonstrate how the focal actor overcame it.

Episodic Anchoring in Prospective Sensemaking. Participants provided many vivid *episodic* details that align with well-known process terms in the change literature such as Announcement, Planning, Implementation, and Evaluation

(Figure 2). On a high construal level, the rhythm of change, starting with an announcement up until the evaluation that settles a new situation, forms a generalized sequence of personal experiences. This pattern resembles prior work from change management anchors such as Lewin (1947) and Kotter (1996). Main phases of change seem used by employees to bring a meaningful pattern and coherence to their experiences and fit them in logically ordered thematic time frames (Sadeghi et al., 2025).

However, and next to our observation of leaning in on a familiar sequence, true episodic prospection is based on projected, detailed, personal pre-experiences (Atance & O'Neill, 2001). Those seem represented in the captivating chapter labels such as Ghost Stories, Atmosphere, Screwed, Strong Together, and Future Perspectives (Figure 2). Moreover, when examining the content of the prospective stories, several observations characterize the episodic prospection - the mental simulation of personal future events rich in contextual detail - identified in this study. First, the pre-experiencing of events is not unrestricted. Instead, boundaries for episodic prospection are established by regularities in daily organizational life, with most participants reporting the provision of plausible stories. In general, we observed contextual plausibility as a shaping factor. Second, based on our examination of the if-then combinations we bring forward that expectations on important events for the focal actor (e.g. *personal interaction* or *decision making and a turn to agency*) create strong episodic signaling. Our participants provide such events with vivid, imaginative, elaboration - as if you can almost see the scene. Below we illustrate such important events as participants storied on the expected *interactions* of Jim with a spouse or with colleagues; or on Jim's engagement in *agentic decision making*, as for example he decides to wait no more and confront a manager.

"Upon returning home, my partner was already there with open arms. This is the first time I have cried in a long time, but I needed this" (Participant 13)

"I'm going to call my dear colleague right away, who is often the same way" (Participant 4)

"... but eager to allay the concerns of colleagues, he decides to call the CEO to ask if it would be possible to already share some more information to share with the company" (Participant 5)

"What happens next is that Jim decides to take on a leadership role. He takes it upon himself to collect and categorize all questions" (Participant 3)

Although we know that people tend to think abstractly as they think of the distant future (Trope & Liberman, 2003), the detailed episodic projections in our data show that our participants succeeded in mentally simulating future real life experiences (Carton & Lucas, 2018).

Semantic Anchoring in Prospective Sensemaking. The semantics used by our participants, resulting from more abstract contemplation, turned prospective events into change 'meanings'. The examination of semantics in our work provides two additional thoughts on recipients' prospective sensemaking. First, many semantics were provided in the form of lay wisdom on change or as change theories held by the storytellers. Examples of such are the generalized, decontextualized (i.e., no connection to industry or type of change) lessons included in the stories. For example, at the end of their stories, participants seemed to show a habit of ending with messages like "united we stand" (#87). In this sense, in their article on corporate cultures as organizations' theories, Gorton and Zentefis (2024) referred to the term 'implicature' as an organizational practice in which meanings and assumptions seem to be implied and understood by members of certain social groups without notion. Table 5.5 provides examples of such implicatures observed in the data. For sake of clarity, we added interpretations of what *could* have been meant by the statements. The fact that these notions were included in the stories, while not referring to the specific context at hand, suggests that they reflect a semantic repertoire ('knowledge of the world') of employee change beliefs.

Second, the semantic turn to our analysis provides insights into otherwise unexpected or atypical change mechanisms. For example, whereas one would think of bad news leading to negative responses as being a change lawfulness, we, on the contrary, illustrate the case of bad news leading to positive active behaviors. Participant 94 demonstrates this by their following quote:

"It takes a moment for Jim to realize what has been said ... The emotions in his head become too much for him, what will the new changes mean for him? ... Probably it's because his department might be hit hardest. And he either loses his job or position. ... When management announces the above change, Jim responds

by already looking at other positions within the company, maybe already outside the company, and asks himself whether retraining is needed? Additional courses maybe, educate him more ... Maybe he can make a new career switch within the company and there are new opportunities for him. He has always been interested in other functions and departments" (Participant 94).

Table 5.5: Implicatures or general change beliefs

Part.	Quote	Our interpretation	
#1	"Change is not always easy, but it is necessary."	There will always be change	Positive life lessons
#3	"The common goal is to once again become a thriving and growing company with opportunities for all."	Stress the importance of equality in the organization	
#4	"After all, being together in good times and also in bad times creates a bond, he said."	Change is something we do together	
#7	"People have to learn to live with the fact that pandemics can happen, and that death is part of life."	Always keep going strong	
#9	"All in all, Jim feels that again, we have weathered this crisis well, and it has actually been a great opportunity to make real changes, he said."	Always look for opportunities	
#11	"Change was suddenly no longer a dangerous creature, but an opportunity to learn or grow. He had worried a lot about the future and what could happen, both at work and at home, but that doesn't always have to be a bad thing."	Change is a chance to grow	
#13	"Jim has a more wait-and-see attitude. He thinks; This has been thought about, and change is not always wrong. Right? He assumes that the best will be done."	Focus on the positive	
#16	"Jim doesn't look so far ahead anymore, actually that's better for Jim too because of that he can really enjoy the present more."	Focus on here and now	
#20	"Nothing is as dynamic as aviation And that is changes will always be, is a given."	There will always be change	
#53	"This is caused by the fact that a lot has already changed within the company in recent years. Sometimes for the better, but sometimes not. But it usually works out in the end."	It will turn out alright	
#76	"... more than ever, everyone is aware of the fact that all united they have to pull it together and work hard to make it a healthy and resilient organization."	Demonstrate work ethos	
#2	"What also stands out; all the managers are already in place ..."	Management takes care of them selves first	Sceptic of management
#2	"So, we don't really know anything yet. They talk to consultants, to the works council, to managers among themselves, but they don't talk to us."	They don't talk to us	
#6	"Management had made such statements before and then nothing happened either."	No trust that management follows through	
#10	"Ah it was just another one. A reorganization, a mega success according to the CEO. But according to Jim? Nothing changed, some people moved and a different name. We'll do it again in two years."	Different perspectives of success	
#13	"Why is nothing being done about the plethora of management layers and useless work groups?"	Why is management untouched	
#14	"After long weeks, the plan finally comes out through a Teams meeting. How terrible is that?"	They don't talk to us	
#56	"We can't ask for anything. Yes, you can call them, but I'm not going to do that now, everyone is already so busy. And it's already decided anyway"	No influence on decision making	
#57	"Jim does find this frustrating because with some of the decisions he feels they were not well thought out. ... Jim does notice that he does not always have great confidence in the management."	They don't think things through	

The experience of receiving negative information appears intrinsically linked to an alternative interpretation, which holds greater significance for the narrator than the external event itself. This example could belong to an activated 'implicature'

or general change theory such as: “when life gives you lemons, make lemonade” or more straightforward: always make the best out of every situation. People are prone to turn to meaning making cognitions when facing unknown situations and futures (Carton & Lucas, 2018). We discussed content elements of individuals’ meaning systems - semantics – related to the unfolding of organizational change.

5.6.3 A Model of Prospective Change Sensemaking

We found examples of emotion-, experience-, and meaning-based expectancies in the ‘mental time travel’ (Carton & Lucas, 2018) of our participants as they crafted their prospective change stories for focal actor Jim. We discussed this as participants’ prospective sensemaking process that appears to be shaped by emotive-, episodic-, and semantic anchoring. In line with prior studies in non-organizational settings (Strikwerda-Brown et al., 2022; Szpunar et al., 2014), we propose that, although they consider different focus and aspects, none of these elements is dissociable from one another to form a coherent future based script. A purely semantic approach would lead to plausible yet abstract generalizations, lacking both detailed experiences and affective interpretation (called the blurry vision bias; Carton & Lucas, 2018). Conversely, a purely episodic approach would imply significant experiential episodes, however they would merely provide loosely coupled or disconnected subjective descriptions and lack broader meaning. Lastly, an exclusively emotive view of the future would depict affective motivation, but only in the form of a flux of emotions without forming a coherent narrative. Therefore, we propose a triad model reflecting the continuous and hybrid dimensions of the three approaches. As we elaborate next, this model represents our theorizing on the workings of prospective change sensemaking (Figure 5.5).

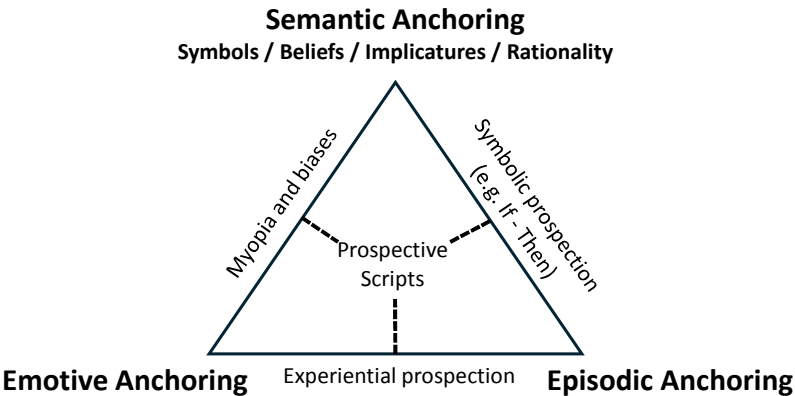


Figure 5.5: Triad model of anchoring prospective change sensemaking efforts

The axis connecting emotive and episodic anchoring is characterized by what most closely resembles Weicks' "future perfect thinking" (1979, p. 199) as this combination of episodic and emotive future thinking allows one to pre-experience the future. On this axis, prospected personal-relevant events are thought of in detail (episodic) and are enriched by the prospection of emotional valence and intensity (emotive) - creating a personal, subjective imagination and pre-experience of what will be.

