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# “Out of Sight... Out of mind”

How employees made sense of organisational changes resulting from  
crisis management

by

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# Abstract

**Purpose** - The purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of how employees, of the London Hilton on Park Lane hotel, make sense of organisational changes resulting from crisis management during the Covid-19 pandemic. We aim to contribute to the existing literature within the field of change and crisis management and build on Weick's (1995) concept of sensemaking. Therefore, our study seeks to answer:

*How do employees make sense of organisational change resulting from crisis management?*

**Methodology and Methods** - Following the interpretive tradition, more specifically, symbolic interactionism, this study took on a qualitative method and abductive approach. Data was collected through 12 semi-structured interviews with employees of the London Hilton on Park Lane. Based on the research approach, patterns arose during the interviews. As we engaged with the empirical data, the patterns and the literature we were able to theorize based on empirically grounded argumentations, which we present as excerpt commentaries.

**Findings** – Our findings show that *employees make sense of organisational change resulting from crisis management* through the following: (1) enacting different sensible environments in different timings, (2) social interaction, and (3) by recalling past experiences (retrospective sensemaking).

**Conclusion** – Our theoretical contribution particularly focuses on the hotel closure and lockdown as the changes, due to the novel and significant impacts they had on sensemaking. The combination of the two cues: not being able to go to work due to the hotel closure and the fact that employees still received remuneration through furlough caused difficulties for sensemaking processes. The free time during lockdown and guaranteed financial safety from furlough meant this change was perceived as a holiday. Employees were not able to engage with the physical organisational setting, and mentally detached themselves from the organisational reality hence we label this as “out of sight... out of mind.”

**Keywords** - Sensemaking, Change management, Crisis management, Employees, Hospitality Industry, United Kingdom, Covid-19, Lockdown

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# Table of Contents

Abstract	2
Acknowledgements	3
1. Introduction	6
1.1. Background	6
1.2 Research Purpose	7
2. Literature Review	9
2.1 Crisis Management	9
2.1.1 Crisis management definitions	9
2.1.2 Crisis Management Approaches: Proactive and Reactive	11
2.1.3 Crisis Management and Business Continuity as Change Management	13
2.2 Organisational Change	13
2.2.1 Diagnostic Organisational Development	14
2.2.2 Dialogic Organisational Development	14
2.3 Theoretical Framework: Sensemaking	15
2.3.1 Sensemaking as a process	16
2.3.2 The Seven Properties of Sensemaking	22
2.3.3 Sensemaking and emotions	27
2.3.4 Sensemaking and communication	30
2.3.5 Sensegiving	30
2.4 Chapter Summary	31
3. Methodology and Methods	33
3.1 Methodology	33
3.2 Data Collection	35
3.2.1 Sampling and Semi-Structured interviews	35
3.1.2 Research procedure and tools	36
3.3 Data Analysis	37
3.4 Reflexivity on the methodology and methods used	38
3.5 Chapter Summary	40
4. Analysis	42

Case Background	42
4.1 Enacting different sensible environments in different timings	45
4.1.1: Cancellations and quiet hotel as first cues that were enacted	45
4.1.2: Minefield: making sense of unknown territory as the hotel closes	47
4.1.3: Redundancy process: a new cue for sensemaking that spread insecurity and uncertainty	50
4.1.4: A change in environment as the hotel reopened, but, how about the change in conversation?	52
4.2 Sensemaking through social interactions	54
4.2.1 Outbreak of panic while making sense of the cancellations and quiet hotel	55
4.2.2: Making sense through virtual contact	56
4.2.3: Face-to-face contact allowed for further sensemaking	60
4.3 Making sense backwards: Retrospective Sensemaking	61
4.3.1: Lack of past crisis experiences, to call upon for sensemaking	61
4.3.2: Out of sight... out of mind, they say: Hotel closure made sense of as a holiday	64
4.3.3: Same same but different; repeat openings and closures, different sense made	68
4.4 Chapter Summary	71
5. Conclusion	73
5.1 Theoretical Contribution and Implications	73
Out of sight... Out of mind	73
5.2 Practical Implications	76
5.3 Further Research	77
List of References	78

# 1. Introduction

This section introduces the study that was carried out. Starting with a broader theoretical background of crisis management, which is then followed by the research purpose. Finally, presenting the research question this study seeks to answer.

## 1.1. Background

The Covid-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the economy (Le & Phi, 2021). However, certain industries such as the hospitality sector have experienced more loss than “all previous crises combined, including the 9/11 terrorism attack, 2008 recession or SARS epidemic” (Oxford Economics, 2020 as cited in Le & Phi, 2021, p.1). The impact is expected to be long-lasting which calls for changes, innovation such as service automation and revenue diversification and transformation of hotels as we know them today, while still balancing the element of “human touch” (Le & Phi, 2021). According to Duarte Alonso et al (2020, p.1), 60 percent of hotels made “changes to the day-to-day running of the business to respond to initial impacts.” While there are many studies on organizational crises, such as the Bhopal crisis (Weick, 1988), the collapse of Barings Bank (Brown, 2005), the roof collapse at the railroad museum (Christianson et al., 2009), a deadly heatwave (Boudes & Laroche, 2009) and other environmental disasters (Gephart, 1993) due to the novelty of the pandemic, this specific crisis requires further study (Christianson & Barton, 2020). Furthermore, according to Seto, Johnstone and Campbell-Meier (2018), there is a gap in research on long-duration crises.

Long-duration crises are those that go further than the 72-hours in crisis response mode (Seto, Johnstone & Campbell-Meier, 2018), and therefore includes Covid-19. Long-duration organizational sensemaking has mainly been researched in a non-crisis environment, and therefore this study seeks to explore sensemaking in a crisis of long-duration to address the gap. Compared to other crises such as natural disasters, when a public health emergency is declared, in this case the Covid-19 pandemic, it can take up to years to resolve (Seto, Johnstone & Campbell-Meier, 2018) hence making this study valuable moving forward. This study can avail the research community through the provision of theoretical traces, to follow or challenge, aiming towards a

wider understanding and usefulness of sensemaking in the hospitality industry during Covid-19 (Duarte Alonso et al., 2020).

Although we traced back crisis management literature to the second half of the 20th century, our early discoveries on crisis management show that following the financial crisis between 2007 and 2008, organisational crisis management became an increasingly popular topic (Boin, 2009). The Covid-19 pandemic heightened crisis management to an important and compelling research topic. In their research comparing Covid-19 to previous crises specifically in relation to tourism and hospitality, Davahli, Karwowski, Sonmez and Apostolopoulos (2020) suggest that the long-term impacts are expected to be greater with this crisis compared to previous crises such as the economic crisis, SARS epidemic and 9/11 terrorist attacks. Moreover, it is believed that the current state of the globe is expected to lead to increasing pandemic threats going forward, supporting a need for a deeper understanding of sensemaking during (long-duration) crises (Davahli et al., 2020; Ritchie, 2004). We recognise that the Covid-19 phenomena, in organisational studies cannot be isolated, and it is often studied as a complement to industries, sectors or problems to discover its effects. Hence our decision to research change management during crisis through sensemaking as the theoretical framework in the hospitality industry. On one hand, our literature review encompasses both change and crisis management given Pearson and Clair's (1998) definition of crises as ambiguous events that take place with uncertainty around their causes and effects and that stimulate change. On the other hand, sensemaking as our theoretical framework, in exploring how people (employees) make sense or try to understand events (changes) that differ from the normal or from their expectations (Weick, 1995; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014).

## 1.2 Research Purpose

The overarching aim of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of how employees make sense of organisational changes resulting from crises management. For this study we decided on a hotel: London Hilton on Park Lane (hereafter referred to as the hotel) as the case company because the hospitality industry was one of the most impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic (Le & Phi, 2021). Contrary to the focus on managers, also reflected in the growth of sensegiving studies (Gioia &

Chittipeddi, 1991), and more recently middle management in crisis management and sensemaking studies (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010), there is limited research on employees in all levels of the hierarchy without distinction, and therefore requires further exploration (see 3.2.1).

Considering that, George and Jones (2001) state that it is not simply the fact that less attention has been paid to change recipients, there has been even less attention on how they perceive change; more studies have leaned towards cognition rather than emotion and perception (Kumar & Singhal, 2012). Additionally, emotion has only been explored in a select few studies on crisis (Bartunek et al., 2006; Sonenshein, 2009; Weick, 1990). Hence, this study not only focuses on how employees make sense of organisational changes but also touches upon how they felt during the changes that resulted from the pandemic.

Additionally, many studies have focused on collective sensemaking and the interactions amongst members within an organisational social setting (Kumar & Singhal, 2012; Thurlow & Helms, 2009; Weick, 1995). These interactions were disrupted by the physical distance created through lockdowns, and financial schemes, such as furlough, especially in the hospitality industry, which relies on social interactions. The physical element of interaction that was removed and its implications on sensemaking requires further research. In fact, Christianson and Barton (2020, p.572) claim to have “rarely seen a time when sensemaking was so critical yet so difficult to accomplish” and therefore, believe that the Covid-19 crisis presents a unique opportunity for sensemaking research. The complexity, novelty and rapid changes resulting from the pandemic increased researchers' curiosity to challenge the assumptions in sensemaking theory that are currently largely unexamined (Christianson & Barton, 2020). Hence, we aim to contribute to the existing literature and build on Weick's (1995) central concept of sensemaking by critically questioning the underlying assumptions. Therefore, our study aims to answer the following research question:

***How do employees make sense of organisational change resulting from crisis management?***



## 2. Literature Review

In this section we pursue the overview of the literature review of crisis management and change management within a sensemaking theoretical framework. We firstly start by exploring different definitions of crisis and crisis management (Dutton, 1986; Faulkner, 2003; Pauchant, Mitroff and Ventolo, 1992; Quarantelli, 1988), then we explore the two approaches to crisis management: reactive and proactive (Pearson & Clair, 1998; Sahin, Ulubeyli & Kazaza, 2015; Spillan, 2000; Vašíčková, 2019). These two are chosen as the most relevant crisis management approaches to the Covid-19 crisis we are analysing. We also connect crisis management to change management through business continuity (Herbane, 2010). Change management is regarded as one of the approaches to organisational development (Odor, 2018). Within this literature review we consult the diagnostic change and dialogic change (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2016). Dialogic change is regarded as an important change management approach that accounts for sensemaking and its importance during change management (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2016). We consult the sensemaking literature as a framework for our study in understanding what sensemaking is and how its processes affect employees.

### 2.1 Crisis Management

Crisis management has gained notorious engagement due to the pandemic. In order to grasp this topic, we begin with drawing on the available literature to define crisis and crisis management. Then we explore the approaches to crisis management, focusing on the reactive and proactive approaches (Spillan, 2000). As we investigated the literature on crisis management and its connection to change management, we encountered business continuity (Herbane, 2010).

#### 2.1.1 Crisis management definitions

In presenting many definitions of crisis management we focus on different aspects such as ambiguity, element of surprise and perceived changes. Dutton (1986) defined crisis, only, as highly ambiguous events where causes and effects are unknown. Slightly earlier in time, Selbst (1978 cited in Faulkner, 2003) defines a crisis as any action or failure to act that restrains operations and

causes changes to the viability of the organisation. Faulkner (2003) challenges Selbst's (1978 cited in Faulkner, 2003) definition as he does not account for unforeseeable and uncontrolled events that threaten the survival of the organisation. On one hand, Faulkner (2003) acknowledged that crises involve unpredictable and ambiguous events, on the other hand, he believed that managers were responsible for these events. Consecutively, he defines crisis as a self-inflicted situation as the managers fail to understand the core source of the crisis, and to adapt to change (Faulkner, 2003). This definition, however, assumes that the source of crises can be discovered and that managers can account for all variables that are involved, within the crisis. Faulkner's (2003) definition contradicts Dutton's (1986) acknowledgement of crises as events where cause and effects are unknown. Referring back to Selbst (1978, cited in Faulkner, 2003), he discusses some of the variables involved in crisis management such as the employees' perception of the changes resulting from crises. Pauchant, Mitroff and Ventolo (1992) add that crisis is also the disruption of the entire organisational system that questions its basic assumptions, sense of self and its essence. The perceived changes can be associated with the process of sensemaking as a variable that is very difficult for managers to fully account for. For example, during the Covid-19 pandemic many organisations engaged in crisis management through implementing changes to face the ambiguous nature of the unfolding events (Zhong et al., 2021). However, the process of the employee's sensemaking is subjective (Weick, 1995).

Quarantelli (1988) referred to crisis, as events where managers and employees are pressured to make quick and strategic decisions to tackle the unpredicted events. The strategic actions in crisis management are discussed by Vašíčková (2019). More recently than Quarantelli (1988) Pearson and Clair (1998) and Vašíčková (2019) reviewed the crisis management literature and provides a general definition of crisis management as a system that captures, evaluates and measures crises activities. The capture involves the understanding of the crisis management stage within an organisation (Vašíčková, 2019) . This system is important because it steers the organisations' operations and decision making towards the containment of the impact the crises may impose on the organisational environment (Vašíčková, 2019) . An important role of crisis management is played by a crisis team that can effectively and flexibly respond to the situation (Mikušová & Horváthová, 2019). Furthermore, crisis management procedures should be part of

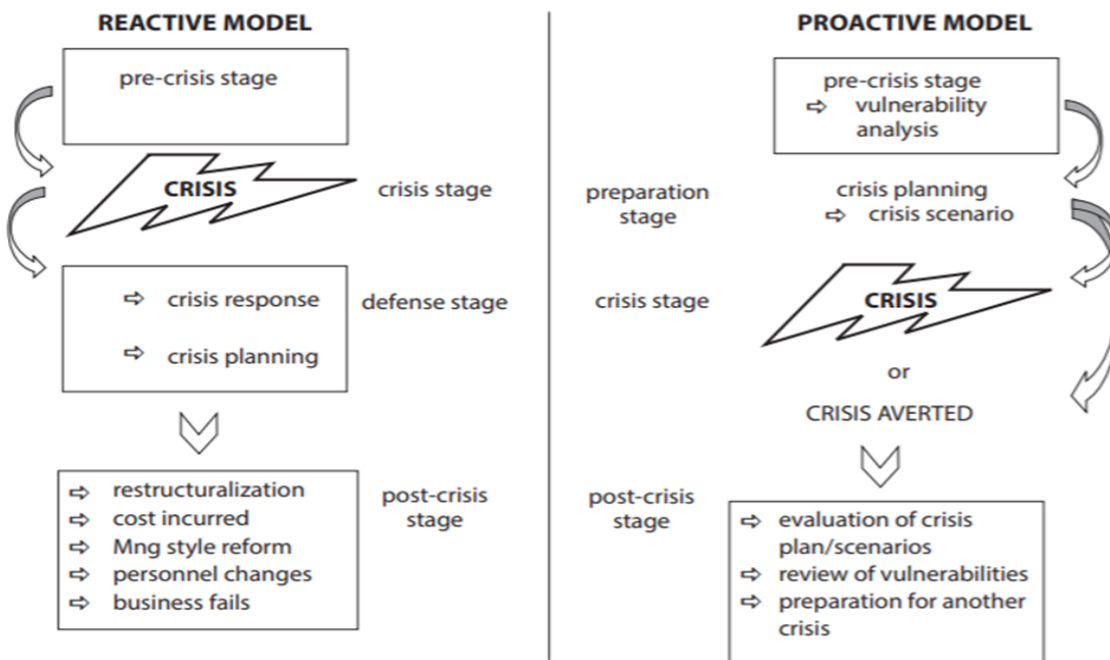
the organisational strategic approach and these should be flexible to bend according to the new unfolding of events (Vašíčková, 2019).

Herman (1963) discusses the crisis management as the handling of surprising events; where the element of surprise requires containment by the organisational members. The element of surprise in crisis management creates uncertainties as to what kind of crisis is faced and how to deal with it (Stafford, Yu & Armoo, 2002). Hence, according to Vašíčková (2019) crisis management should strategically choose its best fit approaches, methods and measures used to minimise the impact of the crisis and its ambiguous nature.

### 2.1.2 Crisis Management Approaches: Proactive and Reactive

Amongst the many approaches discussed by Sahin, Ulubeyli & Kazaza (2015) we briefly discuss the *proactive and reactive approaches*. As shown in Figure 1, the *proactive approach* is a process that provides information on the crisis and its potential consequences through a close examination of the warning signals, making plans and determining risks (Sahin, Ulubeyli & Kazaza, 2015). This approach involves stages that are prior to the crisis itself, these include: pre-crisis stage, such as vulnerability analysis and the preparation stage, where scenario planning takes place (Spillan, 2000). Once the crisis strikes, the proactive model approach is considered to be able to avert the crisis and limit impacts, due to the consistent analysis of warning signals and the planning of new scenarios (Mitroff, Pauchant & Shrivastava, 1988). As attested by Jaques (2010) the pre-crisis prevention stages are strongly connected to organisational crisis preparedness. Moreover, Vašíčková (2019) add that crisis processes which start with detection of the crisis, end with organisational learning. In other words, the proactive approach process starts with the preparation for a potential crisis, through vulnerability analysis and scenario planning, when the crisis strikes, the crisis management actors are able to avert the crisis, finally, the processes and scenarios followed are reviewed and the learning outcomes are used to prepare for other crises (Spillan, 2000; Vašíčková, 2019). Studies carried during the Covid-19 outbreak show that corporations that had the scenario of a pandemic in their risk assessment, or pre-crisis planning stage, were able to tackle this crisis better than those that did not have anything as such pre-planned (Alauddin et al., 2020).