The axis connecting semantic and episodic anchoring is characterized by symbolic prospection as people combine thoughts on autobiographical events with how very similar events are known and embedded in their general knowledge on change practices. In the accumulated sensemaking processes on change as a recurring organizational phenomenon (high event familiarity), the once episodic prospected events seem to have turned into symbols (e.g. the announcement) that semantically represent and mark key moments in a change process. People tend to blur, or mix up, what they *believe* about what they have experienced, and what they *actually* experienced, and this cognitive mixture forms important input for expectation development.

The axis connecting emotive and semantic anchoring is characterized by the idea that much emotive future thinking is influenced by semantic beliefs on what would be plausible emotions to feel in certain situations. The "gut feeling" resulting from emotive reasoning gets comprehended by logical analysis and reframing. At the same time, the axis represents the influence of an affective dimension on the dispositional activation of semantic thoughts. Otherwise stated; emotions can direct focus as for example the prospection of *fear* might draw attention to different semantics than prospection of *joy*, which, in its turn, provides different framing than does *hope*. Mutual influence between emotive- and semantic anchoring expectedly increases the likelihood of biased sensemaking outcomes. Emotions get suppressed by, or molded into, what is semantically plausible or appropriate, yet simultaneously emotions hold potential performative - or framing - power on semantic reasoning leading to enforced outcomes.

In the middle of our proposed model 'prospective scripts' are presented. Scripts, as defined in our introduction, concern "a structure that describes appropriate sequences of events in a particular context" (Schank & Abelson, 1977, p. 210). Prospection in script-form allows for the incorporation of strings of events that can include the discussed *episodic details*, *conceptual*

semantics, as well as constructed meanings and the expression of *emotions*. Script fragments on prospected events are considered to be ‘scattered’ in the triangle space that is created by the three (emotive, episodic, semantic) nodes and connecting axes. Script fragments are subject to the interplay of different influences and biases that stem from different forms of prospection that, in our view, can hardly be disentangled. To illustrate this, consider a fragment of the script provided by participant 9 and our interpretation of its content and prospective anchoring:

“Jim ran into Anique at lunch the following day and decided to ask her if she knew anything. She could tell (unofficially, of course) that all the temporary contracts were not going to be renewed and that working from home was going to be implemented more. The office space would be better utilized by setting up more flex spaces. The idea would be that everyone would work from home a few days a week and not have a fixed desk”.

Interpretation: [episodic – semantic] episodic details might be influenced by the semantic idea of ‘Corona means working from home’ and ‘offices use flex spaces’.

“Working from home he already did because of the corona, so that didn't really come as a big surprise to Jim. Only the news about the temporary contracts ... he was very sorry for his nice young colleagues”.

Interpretation: [episodic with semantic influence – emotive] reflects the pre-experience that, when in tough times, young colleagues will have to leave the organization first. This evokes the emotion of feeling very sorry that will likely frame what will come next.

“But Jim also knew that things in aviation always went up and down, so he hoped to see them again anyway”. (Participant 9)

Interpretation: [semantic-emotive] the semantic idea about aviation eases the prior introduced emotional load.

While our interpretation of this example could be debated, as many examples were with our team of researchers, the key point is that the scripts appear to develop through the sequencing of fragments that utilize various modes

of prospection. Through this integration, a coherent prospective narrative emerges. From our findings it seems that none of the 94 participants relied solely on either emotive-, experience-, or meaning based cognitive processing (Carton & Lukas, 2018) rather they used the whole triangle 'surface' to verbalize their change process expectancies.

Our model addresses the priorly studied episodic-semantic bidirectional interaction during prospection (Strikwerda-Brown et al., 2022; Szpunar et al., 2014). Moreover, our model additionally highlights emotive- as equally important as semantic- and episodic anchoring to prospective sensemaking. Herewith complementing the debate on empirical and theoretical integration of prospective (next to retrospective) sensemaking in organizational change literature. In particular, employees' expectancies direct anticipatory behaviors in ambiguous change circumstances (Brown et al., 2015), making this an especially pertinent topic for continued research in the field of organizational change (Bruskin & Mikkelsen, 2020). The inclusion of affect in prospective sensemaking highlights the role of emotion as an informative source that impacts cognitive processing (Clore & Huntsinger, 2007), this is a critical consideration given the influential role emotions play in organizational change experiences (Oreg et al., 2018). By integrating the continuous interaction of emotive-, episodic-, and semantic prospection, the proposed model provides nuanced, rich insights into employees' process expectancies that led to narrative *scripts* that contain *strains of events* concerning the unfolding of organizational change. Based on the above, we propose that employees can and do make sense of events and processes that are yet to come in ways that go beyond future perfect thinking (Weick, 1995). The growing academic focus on prospective cognitions aligns with our perspective, highlighting the importance of this emerging area for further scholarly inquiry (Gümüşay & Reinecke, 2024).

5.6.4 Limitations and Future Research Suggestions

There are limitations to this study that we must address, and follow-up questions that are worthwhile to pursue in future scholarly work. One of the limitations is that the whole study was done 'within-sphere', hence plausibility could have been expected (Van Mulukom et al., 2013). With this we mean that the story setting was similar to participants' own business context. When similar studies will be done 'across-sphere', new and different stories get a better chance to arise. Therefore, future studies might consider having people involved in writing narratives that are not considered within their own business context.

Additionally, in future empirical work, researchers might pay more attention to the vitality of the outlier stories that actively push back the 'common outcomes' and focus on unexpected events and their interpreted functions in change processes. Additionally, we suggest future studies to use different formats for the writing exercise. The fact that we invited participants to provide four to five chapters encouraged their episodic cognition and might have influenced the periodization that resulted in our episodic process view. Hence, we suggest that new experiments could try to use less framing of participants and pay more attention to dispositional starting points of different participants. Furthermore, as the topic of our work, to the best of our knowledge, is novel within change sensemaking research, more studies on prospective narratives could increase the robustness of our findings, including studies in other industries and in different cultures as institutional logics and norms shape the frames people use (Oreg & Sverdluk, 2018).

Yet also other methodological applications form interesting avenues for further research. One promising direction involves longitudinal studies that track employees' prospective sensemaking processes across different phases of change, capturing how these sensemaking outcomes evolve in response to emerging cues and shifting narratives. Another suggestion is to leverage digital trace data such as e-mails, chat messages, intranet posts to analyze the prospective sensemaking included in this naturally occurring communication. This would allow the researchers to minimize disadvantages of research settings, and adds opportunities to study sensemaking in real-time, and to enlarge the scale of such research.

5.6.5 Practical Implications

In everyday organizational discourse, change is often characterized as challenging, imposing a significant cognitive burden on individuals who already face demanding work schedules. Additionally, the outcomes of such changes are uncertain, and failure is sometimes anticipated. However, our work provides an alternative story, and we propose that the 'story-making' can be used as an artifact in itself that builds on the laws - and power - of storytelling. We already addressed that people commonly tend to have a positivity bias in future thinking (Barsics et al., 2016; Szpunar et al., 2014) and that this positive effect might be strengthened by the storytelling lawfulness of most stories (especially in popular culture stories) following the same emotional arc concluding with a happy end as if it were a necessary component (Reagan et al., 2016).

Prospective change sensemaking enables individuals to anticipate and harness the performative power of their theorizing, thereby increasing the likelihood of desirable futures materializing. Stories with positive emotional trajectories resonate well with other people and are often perceived to be strong stories. The associated positivity bias can influence individuals' present decisions and behaviors, often leading to more goal-congruent actions (broaden-and-build theory; Fredrickson, 2005). As individuals respond in ways that align with their expectations, these expectations become integrated into their enacted reality, hereby effectively creating a self-fulfilling prophecy (Gumusay & Reinecke, 2024). This line of reasoning is supported by psychology literature (e.g., Sools & Mooren, 2012) which suggests that the use of prospective narrative sensemaking adds to the resilience of individuals dealing with the local-level consequences of big changes.

5.7 Conclusion

Employees often think of what their organizational future will look like and their generalized expectations (expectancies) direct anticipative behaviors. Expectancies are not mere flights of fantasy. Rather, generalized knowledge, and personal experiences in a categorial similar setting, provide important direction in the development of future expectations. Based on our exploration of employees' process expectancies in organizational change context, we propose a model of continuous and interrelated emotive-, episodic-, and semantic anchoring in prospective sensemaking efforts. These insights contribute to the incorporation and understanding of employees' forward-looking awareness in daily organizational life which is crucial for the advancement of organization studies as the expected future co-directs our behaviors today.

5.8 References

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Appendix B: Scripts used as story stem in Story Completion Method

Introduction Jim (translated to English):

"Hi. I'm Jim, 40 years old. I really enjoy working here, I really like the company. You asked me what's so nice here? Good question. Yes, colleagues, of course! Great people to work with. And I especially enjoy seeing what you do it for. You do the work to make beautiful trips for our customers. That's what you do it for! I have already heard in the corridors that change is coming. Digitalization has obviously been in play for a long time and now Covid has come over it globally. I am curious what they have come up with again this time."

Announcement by Company CEO (translated to English):

"Hello all. Welcome to this meeting. Good to see you, even if it is digital. It feels strange to address you through a screen, but I hope it is easy to follow. If you have any questions, please leave them in the chat, we'll get back to you in the next week and I would like to ask everyone to put their microphone on mute.

I am glad that so many people have logged in and that we can inform those about the upcoming changes. The world has been turned upside down for more than a year now. Everything we thought was normal is temporarily not normal, and there is uncertainty about the future. Certainly, heavy blows are falling in our industry as well. And although the vaccination program is running and there is light at the end of the tunnel, we are not there yet.

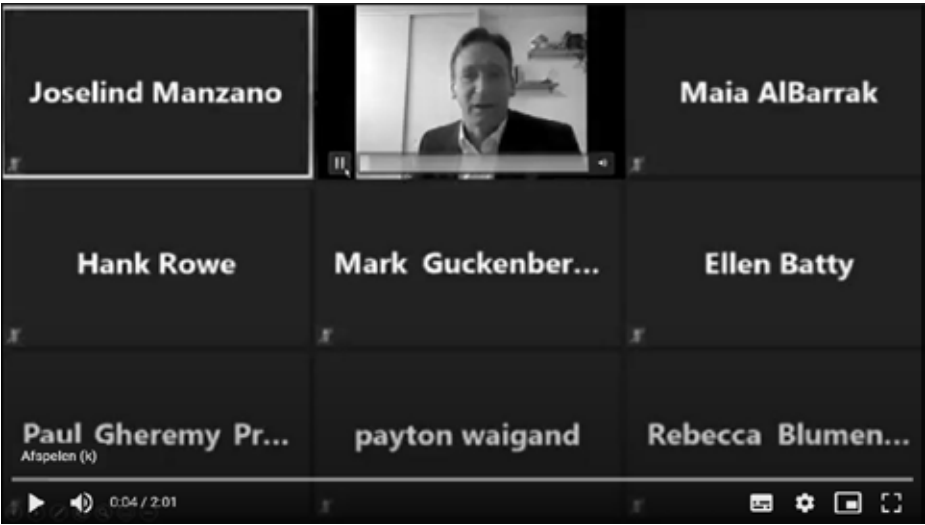
I want to thank you for your continued commitment, and I know that working from home. The fact that the schools are closed, and you can't see each other much has taken a lot. The past period has forced us to make some major internal changes that will be felt by all of us.

Although the necessary changes have also been set in motion in the past, it is now necessary to accelerate to maintain our position in the market and to be ready when the world reopens. We hereby appeal to everyone's flexibility and constructive contribution.

More specific information will be distributed by letter next week. We are currently working hard on this letter to provide as much clarity as possible. Based on this, I ask you to discuss in your teams how the changes affect your daily work. Again, these times are challenging and Only If we put our shoulders

to the wheel together, we will go far. I am very confident that we can make this happen. And I want to thank you for your attention and commitment.

Thank you.”



Appendix C: If and then coding

In the table below we present a matrix of categorized IFs and THENs that are combined from IF-THEN dyads. Below we illustrate the development of our categories used in this matrix.

	First order	Second order	Aggregate
IF	Discussions Disagreements Pointing finger	Colleagues interact negative	Experiencing colleagues interacting
	Asking questions Talking Share opinions	Colleagues interact neutral	
	It's ok now Think of next change Look forward	Experience end of change (neutral)	Experience end of change
	Threat of job loss colleagues New teams Good people leaving	Impact & Consequences (social - negative)	Experiencing impact & consequences (social/personal/technical)
	Threat of job loss Less salary No control	Impact & Consequences (personal - negative)	
	Promotion Job secure No lay-offs at all	Impact & Consequences (social/personal - positive)	
	Different management Expansion New strategy	Impact & Consequences (technical positive & negative)	Experiencing information & communication
	Vague announcement Lack of information Poor communication	Information & Communication (negative)	
	Receiving information More clarity Announcement is clear	Information & Communication (positive and neutral)	Experiencing negative emotions
	Uncertainty Disappointment Stress	Negative emotions	
	I am not seen Unfairness Not involved	Participation & Consideration (individual & group - negative)	Experiencing Participation & Consideration
	Invited to contribute Taken seriously Recognition	Participation & Consideration (individual & group - positive)	
	Reframing New opportunities Windfall	Positive aspects and opportunities	Experiencing positivity
THEN	Positive thinking Regained rest Acceptance Relief	Passive Positive	Positive response
	Seek new challenge Active contribution Prepare well	Active Positive	
	Feeling scared Ruminating & worrying Speculate (with others)	Passive Negative	Negative response
	Actively withdraw from process Resistance behavior	Active Negative	
	Wait and see Diary writing No response	Passive neutral	Neutral response
	Talking to colleagues Talking to family Summarize information	Active neutral	



Chapter 6

Discussion and Conclusion

In this doctoral dissertation, I set out to study the employee experience of change, and build on the following overarching research question: *What are employees’ interpreted change experiences and what implicit mechanisms underly their interpretations?* The different empirical chapters in this thesis focused on the following research questions: 1. How do employees interpret their retrospective experiences of change processes? 2. How are employees’ change experiences embedded in a broader social exchange system? 3. What could be considered “common sense of a higher order” (Weick, 1979, p. 3), that is, a system of common interpersonal experiences, that creates a consensual, taken-for-granted reality when it comes to interpretations of organizational change? And 4. What are employees’ prospective interpretations of upcoming change experiences and how do those inform change sensemaking? In the following sections, I will summarize the main findings of this thesis and then reflect on the theoretical contributions and implications, limitations, avenues for future research, and practical implications of this dissertation.

6.1 Summary of Main Findings

An overview of the different empirical research chapters of this dissertation is provided in Table 6.1. For each chapter, the title and the main outcomes of each chapter are summarized. A common theme in the findings of this dissertation is that daily change events in local contexts shape employee change experiences. In the sections below, I will discuss this empirical insight in more detail and will outline the ways in which this dissertation offers new insights to organizational change theories and practices.

Table 6.1: PhD summary of empirical research chapters

Chapter	Title	Key Findings
2	Change Recipients’ Sensemaking of Their Lived Experiences	The experience of digital transformation as large-scale organizational change is positively perceived at an abstract (higher construal) level. Optimistic perspectives become challenged when transformation causes here-and-now (lower construal level) change experiences. Employees’ experiences are dynamic, and their perceptions shift over the course of daily change events. At local level, change becomes an emotional experience especially when employees face disruption of social order. Experiencing social order change represents a deep structure change that is difficult to deal with.

Table 6.1: Continued

Chapter	Title	Key Findings
3	Embedding Social Exchange Experiences in Change Context	Social interaction is an important aspect in employees' evaluation of their experiences with large-scale organizational challenges on a day-to-day level. Psychological contracts are subject to change alongside experiencing organizational change implementation. Change recipients change their (social) expectations throughout their periodized experiences of change.
4	Interpreted Role-taking Dynamics of Change Recipients	Employees in their role as change recipients cast and recast their roles over the course of a change initiative. Employees utilize storied experiences and implicit assumptions about the way in which they ought to act during organizational change. Individuals seem to refer to higher order narrative templates when making sense of their experiences. Five composite narratives explicate pathways of change recipients' role-taking in which changing conditions and events can lead to in-story role shifts as the scripted change journey unfolds.
5	Employees' Prospective Sensemaking of Future Change Experiences	Employees hold event- and emotion-driven expectancies on processes of upcoming change. Their prospective sensemaking is anchored in combinations of episodic-, semantic- and emotive future thinking. There is a positivity bias in prospected change experiences that can lead to self-fulfilling prophecy effects in employees' role-taking.

6.1.1 The Importance of Daily Experiences

This dissertation indicates that organizational change programs often appear opaque and abstract to employees (e.g., digitalization), whereas their daily change experiences are much more tangible and concrete. These everyday positive and negative change experiences form the basis for how employees evaluate the 'big change' and thus influence their levels of change support (Kiefer et al., 2025). The findings of this dissertation provide empirical evidence for the idea that construal level differences lead to different change perceptions (Giaver & Smollan, 2015). Construal level differences explain why employees, in general, often support long term organizational change intentions, however, struggle while dealing with the downstream short-term focused (time scope of days or weeks) consequences in their work. The aggregation of negative daily change experiences seems to trigger skeptical attitudes on the entire change, while, on the positive side, one positive event that is perceived relevant in the eyes of the change recipients (e.g., a good conversation with manager) can compensate for negative attitudes towards

the large-scale change. This implies that daily change experiences matter a lot in terms of understanding employee change behaviors. In contrast to current literature in this field (e.g., Kiefer et al., 2025), according to the results of this dissertation, it is suggested that change recipients might even disconnect their daily change experiences from the organizational-level change as they get so caught up in daily challenges that they simply forget what the change was about.

The link between employees' expectations of high construal-level organizational change and low construal-level experiences can be explained in different ways. As Kiefer et al. (2025) argued, positive anticipatory perceptions (e.g.: "yes I support digitalization, it will be great") could prompt change recipients to attend to cues that are consistent with this information. This could guide their attention to positive events, once change has reached their daily context, hereby leading to more positive experiences. On the contrary, one could reason that high construal-level positive anticipatory perceptions can hinder change implementation at a later stage. To explain this, one might think of employees dreaming of a bright future and as a result those employees might underestimate - and hence are unprepared for - possible offers (negative consequences) this future entails ("I did not expect it to lead to this impactful consequence"). The mismatch between expectation and reality might trigger strong disappointment. Based on the many change stories that I have collected for this dissertation and especially the results presented in Chapter 2; contrary to prior literature, I argue for the latter. In many instances, employees tend to underestimate the impact of change on their daily local realities, as unforeseen aspects of organizational life become disrupted. For example, referring to Chapter 2 and 3, while individuals may be prepared for one facet of change, such as the introduction of new technology, they may be caught off guard by another, such as social struggles. Consequently, change often manifests as a 'battle to overcome'.