The other approach that we consider to be considerably relevant for our research is the *reactive approach*. This concept is considered a set of procedures and principles that assist organisations to exit the crisis and stabilise operations and the environment in general (Sahin, Ulubeyli & Kazaza, 2015). This approach starts with identification of the crisis when it happens, it is rarely identified during the pre-crisis stage (where the crisis starts emerging but has not formed to be a crisis yet), followed by the crisis strike that triggers managers into taking action (Loosemore & Hughes, 1998; Vašíčková, 2019). Thereafter, a defence stage is enacted, where planning the responses to crisis is fundamental (Spillan, 2000). This stage and the following one: post-crisis, involve quick problem solving in surprising situations, such as cost cuts, closing down departments and making redundancies (Sahin, Ulubeyli & Kazaza, 2015). This approach is considered a short-term problem resolution that has long term implications on employees (Vašíčková, 2019). The motivation of the importance of the reactive approach in our study concerns the fact that many hospitality venues took a reactive approach to the Covid-19 outbreak, including cost cuts and redundancies (Zhong et al., 2021). As a final point of this section, both approaches can be considered to stimulate change and continuous identification of threats to ensure business continuity (Herbane, 2010; Pearson & Clair, 1998; Vašíčková, 2019).



**Source:** (Vašíčková, 2019 modified according to Spillan, 2000).

**Figure 1:** Reactive versus proactive approach to crisis management

### 2.1.3 Crisis Management and Business Continuity as Change Management

According to Herbane (2010) business continuity is paramount during crisis management. He defines business continuity as the process that identifies threats, creates a strategy to handle the risk and the capability to effectively respond by limiting or eliminating the crisis incidents. Organisations integrate business continuity to their business strategy to cope with events triggered by crises and to minimise the effects of disruptive events (Faisal, Albrecht & Coetzee, 2020). This approach incorporates contingency management, whereby managing processes are based on uncertain eventualities (Faisal, Albrecht & Coetzee, 2020). Although business continuity is an evolving concept, it is strictly rooted in the crisis management study (Sahebjamnia, Torabi & Mansouri, 2015). In light of the nature of the business continuity, Faisal, Albrecht and Coetzee (2020), believe that business continuity is a fundamental part of change management that is rooted in the crisis management studies. In the next section, we will introduce the readers to change management as a phenomenon that takes place because of a (need) new order or the need of adaptation.

## 2.2 Organisational Change

In defining organisational change at a general level, according to Ford and Ford (1994, p.759) “change is a phenomenon of time. It is the way people talk about the event in which something appears to become, or turn into, something else, where the ‘something else’ is seen as a result or outcome.” Huber (1993) adds that in organisational contexts, change involves the functioning of the organisation including its members. Porras and Robertson (1992) define change as the way to enhance an individual's performance and therefore improve organisational accomplishments. Finally, Lewin (1951) states that a system cannot be clearly understood until it is attempted to be changed and Schein (1995) adds that a situation is fully appreciated after it is changed. Maruhn and Greiner (1972) discusses the rhythms of change as periods of convergence abrupted by external unforeseen events. Crises can be considered abrupt events that call for change management resulting from the crisis management activities (Faisal, Albrecht & Coetzee, 2020). Therefore, organisations that are undergoing change resulting from crises are considered to act as

sensible environments, for both managers and employees to make sense of (Faisal, Albrecht & Coetzee, 2020; Weick, 1995).

### 2.2.1 Diagnostic Organisational Development

As mentioned earlier in the introduction and later in the methodology section, our study focuses on phenomenology: the study of structures of experiences from a subjective perspective (Husserl, 2013). In change management many researchers and practitioners focused on creating models and steps for researchers to further investigate and for practitioners to implement in organisations. This type of change management is called diagnostic change, whereby the concern is: What has to change? And what frameworks/models fit best to solve the diagnosed problem (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2016). Some examples of models are: the Kotter's eight-stages model (Kotter, 2012) and the famous model of unfreezing-moving-refreezing by Lewin (1951). This last model assumes that individuals suffer inertia, therefore, it has been investigated in recent years and argued to change to freeze-change-unfreeze (Weick, 2000). Firstly, this approach (freeze-change-unfreeze) enables emergent changes to occur and the adaptation takes place during the freezing stage (Weick, 2000). Secondly, this approach is thought to be relevant as, recently, organisations operate in continuously changing environments, that to be stable they need to grow dynamically (Rosa, Dörre & Lessenich, 2017; Weick, 2000). Finally, due to the Covid-19 crisis, organisations found themselves vulnerable to the fast-paced emerging changes imposed by external pressures, such as international and national law, and internal pressures, including redundancies processes and communication changes (i.e. from physical to virtual) (Weick, 2000; Zhong et al., 2021).

### 2.2.2 Dialogic Organisational Development

In the process of organisational development, through new approaches to managing change, such as appreciative inquiry, whereby the organisation attempts to answer the question “what is not working?” by starting from what is already working (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999); the diagnostic approach became incomplete. As diagnostic change focused on determining organisational situations, it applies expertise based on models and the change agents (those implementing change), were often distanced from the change receivers, therefore it did not account

for the sensemaking processes of those affected by the change (change receivers) (Marshak, 2015; Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2016; Weick, 2000). Consequently, influenced by Weick's (1995) work, Bushe and Marshak (2016a) constructed dialogic organisational development, an approach that borrowed from many methods including: appreciative inquiry, Art of Hosting, Community Learning and many others to express that dialogic organisational development engages with events as subjective realities. Therefore, according to Bushe and Marshak (2016b, 00:09:17) change is more credible and accepted by both change agents and change receivers, through productive and fruitful conversations rather than only persuasive facts (diagnostic change) (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2016a). Bushe and Marshak (2016a) developed eight key premises of dialogic organisational development, out of which we are interested in the following: (1) reality and relationships are socially constructed; (2) Organisations are meaning making systems and (3) Creating change requires changing conversations. They develop on further explaining these points as follows. (1) The authors believe that organisations are a social setting that allow, or limit (Weick, 1995), the construction of realities that influence how employees think and act. (2) They further state that due to this setting, conversations create, maintain, add and change the reality, therefore, rather than the absence of a single objective reality, there are many different realities that change continuously through employees' sensemaking. (3) As conversations create new realities, according to dialogic organisational development, change requires the transformation of these conversations (Bushe & Marshak, 2016a). In sum, sensemaking is an important factor for dialogic organisational development as this approach acknowledges the importance of subjective interpretations and the creation of realities through conversations (Bushe & Marshak, 2016a; Weick, 1995).

### 2.3 Theoretical Framework: Sensemaking

This section is considered to be fundamental for our study as it magnifies on the sensemaking processes. We begin with sensemaking as a process, in which we consult the different definitions of sensemaking, distinguishing between: interpretation and sensemaking; action versus belief-driven sensemaking and cues, noticing and frames (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2014; Starbuck & Milliken, 1988; Weick, 1995). We follow by exploring Weick's (1979;

1995) seven properties of sensemaking, where we consider other relevant debates on the matter (Christianson & Barton, 2020; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Starbuck & Milliken, 1988; Stigliani & Ravasi, 2012). As change management accounts for human capital and their emotions we looked into sensemaking and emotions: positive and negative emotions (Helms, Thurlow and Mills, 2010) along with uncertainty and ambiguity (Milliken, 1987). Due to the nature of our study: abductive approach, we explored the literature as we interviewed our respondents. During this process we recognized the importance of communication within sensemaking, therefore, we decided to consult the available literature on sensemaking and communication and focused on the influence of communication on uncertainty and ambiguity (Christianson & Barton, 2020; Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld, 2005). Lastly, although our study focuses on all employees of the organisation, regardless of their hierarchical position, we briefly touch upon sensegiving as Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) believe that the two go hand in hand.

### 2.3.1 Sensemaking as a process

Crises provide “powerful sensemaking triggers” (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Compared to environmental jolts, the “more diffuse impact” of crises calls for a more intensive search for understanding, explanation and action (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Following this, we aim to provide an overview and understanding of the sensemaking concept during crises.

#### **Defining sensemaking**

To begin with, the different definitions of sensemaking will be covered, reflecting the small differences between them. Weick (1995, p.7), who originally developed the concept of sensemaking, defines sensemaking as

“a process that is (1) grounded in identity construction, (2) retrospective, (3) enactive of sensible environments, (4) social, (5) ongoing, (6) focused on and by extracted cues, (7) driven by plausibility rather than accuracy.”

The seven properties that make up sensemaking will be explored following the overview of sensemaking. Although certain properties have been questioned in later research (Gioia & Mehra,



1996), in the broader sense, authors define sensemaking as how people try to understand and make sense of events that differ from the normal or from their expectations (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1995). Louis (1980) defines sensemaking as a recurring cycle of events manifesting over time that arises as employees attempt to form conscious or unconscious assumptions or predictions. Starbuck and Milliken (1988, p.51) focus on the numerous characteristics of the sensemaking process, defining sensemaking as being made up of “comprehending, understanding, explaining, attributing, extrapolating, and predicting, at least,” highlighting that common to this is the process of placing stimuli into frameworks that make sense of that stimuli. Gephart (1993) states that sensemaking is the process that attempts to articulate eloquently the construction and interpretation of the social world. In Gephart’s later research with Topal and Zhang (2010), they expand on this and refer to sensemaking as a continuous process that generates interpersonal shared meanings through verbal and non-verbal interactions with the intention to create, negotiate and maintain shared meanings. In Maitlis’ (2005, p.21) definition of sensemaking she brings together the ideas from many prominent researchers in the field of sensemaking, describing sensemaking as “occur[ing] in organizations when members confront events, issues, and actions that are somehow surprising or confusing.” Emphasizing the ongoing and retrospective properties from Weick: “the basic idea of sensemaking is that reality is an ongoing accomplishment that emerges from efforts to create order and make retrospective sense of what occurs” (Maitlis, 2005, p.21). Maitlis (2005, p.21) also covers both the individual as well as social aspect of the process with “sensemaking is a process of social construction in which individuals attempt to interpret and explain sets of cues from their environments.” The ontological differences that make up the various definitions have consequently impacted theory development (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014).

Crisis sensemaking is not that different from sensemaking in ‘normal’ situations (Seto, Johnstone & Campbell-Meier, 2018). The sequence of the process is similar but it is the intensity that differs (Weick, 2010). According to Weick (2010), as the severity of the crisis increases, so does the sensemaking and hence once the crisis becomes less severe, sensemaking is reduced.

### **Interpretation**

According to Weick (1988) organizational crises challenge interpretations and place great demand on one’s ability to make sense of events that reach the point of crisis. Interpretation plays a central

role in sensemaking, but the two should not be regarded as the same and the two occur at different stages of the process (Weick, 1995). Interpretation suggests there is something in the world waiting to be discovered, and once discovered can be made clear while sensemaking is more about generating what the sense maker interprets (Weick, 1995). It is also important to highlight that the unexpected event itself is not necessarily the trigger for sensemaking, but sensemaking occurs when the variance between expectations and the experience is significant enough to raise the question “what is going on?” and “what next?” (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Sensemaking allows individuals to engage with and interpret cues from the environment to clarify the ambiguity or uncertainty they experience (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). The question “what next?” ties in with the idea of sensemaking as action (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005).

### **Action-driven processes of sensemaking**

When sensemaking starts with action, sensemaking focuses on what people do rather than believe (Weick, 1995). There is however a dilemma associated with action and sensemaking during crises (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). People want to gain more information in order to guide their actions, however due to the nature of crisis, people are often required to act with the information available which is often incomplete (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Within this, there is the trade-off between action possibly providing more information and understanding and inaction which maintains confusion (Weick, 1988). For the pandemic however, the ability to take action was also disrupted through lockdowns and restrictions that meant most action was either significantly reduced or even stopped (Christianson & Barton, 2020). Reduced opportunities to interact with others and the environment leads to fewer occasions to create cues (Christianson & Barton, 2020).

### **Belief-driven processes of sensemaking**

Actions and beliefs are interrelated and therefore sensemaking can begin at any point (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005). When sensemaking is belief-driven, the process is such that the beliefs are “embedded in frames such as ideologies, paradigms, that influence what people notice and how events unfold” (Weick, 1995, p.133). The latter is impacted when the beliefs create a self-fulfilling prophecy (Weick, 1995). Weick (1995), claims that when it comes to sensemaking “believing is seeing,” in other words believing is to selectively notice (Weick, 1995, p.133). Belief-driven sensemaking can take on the arguing or expecting form (Weick, 1995). Argument, according to

Brockriede (1974 as cited in Weick, 1995, p.138) is when “people reason their way from one idea to the choice of another idea.” Compared to arguments, expectations are “held more strongly,” because people are more interested in finding a way to confirm what they believe than contradicting their beliefs (Weick, 1995, p.145). Due to impact expectations have as a result, they also more severely filter input for sensemaking (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking as expecting refers to using that which is available (Weick, 1995). Moreover, time pressure during change and crisis often means accuracy is seen as a luxury people cannot afford (Weick, 1995). This pushes people to find a way to confirm what they expect, hold onto their original hypothesis and prefer a paradigmatic and data-driven narrative mode of thought (Weick, 1995).

### **Cues, Noticing and Frames**

Sense is made by extracting cues and relating them to frames of reference based on past experiences and knowledge (Weick, 1995). Weick (1995, p.50) describes extracted cues as “simple, familiar structures” that people use to build on to create a greater sense of what is happening. As triggers of sensemaking, cues are often unexpected occurrences where “the meaning is ambiguous and/or outcomes uncertain” (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014, p.70). Cues are therefore the foundation of sensemaking, that provide the material from which people make sense (Maitlis, Vogus & Lawrence, 2013). Any event could serve as a cue that triggers sensemaking, Sandberg and Tsoukas (2014, p.12) however created five broad categories:

“(i) major planned events, (ii) major unplanned events, (iii) minor planned events, (iv) minor unplanned events, and (v) hybrids of major/minor planned/unplanned events.”

The Covid-19 pandemic would fall under major unplanned events. This type of event “triggers intensive sensemaking efforts, sometimes even leading to the collapse of sensemaking” (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2014, p.13). The changes that resulted from the crisis, however, can be considered minor planned or in certain cases unplanned events. Supported by van der Steen (2017, p.768), who states that a “disruptive crisis in an organisation functions as a single, very salient cue, and is able to generate considerable ontological insecurity.” While Weick claims through his examples such as the Bhopal (Weick, 1988) and Mann Gulch disasters (Weick, 1993), Maitlis and Christianson (2014) argue that while crisis may trigger sensemaking, there are other cases where crisis could stop sensemaking from being triggered. Furthermore, while there seems to be a shared

agreement that crisis can be regarded as a stimulus for sensemaking, differences regarding how it is constructed, to what extent it is shared and the orientation in sensemaking, remain between authors (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014).

If sensemaking is regarded as being about enlarging smaller cues and thus searching for a context where details work together and make sense, the process is represented as people using what they have, comparing, at times copy others directly or indirectly and then acting as if they have made sense of the situation for the time being (Weick, 1995). Christianson and Barton (2020) found that during the pandemic, people have had to deal with making sense of vast amounts of information over an extended period of time where there were numerous updates that required new understandings of the changing situation. Moreover, the changes impact both professional and personal lives, at times competing for attention which makes it more challenging to decide on which cues to focus on (Christianson & Barton, 2020). This leads to consequences such as attentional fatigue by attempting to look at multiple cues, reduced cognitive resources through the constant making and remaking of sense over a long period of time and lastly, “disrupted attentional stability and vividness” (Christianson & Barton, 2020, p.573).

The above-mentioned occurrences disrupt flow, understanding and create uncertainty when noticed (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Hence it is when a cue is noticed that sensemaking begins. Cues are thus closely related to noticing but should not be confused and also differ from sensemaking (Starbuck & Milliken, 1988; van der Steen, 2017). The process of noticing “refers to activities of filtering, classifying, and comparing, whereas sensemaking refers more to the interpretation and the activity of determining what the noticed cues mean” (Weick, 1995, p.51). Noticing is therefore when there is awareness around signs that differ from “the “normal” demeanour” (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005, p.411). The response to the interruption, that occurs during a change or crisis, provides signs for closer inspection, helps simplify the world and provide direction (van der Steen, 2017; Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005). Noticing is also crucial for sensemaking because it determines if people attempt to make sense of the situation, as events that go unnoticed or are not available for sensemaking (Weick, 1995). People notice both familiar and unfamiliar events, along with what they believe is “relevant, significant, desirable, or evil” (Starbuck & Milliken, 1988, p.43). Due to the novelty of the pandemic, Covid-19 can be classified under unfamiliar events (Christianson & Barton, 2020).