6.2 Implications for Theory

In this dissertation, I showcased the importance of understanding employees' interpretations of their daily change experiences to understand employee change responses. There are several theoretical implications of the results that will be discussed next while focusing on reflections on change experiences as mental schema (6.2.1.), the role of time and temporality in change experiences

(6.2.2.), and the strong influence of social exchange in the content of those experiences (6.2.3.).

6.2.1 Change Experiences as Schema

Changing situations strongly influence human behavior. Throughout this dissertation I argue that employees use change cues about what will happen and know how to behave according to an activated set of expectations (their script). While change recipients and their behaviors are often classified in models that expect them to behave consistently throughout change processes (Oreg et al., 2011), this dissertation presents several process models representing the flow of different daily experiences (Kiefer & Muller, 2007; Morgeson et al., 2015) and how they lead to different role-taking throughout a process. Throughout this dissertation, I recognize generalized “this-is-how-it-goes” interpretations and the structure of change experiences found in Chapters 2, 4, and 5 show a similar pattern that, by its dominant empirical appearance, can be considered a change schema (Table 6.2). This can also be referred to as templates, or scripts, used by employees to make sense of their consecutive experiences.

Table 6.2: Different Process Models presented in this dissertation
(Number of episodes differs in different chapters)

		Episode 0	Episode 1	Episode 2	Episode 3	Episode 4	Episode 5
Chapter 2	<i>Episodes</i>	Before Change	Announcement	Awaiting Info	Implementation	Evaluation	Looking Ahead
	<i>Interpretation</i>	Turbulent World + Change is Coming	Did not see that coming	Wait & See	On the Move	Like it or Leave it	Heading for Future
Chapter 3	<i>Episodes</i>	Maintenance/ Collective	Disruption/ Individual	-	Renegotiate & Repair/ Individual & team	-	Return to Maintenance/ Team
	<i>Interpretation</i>	The Way Things Are/ Communal Sharing	What does this imply for me?/ Market Pricing	-	Everyone against Everyone/ Equality Matching	-	Back Together/ Interaction Varies
Chapter 4	<i>Episodes</i>	Before Change	Announcement	Planning or Awaiting Info	Implementation	Evaluation	Looking Ahead
	<i>5 Interpretations:</i>						
	<i>1. Loyal Rebel</i>	-	Announcement	Estimate Local Impact	Create Space	Adjusted Change = Success	Reinforced Team Cohesion
	<i>2. Redeemed Recipient</i>	Enjoy Strong Social Ties	Announcement	Skeptically Wait & See	Coming Together/ Breakthrough	Upwards Spiral	-
	<i>3. Easy-Going Optimist</i>	-	Announcement	What is in it For me?/ Peer Influence	Opt for Personal Gain	It was for the Better	-
	<i>4. Wannabe Hero</i>	Early Involvement	Being Frontrunner	Getting Sidelined	A Good Conversation	Still on the Team	-
	<i>5. Bystander</i>	Personal Circumstances	Announcement	-	Supporting to Management	They have Always been Good to me	Trying to Survive
Chapter 5	<i>Episodes</i>	-	Announcement	Plan of Action	Implementation	Evaluation	Look Ahead
	<i>Interpretation</i>	-	Ghost stories	Atmosphere	Screwed	Strong together	Future perspectives

The uncertainty and lack of information in the early experiences, and the redemption and optimism experienced in Episodes 4 and 5 of the different process models, seem to represent a common part of employees' change schema. As was discussed in the theoretical outline of this dissertation, such schemas help employees to make sense of, and structure, change experiences in their daily work lives (Steele, 2021). For example, as they know that after the announcement follows the making plans - episode, employees know when to engage in what active and passive behaviors (such as listening, bonding, lobbying). Moreover, as was discussed in Chapter 3, the structures facilitate coherence and a sense of predictability in employees' role transitions.

In terms of the evolving episodes of change, I notice common cognitive and interactional activities such as dealing with uncertainty, discussing with colleagues, looking back on what happened. However, when exploring those

experiences that have been provided in this dissertation in more detail, a more varied spectrum of interpretations is found. On a low construal-level, the different daily events happening throughout change *mean different things to different people*, resulting in different role-taking. Interestingly, although many factors come in play (traits, prior experience, circumstances, values, etc.), as seen in Chapter 4, differences do not seem infinite, and this dissertation suggests the existence of a *set of change schemas* that revolve around similar change experience tensions (e.g., conformity and agency). The term tensions refers to 'the clash of ideas, principles, and actions as well as any feelings of discomfort' (Fairhurst et al., 2002, p. 506). Chapter 4 provides explicit illustration of this, but, for example, also the experiences of the traditional travel employees versus those of technically savvy entrants in travel industry in Chapter 2 support this view.

6.2.2 Experiencing Time and Temporality in Change Sensemaking

In line with recent literature (Bansal et al., 2025; Karlsen, 2022), the presented sensemaking outcomes are inherently linked to the experiences of time. The summarized processes seem to dictate what is considered a logical or 'right' time to act in the evolving orderly episodes of change that are embedded in the organizations' social context (Belschak & Jacobs, 2023; Wiebe, 2014). In other words, people expect that Episode 2 will follow Episode 1 and precedes Episode 3. In this orderly structure, the presented schemas suggest a linear time process marked by critical events and actions. However, this linearity should be interpreted with some flexibility in mind. While this specific linear time ordering *can* apply, not all episodes are experienced per se, and individuals might move back and forth to relive certain episodes more than once.

There is more to the experience of time as observed throughout this dissertation to discuss. Time, as experienced in organizational change, is both informed by social, collective assumptions, as well as by psychological, individual interpretations. Otherwise said, experienced time is a socio-psychological consideration (Dóci, 2024). Despite similarities of the different process models discussed (suggesting collective assumptions), individual actors experience their time-lived and event-timing differently (Belschak & Jacobs, 2023). In this vein, Brown, Stacey, and Nandhakumar (2008) referred to 'discrepant sensemaking' to explain that although central messages are received simultaneously by all change recipients, the timing of trickle-down effects varies, leading to different interpretation outcomes. For example, while one individual might quickly process the announcement and concurrent

sensemaking, moving swiftly to the next phase, another might take significantly longer to remain in their initial phase. Similarly, one participant might perceive a two-week wait for information as excessively long, while another might find the same period satisfactorily prompt. Moreover, employees' sensemaking varies in temporal depth: "the temporal distances into the past and future that individuals and collectives typically consider when contemplating events that have happened, may have happened, or may happen" (Bluedorn & Standifer, 2006, p. 201). Where one employee might compare and relate a current experience to a similar one five years ago, another employee with a shorter retrospective time frame in mind misses out on this comparison and might find themselves confronted with an unprecedented new experience. Such variations in experiencing time partially explains the differing behaviors observed at various times, making them less incomprehensible than previously assumed.

Another important notion on the role of time in employee change experiences is that time orientation, through which individuals perceive and make sense of change, can be seen as mental time travel, shaped by relations between past, present, and future perspectives (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Meier & Ingerslev, 2023; Shipp & Jansen, 2021). All process approaches in this dissertation show employees adjusting their time orientation as change evolves, highlighting that anticipation and prospection are *as crucial as* a present focus and retrospection in change sensemaking. I discuss different time orientations in employees change sensemaking that I observe throughout this dissertation:

1. Common prospection: All process models include a phase of 'the announcement,' after which employees develop future-oriented cognitions about anticipated events and their personal impact. Throughout the process, employees look forward, anticipating what comes next, *estimating local impact*, *foreseeing chaos*, and *expecting breakthroughs*. These labels, used throughout this dissertation, reflect a future time orientation.
2. Common present focus: Most process models feature a phase of disorientation and reluctance, where employees are rooted in the present, focusing on current events. "*Wait and see*" is the language often used to describe these moments. Similarly, the act of making operational adjustments in the daily work illustrates a present focus.
3. Common retrospection: Employees narrate on many experiences that are linked to their working life past. For example, they mourn over the layoffs, or over a team break up, and they refer to prior times when 'things were better'. However, despite the retrospective interpretations, there appears

a simultaneous tendency to want to move forward. For example, one might expect that the episode of *evaluation* is devoted to retrospection, yet this often represents a moment of celebration of the newly achieved status quo followed by a new future focus on 'what will come next'. A future-oriented nature of change, with actors working towards a future state, seems reflected in the (cultural) interpretive repertoire. Otherwise stated; the 'moving forward' (Western) conceptualization of change leaves little room for 'dwelling on' (nor celebrating) the past.

These empirical observations support the idea that change is experienced and interpreted in retrospective-, present-, and prospective sense (Shipp & Jansen, 2021). This is important as an orientation towards the past can trigger different interpretations than does an orientation towards the future, leading to different change behaviors. Although this research is of an explorative nature, this observation introduces a sensemaking variety that supports the notion that time orientation is an understudied, yet important, factor in understanding individuals' change sensemaking (Hernes & Schultz, 2020; Karlsen, 2023; Meier & Ingerslev, 2023; Wiebe, 2014). Hence, there is a need to prominently situate actors within the flow of time to better understand their agentic roles in change processes. This notion relates to Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) conceptualization of human agency defined as: "a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment)" (p. 963).

6.2.3 The Importance of Social Exchange at Team Level

The consideration of temporal interactions is crucial for comprehending the role of employees as social beings (Blau, 1964). This dissertation underscores the dynamic nature of workplace relationships, power structures and relational expectations (such as the Psychological Contract) in change contexts. This dissertation advocates for advancement of further 'socialization' of change literature by addressing the challenges faced by employees' that are caused by their strong focus on social bonding and – comparison. Such a challenge is for example the cognitive and emotional internal conflict arisings while employees navigate change as they balance a) satisfying a need for belongingness and safety in the local team, b) satisfying a need for, and secure, a good relationship with one's supervisor, and c) satisfying a need for independence to make one's own decisions in change role-taking (as discussed in Chapter 4).

Big societal changes that translate into organizational change mobilize different social forces and role transitions within organizations (Johansen et al., 2024). Different employee groups represent different social identities and status within a changing organization, and change presents itself as a re-negotiation of social order (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995). This horizontal (between colleagues) social divide, causing deep structure change, is not a stand-alone finding in travel industry yet is seen in more business contexts nowadays (Briken et al., 2017; Chernyak-Hai & Rabenu, 2018). As different social groups engage in comparison and self- and other stereotyping (Leonardelli, 2023), under the pressure of change, this often leads to misunderstandings and increased tensions amongst colleagues. To overcome this challenge, emphasizing shared objectives might bridge divides, and highlighting common goals can reduce in-group/out-group conflict (Dimant & Kimbrough 2024; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Based on Blau's (1964) Social Exchange Theory, I argue that change literature should encompass not only organizational-level change from a management perspective and individual-level change from an employee perspective but also include knowledge development on the less often addressed intermediate perspective of social groups and teams (for an example see: Kanitz et al., 2023). These groups and teams likely share perceptions of their experiences, and this has a crucial impact in terms of fostering or hindering positive change outcomes through collective reinforcements. This is especially important in the context of many Western organizations, moving from hierarchical organizational structures to horizontal, team based, structures in which self-organizing teams are responsible for their own success (Gersdorf-Van den Berg et al., 2024; Groulx et al., 2023). Since such structures intensify horizontal cooperation and social exchange with less interference of a manager 'higher in command', one can foresee that the influence of group norms and processes of social enactment on organizational change outcomes strengthens in the years to come (Van Kleef et al., 2019).

6.3 Limitations and Related Future Research Suggestions

There are several limitations to this dissertation that should be addressed. These limitations will be discussed and linked to new avenues for future research. First, note that the challenges addressed in this dissertation

are relevant mainly to organizations operating in Western culture. Culture prescribes values, shapes motives, and sets direction of appropriate behavior (Chernyak-Hai & Rabenu, 2018) and thus has an influence on this dissertations' results by the fact that both the research and the participants were Dutch. Future studies could include participants from diverse cultural backgrounds to examine whether the findings hold true across different cultural contexts. This would help in understanding the influence of cultural variables on the research outcomes.

Second, this dissertation underscores the significance of exchange relationships in evaluating experiences, my theorizing on this issue could have benefitted from inclusion of additional related theories. Chapter 3 employs the Psychological Contract as a framework to examine management-employee exchange dynamics from the employee's viewpoint. Notably, the Leader-Member Exchange (LMX; Bauer & Green, 1996) theory could be utilized as a lens to enhance our understanding of the quality of these relationships. To enrich the study of change experiences, it is beneficial to incorporate the perspective of the 'two-way street' of exchange between leaders and employees. Given the relevance of LMX to various social exchange issues, such as empowerment, emotional support, and feelings of obligation, its application presents a promising avenue for future research. Such research could involve collecting data from both parties (e.g. diary study) to understand the reciprocal influences on change experiences. Relatedly, future studies could explore the similarities and differences between employee-based change stories as used in this dissertation and management-based change stories as used in high-quality studies such as the one by Wiebe (2014) to explore how experiences are actor dependent or reside in the more general atmosphere of the organization.

A third limitation relates to the interest in time and timing in the different process models developed throughout this dissertation. Something that is not included in this dissertation's set up is an insight in the actual time frame (based on clock time) of a change process, or the clock time frame within which a change story is expected to play out (Shipp & Jansen, 2021). Such time frame, including a temporal structure, for change processes could complement this dissertation's process view (de Metz et al., 2024). Future research could include the exploration of duration of episodes and possible temporal structures (Orlikowski & Yates, 1999) such as a weekly change meeting, or monthly progress update. Insights in whether and how employees

use such structures as a handhold could provide a deeper understanding into the duration of episodic experiences and possibilities to (via social practices) create joint rhythms (Karlsen, 2022). The now varied and unknown durations and time frames in change schemas cause an unpredictability in the timing of change recipients' experiences and responses, making it difficult to facilitate in their timely needs (Bansal et al., 2025; Oreg et al., 2011).

A promising avenue for future research involves extending the study of digital transformation by explicitly examining the role of Artificial Intelligence (AI) within the context of this dissertation. AI technologies are not only reshaping operational processes but also profoundly influencing employee experiences—and vice versa. First, the adoption of AI serves as a major catalyst for large-scale organizational change, disrupting routines and workflows (Mahringer et al., 2024). The successful integration of AI into organizational contexts hinges critically on employees' trust in these technologies (Glikson & Woolley, 2020). Building on the findings of this dissertation, future research could incorporate AI-specific sensemaking approaches to investigate how employees construct narratives around algorithmic change and evolving roles. Second, AI is expected to alter patterns of workplace interaction: human-AI collaboration (HAIC) may reshape, or even displace, both vertical relationships (e.g., between managers and employees) and horizontal dynamics (e.g., among coworkers) in everyday work settings (Hillebrand et al., 2025). Future studies could explore the possible building of human-AI psychological (change) contracts and explore consequences for normative interaction and exchange. Third, modern organizational change is considered human-based change practice as it can be considered a generative activity of people engaging in interaction to co-construct a desired future. AI has the potential to transform this organizational practice and form a new base for change problem solving and - decision making, altering change processes and subsequent experiences altogether (Oswick, 2024). Future work could explore and compare employee experiences in human versus AI- based change practice.

Last, future research could apply mixed-method and quantitative approaches to add to the study of change experiences. Such studies could complement the rich, thick micro descriptions provided in this dissertation. For example, quantitative methods could be applied to advance the study of change recipients role taking and bring forward more generalizable insights (Queirós et al., 2017).

6.4 Implications for Practice

In many professional contexts, and as echoed in practitioner and management literature (see for example the Forbes Leadership, Harvard Business Review or McKinsey & Company websites), organizational change suffers from an image problem. As illustrated in this dissertation, employees often brace for a difficult period upon hearing the word ‘change’ – anticipating poor communication, untraceable organizational politics, and chaos. While many expect to eventually emerge from this process with positive outcomes, they first feel they must confront and conquer what is perceived as a formidable challenge. For some, it has simply become one challenge too many. Initially, I considered whether reframing ‘change’ as organizational ‘development’ might reduce those negative connotations. However, with the risk of employees feeling misled by this potential euphemism, this might not benefit change after all. A more promising approach may lie in timely focusing on social construction of change rather than technical- and by bridging the psychological gap between the abstract, strategic level of change and the concrete day-to-day change experiences.

There is individual and shared excitement of being part of something new at a high construal level, and many strategic changes in organizations find their origin in societal well-known debates (to date, I recon sustainability and digital transformation as two major driving forces) that people understand are necessary for survival. Once we crack the code of transcending this excitement to low construal-level experiences, could this buffer the experience of uncertainty and potential or real loss? The reality is that people are unlikely to feel excitement about the loss of a colleague, the entrance in a team full of new people, and the hassle of working with new systems that require a lot of extra time. Excitement on a low construal level stems from personal attention and strong social ties; a fulfilment of the basic human needs to be seen, heard and valued. Therefore, the challenge for change agents is to engage people across both construal levels by providing a compelling narrative of organizational purpose and by facilitating personal, relatable experiences of change. One way to do this is by helping individuals craft stories in which they are not passive recipients of change, but active contributors – critically engaged, positively challenged, and socially connected. Based on the findings in this dissertation, my recommendation to change agents is clear: organize for local engagement, and consistently translate large-scale transformation into contextually relevant human-scale experiences.

To foster successful organizational change, it is essential to demonstrate trust and confidence in employees' willingness to support strategic directions—provided they are given meaningful opportunities for local agency. Employees must feel a sense of ownership and belonging, which is best nurtured when they can influence the way change unfolds in their immediate context. After all, they understand local dynamics better than anyone else. One valuable strategy is to invest in strong local networks by empowering local change agents as explorers and advance parties of strategic transformation. Additionally, building strong, diverse teams during periods of relative stability can lay the groundwork for more resilient change responses. When teams already possess a broad range of skills and perspectives, upcoming changes are more likely to align with existing capabilities, enabling individuals to step into leadership roles based on their strengths. This is the critical moment when effective leadership must rise—not through a pursuit of personal gain or status, but through service to the team and the broader purpose. Strong teams provide the psychological safety and cohesion necessary for such leadership to emerge.