In order to influence sensemaking, cues need to be comprehensible, which is when frames play a role in the process (Maitlis, Vogus & Lawrence, 2013). A key difference between frames and cues is that frames are namely past moments of socialization and cues are current experiences (Colville, Pye & Carter, 2013). Frames represent a general point of view that guides interpretations (Maitlis, Vogus & Lawrence, 2013), generating meaning from what was originally meaningless (Goffman, 1986). When the current experience, or cue, does not match the sense maker's expectations (frames), sensemaking is triggered (Seto, Johnstone & Campbell-Meier, 2018). At this stage in the process of sensemaking, if the cue cannot be put into a meaningful framework this results in uncertainty and tension (van der Steen, 2017). As later explored under emotions, uncertainty is often at the foreground of crises (Christianson & Barton, 2020). The use of frames helps single out events for closer attention and be understood (Colville, Pye & Carter, 2013), as frames provide a reference that allows people to "comprehend ... explain, attribute, extrapolate and predict" (Starbuck & Milliken, 1988). Starbuck and Milliken (1988) distinguish between framing within the familiar, expected and what matters. People find it easier to understand and respond to events when they can be framed within the familiar or contexts they frequently interact in (Starbuck & Milliken, 1988). Thus, there may be more difficulty responding to events in unfamiliar contexts (Starbuck & Milliken, 1988), supporting Weick's (1988) claim regarding the difficulty of sensemaking during crisis. Starbuck and Milliken (1988, p.48) highlight that because the world is changing slowly, it is often useful "to formulate expectations incrementally oneself." The world is no longer changing slowly (Seto, Johnstone & Campbell-Meier, 2018), therefore it can be questioned if the opposite of this claim applies. Lastly, framing within what matters is dependent on beliefs, more specifically of how the world should be and how the organization's mission, structure and strategies should be (Starbuck & Milliken, 1988). Similarly, to the challenges posed for extracting cues, the pandemic also impacts framing (Christianson & Barton, 2020). The emergent, fast-paced, unpredictable and at times overwhelming nature of the pandemic contributes to the difficulty of sensemaking (Christianson & Barton, 2020). Moreover, the pandemic can also be typified as novel and emergent, hence the information was and is "incomplete, fragmented or even contradictory" (Christianson & Barton, 2020, p.573).

### 2.3.2 The Seven Properties of Sensemaking

To further unpack the concept of sensemaking, the next part dives into the seven properties of sensemaking that Weick (1995) identifies in his work. Weick (1995) acknowledges that the properties differ in importance based on the context. In this case the context would be the Covid-19 crisis and the organizational changes that resulted from that.

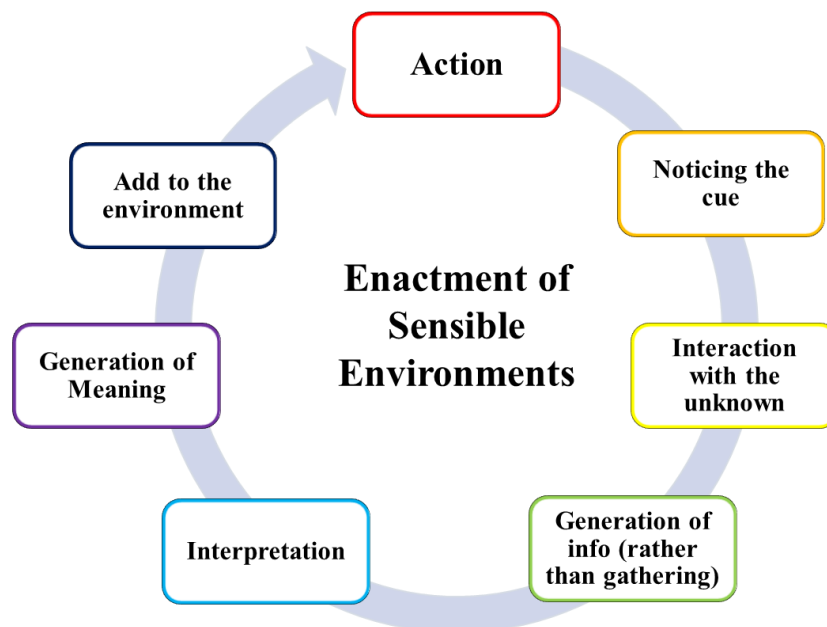
#### **Focused on and by extracted cues**

Within the ongoing process of sensemaking, people focus on certain elements and not others to support their understanding and interpretation, which is referred to as focused on and by extracted cues (Weick, 1995). To grasp how sensemaking takes place, it is important to pay attention to how people “notice, extract cues, and embellish that which they extract” (Weick, 1995, p.49). “Extracted cues are simple, familiar structures” that are used to form a sense of what is happening on a larger scale (Weick, 1995, p.50). This part of sensemaking is regarded as a form-producing process and where most of the “vagueness and indeterminacy of sensemaking” is found (Weick, 1995, p.51). It begins with observing something that people then tie to a general idea in order to make sense, this allows them to clarify the meaning of what was observed which then changes the general idea (Weick, 1995). Context not only affects what is extracted and when, but also how the extracted cue is then interpreted as mentioned in the process of noticing (Weick, 1995), as shown above when discussing the cues, noticing and frames in relation to the pandemic (Christianson & Barton, 2020).

#### **Enactive of sensible environments**

The context and environment we are in enables or constrains our sensemaking, making sensemaking a process that is enactive of sensible environments (Weick, 1995). In organizations, people create part of the environment themselves and this can also constrain their actions (Weick, 1995). The word enactment suggests that people receive stimuli that results from their own activity, in other words people directly interact with the unknown to generate instead of simply gather information in order to interpret the unfolding situation (Weick, 1995). Enactment is also central when determining the difference between interpretation and sensemaking (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Enactment brings together self-fulfilling prophecies, retrospect, commitment and social information processing (Weick, 1988). The self-fulfilling prophecy as part of

sensemaking, naturally makes it so that “people create and find what they expect to find” (Weick, 1995, p.35). This is also where the idea of action is introduced into the concept of sensemaking. The importance of action during sensemaking is due to the fact that action generates new information by generating stimuli or cues (Weick, 1988). Moreover, action can impact meaning in multiple ways - outside of the most obvious cases where it produces visible consequences - by inhibiting, abandoning, checking, redirecting or expressing meaning (Weick, 1995). Hence why action is said to change the situation that may have originally triggered sensemaking, as people encounter new situations resulting from said action (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). The reciprocal influence between the environment and action is labelled as enactment (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Although social is also listed as its own property, the idea is introduced here as enactment is regarded as a social process (Weick, 1988). The process of enactment is seen as repeated action-meaning cycles (see Figure 2) that produce provisional understandings that can then be enacted and modified continuously (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014).



Source: Combination of Weick (1995) and Maitlis and Christianson (2014)  
**Figure 2:** The steps involved in enacting the sensible environment to make sense

## Social

Already present in other properties of sensemaking, the social property refers to how sensemaking is based on interactions with others (Weick, 1995). Weick (1995, p.38) refers to organizations as

“a network of intersubjectively shared meanings” sustained through everyday interactions and the use of a common language. The social property shows how thoughts, feelings and behaviour of individuals is shaped by the presence of others which can be both the actual or imagined presence (Weick, 1995). Moreover, Weick (1995) claims that sensemaking is never solitary because it is always based on others.

Collective sensemaking takes place when individuals exchange their understanding in order to agree on interpretations that can guide action (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005). Individual sensemaking feeds collective sensemaking (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005), supported by Maitlis and Christianson (2014, p.95), who explain this process as when sensemaking occurs within an individual’s head, collective sensemaking occurs when more influential individuals persuade less influential people to think like them. One feeding the other, however, is not necessarily as simple as it sounds. The issue of heterogeneity in sensemaking means that individuals use sensemaking in ways that fit their own identity needs (Brown, Stacey & Nandhakumar, 2008). Hence, there is often a lack of agreement resulting from this (Brown, Stacey & Nandhakumar, 2008). Weick (1995) also puts forward the idea that it is difficult to reach shared meaning. Nevertheless, collective sensemaking does take place in practice. Collective sensemaking often includes practices such as argumentation, metaphorical communication and the exchange of narratives in order to attempt to - in times of crisis or change - generate a common interpretation of unexpected or ambiguous events (Stigliani & Ravasi, 2012). Klein, Wiggins and Dominguez (2010, p.34) also highlight that this typically occurs in ambiguous situations or uncertain conditions such as crisis. Supported by Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010), who claim that the creation of shared meaning is especially significant in crises. Collective sensemaking is achieved through conversation, and therefore is an ongoing process (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Despite the ongoing property of sensemaking, Maitlis and Christianson (2014) highlight that collective sensemaking may pause when enough employees have the same understanding to act collectively.

### **Retrospective**

The retrospective property is defined as using past experiences to understand present events (Weick, 1995). This claim is made on the basis that “people can know what they are doing only



after they have done it” (Weick, 1995, p.26). Retrospective sensemaking involves fairly short spaces in time between the act and the reflection, which “means that memory traces are typically fresh and rich with indeterminacy” (Weick, 1995, p.29). Weick (1995, p.24) claims the attention during sensemaking processes, as “the creation of meaning is an attentional process,” is on what has already occurred. This, therefore, implies a choice in the stimulus that triggers sensemaking, which consequently also influences the choice of what that action means (Weick, 1995). In Stephens et al’s (2020, p.428) research on pandemic sensemaking, they highlight that in this period of retrospective sensemaking people “repeatedly engage in cycles of acting, responding, and adjusting, to determine how new interpretations reduce or increase confusion.” An important goal behind sensemaking is to gain a sense “of order, clarity, and rationality,” and once that is achieved the process of retrospect ends (Weick, 1995, p.29). Retrospective sensemaking only allows the past to become clearer than the present or future (Weick, 1995). Past events are seen more rationally ordered than present or future events, because the retrospective way of sensemaking removes the causal sequences that make the present and future more complicated or obscure (Starbuck & Milliken, 1988). In other words, the past has already been experienced, whilst the present is undergoing its construction and the future is formed, or not, in abstract ways.

According to Gioia and Mehra (1996), however, the emphasis on retrospective is one of the issues with Weick’s work. Maitlis and Christianson (2014) refer to two types of sensemaking that do not fit the retrospective property: future-oriented sensemaking - “sensemaking that seeks to construct intersubjective meanings, images, and schemes in conversation where these meanings and interpretations create or project images of future objects and phenomena” (Gephart, Topal & Zhang, 2010, p.285) and prospective sensemaking - “the conscious and intentional consideration of the probable future impact of certain actions, and especially nonactions, on the meaning construction processes of themselves and others” (Gioia et al., 1994, p.378). That is to say that, the sensemaking process is concerned with what may, or may not, take place in the future. The concept of prospective sensemaking, coined by Gioia, Thomas, Clark and Chittipeddi (1994), only gained attention more recently (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Future-oriented sensemaking is not overlooked by Weick, but is defined as thinking in the future perfect tense, arguing that if the future is imagined as if it has already occurred there is an element of retrospective sensemaking (Weick, 1979, 1995). Gioia and Mehra (1996) support this, stating that interpreting future events

does happen retrospectively because people use knowledge of the past to create a desired future. Other authors particularly see the focus on retrospect as an issue in complex and uncertain situations, such as crisis, when future expectations are ambiguous or uncertain (Bruskin & Mikkelsen, 2020). Moreover, Pitsis, Clegg, Marosszeky and Rura-Polley, (2003) found that Weick's use of the future perfect tense is restricted to more stable environments, supported by Stigliani and Ravasi (2012) who view the future perfect as insufficient for environments that are ambiguous and lack clarity, as is the case during crises.

The process of anticipating the future is also described as foresight (Tapinos & Pyper, 2018). In that case, the process is described as purposefully developing knowledge about the future or in the practical sense, includes bringing the awareness around long-term opportunities and challenges into short-term decisions (Tapinos & Pyper, 2018). Amasteus (2008) even claims the idea of foresight is natural human behaviour, because we try to make sense of any uncertainties we face. The process is also seen as a method used to cope with ambiguous situations, as forward-looking allows individuals and groups to imagine a desirable future, even if it is ill-defined, in order to give the future structure (Gioia & Mehra, 1996; Stigliani & Ravasi, 2012).

### **Grounded in identity construction**

Grounded in identity construction is defined as that who we are and what we have experienced influences how we see the world also described as “depending on who I am, my definition of what is “out there” will also change” (Weick, 1995, p.20). The making of sense occurs simultaneously with reacting to the situation (Weick, 1995). Individuals ask themselves what the environment around them and the events that occur imply for them (Weick, 1995). Moreover, this also has implications for the way in which individuals start to interact with others in the organization (Weick, 1995). Lastly, it is important to highlight that triggering events can also be created by the person making sense themselves based on what they notice or do not notice (Weick, 1995).

### **Ongoing**

Sensemaking is regarded as ongoing because the process is sequential, and sensemaking is always taking place (Weick, 1995). It should be understood as a process in which people select “moments out of continuous flows and extract cues from those moments” (Weick, 1995, p.43). It is this disruption of flow that normally triggers an emotional response; hence emotions also influence the

process of sensemaking (Weick, 1995). Although Weick (1995, p.45) refers to this idea as emotions requiring “arousal or discharge in the autonomic nervous system,” and that the interruptions are what trigger the arousal. Weick (1995) states that arousal triggers sensemaking because it acts as a warning that one must pay attention to a specific stimulus in order to take action. The limitations of this will be explored further when looking at sensemaking and emotions. Again, the differences in definitions also reflect differences in the temporality or continuity of sensemaking. Nevertheless, most cover the ongoing property shown in the use of sensemaking as a process, (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Gephart, Topal & Zhang, 2010; Sonenshein, 2006), a recurring cycle (Louis, 1980) or Weick (1995) himself at times even refers to sensemaking as a sequence that unfolds.

### **Driven by plausibility rather than accuracy**

The final property is that sensemaking is driven by plausibility rather than accuracy (Weick, 1995). This means that people look for cues that make their sensemaking plausible rather than looking at the accuracy of our interpretations (Weick, 1995). Although accuracy is desirable, it is not necessary for sensemaking (Weick, 1995). Plausible reasoning entails going further than what is directly observed in order to generate “understandings that provide enough certainty” (Weick, 1995, p.56). In a crisis situation this property is claimed to be central because as mentioned with regard to belief-driven processes, the time pressure that comes with crises and change means accuracy is a luxury people cannot afford (Weick, 1995).

### 2.3.3 Sensemaking and emotions

According to Helms, Thurlow and Mills (2010), understanding what is happening and what to do is not the only reason individuals try to engage in sensemaking. Sensemaking is also used to overcome the feeling of fear or anxiety that arises in the situation (Helms, Thurlow and Mills, 2010). Emotions were initially overlooked in sensemaking research, and have only been explored in more depth more recently (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2014). The relationship between sensemaking and emotions is two-way (Steigenberger, 2015). Nevertheless, according to Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010, p.567), although sensemaking has the ability to reduce the “emotional power of events” in “emotion-laden crisis ... people struggle to make meaning of

what is happening.” Emotions also guide action; fundamental to sensemaking (Steigenberger, 2015; Weick, 1995). Emotion can be defined as “a transient feeling state with an identified cause or target that can be expressed verbally or non verbally” (Maitlis, Vogus & Lawrence, 2013, p.223). Weick (1995) distinguishes between negative and positive emotions within the concept of sensemaking. Negative emotions are more likely to result from unexpected interruptions or when “the interruption is interpreted as harmful or detrimental” (Weick, 1995, p.47). Positive emotions, on the other hand, occur when interrupting stimuli are suddenly or unexpectedly removed or when events lead to a sudden or unexpected acceleration towards the completion of a plan (Weick, 1995). Although Weick (1995) mentions emotions in his work, he mainly focused on the arousal aspect, stating that the longer people search, the higher the arousal and thus stronger the emotion. Experiencing arousal is, however, not the same as experiencing emotion (Levenson, 1992, as cited in Maitlis, Vogus & Lawrence, 2013). Rather, the level of arousal ranges from high to low depending on the intensity of the emotion experienced (Liu & Perrewé, 2005).

Another dimension that was later explored, other than the level of arousal, was the hedonic tone of emotions (Liu & Perrewé, 2005). Hedonic tone is about “the pleasantness of emotions” (Liu & Perrewé, 2005, p.265), often leading emotions to be categorized as negative or positive. This research has brought to light that “negative emotions are particularly salient in crisis situations and in organizational change” (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2014, p.17). Specifically, the emotions “fear, desperation, anxiety and panic” significantly restrict sensemaking because they reduce people’s cognitive information processing capacity and their noticing and extracting abilities, central to the process of sensemaking (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2014, p.17). Liu and Perrewé (2005) also highlight fear as well as frustration and anger as intense negative emotions experienced by employees during change. Events that induce negative emotions are more likely to fuel a search for meaning, compared to feelings such as “joy or delight [that] suggest that no such effort is required” (Maitlis, Vogus & Lawrence, 2013, p.226). Although negative emotions are more commonly associated with crises and change, positive emotions such as “hope, relief and even joy” are found in these situations (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010, p.568). Fredrickson and Branigan (2002) found that positive felt emotions broaden the scope of attention and thought-action repertoires. Furthermore, “emotions focus attention” (Steigenberger, 2015, p.437) which means that they guide the type of information an individual primarily perceives (Maitlis, Vogus & Lawrence, 2013). Additionally,

although emotions of any kind signal some need for and fuel sensemaking, the different kinds determine if the role emotions play is lesser or greater (Maitlis, Vogus & Lawrence, 2013).