In today's VUCA environment—defined by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014)—many workplaces feel chaotic. Managers, in particular, may experience a diminished sense of control as traditional levers of influence become less effective (Chernyak-Hai & Rabenu, 2018). This often triggers a reflex to increase control. However, the findings of this dissertation suggest that this response is counterproductive. Instead, increasing trust and granting autonomy—particularly to teams of change recipients—proves more effective for navigating and shaping the contemporary business landscape. Trust fosters commitment, adaptability, and proactive behavior. As Blau (1964) argues, strong social relationships are built on the expectation that trust will be reciprocated. Given the team-based nature of many modern organizations, social support and internal networks are crucial elements in any successful change strategy. Employees' perceptions of how change is managed in their daily work context directly influence their willingness to engage with it.

Ultimately, employee experiences do more than shape support for the change process—they also influence how employees evaluate the organization as a whole (Rupp et al., 2014). Investing in local agency, trusting teams, and supporting employees socially and psychologically are therefore not just ethical practices—they are strategic imperatives for lasting change.

6.5 Concluding Remarks

The central question addressed in this thesis was: *What are employees' interpreted change experiences and what implicit mechanisms underly their interpretations?* To answer this question, the empirical chapters in this dissertation all concerned recipients' interpreted organizational change experiences in distinct ways. Chapter 2 discussed how employees interpret their retrospective experiences of change processes. Chapter 3 discussed how employees' change experiences are embedded in a broader social exchange system. More specifically, I linked the interpretation of change experiences to the exchanges that belong to a changing Psychological Contract. Chapter 4 discussed composite narratives as a "common sense of a higher order" (Weick, 1979, p. 3), that is, a system of common interpersonal experiences. Those narratives create a culturally shared reality when it comes to interpretations of organizational change. Chapter 5 discussed employees' prospective interpretations of upcoming change experiences.

Organizational change is fundamentally about embracing newness. This dissertation posits that, for employees as change recipients, the journey toward newness is shaped by dynamic and socially embedded interactions, which are expressed through what I refer to as institutionalized change repertoires. These repertoires are grounded in employees' prevailing beliefs about their own roles and those of others within the context of socially constructed exchange processes. Furthermore, the thesis argues that employees' perceptions of their role within change processes are not static but evolve over time. This evolution is influenced by a range of everyday interactions and events, with individuals drawing on their interpretations of the past, their experiences in the present, and their expectations for the future. These temporal cognitions inform how employees make sense of "what is going on" during organizational change. The interpretation of these experiences often takes shape in the form of change narratives—recurring story patterns that reflect the changing dynamics of agency and conformity experienced by the employee as a focal actor. These narratives serve as important sensemaking tools, both for the employees who construct them and for researchers seeking to understand their experiences. By analyzing these stories, we gain insight into how employees navigate change, reposition themselves within evolving structures, and find meaning in the midst of uncertainty.

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Appendices

English Summary

Nederlandstalige samenvatting

Research Data Management

About the Author

Personal Reflection

Curriculum Vitae

English Summary

This dissertation highlights the importance of everyday change experiences in shaping employees' interpretation of, and contribution to, large-scale organizational change like going digital or becoming more sustainable. While leaders often talk about change in abstract terms, employees live through it in very real, personal ways. Their day-to-day experiences, emotions, and interactions are what ultimately determine whether change efforts succeed or fail. Strategic changes ideally translate into positive daily experiences. However, excitement can be hard to maintain in the everyday chaos of change. Four studies address the issue of employees' interpretations of their daily change experiences and illustrate concepts and mechanisms at play that influence employee change sensemaking outcomes.

The first study describes how Construal Level Theory (CLT) can be applied to understand the impact of digital transformation as considered by employees in the Dutch travel industry. It explains why digital transformation is exciting in theory, tough in practice. When digital transformation is considered at an abstract and impersonal level (higher construal level), it is usually received positively. Employees see the benefits, such as the need to keep up with the times and the opportunities that digitalization brings to the industry. At this level, there resides excitement and positive challenge in people's minds and the emotional valence is positive, and intensity of emotions is low. However, as the changes become more concrete and directly affect their daily work (lower construal level), employees' perceptions shift to a more challenging and often negative experience. Digital transformation at this level 1) results in a disruption of social order in the workplace, which can lead to social tensions, conflicts and a deterioration of the work atmosphere, and 2) results in a devaluation of traditional knowledge and skills, leading to feelings of disillusionment and reduced work motivation.

The disruption of social order in the workplace explains why perceptions of digital transformation become more negative at a lower construal level. Employees in the travel industry value the strong social bonds and sense of community in the workplace. Digital transformation can disrupt these social structures through the arrival of new colleagues, shifting roles and responsibilities, and increasing competition. The arrival of new colleagues with specialized technical knowledge can lead to uncertainty and fear of being replaced. Employees who adapt quickly to new technology and practices may

experience social disapproval from colleagues who struggle to cope with the changes. This can lead to a change in perceived fairness of the situation, in turn leading to tension, conflict and a deterioration in the work atmosphere. The study shows that how people “frame” change—whether they see it from a distance or up close—makes a big difference in how they feel about it.

The second study describes how the dynamic phases of psychological contracts are reflected in employees' experiences of organizational change. Employees experience a sense of balance and stability (maintenance) in their psychological contracts when there are no major disruptions. But when major changes are announced—like team reshuffles or possible layoffs—employees start to question what they're getting in return for their efforts. In response to change, employees evaluate the situation from a “what's in it for me” perspective (renegotiation/recovery), focused on achieving personal goals. Trust and relationship management by the employer, including responsiveness to the employee's needs, are crucial to the restoration of the psychological contract (restoration of maintenance). The study additionally describes how social interaction affects the dynamics of psychological contracts during change processes. Although social interaction is a core concept in social exchange theory, this aspect is largely overlooked in the current literature on psychological contracts. The study also highlights the importance of social comparison. People don't just evaluate their own situation—they look at how their colleagues are treated too. This shapes their sense of fairness and their willingness to stay engaged.

The third study examines the dynamic role-taking of change recipients. I propose that employees don't just passively follow change—they actively shape it. But their role isn't fixed. It shifts depending on the situation, their needs, and their interactions with others. 80 participant stories from eight different Dutch organizations were analyzed and this resulted in five composite narratives reflecting the different ways recipients can experience their role in a change process. Two key tensions influence the role shifting of the recipient. The first role shifting comprises conformity vs. individuality (“blending in vs. standing out”): sometimes employees want to blend in and go with the flow. Other times, they want to stand out and be recognized. The second comprises active involvement vs. safety (“stepping in vs. holding back”): sometimes employees are eager to jump in and help. Other times, they hold back to protect themselves. The study shows that the role of change recipients is complex, adaptive, and social in nature. Understanding these role dynamics can help

leaders support employees more effectively and create space for different kinds of contributions.

The fourth study advocates a new view of how employees deal with change processes. Current literature focuses primarily on the retrospective analysis of change processes, focusing on how employees interpret the change after it has occurred. However, it is crucial to also look at how employees anticipate the future, or in other words, how they expect and interpret the change processes in advance. "Prospective sensemaking," the anticipatory interpretation of change, has a significant impact on employees' emotions and reactions. By analyzing participants' fictional change stories, patterns emerged in how people expect change to play out. These stories confirmed that people rely on familiar storylines as they provide a recognizable, "episodic" model of change processes, parallel to existing management theories. They also draw on cultural ideas about what change means—like "change is hard" or "change is exciting." And their expectations are shaped by emotions—how they think they'll feel when the change happens. The study proposes a new model that combines these three elements: the storyline (episodic), the cultural meaning (semantic), and the emotional tone (emotive). Together, these shape how people prepare for and respond to change.

To conclude, this dissertation notes the role of change schemas held by employees to understand and shape their role in change. Based on this dissertation, I conclude that employees tap into common, and socially shared, scripts to navigate their experiences. Those scripts entail different phases or episodes during change processes, with script holders' orientations shifting between a focus on the past, present and future. The dissertation argues for a broader focus on the social world of employees in change processes and emphasizes the importance of daily exchanges within teams. By unravelling the periodized social dimensions of change interactions and events, we will better understand how people feel and talk about change and what makes them decide on their roles and behaviors in change. Change isn't just a plan—it's a lived experience. And by supporting employees in that experience, organizations can achieve more meaningful and lasting change and with that us managers, change agents, and employees can achieve more change success altogether.

Nederlandstalige samenvatting

Medewerkers hebben een onmisbare rol in het slagen van organisatieverandering. Dit proefschrift is gericht op het beter leren begrijpen van de dagelijkse verander-ervaringen van medewerkers en hoe hun eigen interpretaties hiervan de rol en bijdrage van medewerkers in verandering beïnvloeden. Hoewel verander programma's abstract kunnen lijken in managementpresentaties, zijn dagelijkse ervaringen van medewerkers heel concreet en het zijn deze concrete zaken die een positief of negatief beeld (met bijbehorende emoties) van de verandering schetsen voor medewerkers. Strategische veranderingen, zoals duurzame - en digitale transformatie, moeten zich idealiter vertalen in positieve dagelijkse ervaringen zodat medewerkers de verandering steunen en actief vormgeven en verankeren in het dagelijkse werk. Echter, een positief toekomstbeeld met bijbehorende positieve ervaringen is niet vanzelfsprekend! Vier studies gaan in op de interpretaties van deze dagelijkse verander-ervaringen en de verwachtingen die medewerkers hierbij hebben. Bovendien illustreren de studies concepten en mechanismen die de uitkomsten van het *betekenisgeven aan veranderingen* door medewerkers beïnvloeden.

Digitale transformatie: leuk in theorie, lastig in praktijk! De eerste studie beschrijft hoe Construal Level Theorie (CLT) kan worden toegepast om de impact van digitale transformatie te begrijpen vanuit medewerker perspectief. Wanneer medewerkers digitale transformatie op een hoger abstractieniveau beschouwen, wordt het positief ontvangen. Men ziet de noodzaak om bij de tijd te blijven, liever nog: voorop te lopen, en men ziet kansen die digitalisering aan de organisatie en industrie biedt. Echter, naarmate de veranderingen concreter worden en het dagelijkse werk beïnvloeden (lager abstractieniveau), verschuift de perceptie van medewerkers gemakkelijk naar een negatievere ervaring. Dit komt doordat digitale transformatie op dit niveau leidt tot 1) een verstoring van de sociale orde op de werkplek, en 2) daaraan ten grondslag liggend verschuiving van de waardering voor traditionele kennis en vaardigheden. Waar het eerst een goed idee leek, blijkt na een tijdje dat de verandering onvoorziene negatieve gevolgen heeft.

Medewerkers hechten over het algemeen veel waarde aan sterke sociale banden en een gevoel van samen op de werkplek. Digitale transformatie kan deze sociale structuren verstoren door de komst van nieuwe collega's, verschuivende rollen en verantwoordelijkheden, en toenemende concurrentie.

De komst van nieuwe collega's met gespecialiseerde technische kennis kan onzekerheid en angst triggeren bij anderen. Medewerkers die zich snel aanpassen aan nieuwe technologieën en praktijken kunnen sociale afkeuring ervaren van collega's die meer moeite hebben met de veranderingen. Medewerkers ervaren gevoelens van onrechtvaardigheid, spanningen, conflicten en een slechte werksfeer. Deze studie laat zien dat de framing van verandering – en het kijken van veraf of dichtbij – bepaalt hoe verandering wordt ervaren en waarom de grote voorstanders twijfels kunnen krijgen en andersom.

De tweede studie beschrijft hoe dynamiek in het psychologisch contract (PC) wordt weerspiegeld in de ervaringen van medewerkers in organisatieverandering. Het PC is de set aan verwachtingen en beloftes die een medewerker heeft ten aanzien van de relatie werkgever-werkgever. Medewerkers ervaren een gevoel van balans en stabiliteit in hun PC wanneer er geen grote veranderingen zijn. De aankondiging van veranderingen, zoals de vorming van nieuwe teams, herstructureringen en mogelijke ontslagen, wordt vaak ervaren als een versturende gebeurtenis. In reactie daarop evalueren medewerkers de situatie vanuit een "winst of verlies" perspectief, gericht op het bereiken van persoonlijke doelen. Vertrouwen en investeren in de relatie door de werkgever, inclusief goed kunnen reageren op de (nieuwe) behoeften van de medewerker, zijn cruciaal voor het herstel van het PC wanneer dit beschadigd is geraakt. De studie beschrijft hoe sociale interactie de dynamiek van psychologische contracten beïnvloedt tijdens veranderingsprocessen. Hoewel sociale interactie een kernconcept is in de sociale uitwisselingstheorie (de basis van het PC), wordt dit aspect grotendeels over het hoofd gezien in de huidige literatuur over verandering. Medewerkers vergelijken hun eigen inzet en beloningen met die van collega's om hun gevoel van rechtvaardigheid te bepalen en doen dit afwisselend op individueel of collectief (gedeeld) niveau.

De derde studie onderzoekt de verschillende dynamische rollen die medewerkers spelen in verandering en hoe het komt dat men soms *tijdens* een traject van rol verandert. De manier waarop medewerkers hun rol in een veranderingsproces vormgeven, is dynamisch en wordt beïnvloed door verschillende factoren, zoals gebeurtenissen, interacties en persoonlijke behoeften. De verhalen van 80 deelnemers uit acht verschillende Nederlandse organisaties werden geanalyseerd, wat resulteerde in vijf samengestelde narratieven (verhaallijnen) die de verschillende manieren weerspiegelen waarop medewerkers in de rol van 'ontvangers' hun rol in een veranderings-

proces ervaren. Twee belangrijke spanningsvelden beïnvloeden de rolverschuiving in deze context. De eerste betreft het veld tussen conformiteit en individualiteit (opgaan in de groep versus opvallen): de behoefte om zich aan te passen aan de groep en de behoefte om uniek en erkend te worden. De tweede betreft het veld tussen actieve betrokkenheid versus (passieve) veiligheid (je nek uit steken versus terughoudendheid): de wens om actief bij te dragen aan de verandering versus de behoefte om risico's te vermijden en zich veilig te voelen. De studie toont aan dat de rol van 'veranderingsontvangers' complex, adaptief en sociaal van aard is.

De vierde studie pleit voor een nieuwe kijk op hoe medewerkers omgaan met veranderingsprocessen. De huidige literatuur richt zich voornamelijk op de retrospectieve analyse van veranderingsprocessen, waarbij de nadruk ligt op hoe medewerkers de verandering interpreteren nadat deze heeft plaatsgevonden. Het is echter ook belangrijk om te kijken naar hoe medewerkers de toekomst anticiperen, of met andere woorden, hoe zij de veranderingsprocessen van tevoren verwachten en hun beelden hierop aanpassen. "Prospectief betekenisgeven", de anticiperende interpretatie van toekomstige verandering, heeft impact op de emoties en reacties van medewerkers. Door analyse van de fictieve veranderingsverhalen van deelnemers, kwamen verschillende patronen naar voren die weergeven hoe mensen *verwachten* dat veranderingen zullen verlopen. Deze verhalen bevestigden een herkenbaar, "N-fasen" model van veranderingsprocessen dat men waarschijnlijk vaak heeft meegemaakt en dat in lijn is met bestaande managementtheorieën. Aanvullend aan deze procesmatige verwachtingen waren semantische interpretaties van verandering in de verhalen verweven. Deze semantische/ verhalende elementen betreffen gegeneraliseerde, culturele opvattingen over verandering die door de deelnemers werden gebruikt. Als derde element worden de verwachtingen gevormd door emoties. De resultaten van deze studie leiden tot een model dat weergeeft hoe prospectieve betekenisgeving van veranderprocessen leunt op episodische-, semantische-, en emotionele toekomstgedachten. De studie suggereert dat het moeilijk is voor mensen om alternatieve toekomstige scenario's voor te stellen, waardoor de traditionele, gevestigde kijk op verandering dominant blijft.

Een conclusie van dit proefschrift is dat medewerkers nieuwe verandering niet aangaan vanuit een tabula rasa ofwel onbeschreven blad/ schone lei perspectief. Eerdere ervaringen en verwachtingen over de toekomst spelen logischerwijs een rol in hoe medewerkers denken over aankomende

verandering. De veranderingsschema's (een min of meer vaste set aan aannames en verwachtingen) beïnvloeden het sentiment en het vormgeven van een eigen rol in veranderingen. Op basis van dit proefschrift concludeer ik dat medewerkers gebruik maken van gemeenschappelijke en sociaal gedeelde scripts om hun ervaringen te plaatsen en kleuring te geven. Deze scripts omvatten herkenbare fasen of episodes tijdens veranderingsprocessen, waarbij de oriëntatie van de scriptbezitters wisselt tussen een focus op het verleden, heden en de toekomst. Het proefschrift pleit voor een sterkere focus op de sociale context (status, positie, waardering, vergelijk, e.d.) van veranderingsprocessen en benadrukt het belang van dagelijkse sociale interactie binnen sterke teams. Change isn't just a plan—it's a lived experience. Door het ontrafelen en bespreken van verwachtingen en ervaringen, met aandacht voor de geperiodiseerde sociale dimensies van veranderingsinteracties, zullen we medewerkers en hun rol en gedrag in verandering beter begrijpen en kunnen we (onderzoekers, veranderaars en medewerkers) samen meer bereiken.

Research Data Management

All interviews and stories used in this dissertation were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim in MS Word files. The prospective stories used in Chapter five were electronically typed down by the participants in Qualtrix during the online session. All data is stored on password-protected devices. Backup copies are maintained on secure cloud storage with restricted access. All shared data is anonymized to protect participant identities before sharing. Access to the original data will be granted to verified researchers upon request.

Data will be retained for a minimum of ten years post-publication. After this period, all identifiable data will be securely deleted. Anonymized data may be retained for own future research purposes.

All participants were informed on how their data was used, stored, and shared. Ethical consideration was taken into account at all times.

About the Author

Annemiek was born 13 May 1984 in Heerlen, The Netherlands, as daughter of Jos Van der Schaft and Elly Van der Schaft-Van Uum. After finishing secondary school (VWO) at the Jeanne d' Arc College in Maastricht in 2002, Annemiek started her studies International Business (IB) at Maastricht University. In 2007, she spent a semester at Aarhus School of Business, Denmark, and earned her MSc. degree. In 2008, she moved to 's-Hertogenbosch and started working at Breda University of Applied Sciences, where she found the opportunity to combine her job as an organizational advisor, specialized in change and development, with PhD research at Radboud University in Nijmegen. February 2025, she started working as strategic advisor on the topic of digital transformation for the Dutch Police.



Personal Reflection

(in accordance with article 71 of the RU PhD Policy)

Early in the process, one of my supervisors reminded me, "It takes a village to raise a PhD," highlighting the collaborative nature of this endeavor. As I end my PhD journey, I reflect on my individual contributions to the dissertation and the challenges I faced.