When it comes to dealing emotions in uncertain times, thus change or crises, information reduces the feeling of anxiety and uncertainty and consequently increases efficacy levels when dealing with said change (Liu & Perrewé, 2005). “Uncertainty is an inherent facet of emotion” (Tiedens & Linton, 2001 as cited in Liu & Perrewé, 2005, p.265). Emotions “are inherently intra-personal” (Lazarus, 2006, as cited in Steigenberger, 2015, p.439), emotions can also “spill over” from one individual to another “through observation and [subconscious] information processing” (Barsade, 2002, as cited in Steigenberger, 2015, p.439).

### **Uncertainty and Ambiguity**

Uncertainty is present in the foreground of most crises, and the Covid-19 pandemic as well (Stephens et al., 2020). For the Covid-19 pandemic specifically, both short- and long-term views were uncertain (Stephens et al., 2020). Additionally, dynamic uncertainty defines the environment during the Covid-19 pandemic, where routines are gone and normal interactions were disrupted (Christianson & Barton, 2020). In the presence of uncertainty, “people engage in sensemaking because they are ignorant of any interpretations” (Weick, 1995, p.91). Uncertainty can be used to describe both “the state of organizational environments and as a descriptor of the state of a person who perceives himself/herself to be lacking critical information about the environment” (Milliken, 1987, p.134). For the purpose of this paper, the focus will largely be on the latter. Uncertainty in that case can also be defined as “an individual's perceived inability to predict something accurately” (Milliken, 1987, p.136). Uncertainty about the future can be reduced by providing people with the earliest available information that shows what action to take or direction to go in (Weick, 1995).

Information load, complexity and turbulence are crucial to perceived environmental uncertainty (Duncan, 1972). Information load is the “complex mixture of the quantity, ambiguity and variety of information that people are forced to process” (Weick, 1995, p.87). Information load triggers sensemaking because cues are forced out of an ongoing flow, and as the load increases people do more to manage the information (Weick, 1995).

Another occasion for sensemaking, other than uncertainty, is ambiguity (Weick, 1995). Ambiguity supports multiple different interpretations that occur simultaneously through an ongoing stream (Weick, 1995). In the presence of ambiguity, “people engage in sensemaking because they are confused by too many interpretations” (Weick, 1995, p.91). Meaning multiple plausible explanations may result from sensemaking and hence a lack of clarity (Martin, 1993).

### 2.3.4 Sensemaking and communication

One of things that can reduce uncertainty and ambiguity is effective internal crisis communication (Kim, 2018). According to Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld (2005, p.413) communication is central to sensemaking, because “sensemaking is about organizing through communication.” Employee sensemaking can be held back when there is a misalignment between management and employees due to the communication, and therefore leads to misinterpretation, resistance or even rejection from employees (Daymon, 2000). People are motivated to generate meaning from what is happening around them (Wrzesniewski, Dutton & Debebe, 2003). This eagerness means employees have higher expectations concerning accurate, sufficient and timely updates about the crisis from their organization (Heide & Simonsson, 2014). When it comes to communication in the Covid-19 pandemic, unique factors have influenced the ability and form of communication (Christianson & Barton, 2020). People are wearing masks and often communicate online which makes it more difficult to be understood properly (Christianson & Barton, 2020). This increased distance and the change in (primary) communication channels reduce the “richness and consistency of information flow” (Christianson & Barton, 2020, p.574).

### 2.3.5 Sensegiving

This study focuses on employees rather than managers and hence, less on sensegiving, therefore for the purpose of this paper it is important to acknowledge but will not be explored in depth. Sensegiving is important since sensemaking is often accompanied by sensegiving, which is defined as “the process of attempting to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others toward a preferred redefinition of organisational reality” (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991, p.442). The influence on meaning that change agents - often managers - have includes both what they say and do (Kumar & Singhal, 2012). Therefore, relevant to our study as the employees interviewed may have made sense through the sense their managers gave.

## 2.4 Chapter Summary

In sum, as we explored the different literature on crisis and crisis management, there are few opinions that date on the second half of the 20th century and few after the financial crisis of 2008 (Boin, 2009). Vašíčková (2019), the most recent crisis management literature, who defines crisis management as a system that captures, evaluates and measures crisis activity. Additionally, most crisis management authors agree that this type of management involves events of uncertainty; however, Faisal, Albrecht and Coetzee (2020) add an important factor: change management. They believe that business continuity is rooted in crisis management and fundamental to change management, as it considers crisis management strategies the pre-stage to change management.

Change management is important as organisational systems cannot be clearly understood until they are changed and because the rhythms of change are regarded as periods of convergence abruptly by external unforeseen events (Lewin, 1951; Maruhn & Greiner, 1972), such as during crises. The diagnostic and dialogic approaches are thought of as organisational development strategies that assist change successfully (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2016). The first one, includes models that can be applied to situations and the second involves the understanding of organisations as social settings that allow meaning making (Bushe & Marshak, 2016a).

We consulted the literature on sensemaking and we summarize that sensemaking is: how people (employees) make sense or try to understand events (changes) that differ from the normal or from their expectations within ambiguous and uncertain events (Weick, 1995; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Milliken, 1987). In order to further grasp sensemaking as a process the following differences were explored. To begin with, interpretation diverge from sensemaking because the first suggests there is something in the world to be discovered, whilst sensemaking is about generating what the sense maker interprets (Weick, 1995). In addition, action and belief-driven are two different processes of sensemaking, as the first (action-driven) focuses on what individuals do than believe, the second involves the framing of beliefs that influence what people notice and how events unfold (Weick, 1995). Making sense through action, however, was disrupted as lockdowns and furlough restricted the ability to take action, consequently (Christianson & Barton, 2020). Moreover, cues noticing and frames differ, because: cues are unexpected situations that involve uncertain and

ambiguous meanings and/or outcomes; noticing, is the action that allows the cues to be picked up on in order for sensemaking to begin, and frames, are past events that guide interpretation (Colville, Pye & Carter, 2013; Maitlis, Vogus & Lawrence, 2013; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). When cues are noticed and, where relevant, put into frames sensemaking occurs (Weick, 1995). The author further divides sensemaking into the following seven properties. (1) Focused on and focused by, meaning that people focus on certain elements more than others to support their understanding and interpretations. (2) Enactive of sensible environments, here, the environment is regarded as reality(ies) that people actively or passively enact, which enables or limits the sensemaking process. (3) The social property is shaped by or based on interactions with others. (4) Retrospective sensemaking involves recalling past experiences to make sense of present or/and future events. (5) The grounded in identity property, constructs reality based on who we are and what we have experienced individually. (6) Ongoing sensemaking means that the process of making sense is in continuous motion. (7) Driven by plausibility rather than accuracy means that people search for cues that confirm their understanding rather than seeking accurate interpretations. As the pandemic developed, people found themselves in the situation where they had to address many emotions. According to Helms, Thurlow and Mills (2010) people engage in sensemaking motivated by the aim to address emotions. The available literature argues that positive and negative emotions encompass a two-way process, whereby these emotions affect sensemaking and vice versa (Steigenberger, 2015). An additional difference that the literature addresses is between uncertainty, whereby people perceive themselves to lack important information about the environment to enact it (Milliken, 1987), and ambiguity, which involves the engagement of sensemaking due to confusion of multiple interpretations (Weick, 1995). These are relevant characteristics of the crisis and changes that the literature refers to as dynamic uncertainty, given the continuous uncertainty brought by the pandemic (Christianson & Barton, 2020). Furthermore, uncertainty and ambiguity are argued to be affected by communication (Kim, 2018). This is important in change management, more specifically in dialogic change, because the organization is regarded as a setting that enables or constraints realities (Bushe & Marshak, 2016a). Communication is central to sensemaking as it is used as a tool to organise and inform sensemaking (Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld, 2005). Lastly, sensegiving is the process that attempts to influence sensemaking towards a preferred reality (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991).



### 3. Methodology and Methods

This session puts forth the *methodology* and the *methods* used to carry out our research. Before we expand more on these, we highlight the difference between *methodology*: the rationale along with the lenses used for our research; and *methods*: the tools we used to carry our study (Tuck & McKenzie, 2014).

Our study aims to put forth the sensemaking process of employees that is triggered by organisational change that resulted from crisis management. Thus, we conducted qualitative research that allowed us to understand the social nature of the phenomena through semi-structured interviews and the exploring of different processes, meanings and qualities (Rennstam & Wasterfors, 2018). This is essential for the study because we aim to understand the process of sensemaking during change management resulting from crises management. Therefore, it is fundamental to explore the *ontological* and *epistemological* assumption and how *phenomenology* guided our interpretation of excerpts (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Husserl, 2013; Prasad, 2017; Rennstam & Wasterfors, 2018).

#### 3.1 Methodology

Initially, we start by analysing the philosophical assumptions that we considered. The ontological assumption is concerned with: What is the nature of reality? as reality is perceived through many interpretations, therefore, the researchers' perspectives vary along with the forming of themes in the finding phase (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The epistemological assumption is oriented towards: What can be acclaimed as knowledge? and how are knowledge declarations legitimised? (Creswell & Poth, 2017). This involves the subjective interpretations of the participants and those of the researcher, where the researcher relies on empirical material.

Another philosophical lens that we use in our study, as a subcomponent of ontology is *phenomenology*, whereby we embrace the meaning of reality as a construction allowed by one's first-person interpretations (Husserl, 2013). For example, a stick that allows ink to shape symbols on paper, is interpreted as a pen in our contexts, however, for other contexts it may be interpreted as a symbol (like a quill) of knowledge and wisdom. As phenomenology developed over the years and accounted for different interpretative traditions such as: symbolic, hermeneutics, dramaturgy

and dramatism, ethnomethodology and ethnography (Prasad, 2017). Our study falls under symbolic interactionism. Hence, we studied the phenomenon of sensemaking in the context of organisational changes resulting from crisis, in other words: what do the changes mean to employees? We also recognise that although this tradition accounts for socially created contexts it also recognises that constructions take place only because of human associations of meanings with events, situations and interactions (Prasad, 2017). Therefore, we recognise this tradition to be important to understanding the meaning of subjective and social realities over the causalities (Weber, 2017) produced by the crisis.

In motivation and limitation as to why we chose Symbolic Interactionism (SI) rather than other interpretive traditions, are the following. Firstly, the industry we based our research on: the hospitality industry relies on daily interpretations of events, that are based on the employee's intrinsic meanings given based on the meaning these events mean to them, and these meanings are not stable but in continuous change (Blumer, 1969). Secondly, it encompasses the characters of everyday life such as organisational social contexts that continuously evoke a variety of emotions that to be made sense of (Prasad, 2017). Finally, it is important to acknowledge that SI is argued to focus on rational thinking and reflecting on the self, avoiding the unconscious (Burke & Reitzes, 1991; Prasad, 2017).

Having shed light on the interpretative tradition and its ontological and epistemological properties we will now address another methodological aspect of our research. We followed an abductive approach as we consulted existing literature on topics such as crisis management and sensemaking (deductive approach). Nevertheless, we did not hypothesize based on this prior to our interviews, as we wanted to engage with the emerging topics during the process organically (inductive approach). The motivation for our abductive approach was to start our research with an understanding of the chosen topics (as outlined in chapter 2) through the lenses of the literature and also our personal knowledge of the hospitality industry, as both authors of this thesis have experience in the hospitality industry and one of the authors worked in the organisation, under study, for four years, experiencing the first lockdown. Therefore, our investigation started with the interviews and then we researched more in the literature available on: sensemaking, crisis management and organisational development.

## 3.2 Data Collection

Our research question involves the understanding of: how employees make sense of organisational change resulting from crisis? and we decided to carry this study on a one case organisation. Baškarada (2013) argues that the case study method is widely used, although it is not fully understood, this is because the scientific diligence and the findings are difficult to validate (Gustafsson, 2017). On the other hand, Cousin (2005) argues that the case method is good to simplify the understanding of a situation. (Creswell, 2013) further builds on this by arguing that this method is good to explore real life situations in depth through data collection. Thus, we aim to gain deeper understanding of the employees sensemaking process within their organisational settings, exploring their real-life situations.

### 3.2.1 Sampling and Semi-Structured interviews

In accordance with our symbolic interactionism grounded in epistemological, ontological constructivism and practicalities, such as time, we decided to interview 12 people employed at the hotel. We decided to organise our interviews in three connected parts: past, present and future following a semi-structured style (see Figure 3). This is because the crisis that caused different organisational changes took place previous, during and will persist after our interviews. We acknowledge that, during sensemaking these timelines manifest themselves all at once, in other words we see the crisis timeline as a construction of the past, present and future to be connected and unified (Schaefer, forthcoming) in the sensemaking process. We created an interview guide with a list of open-ended questions for each different time (past, present, future) which allowed flexibility and dialogue as we diverted to follow up questions and steered back to our set of questions. In accordance with Kallio et al. (2016) who developed a guide for semi-structured interviews including five phases, out of which we are interested in formulating the preliminary semi-structured interview guide, that argues the articulation of an interview guide as a tool for data collection using previous knowledge (Turner, 2010) in a structural, logical and coherent way which allows space for a loose and flexible dialogue. This flexibility gave “interviewees a degree of freedom to explain their thoughts” (Humphrey, 2007, p.340). Additionally, through asking follow-up questions that relate to the employees’ answers rather than anchoring ourselves to a script, this avoided limiting our findings.

PAST	PRESENT	FUTURE
How would you describe a day/ week of work prior to the pandemic?	If you have returned to work, how does a day/week of work look like now?	How do you think it will be different in the future?
How did that change at the beginning of the pandemic?	Did talking to guests help your understanding or change your opinion on the situation?	How do you feel about that?
How were changes/updates communicated?		How do you think demand can be met when it raises back up?
How did you feel during the changes?		
How did this change throughout the pandemic?		
What was your understanding of what was going on?		

**Source:** Julia van Veen and Sara Imaoui

**Figure 3:** Interview questions

### 3.1.2 Research procedure and tools

We approached the hotel and explained our intentions to research employees' sensemaking of organisational change resulting from the crisis. Therefore, the HR Manager introduced our study to all hotel's employees and the response was positive immediately as four members emailed us volunteering for the study. However, two days after the high peak plunged. As we both have experience in the hospitality industry, we recognised that not all employees are familiar nor comfortable with communicating via emails. We, therefore, decided to remind employees of their appreciated participation through social media, specifically LinkedIn. We chose this platform as it conveys serious intent (van Zoonen et al., 2018). The message sent through LinkedIn was the same as the HR Manager's to allow remembrance. We contacted around 14 people, 6 of which responded. Additionally, we contacted 2 more managers via email, who were available. The interviews ranged between 30 to 40 minutes and took place online via Zoom.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

Qualitative data is by nature disordered when collected (Rennstam & Wasterfors, 2018). Therefore, a strategy was devised as to how we would sort and analyse the data. Once all interviews were conducted and transcribed, the data was reduced and ordered. We, individually, sorted through the interviews to avoid our interpretations influencing each other in the initial stages. This enabled us to look closely at what interviewees said and how they said it, in order to understand how they interpreted and made sense of the situation.

We recorded the interviews with the approval of the respondents, the recordings served as interactions that we were able to evaluate during our analysis process, which allowed us to evaluate the discourse that took place. In accordance with Kreuz and Riordan (2018) recordings allow the analysis of the discourse to stay alive, or it brings up new factors that the researchers were not able to pick upon during the interview (Flick, von Kardoff & Steinke, 2004). During the interviews we used Otter.ai, whereby the speech exchange was automatically transcribed, we manually checked it. Once our transcriptions were complete, we used the ATLAS.ti software to code our qualitative content. Initially we started coding based on what we found interesting and recognised the patterns, simultaneously, we also coded based on the Weick's seven properties (1995). This assisted our orientation during our coding process as the repeat coding increased our relationship with the literature and the content we were analysing. During this process (coding) we developed concepts which assisted us to hypothesise. According to Flick, von Kardoff and Steinke (2004) developing hypotheses whilst coding not only captures content but also the creative ways to observe and contemplate the data. We drew on aspects of grounded theory as part of our research, calling upon open coding - where the collected data is put into categories - and axial coding - where relationships between the categories will be identified (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2015). Corbin and Strauss (2015) suggest three different approaches for naming the categories; based on terms used in the data, terms used by the participants or from the existing literature. A combination of the terms participants used and what is found in existing literature were used. Axial coding is a process of theoretical development, which allowed us to "explore and explain the phenomenon" (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2015, p.511) by looking at what is happening, why it is happening, how external factors impact this, how that is managed in the specific context and the consequences from the actions taken. To answer the research question fully, what is happening and why as well

as both the external factors and the internal context needed to be explored in relation to crises and the sensemaking of it. This style of coding involves creating subcategories around a category (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). According to Corbin and Strauss (2015, p.125) this gives “the concept greater explanatory power” by allowing researchers to answer questions regarding the phenomenon such as when, where, why, who, how and with what consequences. Again, relevant to this study both in relation to crisis management, change management and sensemaking.

As we finished our coding phase, we were able to engage with our coded phrases in creative ways. Conducting our coding through the ATLAS.ti software we were able to download reports of the coded areas as Excel sheets. Here, we used Pivot tables to sort our data based on specific employees, specific codes or words and the number of times the same word was mentioned to highlight patterns. However, during this process we were vigilant to not miss hidden messages or emotions as this software might take away meanings from the context (Flick, von Kardoff & Steinke, 2004).

We decided to combine our findings and analysis sections to allow a smoother flow of our results to have a better “conversation” with the borrowed existing literature. According to Levitt, Bamberg, Creswell, Frost, Josselson and Suárez-Orozco (2018) this method allows researchers to maintain the integrity of intertwined sections of findings and analysis that are not possible to split. In other words, this method allowed us to keep the event and our interpretation together. Additionally, our analysis explored the data as experts, that we used to theorise based on our empirical findings (Rennstam & Wasterfors, 2018). Finally, we used the data collected as a source of inspiration to form a dialogue between the theoretical framework of sensemaking, literature of: organisational development and management, and our empirical findings (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007).

### 3.4 Reflexivity on the methodology and methods used

In the preceding sections we introduce the targeted audience of future researchers and practitioners to our methodology and methods used to carry out our study. We identified our work as an interpretative research tradition, more specifically as a Symbolic Interactionism study, concerned with the meaning of employees' sensemaking during organisational change resulted from change.

This indicates that we are not interested in finding objective truths, but rather in the understanding of subjective meanings along with their effects on the organisation as a social setting for interaction. Additionally, this study is a case study based on one organisation and it is based on the hospitality industry, therefore it cannot be removed from its context and looked at as an independent variable. Additionally, the study is influenced by the respondents and our interpretations of the events and gathered materials. Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2018) argue that research following the interpretative tradition are highly influenced by both the respondents and the researchers therefore the study should not be generalised nor removed from its context. Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2018) further stress the importance of the researchers to be reflexive and revisit their intentions and that of the interviewee.

Firstly, we recognise that one of the qualitative research limitations is that respondents may have responded to the questions thinking of a right or wrong answer. In order to avoid this, at the beginning of every interview we informed the participants that we are interested in their interpretations and that there is no correct or incorrect answer. Additionally, we asked follow up questions, to show that we are interested in their experiences rather than specific answers.

Secondly, Nunkoosing (2005) highlights the problem of power during interviews, whereby the authority of the interviewer, who seeks knowledge and expertise from the interviewee, comes from having power over the research itself. Whilst the interviewee has privileged knowledge that she or he may decide to not share (Nunkoosing, 2005). The nature of semi-structured open-ended questions allow employees to feel control over the outcome of the interview, taking away power from the interviewer, whilst the researcher has the opportunity to ask follow up questions when required best to gain more insight about a specific topic (Alsaawi, 2014).

Finally, as we discussed in the hospitality industry, and service industry, there is an imposed happy and positive mindset that employees have to abide by (Mullins & Dossor, 2013).

Kogovsek and Kogovsek (2014) define this as emotional labour, whereby employees display behaviours that satisfy guests or stakeholders (Harrison & Qureshi, 2000) at the expense of authentic behaviours. This may be relevant because some employees feel like ambassadors of the organisation, meaning when they are dealing with work related matters, they feel like they have to

behave by the organisation's, or industry's, rules (Potgieter & Doubell, 2020). Additionally, researchers are also considered stakeholders of the organisation (Harrison & Qureshi, 2000). In other words, because industry imposes a positive mindset and employees may feel as ambassadors of the organisation, they might have exaggerated or put their experiences into embellished perspectives. With a focus on avoiding this we asked subjective follow up questions such as, how did/does that make you feel personally? This was to gain a more subjective interpretation of the events.

### 3.5 Chapter Summary

In summary, our methodology accounts for *ontological* and *epistemological* assumptions. Whereby the ontological assumption is concerned with: what is the nature of reality?, as the answer varies due to different perceptions of reality; and the epistemological assumption addresses: what can be acclaimed as knowledge, and how is knowledge acclaimed?, as we recognise that individuals (participants and researchers) rely on empirical material (Creswell & Poth, 2017). We also acknowledge the philosophical branch of ontology: phenomenology, as we explore reality with the assumption that reality is allowed by subjective interpretations (Husserl, 2013). Given this assumption, we adopt symbolic interactionism as we explore interpretations of events (Prasad, 2017). This is because we are not interested in finding objective thrusts but the understanding of subjective meanings along with their effects on the organisational social setting.

Our data collection took place through qualitative research of 12 semi-structured interviews. We organised our interview questions based on past, present and future (Schaefer, forthcoming) this is to have more clarity in terms of timeline and changes, due to the many events that took place within 2020 and 2021. Additionally, we used Otter.ai to transcribe our interviews and ATLAS.ti to code the data. In acknowledgement of the reflexivity on our methodology, we recognise that between interviewees and researchers there may be problems of powers, whereby both parties feel that they may hold a position of power or vulnerability over the other party (Nunukoosing, 2005). The interviewee may perceive their power through privileged knowledge and vulnerability as they do not have control over the research and vice versa for the researcher (Nunukoosing, 2005). Finally, another problem we believe may be relevant to account for is the strong presence of forced positive mindset and emotional labour in the hospitality industry (Kogovsek and Kogovsek, 2014; Mullins



& Dossor, 2013). Employees display behaviours that satisfy guests, or stakeholders in general, and researchers can be perceived as stakeholders of organisations given their interest in the organisation under study (Kogovsek and Kogovsek, 2014; Mullins & Dossor, 2013; Harrison & Qureshi, 2000).

## 4. Analysis

This section explores the excerpts of the 12 semi-structured interviews conducted with employees of the London Hilton on Park Lane and the analysis of those findings. We observed the excerpts within their contexts by referring back to the transcripts of the interviews. Based on the empirically grounded observations we theorised as to how and why employees said or felt what they did (Rennstam & Wasterfors, 2018).

The bigger context of our study is sensemaking of organisational changes resulting from crisis management. Based on our empirical findings we grouped these changes as displayed in Figure 4. We discuss how we interpreted the results of how employees make sense of the following unintentional organisational changes: hotel downturn in business and the hotel closure; and the intentional changes including: redundancies and hotel reopening (Palmer, Dunford & Buchanan, 2016). As we draw on classic and recent literature of sensemaking, organisational change and crisis management to understand the process of employees' sensemaking, we are primarily guided by the sensemaking patterns, along organisational changer (rather than the other way around) which are then grouped into: enacted environment; social sensemaking and retrospective properties (Weick, 1995). Based on our interpretations we arranged our patterns and findings in order to answer the question: how do employees make sense of organisational change resulting from crisis management? Thus, we decided to analyse these three patterns under the organisational changes we theorised to be relevant. In order to give context to our analysis. We first present the case background.

### Case Background

Below are the organizational changes that we grouped our analysis into. Figure 4 also shows the governmental changes that are connected to these organizational changes.

As the outbreak of Covid-19 started in Wuhan, January and February appeared to be as quiet as normal, during this period in hospitality. In the beginning of March, the alarm raised as the outbreak reached everywhere around the world and drastically impacted national and international

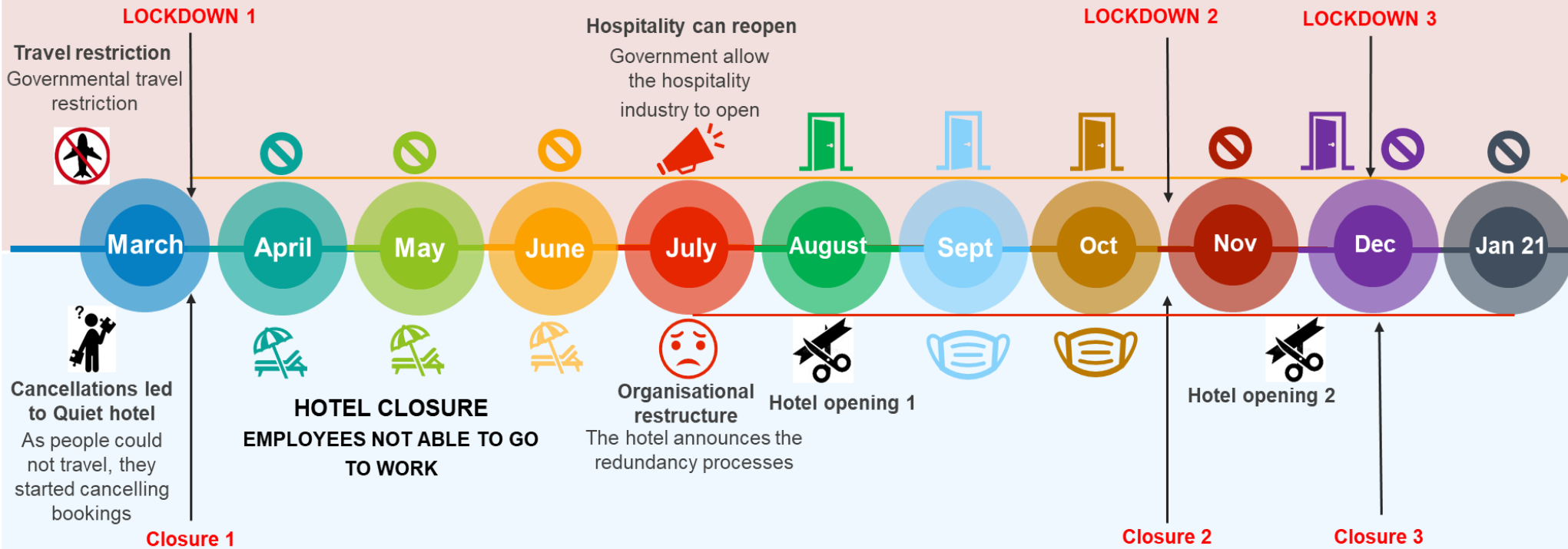
travel. The London Hilton on Park Lane experienced cancellations that led to an extraordinary quiet period from mid-February until the unintentional closure at the end of March.

At this stage, employees were told the hotel might close and the majority were no longer required to go to work. On March 20th the UK government introduced the furlough scheme, a grant that covers 80% of the wages for those that are on the company's payroll but not working. As part of the furlough scheme employees were not allowed to work and therefore did not have access to their work logins or emails. Then, on March 23rd the first lockdown was announced for which the measures started on the 26th and lasted until the 15th of July 2020.

In July 2020, the hotel had a meeting with all employees informing them that they would have to make certain people redundant and which positions were at most risk, therefore this is when the redundancy process officially started. At the start of August, the hotel opened its doors for the public, although they were able to form the 15th of July, making this an intentional organisational change. The hotel then remained open, with limited capacity and opening hours, until the end of October. Another forced closure, because of a second lockdown.

After the second lockdown ended on December 2nd, the hotel reopened. Discussions regarding the Christmas rules and restrictions were ongoing during the first weeks of December, before tighter restrictions were announced for the UK on December 19th. The hotel was therefore only open for a very short time before closing again just before Christmas. This was also when the third lockdown began. The redundancy process was ongoing until January 2021. When conducting our interviews in March and April 2021, the third lockdown was still in effect.

## Governmental imposed changes



## Organisational changes

Source: Sara Imaoui & Julia Van Veen (Institute for Government, 2021)

Figure 4: Timeline of the organizational changes in the hotel during the Covid-19 Pandemic, based on the conducted interviews and the UK governments Covid timeline

## 4.1 Enacting different sensible environments in different timings

Under this first heading of the analysis, we introduce the reader to how employees made sense of organisational changes through the enactment of sensible environments at different times. As our study took a phenomenological approach, whereby we embrace the construction of reality as a first-person interpretation (Husserl, 1960), we identified that a large number of employees enacted their reality at different times and by noticing different cues (Weick, 1995). Therefore, we investigated the timings employees were able to enact their surroundings, or what was happening around them. We then picked upon common situations where multiple employees began their sensemaking process and these, included the following organisational changes: cancellations/quiet hotel, hotel closure, redundancy process and the first hotel reopening (see Figure 4). We draw on the literature of Weick (1995): enactment of sensible environments - inspired by the cycle in Figure 2 below - and the focused on and by extracted cues to analyse employee's sensemaking processes during the respective organisational changes.

### 4.1.1: Cancellations and quiet hotel as first cues that were enacted

The first organisational change, caused by the Covid-19 crisis, is the cancellations that created an environment referred to as a quiet hotel. Our empirical data shows that guests started to call to cancel booking and the hotel started to become less occupied throughout March. In this section we aim to understand how employees made sense of this unintentional organisational change, we focus on which cues were noticed and how certain employees enacted the environment to make sense of this change.

Certain employees noticed guests calling to cancel and seeing less guests in the hotel when talking about the beginning of the pandemic:

*“We were just cutting phone lines, a lot of people calling us to cancel, guests calling us in panic, asking those questions which we didn't even know the answers to. So a lot of that, that but mostly just hours were cut.” (Allegra)*

Here, we picked up on three important aspects of what Allegra said: guests calling to cancel, not having immediate answers to give to the guests when speaking to them on the phone and the hotel reducing their work hours. Drawing on the properties of sensemaking, in particular focused on and by extracted cues (Weick, 1995), Allegra first noticed the ongoing crisis when noticing and extracting the cues: cancellations and reduced working hours. As part of the sensemaking process, people focus on certain elements more than others to support their understanding (Weick, 1995). Therefore, suggesting that, at this point in the pandemic, focusing on these two cues specifically allowed Allegra to start making sense of the situation. It is important to highlight, here, that people enact their own reality based on what they notice or do not notice (Weick, 1995). In fact, for Allegra the cues mentioned above that she focused on, are cues she is familiar with as a sign of downturn in occupancy and therefore this can be labelled as the meaning she assigned to the cues.

The reduced working hours cue that Allegra mentions, suggests that for some employees, the risk of losing their jobs was triggered at this stage, the “beginning” of the pandemic: March 2020. While others’ sensemaking concerning redundancies were associated with the official process which began in July 2020 as we will expand on later (see 4.1.3). We argue that the two different times in which job insecurity was triggered is due to certain employees noticing the cue of reduced work hours and other employees not noticing this cue. This could be explained through what Weick (1988) refers to as capacity for crisis perception. Which is about how people see the events they believe they are able to act upon (Weick, 1988). When talking about the first months of the pandemic Tim mentions: “*because it's completely beyond our control*” which corresponds with Weick’s (1988) claim of in this case, the perception of not being able to act upon the crisis. Following this, Weick’s (2010) research on the Bhopal disaster and optimistic sensemaking during crises supports this plausible explanation. Weick (1988) argues “that crises are more controllable than we think” (as cited in Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010, p.554), which impacts sensemaking because holding this perception means people are open to noticing more cues they can affect (Weick, 2010). Therefore, suggesting that the opposite applies to this case. In other words, employees who felt the Covid-19 crisis was out of their control, may have noticed less cues as a result, which is needed to begin making sense.

In sum, the cues noticed were cancellations and reduced working hours. The cancellations led to a quieter hotel, which is regarded as a sensible environment that was enacted, and given the meaning

of low occupancy. Those that therefore noticed and focused on the reduced work hours were also able to make sense of the situation as a threat to their jobs, thus introducing job uncertainty and a state of confusion, that we develop further in the following section.

#### 4.1.2: Minefield: making sense of unknown territory as the hotel closes

The next change employees spoke about was when the hotel closed and the United Kingdom went into lockdown. The hotel closure meant employees were no longer required to come to work and had to stay home: a new organisational setting for employees. This section begins by exploring how employees were disoriented and how their environment enabled or constrained their sensemaking (Weick, 1995; Bushe & Marshak, 2016a). Then we explore panic, firstly as a negative emotion and secondly, its potential relations to uncertainty and job insecurity (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014).

Following on from the above-mentioned point, and how employees notice cues for sensemaking (Weick, 1995), Allegra and Paul express feeling lost as they could not ask their managers for answers:

*“I remember that I was lost, lost so lost I think, and we were walking into the office, you don't even really know what was happening, and even our managers didn't know what was happening so we couldn't ask for advice, we couldn't ask for anything, because no one knew... So I think it was already a kind of just an uneasy time, and how it was honestly like I tried to think about unknown causes and vague answers”* (Allegra)

*“I feel like for my team who are used to seeing management with answers to their problems, it was very insecure for us, because I believe in their perception of things that management usually has the answers to their problems, but in this case we didn't have any answers.”*  
(Paul)

At this very beginning stage, no one knew what to do or what to expect from this new situation and therefore managers did not have answers to the questions employees asked. As shown by Paul's quote, employees are used to managers helping them to solve their problems. The lost

feeling as a result reflects this as a constraint to their sensemaking processes as managers and the organisation (as their environment) did not have explanations to contribute to the general idea (Weick, 1995), concerning the changes they were undergoing. Previously, as suggested by Paul's quote, the organisational setting served as a social setting where shared understandings were established. Thus, employees were able to enact their environment through the manager's guidance (employees' sensemaking was focused by managers).

In the attempt to explain the excerpts above, specifically, where employees did not receive guidance from their managers, we borrowed the Starbuck and Milliken (1988) framing theory. Starbuck and Milliken (1988) discuss framing situations within the familiar, expected and what matters. People find it easier to understand and respond to events when they can be framed within the familiar or contexts they frequently interact in (Starbuck & Milliken, 1988). Thus, there may be more difficulties responding to events in unfamiliar contexts (Starbuck & Milliken, 1988), which is reflected in how both managers and employees felt lost and insecure. In other words, the explanation as to why both employees and managers were unable to make sense of Covid-19 in March 2020, is that they found themselves in an unfamiliar context and wondering "what's going on here?" and "what do I do next?" (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005, p.412).