One of my primary contributions was translating my professional interest into a scientifically sound PhD theme. My initial interest stemmed from my experiences as an internal change agent, where many initiatives felt "top-down" to my colleagues, leading to emotional strain and sometimes a lack of commitment. I believed in a more collaborative approach between change agents and recipients. This turned my interest to deeply understanding employee change experiences as a better understanding of those experiences has the potential to bring about better cooperation in change initiatives.

Believing that in-depth, personal research approaches would yield the most valuable insights, I persuaded my supervisory team to pursue a qualitative dissertation. After careful consideration, I selected interviews and storytelling methods for data collection. I developed protocols which were crucial for obtaining rigorous and relevant results. I took the lead in the data collection process, visiting organizations, engaging with management and employees, conducting interviews, and gathering stories. Additionally, I trained several research assistants to help collect stories. My contribution extended to data analysis, where I employed various qualitative techniques and presented my ideas and findings to the team as input for our discussions

I dedicated considerable time to drafting, revising, and refining each chapter, ensuring clarity, coherence, and academic rigor. Additionally, I delivered presentations at academic conferences and industry events, which helped disseminate ideas and findings and receive valuable feedback.

Of course, I encountered several challenges. The first includes time management and balancing research with other responsibilities, especially in Corona times when my -then- 6-years old needed home schooling. Second, as I can be a "loner" from time to time, I also learned the importance of seeking feedback and collaborating with peers and my mentors to enhance the quality of my work or just share experiences. I learned that working with a diverse

team of authors can be challenging yet rewarding as the joint forces led to new insights. Third, initially, I did not fully comprehend the nature of the practice-theory gap. I directly studied issues from practice and provided insights from my research in return. However, as I progressed, I observed that this process became increasingly challenging. The deeper one delves into theory, the more difficult it becomes to translate this theoretical knowledge into practical applications.

This journey has not only deepened my knowledge in my field of study but also equipped me with valuable research and analytical skills that will be beneficial in my future academic and professional career.

Curriculum Vitae

Academic Output

Published Articles

- Van der Schaft, A., Solinger, O., Van Olffen, W., Ruotsalainen, R., Lub, D., & Van der Heijden, B. (2024). The role taking dynamics of change recipients: A narrative analysis. *Group & Organization Management*, 10596011241265153.
- Van der Schaft, A., Lub, X., Solinger, O., & Van der Heijden, B. (2020). The influence of social interaction on employees' changing psychological contracts in digitally transforming organizations. *European Journal of Work & Organizational Psychology* 29(2), 164-182.
- Van der Schaft, A., Lub, X., Solinger, O., & Van der Heijden, B. (2022). How employees experience digital transformation. A dynamic and multi-layered sensemaking perspective. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research*.48(5), 803-820.

Presentations at Academic Conferences

- Van der Schaft, A., Solinger, O., Van Olffen, W., Lub, X., & Van der Heijden, B. (2024). "I Saw That Coming": Employees' Prospective Sensemaking Antenarratives of Organizational Change. 13th Biennial Conference of the Dutch HRM Network, Rotterdam, The Netherlands, November 6-8, 2024.
- Van der Schaft, A., Solinger, O., Ruotsalainen, R., Van Olffen, W., Lub, X., & Van der Heijden, B. (2024). Are They Loyal Rebels? Academy of Management Annual Meeting, Chicago, United States, August 9-13, 2024.
- Van der Schaft, A., Solinger, O., Ruotsalainen, R., Van Olffen, W., Lub, X., & Van der Heijden, B. (2024). The Role-taking Dynamics of Change Recipients: A Narrative Analysis. AoM Careers Division Community Conference, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, April 18-19, 2024.
- Van der Schaft, A., Solinger, O., Olffen, W., Lub, X., Van der Heijden, B. (2022). How will the story end: Employees' prospective scenarios of organizational change. 20th Bi-annual conference of the European Association of Work and Organizational Psychology (EAWOP), Glasgow, Scotland, January 11-14, 2022. (*Manuscript accepted, conference cancelled due to COVID 19*).
- Van der Schaft, A., Solinger, O., Ruotsalainen, R., Van Olffen, W., Lub, X., & Van der Heijden, B. (2020). The Development of Implicit Followership Theories in Organizational Change Processes. 80th AOM Annual Conference "20/20: Broadening our Sight", Online Conference, August 7-11, 2020.

- Van der Schaft, A., Solinger, O., Ruotsalainen, R., Van Olffen, W., Lub, X., & Van der Heijden, B. (2020). The Development of Implicit Followership Theories in Organizational Change Processes. 5TH Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Leadership Symposium “Leadership and Context”, Mykonos, Greece, May 6-9, 2020. (*Manuscript accepted, conference cancelled due to COVID 19*).
- Van der Schaft, A., Solinger, O., Ruotsalainen, R., Van Olffen, W., Lub, X., & Van der Heijden, B. (2019). Change narratives and related employee behavior throughout time. 11th Biennial International Conference of the Dutch HRM Network “The Societal Impact of HRM”, Tilburg, The Netherlands, November 14-15, 2019.
- Van der Schaft, A., Lub, X., Van der Heijden, B., & Solinger, O. (2019). The Influence of Social Interaction on the Dynamics of Employees’ Psychological Contracting in Digitally Transforming Organizations. 19th Bi-annual conference of the European Association of Work and Organizational Psychology (EAWOP), Turin, Italy, May 29-June 1, 2019.
- Van der Schaft, A., Lub, X., & Solinger, O. (2018). A dynamic perspective on how employees make sense of technology-driven organizational change. Academy of Management Annual Meeting, Chicago, United States, August 10-14, 2018.
- Van der Schaft, A., Lub, X., Van der Heijden, B., & Solinger, O. (2018). A social perspective to large scale organization change. EuroChrie, Dublin, Ireland, November 7-9, 2018.
- Van der Schaft, A. & Lub, X. (2017). A multi-level process study on employee appraisal, experience and response to the process of technological innovation at work. 10th Biennial International Conference of the Dutch HRM Network, Nijmegen, The Netherlands, November 9-10, 2017.

Awards

- 2024 Annual meeting Academy of Management, Chicago, Illinois, USA, division Organizational Development and Change: “Best PhD Paper Award”, Augustus 15, 2024.
- 2018 EuroChrie Conference “Emerald/IJCHM & Dublin Institute of Technology” highly commended PhD Paper Award, November 7, 2018.

Grants

- PhD scholarship grant €194.000 provided by ANVR/Reiswerk and Centre of Expertise Leisure, Tourism, Hospitality.

Societal impact/ Practitioner based output

Industry Articles and Whitepapers

- Van der Schaft, A., Lub, X., Van der Heijden, B., & Solinger, O. (2024). Mensen begeleiden bij Organisatieverandering? Een perspectief van geven en nemen. *Loopbaanvisie*, augustus 2024, pp 63-67.
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- Van der Schaft, A. (2021). Organisatieverandering tijdens Covid19. Whitepaper Reiswerk.
- Van der Schaft, A., Bergs, Y., Breugel, S., & Lub, X. (2019). Zes HR-uitdagingen voor de Leisure, Toerisme en Hospitality sector. In: *Trendrapport toerisme, recreatie en vrije tijd 2019*. NRIT.
- Van der Schaft, A. (2020). Organisatieverandering: volgerschap. Whitepaper Reiswerk.
- Van der Schaft, A. (2019). Organisatieverandering en het Psychologisch Contract. Whitepaper Reiswerk.
- Van der Schaft, A. (2018). Business transformatie en organisatieverandering in de reisindustrie. Whitepaper Reiswerk.
- Van der Schaft, A., Lub, X., Van der Heijden, B., & Solinger, O. (2018). Personeel in betwixt and between. *Recreatie en Toerisme*, 28 (september).

Public Presentations and Keynotes

- Van der Schaft, A. (Invited speaker), *Human Capital*, 14 Jan 2021, Travel Congress, Jaarbeurs Utrecht, The Netherlands, January 14, 2021.
- Van der Schaft, A. (Invited speaker), *Medewerkers in verandering*, Vakdag Vakantiebeurs, Jaarbeurs Utrecht, The Netherlands, January 14, 2020.
- Van der Schaft, A. (Invited speaker), *Understanding Perspectives*, Hacking HR Meet-up, Rotterdam, The Netherlands, November 12, 2019.
- Van der Schaft, A. (Invited speaker). *Social Exchange in organisatie ontwikkeling*, Reiswerk Learning Event, Naarden, The Netherlands, October 4, 2018.
- Van der Schaft, A. (Keynote speaker). *Wat hebben ze nu weer bedacht*, Reiswerk HR expertmeeting, Nieuwegein, The Netherlands, March 29, 2018.

When the chaos of change rains down on your desk

This dissertation highlights the importance of everyday change experiences in shaping employees' interpretation of, and contribution to, large-scale organizational change. The *experience* of organizational change is omnipresent in people's daily work lives and encompasses both individual- and group level phenomena.

This dissertation notes the role of change schemas held by employees to understand and shape their role in change. This dissertation proposes that employees tap into common, and socially shared, scripts to navigate their experiences. Those scripts entail different phases or episodes during change processes, with script holders' orientations shifting between a focus on the past, present and future.

The dissertation argues for a broader focus on the social context of change processes and emphasizes the importance of daily social exchanges within teams. By unravelling the periodized social dimensions of change interactions and events, we will better understand employees and their roles and behaviors in change. This knowledge can be used by managers, change agents, *and* employees to achieve more change success altogether.

About the image: The Dandelion

Everything seems impermanent up close but if you look from a distance you discover a rhythm of ritual transition and rebirth.

Dare to say goodbye to say hello.