This confusion plays a vital role in the organisation as it shaped the perceived reality and therefore, the environment that was enacted. In other words, the organisational context as a social setting for sensemaking and the enactment of new realities was threatened, as socially no one is able to influence what people think and how they act (Weick, 1995; Bushe and Marshak, 2016a). Weick (1995) and Bushe and Marshak (2016a) find that all employees contribute to creating part of the environment, which consequently, constraints or enables sensemaking (dialogic change). At this stage no one, employees nor managers, were able to assist in contributing to the environment which caused the feelings of disorientation expressed in the quotes above.

In contrast, we argue that the difficulty for employees to enact their surroundings served as an environment of confusion that employees enacted. That is to say: the lack of guidance from management, created an unfamiliar context within which employees enacted the action (of not knowing) to bring clarity to their confusion (Starbuck & Milliken, 1988).

This disorientation was also reflected through the panic employees displayed:



*“And most of that information [closure related] made no sense whatsoever, and was confusing for us, for the company and for the guests, and all of that created the panic in people's mind” (Carlos)*

We regard the panic as a negative emotion (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). Sandberg and Tsoukas' (2014, p.17) build on negative emotions referring to “fear, desperation, anxiety and panic”, the latter emotion being relevant in this case. Hence, as a result this may have reduced the cognitive information processing capacity of employees and their noticing and extracting abilities when making sense of the hotel closure.

The panic displayed was also associated with job insecurity:

*“I was feeling a bit. I was panicking a bit, especially from a financial point of view.”*  
(Vince)

*“I mean, kind of in periods of time, in the first few weeks there was a lot of anxiety, concern... Jesus Christ, it was just like, how am I going to find food, and that really shocked me the most. That couple of weeks of panic”* (Paul)

For these employees, it shows that the panic is not only regarded as a negative emotion but also related to the perceived risk of losing their jobs as a result of the hotel closure. In further investigating panic and its relation to uncertainty, we borrow the following literature. Maitlis and Christianson (2014, p.70) state sensemaking is triggered by cues (hotel closure), where “the meaning is ambiguous and/or outcomes uncertain.” In this case, we argue that the sensemaking was triggered by the hotel closure because the outcome of ‘what does this mean for me’ was uncertain (Weick, 1995). Therefore, concluding that the uncertainty may have a relation to the perceived job insecurity leading to panic. Additionally, a new form of uncertainty during the pandemic: dynamic uncertainty was pointed out by Christianson and Barton (2020). Whereby, uncertainty means the continuous change of the unknown creates new uncertainties and therefore more cues that call for explanation and thus trigger sensemaking (Christianson & Barton, 2020; Weick, 1995). Dynamic uncertainty may have caused various changes that we identified (see Figure 4), in their similar but different repetition that we discuss later (see 4.3.3).

Lastly, this form of uncertainty also describes the sensibility of the environment (Weick, 1995) as there was a continuous disruption of routines and normal interactions (Christianson & Barton, 2020) and employees perceived themselves to lack information about the environment (Milliken, 1987).

In sum, during the organisational change: hotel closure, we found that there was no guidance for both managers and employees who perceived themselves lost during this change. Although the disorientation limits the organisational setting as a meaning-making entity (Weick, 1995; Bushe & Marshak, 2016a), we found that employees enacted the “not knowing”, from the environment, to bring clarity to their confusion. In relation to this, panic was found to be a common negative emotion (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2014). In further analysing panic, through our empirical data and the available literature we found a relationship between uncertainty and job insecurity resulting in panic (Weick, 1995; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Due to the Covid-19 crisis, Christianson & Barton (2020) argue that uncertainty takes a new form of dynamic uncertainty as it continuously evolves, resulting in new changes. New changes for the hotel meant decision making such as the one of redundancies.

#### 4.1.3: Redundancy process: a new cue for sensemaking that spread insecurity and uncertainty

The change discussed in this section is the organisation restructure that started in July 2020, where certain positions and the people holding them were at risk of losing their jobs. We consider the redundancy process as an organisational change, resulting from crisis management as a reactive strategy (Spillan, 2000; Vašíčková, 2019). This change served as an action to enact the sensible environment (Weick, 1995). Therefore, this section consults the enactment of sensible environments property (Weick, 1995) to understand how employees made sense of the redundancy as a new uncertain environment.

Spillan (2000) discusses the reactive approach to crisis management, whereby the organisation does not, necessarily, take actions before crisis (see Figure 1), therefore, they find themselves in a

defensive position. Vašíčková (2019) adds that defensive activities include cost cutting. The hotel engages in such a defensive activity by introducing the organisational change of: redundancies.

In different forms, the majority of interviewees referred to a sense of uncertainty and job insecurity when talking about the start of the redundancy process:

*“Around that time [July] of course I'm very nervous because they're cutting jobs, people be made redundant, and no one knew who”* (Allegra)

*“I was at risk of redundancy as well, but I was like okay let's see what's gonna happen.”*  
(Vince)

*“Well at the beginning, yeah it was a bit obviously a bit of uncertainty and we didn't know what would happen at that time, we didn't even know that there would be a restructure of the team because it was too early and we didn't know how long this would last. So, yeah, the beginning I think it was just a bit of uncertainty about the whole future of this world”*  
(Cara)

*“I mean to me like because I'm married, the greatest kind of safety I need to feel is that my wife is secure and safe, that I can always provide food and water and money so we can live a lifestyle we want”* (Paul)

Certain employees referred to aspects of their individual situations when talking about the uncertainty. Tim worried about the potential issue of paying rent while Paul focused on what this would mean financially for him and his wife. However, in general there was a concern about losing their jobs and what that meant for the future and their financial situation across the board. Although, according to Bean and Hamilton (2006), during crises, downsizing teams is an expected consequence of crisis management; the redundancy process was shocking for employees because of the governmental aid for employees: furlough (Institute for Government, 2021). The furlough scheme was officially announced after the hotel closed. We believe that everyone thought they were safe, because the government was paying their wages, not the business they are employed by.

The safety feeling came to an end, for some, when the hotel announced that there would be redundancies as stated:

*“That was the first time [in July] I was a bit like, right, this may actually be a massive change, in London rent is expensive without an income I wouldn’t know what to do” (Tim)*

Tim’s statement clearly shows that he gave little if not no importance to the changes before this one (redundancies). In line with Weick’s (1995) view, our findings portray how employees extracted from different events, the hotel closure (4.1.2) for some and the redundancy process (4.1.3) for others, but most eventually had a time in which their sensemaking made them feel uncertain about their job. We believe the uncertainty is tied to jobs, because in the crisis management, we observed that the hotel took a reactive approach, whereby managers acted through cost cutting (Spillan, 2000; Vašíčková, 2019). This approach, unlike the proactive approach, does not prepare employees’ sensemaking as we will expand on when we explore retrospect (4.3.1).

In sum, the organisational restructure that resulted from a reactive approach to crisis management, creating an environment that employees enacted as uncertain and insecure jobwise. The security brought by furlough was abrupt here as employees were at risk of redundancy, which came as a shock. Additionally, based on the excerpts above and our empirical theorising, we found that during this change (redundancies) more employees noticed this as a cue. As we compared this change to the previous ones and sensemaking through the enactment of sensible environments, it became clear that employees noticed cues at different times, enacting their environments at different times.

#### 4.1.4: A change in environment as the hotel reopened, but, how about the change in conversation?

The change that was the hotel reopening in August 2020, was the first time that employees were back at work and in the hotel environment in over four months. This section begins by looking at

the cues and how they were made sense of. We also look at what returning to work meant for enacting different sensible environments.

When talking about being back at work during the first reopening, the employees that returned repeatedly mention the following cues: masks, hygiene regulations, social distancing and other restrictions:

*“In the restaurant, of course we had constantly to be with the mask, respecting social distancing, sanitizing hands, stations and tables when they were like, changing when this was more from the floor team about in general so the reception we have to follow sanitation procedures, sanitizing menus well, all these kinds of rules of course to be Covid safe”*  
(Vince)

*“Something like you see on movies with the FBI, so they put those stickers on the board, no one is allowed in”* (Carlos)

*“I didn't mind because I was happy to be back at work. But... there was a lot of pressure I think because it was such a small team.”* (Harry)

Based on these excerpts we believe that the health and safety regulations were part of the crisis management strategy rather than the dialogic organisational development. In other words, we argue that employees perceived these rules as an addition to their job description. As they state that they felt like they were policing the new rules, upon themselves, their colleagues and on the guests:

*“We were in masks for 12 hour shifts and stuff like that this is horrible like go to our staff canteen to I mean this is probably a good thing that we're doing this now but we had to clean the tables after we left and the chairs before we sat down and before we left the canteen.”* (Allegra)

*“The staff was cut. And we had to wear the mask. Yeah, so basically we were working between eight and twelve hours a day, with a mask. It was really difficult, trying to communicate with the guests, it was a nightmare”* (Carlos)

*“Getting us to come back and then making us follow new regulations on social distancing, hygiene, sanitizing tables, and the whole new way we managed the restaurant. It was hard to get used to it.” (Paul)*

We found that while most employees understood the importance and necessity of the rules, these excerpts indicate that they saw this situation as a hindrance to their work flow. In understanding the reason behind this sensemaking process we explore the importance of dialogic organisational development. According to Bushe and Marshak (2016a) there are eight vital practices for change to be successful, one of which is creating change requires changing conversations. The authors argue that, to move from one organisational setting to the desired one (Ford & Ford, 1994), the change in conversation is fundamental to allow the sensible environment to, or organisational reality, to be enacted by its members (Bushe & Marshak, 2016a; Weick, 1995). In this case, no interviewee talked about how or if the organisation changed the conversation towards the desired outcome of everyone (employees and guests) following the rules.

In sum, the new health and safety rules related to the restrictions were made sense of as a hindrance. We found that employees also focused on the negative when talking about following and policing the new restrictions that contributed to the environment during the reopening. However, we did not find a change in conversation to assist the organisation as a social setting for meaning-making (Bushe & Marshak, 2016a).

## 4.2 Sensemaking through social interactions

Social interactions and communication took on different forms, virtual versus physical, which influenced how employees were able to make sense of the changes that resulted from the crisis. The changes 4.2 focuses on are cancellations/hotel quiet, hotel closure and the first reopening, (see Figure 4) these changes were where there was the most significant impact on sensemaking as a result of the switch from the virtual to organisational setting or no updates to consistent communication took place. Under this heading we engage with the social property of sensemaking (Weick, 1993, 1995) and other research that ties in with this property (Christianson & Barton, 2020; Gephart, Topal & Zhang, 2010; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014).

#### 4.2.1 Outbreak of panic while making sense of the cancellations and quiet hotel

Aside from the feeling of being lost as part of the change when the hotel became quiet and hours were reduced, there was a lot of panic which was shared through interaction between employees and managers as well. This section looks at the impact of panic on the sensemaking process and how that ties with collective sensemaking and shared meaning (Weick, 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005). This angle of investigating panic differs from 4.1.2 as we are interested in its effect in a social sensemaking within a different change (quiet hotel).

Although other interviewees also spoke about panic, we found that Allegra repeatedly mention the word panic and that this was particularly the case for her and her colleagues that were sharing the same office space at the time of the cancellations, when the hotel became quiet and work hours were reduced:

*“We were panicking ourselves, in order to keep our jobs. And what's happening is that we're gonna have to take a holiday which we don't want to use now ... I was panicking the same her initial thing was, am I also going to lose my job after being so many years so she was. It was a very it was just a panic time in the office ... It was just complete panic in that office ... So, all four of us are kind of panicking and then outside it was a little bit less, I would say, I think it's just four people kind of just projecting all their panic on each other.”*  
(Allegra)

*“You know, it did help because we were the only ones in that moment who knew how each other felt. Of course, the whole world was panicking, but in that moment only the 4 of us knew exactly what we felt in that tiny office. So I think it was a good thing, I think it did mean that we're all just projecting our fears... Talking is a good thing.”* (Allegra)

Allegra explains how she felt the panic as her line manager also panicked while everyone walked into an unknown minefield, and eventually all four of the team panicked. When asked to recall how she felt at the beginning of the pandemic, Allegra namely talked about the panic it created. This is interesting to note because when asked “how do you perceive change in general?” Allegra answered “*change is panic for people.*” The association between change and panic was extremely powerful and engraved in her perception of the period throughout March 2020. Furthermore, no

one had answers and there was no opportunity to make sense of the situation based on the past (see 4.3.1) thus we argue this is why the panic grew within and was passed on between colleagues as shown in the quotes above. According to Barsade (2002, as cited in Steigenberger, 2015, p.439), because emotions “are inherently intra-personal” they can also “spill over” from one individual to another “through observation and [subconscious] information processing.” In this case, panic was the emotion that spilled over. Moreover, Weick (1995) also talks about people at times copying each other directly or indirectly as part of the sensemaking process, which could also explain what happened here.

In further analysing the collective sensemaking we consult Maitlis and Christianson (2014). They argue that social sensemaking is a process that focuses on the negotiation and mutual development of meaning. Our empirical finding also suggests that shared meaning between Allegra and her colleagues in the same office, established through conversation, allowed them to reach an understanding that was not identical but close enough to collectively make sense (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). This is clear as Allegra states she experienced the talking as “*good*” despite the panic created. It seems the collective sensemaking therefore took place through individual exchanges of interpretations (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005) and empathy towards colleagues. Allegra shares her panic through the felt panic of her colleagues.

In sum, when cancellations started and the hotel became quiet, a shared panic was established through the interactions with colleagues as they built up and spilled over (Barsade, 2002, as cited in Steigenberger, 2015). These interactions, or social sensemaking, also reflected that Allegra and her colleagues in this case established a shared understanding that was not identical but close enough to collectively make sense (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014)

#### 4.2.2: Making sense through virtual contact

Another significant change when it comes to interactions was when the hotel closed, and employees were no longer able to interact with each other face-to-face and communication could only take place virtually. We borrow the social property of sensemaking (Weick, 1995) to understand the implications of the dilemma of action and inaction that hinders the sensemaking



process, and in this case why sense was not made with regard to the organisational setting (Christianson & Barton, 2020; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014).

During the lockdown employees were physically separated from the organizational setting, there was a lack of cues to make sense of the crisis with regards to the organizational setting. This may have been exacerbated by the fact that there were few updates from the hotel in the initial months of the lockdown. When asked about the communication during the first hotel closure, employees showed confusion and uncertainty:

*“At the beginning, it was a bit obviously a bit of uncertainty and we didn't know what would happen at that time, we didn't even know that there would be a restructure of the team because it was too early and we didn't know how long this would last. So, yeah, the beginning I think it was just a bit of uncertainty about the whole future of this world”* (Cara)

*“I mean we had like a period of time [March to July] that we didn't even know what was going on”* (Amanda)

Some employees also emphasized that there were no updates from the hotel during lockdown:

*“They don't keep you updated”* (Harry)

In light of these quotes, we propose that the uncertainty and confusion is related to the lack of updates, in other words communication, during this period that employees were not physically present. We recognise that communication, specifically during the Covid-19 pandemic is unique for the reason that it had to take place virtually (Christianson & Barton, 2020). Especially because, Christianson and Barton (2020) found that the increased distance and the change in primary communication channels reduces the “richness and consistency of information flow” making it more difficult for employees to make sense. However, the quotes above show rather than a reduced consistency of information flow as suggested by these authors, we found that there was no flow at all, only two check-in messages.

The lack of flow might have been a result of the furlough scheme, which meant employees were by law not allowed to work and, as Isaac (manager) mentions:

*“A lot of information we couldn’t pass on... because of the legal approach that was taken, that was unfortunately not possible” (Isaac)*

Hence, there was no hotel related communication as a precaution for potential misunderstandings and legal breaches. Consequently, did not have hotel related communication to engage with this in the virtual setting allowing events to go unnoticed as they were not available to make sense in the organisational setting in the first place (Weick, 1995).

Some employees expressed confusion as a result of the lack of updates:

*“In the beginning, there was a lot of confusion. No one knew what was going on, even if our company was meeting every fortnight, with the government. There was not enough information coming out of the government, for them to update us” (Carlos)*

The employees’ confusion can be explained through the action versus inaction dilemma caused by crises, as employees have to act with incomplete information (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). According to Christianson and Barton (2020) this dilemma was especially significant with regards to sensemaking in the pandemic, due to the implications of lockdown and furlough on taking action. The trade-off between action and inaction, is acting with incomplete information which may lead to the ‘wrong’ actions or inaction which maintains confusion (Weick, 1988). Kim (2018) adds that poor communication can strengthen the impact of a crisis for employees. This connects to how we found that there was inaction and also “a lot of confusion”. Nevertheless, it is important to point out that in this specific situation there was no trade-off choice as it was not possible to take action due to the restrictions and furlough schemes in place. Therefore, we argue that in the beginning employees, collectively, were not able to make sense of the pandemic within the organizational setting due to the lack of communication from the hotel and the ‘forced’ inaction as a result of the furlough scheme.

When analysing the virtual setting in which employees had conversations during the lockdown, they mentioned keeping in contact through calls and messages:

*“For me, it was very good to know what other people are doing” (Sarah)*

*“Some of them. Yeah, I'd say three or four. Laugh and joke about it, we [colleagues] call at least try and call each other once a week” (Harry)*

*“Yes, we created special groups. So a [Carlo's department] group... we're in contact, all the time. Sending messages, receiving messages, asking questions” (Carlos)*

*“Always, always, actually, we got a group and we keep in touch all of us” (Amanda)*

In particular employees kept in contact with the colleagues they were close to and had different Whatsapp groups per department. These quotes suggest that there was a need for social interaction with colleagues despite being apart, or possibly even to fill the gap that was created due to the previously mentioned lack of updates from the hotel as an attempt to make sense of what was happening during this time. The need for social interaction can be explained by what Christianson and Barton (2020) found concerning the need for social connection during the pandemic. They claim that due to the isolation (lockdown), they found an increased longing to connect which they say results in “narratives shaped by the desire to ally with a social movement or claim a political identity” (Christianson & Barton, 2020, p.574). We were able to identify a need to connect however if this is due to the “desire to ally with a social movement or claim a political identity”(Christianson & Barton, 2020, p.574) remains undetermined.

To sum up, when employees were physically removed from the organisational setting when the hotel closed, they were not able to make sense of the organisational setting as there was no communication from the hotel because of the implications of furlough, that the hotel was legally bound to. Moreover, the lockdown and furlough scheme cause inaction, which according to the action versus inaction dilemma (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014) explains the confusion employees experienced. Despite the removal of face-to-face interaction, employees still came together virtually, through calls and messages, due to a need for social interaction in an attempt to make sense collectively (Weick, 1995).

### 4.2.3: Face-to-face contact allowed for further sensemaking

The first time the employees saw and spoke to each other face-to-face again, was when the hotel reopened in August. Continuing on within the social property, here we explore the nonverbal cues and communication, which were not available or more difficult to make sense of in the virtual setting with the previous change and the impact of those nonverbal cues on sensemaking (Weick, 1995).

We begin with the switch from the virtual to the physical organizational setting, where we found that the face-to-face interaction with colleagues during the reopening allowed them to pick up on nonverbal cues:

*“But when you see that the people are reacting a little bit better, they're not down ... makes you happy. That's what happens to me when it has an effect on other people positive effect on other people”* (Sarah)

These quotes highlight that the employees picked up on nonverbal cues such as seeing their colleagues reacting to the situation in a better way as time went on (within the hotel reopening change) and that this consequently also impacted how Sarah felt. Weick's (1993) research on the Mann Gulch disaster and collective sensemaking, presents a plausible explanation for our findings on the nonverbal cues Sarah noticed. Weick (1993), found that collective sensemaking was difficult because verbal and nonverbal communication was near to impossible during the Mann Gulch disaster. When employees returned to the hotel, both verbal and nonverbal communication became easier and therefore, the reverse of the Mann Gulch case applies. In this case employees moved from a lockdown, where picking up on nonverbal cues in a virtual setting is difficult (Kniffin et al., 2021), to being back in the hotel together where non-verbal cues were noticed. We, therefore, argue that the hotel reopening and face-to-face interaction allowed employees to pick up on verbal and non-verbal cues making collective sensemaking easier. This explanation is also supported by Gephart, Topal and Zhang (2010) who state that interpersonal shared meanings are generated through verbal and nonverbal interactions. The impact of making sense of the nonverbal cues, in Sarah's case, is that this had a positive effect on how she felt.

In sum, in comparison to the previous change where communication took place virtually, making nonverbal cues more difficult to notice (Kniffin et al., 2021), nonverbal cues were easier to notice when the hotel reopened and the employees were no longer physically separated. While making sense of the nonverbal cues, they more easily understood and influenced each other (social sensemaking).

### 4.3 Making sense backwards: Retrospective Sensemaking

In this section we are going to discuss the strength and importance of previous experiences and how they shape employees' sensemaking processes. We do so by analysing the following findings: the lack of past experiences, to call upon in the sensemaking process when there were cancellations and the hotel became quiet; the hotel closures were perceived as holidays as that was what most employees were able to associate their present situation with. Finally, as the hotel had undergone similar changes multiple times (multiple forced closures and multiple reopenings due to lockdown rules), each time the similar changes took place employees could draw on the previous experience, making each new change less uncertain than the previous one. A wide range of literature was used to explore different available opinions, including the sensemaking literature (retrospective, future oriented sensemaking and foresight) and the crisis management literature (Proactive and Reactive approaches) (Weick, 1995; Weick, 1979; Spillan, 2000).

#### 4.3.1: Lack of past crisis experiences, to call upon for sensemaking

In this section the organisational change involved is the cancellations resulted in a downturn in business. Within this change, we explore how employees made sense of the past, present and future crisis related events and some reasons as to why we theorise they lack past crisis experiences to make sense of their surroundings. At this stage the hotel was in the process of closing, however, no one knew what to expect. In order to explain our findings, we draw on the the following literature: Weick's (1995) retrospective property of sensemaking; the future-oriented sensemaking processes (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Tapinos & Pyper, 2018) and the proactive and reactive approaches to crisis management (Spillan, 2000)

When talking about the beginning of the pandemic, certain interviewees referred back to their previous exposure to crises, such as the 2008 financial crisis and 9/11:

*“This whole situation can't be compared to any of the crises that I witnessed in the past 20 years, it's impossible to compare this to a financial crisis or a terrorist attack. In 2008 the Hotel noticed a slight decline in business, more specifically Conference and Banqueting that received a few cancellations but it was small compared to period between September 2001 and the Summer of 2002.”* (Carlos)

We believe that the above empirical excerpt shows that Carlos drew on his previous experiences in an attempt to make sense of the situation, however, he lacked episodes to recall making sense of the crisis or the changes that followed. This is visible as Carlos lists some of the major crises that took place in the past 20 years, however, he insists that those crises are different since they were not as disruptive as Covid-19.

Most employees expressed that they believed no one had experienced a similar crisis to Covid-19, as specifically stated in:

*“I also think this is a pandemic that no one's lived through before we're all taking it step by step. So in some sense, they can't predict it, they did have to go by, moment by moment day by day, update by update, so I do understand.”* (Allegra)

Allegra believes that no one had lived that situation before, therefore, also implying that past experiences could not be used to make sense of the situation. Thus, we theorize that employees lacked crisis experiences to retrospect on during this change (cancellations/quiet hotel) that resulted from this crisis.

In further analysing this empirical theory, it is important to differentiate between the use of past experiences to understand the present, (Weick, 1979) to predict future situations, or attempt to understand what an event will mean in the future (Starbuck & Milliken, 1988; Gioia et al., 1994; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014). On one hand, according to Weick (1995) employees can only retrospect based on events that have already happened to them; and events that took place within a short time between the time the event took place in the past and the present moment (at which the sensemaking process is taking place). This might explain why Allegra believes that the

pandemic cannot be explained, simply because no one has experienced a pandemic such as Covid-19, in modern times; and why Carlos was able to recall only the past 20 years. On the other hand, Weick's (1979) assumption here, concerning future-oriented sensemaking, is that once an individual engages in imagining the future, they create an abstract event that as soon as imagined it becomes past tense. Therefore, when individuals recall the abstract events, the sensemaking process retrospectively to past imagined experiences (Weick, 1979). In other words, employees can imagine the future and then they can draw upon it in order to make sense of current or future situations because at this stage, around March 2020, employees were not able to recall events or experiences to assist them to bring clarity to their surroundings because they had never imagined a similar reality.

In developing our argument concerning the lack of past crisis experiences, to call upon in the sensemaking process, we do not assume that the interviewees were not able to retrospect, as they attempted to construct meanings (Gephart, Topal & Zhang, 2010) through recalling events such as 9/11 or the 2008 financial crisis, however, they were not convinced of the relevance in comparability, among the crises. To put it in other words, they retrospectively with the aim to generate understanding of the situation (March 2020), nevertheless, they did not think that the crises could be comparable as they did not have the same consequences. Thus, they perceive events as novel situations that cannot make sense when past crisis experiences are recalled.

To have a better understanding of the situation we draw upon the crisis management approaches. According to Spillan (2000) and Vašíčková (2019) the proactive approach to crisis management can use future-oriented sensemaking processes to create pre-crisis stages that prepare organisational members to retrospect on. Future-oriented sensemaking processes include: foresight, whereby scenarios are built to create awareness and develop knowledge (Tapinos & Pyper, 2018). The hotel's reactive approach did not include tools such as scenario or pre-crisis planning which would have, otherwise, equipped employees with imaginary events to recall on in their sensemaking process (Weick, 1979). In other words, employees may have not been able to call upon past crisis related experiences because they had never been exposed to one, or a set of, hypothetical events/scenarios during the pre-crisis stage (see Figure 1) that could have hypothetically attempted to tackle extreme cases such as those experienced during Covid-19. This left employees with a lack of experiences to interpret this situation at this stage. However, as we

discuss in the next section, employees were able to retrospect but their retrospecting process does not account for crisis experiences but rather known events that appeared similar to the situation they found themselves in.

In summary, in this section we argue that employees use the retrospective property of sensemaking (Weick, 1995) to conclude that the situation in the hotel during March 2020, just before the first closure, is labelled as “*impossible*” (Carlos), to understand by looking back at past crises. We theorise that this was due to the organisation’s reactive approach which meant employees were not exposed to future scenarios (abstractly stimulated) that could have informed their retrospective sensemaking process (Weick, 1979; Spillan, 2000; Vašíčková, 2019).

#### 4.3.2: Out of sight... out of mind, they say: Hotel closure made sense of as a holiday

As the first lockdown was announced in March 2020, the organisational change the hotel had to face, here, is closure. This meant that employees could not go to work. We investigate this change through the retrospective property, positive emotions, belief-driven sensemaking and the detachment from work during past holidays (Weick, 1995; Shimazu et al., 2016). In this section we theorise the association of not being able to physically go to work as a holiday.

When sharing their experiences during the first lockdown that followed the first hotel closure, almost all employees spoke about the free time they had and the leisure activities they engaged in:

*“I never thought how much I would enjoy the free time and how beautiful it is to have free time ... This beautiful pleasure feeling of being free to you know, rest and enjoy a lot of things that maybe they never had done before.”* (Sarah)

*“It was great weather, you can catch up on TV. So obviously, it was odd. It was weird. But in terms of like stress levels and stuff like that, at the beginning, I’ll be honest, I didn’t really think from like a job point of view I had much to worry about”* (Tim)

These excerpts (and others that follow later) express how employees made sense of the hotel



closure period, as they could not go to work while they engaged in activities that are normally associated with holidays, such as free time and relaxation (Pomfret, 2012). Therefore, we theorise that employees made sense of the situation as a holiday. This can be explained through the retrospective property of sensemaking, whereby individuals use past experiences to understand present and future events (Weick, 1995). Employees had never experienced the closure of the hotel before, as this hotel is open 365 days a year. Therefore, we believe that employees could only compare what they were experiencing: not being able to go to work, time off and limited communication with the hotel (referring back to 4.2.2), to previous holidays. This part of the sensemaking process (retrospective as the hotel closed) can be considered as a phase of noticing, which “refers to activities of filtering, classifying, and comparing,” (Weick, 1995, p.51). Our empirical theory states a comparison to holidays; therefore, they only had these cues (free time and leisure activities) to notice in their sensemaking, which according to Weick (1995) consequently impacts the choice of what that action means. In this case, because of retrospective sensemaking processes, employees made sense of the action of not going to the hotel as a holiday by comparing this time to when they did not go to the hotel during previous holidays.

When recalling the activities and free time employees had during the first closure, they mainly referred to positive emotions and often smiled when talking about what they did:

*“I mean who doesn't want free holidays, paid like you know like, Well, my mindset was like okay I'm gonna be like just only three weeks. One month, to find me like happy like, I've got to enjoy, two, three months home like doing fuck all and relax.” (Amanda)*

Sarah enjoyed the free time so much that she considered not going back to work:

*“I had the feeling that I didn't want to go back to work because I was so happy where I was... It was amazing. It was absolutely amazing. I didn't want to stop. I didn't want it to stop” (Sarah)*

In addition, to the previously mentioned empirical theory: employees made sense of the sudden and unprecedented free time as a holiday, these excerpts show a strong reference to positive emotions, such as joy (Maitlis, Vogus & Lawrence, 2013). In investigating the reasons why

employees recalled positive emotions while making sense of the change as a holiday, we borrowed Weick's (1995) theory on positive emotions within the unprecedented context. Weick (1995) explains that positive emotions occur when disruptive stimuli, in this case the need to go to work, are suddenly or unexpectedly removed. During the hotel closure, we theorise that employees may have felt like they did not need to work any longer as they were being paid anyways. The unexpected removal of having to work appeared to bring positive emotions. That is to say that employees' positive emotions were caused by the sudden removal of "having to work to earn money" (Weick, 1995; Steigenberger, 2015). Furthermore, when employees recalled the last time, they felt that way, it was during their holiday, as Amanda calls this period "*free holiday.*" Therefore, it can be assumed that the positive emotions resulted from the meaning given to the situation, that of being on holiday.

Some employees did not just take this period (hotel closure) as an opportunity to enjoy the free time at home but took the opportunity to travel. Sarah, for example, went to Spain and remembers what she did with her free time during those months:

*"So [from March 2020] until July, I was in Spain, so it was amazing. For me, it was amazing, because I had so much free time, I was in the countryside, we were gardening, we were doing walks."* (Sarah)

This suggests that Sarah felt like she was on a holiday, therefore, she decided to make good use of the free time and travelled despite the lockdown rules. Travelling is another activity associated with holidays (Pomfret, 2012). Therefore, we argue this strengthened the holiday perception of the situation amongst employees. In other words, employees found ways to strengthen their belief that the closure of the hotel meant: free time, consequently holidays. According to Weick (1995, p.145) this form of belief-driven sensemaking is "held more strongly" because the employees are more interested in finding a way to confirm what they believe. Weick (1995) further states that this type of sensemaking severely filters cues, in this case the free time and leisure activities focused on. Research into sensemaking during organisational change resulting from crises, highlights that due to dynamic uncertainty (Christianson & Barton, 2020) (see 4.1.2), people cannot afford the luxury of accuracy. This therefore pushed employees to confirm what they expect through their past experiences, in contribution to their reality (Pomfret, 2012; Pearson, 1995; Bushe and Marshak,

2016a; Weick, 1995), in this case seeing not being able to go to work during lockdown as a holiday. (Christianson & Barton, 2020).

The furlough scheme enhanced and strengthened the feeling of holiday, as the governmental guidance forbade employers to ask employees to work, whilst on furlough.

One of the managers was concerned with how to address the situation and stated:

*“It's just about it's difficult to address. I mean, how can you tell someone that they shouldn't be getting benefits from the government if they don't have to, if their intention is I want to be in benefits as long as possible. Difficult.”* (Isaac)

This translated into a period between March 2020 and July 2020 where managers were unsure of how to approach employees to avoid the risk of breaching the law, therefore, there was no consistent flow of information (as we discussed previously in 4.2.2). We theorise that the lack of consistent communication resulted in a detachment of the employees from the hotel. Consequently, the holiday perception that employees had of the closure was strengthened. The lack of communication associated with holiday is further examined through the following. Shimazu et. al (2016) argue that, when on holidays, employees should not engage in work activities, as this is very important to mental health and to the organisation as employees come back rested. In the past, the culture of the hotel encouraged employees to detach themselves from work when on holidays. This may have strengthened the sensemaking process through retrospectively as employees are, normally, not engaged with during their time off (Weick, 1995; Shimazu et al., 2016). We, therefore, conclude that the retrospectively detached directly fed into the meaning associated with not being able to go to the hotel as a holiday.

In summary, our empirical finding argues that employees had an unprecedented abundance of free time during the hotel closure, which they made sense of as holidays. This is because of the following reasons. Firstly, they attempted to make sense of not being able to go to work, through retrospective sensemaking, by recalling past free time and leisure activities (Pomfret, 2012). Therefore, employees assigned the meaning of holiday to this period of time and experienced joy (positive emotions) (Maitlis, Vogus & Lawrence, 2013). Additionally, the abrupt removal of not having to go to work, strengthened their positive emotions (Weick, 1995). Secondly, belief-driven

sensemaking processes allowed employees to further strengthen their association of not being able to work as a holiday (belief). As they took the opportunity to travel, confirming their belief, since travelling is considered another holiday activity (Weick, 1995; Pomfret, 2012). Moreover, as a result of the dynamic uncertainty, employees could not afford accuracy, reiterating the holiday association with the hotel closure change. Finally, the furlough's legal implications, the lack of consistent communication and organisational culture, whereby employees are encouraged to detach themselves from work when on holiday to allow them to fully enjoy their free time (Shimazu et al., 2016), strengthened the association of not working during the closure with holiday (Pomfret, 2012). However, as the organisational changes were repeated (reopening, reclosing) it is important to explore how the retrospective sensemaking took different paths.

#### 4.3.3: Same same but different; repeat openings and closures, different sense made

After the first reopening, there was another lockdown and shorter reopening followed by the latest lockdown (See Figure 4). When talking about the repeat openings and closings, employees did not emphasize the same cues they had noticed during the first lockdown and opening. Our empirical observation is that the previous openings and closures assisted the sensemaking processes as employees could, now, retrospect (Weick, 1995) on previous similar changes. After the hotel closed again at the end of October, there was a repeat of the hotel closure and lockdown followed by another reopening and another closure. When asking the employees to recall how the communication was throughout the pandemic, at that moment they were in their third lockdown.

When talking about the reopenings and reclosures, employees spoke about the first lockdown and reopening and being able to know what to expect:

*“So this time we're all much more confident that we're kind of at oh looks like we are going into furlough again, we kind of expected we knew we'd be paid. The differences in that first furlough... we didn't know we'd be paid... We didn't know 80% of our money would be covered. So that was a big other side of the panic whereas this time we were like okay we're going to go into furlough, but we know we're being paid. So it's like okay it's a bit annoying we actually closed the restaurant again it's a bit annoying. To do this, but we know we're going to be paid. So it's a completely different kind of mentality now.” (Allegra)*

*“The news, you have read the news and say like, we're gonna go back and lockdown, one plus one it means like you have to go back in, in furlough. So, when they told me that they had to go back and follow up because we're gonna close. That's it.” (Amanda)*

These excerpts show that the repeated events were the first time, during the pandemic, that employees were able to draw on past crisis experiences to assist their sensemaking processes. The ability to retrospect allowed employees to answer the central questions “what is going on?” and “what next?” (Weick, 1995; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Thus, agreeing with Weick’s (1995, p.26) claim that “people can know what they are doing only after they have done it.”

Sensemaking was not only made easier because they had past crisis experiences to retrospect on, but there was also a change in communication when the repeat episodes came about, as managers also learnt from previous experiences. When talking about the communication with the hotel, most employees spoke about the zoom meetings and how the communication from the hotel was honest and consistent:

*“The whole month of November, at home, but the meetings we had online, everything was about planning to reopen in December, and preparing for Christmas and New Years” (Carlos)*

*“I found the communication within the hotel very clear, very honest ... I think that the communication was always consistent... which is something that I really like and, honestly, I didn't expect it at the beginning.” (Vince)*

*“Really good. They were giving constant updates and stuff like that. And there was emails going out.” (Tim)*

*“It was appropriate for communication, you know, especially the beginning regarding the furlough, which is the salary that they give you which is 80% paid by the government minus 20% of taxes... So that has been done properly, like Hilton does.” (Sarah)*

It is important to point out that while they spoke of consistency with communication throughout the pandemic, the weekly meetings only started after the first lockdown. This is shown through how they contradicted themselves when talking about the communication with the hotel:

*“Then, around June the message just started to change.”* (Carlos)

The above quotes show a contradiction between the lack of consistent communication we observed earlier (see 4.3.2) and how the above communication is described as *“always consistent”* (Vince). We theorise that this contradiction results from the implications of recalling the recent past events during retrospective sensemaking. In further exploring this we borrow Weick’s (1995) claim on retrospective sensemaking in which he discusses fairly short spaces in time between the act and the reflection. Weick (1995, p.29) states that it is easier to retrospect based on “memory traces [that] are typically fresh and rich with indeterminacy.” Accordingly, it is possible that the weekly meetings, that were also still happening at the time of the interviews, were fresher in their minds than the time period before this caused the contradiction in how they remembered and made sense of the communication.

In sum, as the same organisational changes (closures and openings) took place multiple times throughout the pandemic, the employees used the crisis experiences lived during the first time to make sense of the following similar events. We recognised a contradiction amongst employees sensemaking of how communication evolved through the process of a better understanding of the changes (as they happened again and again). We theorize that this contradiction resulted from the implications of recalling the recent past situation on retrospective sensemaking. As this property relies on fresh memory traces in the sensemaking process (Weick, 1995). To conclude, the more recent forms of communication were perceived as very clear and very good.

## 4.4 Chapter Summary

Based on our theorizing empirically grounded argumentations, our findings show that *employees make sense of organisational change resulting from crises (management)* through the following: (1) enacting different sensible environments in different timings, (2) social interaction, and (3) by recalling past experiences (retrospective sensemaking).

(1) As part of enacting different sensible environments in different timings, we investigated the timings employees were able to enact their surroundings and what was happening around them through the relevant changes (resulting from crisis management) they attempted to make sense of. We found these to be the following. Firstly, the cancellations, resulting in a quiet hotel, allowed employees to enact their environment through lower occupancy. Moreover, these employees noticed the cue of reduced working hours, making sense of this as job uncertainty (Weick, 1995; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). Secondly, the enactment of the environment (the hotel closure) resulted in disorientation as the managers and colleagues could not add to the general idea, influencing the environment, in the organisational setting as meaning making entity (Weick, 1995; Bushe & Marshak, 2016a). We theorize that uncertainty and job insecurity resulted in panic. This negative emotion (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010) is fed by the continuous uncertainty, labelled as dynamic uncertainty (Christianson & Barton, 2020). Thirdly, the redundancy process as a new cue for sensemaking allowed employees to enact their environment as uncertain and insecure, jobwise. As the financial security brought by furlough (employees' remuneration) was abrupt employees were shocked by the risk of redundancy. We further notice that this change (redundancies process served as a cue for more employees than the previous change: quiet hotel), therefore the environment was enacted at different times. Finally, when talking about the first reopening, employees made sense of the new health and safety rules as a hindrance. We theorise that this may be caused by the lack of change in the conversation, to assist the organisation as a social setting for meaning making (Weick, 1995; Bushe & Marshak, 2016a).

(2) During our interview we recognised that employees influenced each other's sensemaking through interaction. To begin with, we analysed this through the outbreak of panic, the sensemaking through the virtual setting and via face-to-face communication. The cancellations and quiet hotel, resulted in an outbreak of panic that built up and spilt over through interactions

between colleagues (Steigenberger, 2015). We theorise that the shared understanding, although not identical, was close enough to allow them to make sense collectively. Subsequently, as employees were removed from the physical organisational setting, they were not able to make sense of the organisational setting as there was a lack of communication due to the furlough implications. This environment caused confusion. Thus, we argue that employees experienced confusion maintained by inaction (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014), however, employees came together virtually in an attempt to make sense collectively. Lastly, we found that non-verbal cues (Kniffin et al., 2021) were easier to notice as employees were no longer in the virtual setting. Thus, it was easier to influence each other for social sensemaking.

(3) In section 4.3, we analysed the use and strength of previous experiences, labelled by Weick (1995) as retrospective sensemaking. Firstly, the lack of past crisis experiences, to call upon in the sensemaking process is called “impossible” by employees. We argued that this is due to the reactive approach of the organisation, in crisis management, which unlike the proactive approach, did not equip employees with imaginary scenarios that could have informed their retrospective sensemaking (Weick, 1979; Spillan, 2000). This limited the retrospective process of employees, who perceived the comparison of this crisis to others impossible as it was never lived before. Secondly, the hotel closure, employees could not go to work along with positive emotions and belief-driven sensemaking meant employees perceived the hotel closure period (March 2020 to August 2020) as a holiday. Where they travelled and engaged in holiday activities (Pomfret, 2012) because this confirmed their beliefs. The furlough implications further reiterated the association between not being able to go to work and the holiday feeling. Additionally, we theorise that employees’ association was also strengthened by the organisational culture that in the past, encouraged detachment from work during holidays (Shimazu et al., 2016). Finally, retrospective sensemaking (Weick, 1995) was a fundamental practice that worked in favour of everyone in the organisations as the organisational changes (closure, reopening, redundancies) took place multiple times due to governmental rules imposed on the industry and on the country.



## 5. Conclusion

This study aimed to gain a deeper understanding of how employees make sense of the organisational changes that result from crises management. In the essence of our empirical findings, we conclude that employees make sense of organisational change resulting from crisis management through: enactment of the environment at different times, social interactions and as they retrospect their past experiences to develop an understanding of a situation. Following our analysis that ties together the findings and literature in order to answer our research question, this section highlights how our findings may contribute to existing literature theories, and how practitioners can benefit from them, by considering these aspects of sensemaking during their decision-making processes. We then give an overview of the practical implications, before rounding off with directions for future research.

### 5.1 Theoretical Contribution and Implications

As mentioned in the introduction, the majority of sensemaking literature focuses on managers (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). By focusing on all employees in our study, we moved away from the focus on managers and were, therefore, able to explore this under researched part of sensemaking (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). As previous research focuses less on employees, there is even less research addressing how employees perceive change during sensemaking (George & Jones, 2001). Our study highlights how employees make sense of organisational change resulting from crises. Thus, how particular changes, (lockdown and the hotel closure) were perceived as a holiday.

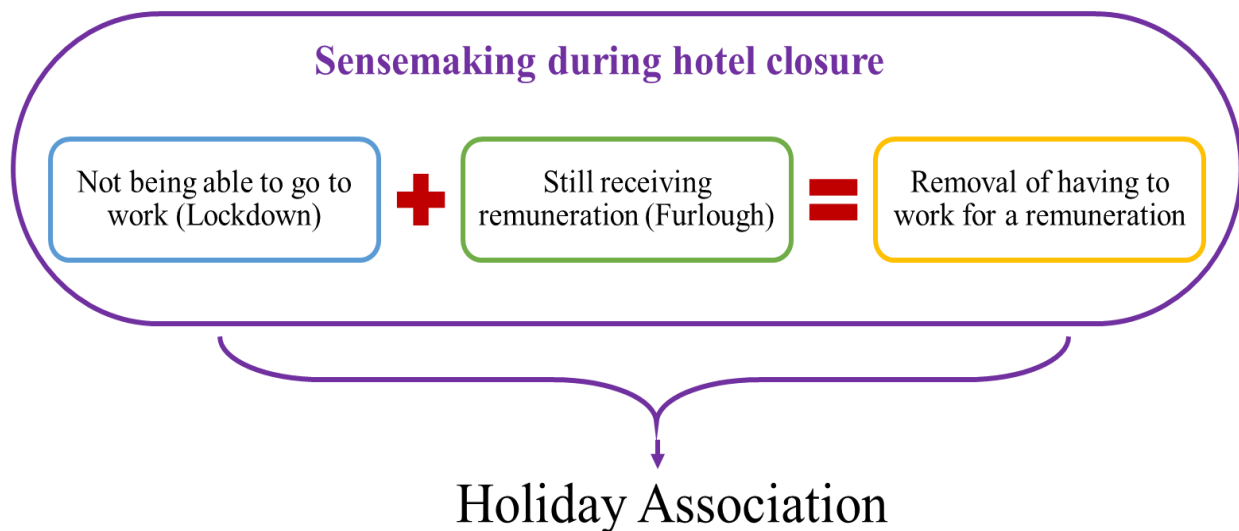
Below we present our main findings under the umbrella of out of sight, out of mind. We then show how this contributes theoretically to current ontological and epistemological assumptions in the sensemaking literature accounting for change and crisis management, by engaging with the resemblances and differences between our analysis and the accessible literature.

#### Out of sight... Out of mind

Referring to our analysis section amongst the changes we theorised upon, particularly the hotel closure due to the national lockdown in the UK. One of our empirically grounded theories expands

on the cues: of not being able to go to work and the fact that employees were still receiving their remuneration during furlough (see 4.3.2). The combination of these two cues, caused the sudden removal of the mindset that underlines “having to go to work for remuneration.” As it is clear that employees attempted to make sense of new unfolding of events, they mention how they made sense through enacting their environment in different timings within the organisational social setting (reality) and finally through retrospecting their situations with their past experiences. The lockdown, which meant employees had free time; the furlough, whereby employees were guaranteed financial safety, resulted in employees making sense of the situation as a holiday (See Figure 5). Hence, we call this finding “out of sight...out of mind”, as employees were not able to engage in the physical organisational setting, which mentally detached them from the organisational reality.

## Out of sight ... Out of mind



Source: Sara Imaoui & Julia Van Veen

Figure 5: Theoretical Contribution “Out of sight... Out of mind”

According to Zhou et al. (2017, p. 268) within a theoretical contribution, the authors should attempt to answer the following questions: “why they add or subtract any variable from existing variables in theory? And how change in the variable will effect on existing theory?”

Referring back to our analysis, Starbuck and Milliken (1988) believe that it is more difficult to enact the environment (Weick, 1995) when framing takes place within unfamiliar contexts. When further exploring this in our study, we came to the conclusion that the unfamiliar context serves as grounds for employees to enact their environment to bring clarity to the confusion. For example, in our study, interviewees found themselves lost as the organisational setting, as a meaning-making entity, was not able to provide guidance, this was perceived as unfamiliar, but it however, encouraged sensemaking to take place, differentiating from the difficulty Starbuck and Milliken (1988) discuss.

Additionally, when exploring Weick's (1995) social sensemaking property and Christianson and Barton's (2020) contribution to this when researching the pandemic, we found that there was not a reduction in the consistency of information flow, as highlighted by Christianson and Barton (2020) but no flow of information during the lockdown. Nevertheless, we agree that sensemaking was more difficult for employees. Therefore, propose to add no flow to their empirical material. In other words, it is more difficult for sensemaking to take place when there is no flow of information (see 4.2.2) or a reduced consistency of information flow (Christianson & Barton, 2020). While exploring social sensemaking, we also connected the trade-off between action and inaction (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1988), with the implications of the lockdown and furlough that Christianson and Barton (2020) highlight, resulting in forced inaction. Although we agree that the inaction maintained confusion (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1988), the difference is that due to the lockdown and furlough scheme there was no trade-off choice for action.

By joining the sensemaking literature on retrospective sensemaking (Weick, 1979; Weick 1995; Gioia et al., 1994; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014) and the crisis management literature (Spillan, 2000; Vašíčková, 2019) we encountered the importance of proactive approach to crisis management, therefore, change management (as we consider crisis management strategies to result in change management). This importance is highlighted as the employees believed that it was "*impossible*" to compare the situation to any other crises because no one has ever lived a similar situation. As Spillan (2000) state that crisis management should engage in pre-planning for crisis through scenario planning as it helps to tackle crisis, we explored why that is through the sensemaking literature and we found that, when an experience, physical or abstract, takes place,

individuals are able to retrospect on those experiences, as soon as they are experienced (Weick, 1979). For example, if individuals are trained on how to manage a situation in an abstract manner, they will be able to retrospect on the “imagined experience” when experiencing a comparable situation.

## 5.2 Practical Implications

Although the changes that resulted from the crisis (Covid-19) we studied are in the past, the pandemic is still ongoing and the likelihood of future crises is increasing (Davahli et al., 2020; Ritchie, 2004) therefore, there are relevant practical implications.

To begin with, our first point as to how employees make sense of organisational change resulting from crisis involves enacting the environment, in different times for different people. Therefore, the organisational setting has a fundamental role: meaning making (Weick, 1995; Bushe & Marshak, 2016a). However, a practical implication here, is that employees are exposed to numerous other environments, or “realities”, that impact sensemaking. Therefore, although the organisation should account for itself as a social setting for sensemaking, practitioners should account for the fact that there are many other factors that affect employees outside the organisational setting (Christianson & Barton, 2020). Even more now due to dynamic uncertainty (Christianson & Barton, 2020).

Additionally, as we explored the sensemaking through social interactions we recognised that the virtual setting hindered organizational communication (Christianson & Barton, 2020). On the other hand, it is important to mention that communication, in particular during Covid-19 took a unique standpoint (Christianson & Barton, 2020), as the increased distance and change in primary communication channels made sensemaking more difficult for employees, because there is no flow or a reduced consistency in flow information (see 4.2.2).

Lastly, the hotel’s reactive approach to crisis management that resulted in organisational changes involving cost cutting rather than averting the effects through preparedness through the proactive approach (Jaques, 2010). Our findings suggest that this hindered the ability of employees to make

sense of their surroundings through retrospect. As we argued earlier (see 4.3.1), the proactive approach to crisis management can use future-oriented sensemaking processes, such as foresight, to create pre-crisis stages that prepare organisational members to retrospect on (Spillan 2000; Vašíčková 2019; Weick, 1979). However, this approach also has practical implications concerning its costs, as in order to engage in scenario planning and such activities require resources, where return in investment potentially comes back at a much later date or not come back at all (Ringland, 1997).

### 5.3 Further Research

In this section we present our reflection, based on our findings to encourage further research on sensemaking related to changes resulting from crises. We draw inspiration from the limitations of our research and our interest on sensemaking to come to the following two areas for future research.

The relationship between sensemaking and change management during crisis in particular within the retrospective property. During our study, we recognised the retrospective property to have an extremely strong presence in the employees' sensemaking. This is because they attempted to recall past experiences on many occasions. Along these lines while drawing on the sensemaking literature we combined this with the potential of physical or abstract experiences (Weick, 1979; Spillan, 2000; Starbuck & Milliken, 1988; Gioia et al., 1994; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014). Therefore, we call on future research to analyse sensemaking through retrospective of abstract experiences during pre-crises.

We believe that context is important in framing empirically grounded argumentations. As our study was conducted within a single establishment within the hospitality industry, we recognise that the specific context that this study took place in, the UK, was the reason employees were exposed to the lockdowns and furlough (Christianson & Barton, 2020; Institute for Government, 2021). However, other contexts may not have experienced these same factors that caused changes. Therefore, we solicit further research in other contexts: nations, organisations and industries.

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