Article

Power in Sensemaking Processes

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Abstract
This article examines the effects of power on sensemaking processes, bridging two major, yet traditionally separate, literatures in organization studies. Dividing power into its systemic and episodic forms, we elaborate how power shapes not only the content of sensemaking, but also the form of sensemaking processes. We explicate the distinct ways in which power works in four archetypal sensemaking processes: automatic (preconscious and committed), improvisational (preconscious and provisional), algorithmic (conscious and committed) and reflective (conscious and provisional). These ideal-type processes help us theorize how influences related to systemic and episodic power induce more or less conscious and provisional forms of sensemaking. This refined understanding of sensemaking processes enables further explication of episodic power into distinctive kinds of sensegiving and sensebreaking activities.

Keywords
coherence, contradiction, discourse, interpretation, plausibility, power, sensebreaking, sensegiving, sensemaking

The effects of power on sensemaking processes remain poorly understood, as noted by a series of reviews (Brown, Colville, & Pye, 2015; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). The omission of power from theories of sensemaking can be traced back to the tendencies of the literature to focus primarily on the outcomes of sense-making rather than the process (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015) and to ignore or downplay the

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relevance of actors' interests and long-term goals. Much could be gained from incorporating a power-sensitive aspect in theoretical models of sensemaking processes, since the unexpected events that trigger sensemaking also threaten existing power relationships. Moreover, theoretical accounts of power often emphasize shared understandings as a key conduit of power in organizations (Clegg, Courpasson, & Phillips, 2006). Since sensemaking captures the situated formation of shared understandings (Maitlis, 2005; Thomas, Clark, & Gioia, 1993; Weick, 1979, 1995), sensemaking theory can play a significant role in understanding how power operates.

A small number of inductive studies have examined power in sensemaking (Brown, 2004; Mills, Thurlow, & Mills, 2010; O'Leary & Chia, 2007; Tourish & Robson, 2006), with a focus on the influence exerted by powerful actors (e.g. Brown, 2005) and the more systemic effects of internalized identities and dominant discourses (e.g. Humphreys & Brown, 2002; Vaara & Tienari, 2011). Moreover, some sensemaking studies scrutinize how actors make sense of power differences (Whittle, Mueller, Gilchrist, & Lenney, 2016) and hierarchies (Tourish & Robson, 2006). While the concepts of sensegiving and sensebreaking provide insights into the managerial use of episodic power in organizations (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Mantere, Schildt, & Sillince, 2012; Pratt, 2000), their connection to the context of systemic power has been largely ignored (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007). Despite their obvious correspondences and the potential posed by integration of the sensemaking and power literatures, this endeavour is not without challenges; both sensemaking and power are broad and ubiquitous phenomena, covered by sprawling academic literatures full of internal tensions.

To expand prior efforts at the intersection of power and sensemaking (Brown, 2004; Clark & Geppert, 2011; Mills et al., 2010), we examine how power shapes the form and content of sensemaking processes, with a particular focus on how actors formulate situated understandings. We conceptualize sensemaking as the pursuit of plausible understandings and accounts through creation of coherence and elaborate four distinct ideal-type sensemaking processes, each associated with distinct kinds of power effects. Building on the distinction between *systemic power* and *episodic power* (Clegg, 1989; Fleming & Spicer, 2014; Lawrence, Winn, & Jennings, 2001), we theorize how various structural influences and deliberate interventions jointly shape how actors make sense. By doing so, we provide new insights into forces that inhibit and facilitate adaptive sensemaking in the face of the unexpected.

Power in Sensemaking

In sociology and organization theory, power is generally understood as influence towards a course of action that an agent would not otherwise undertake (Clegg et al., 2006; Weber, 1978). Organizational research on power is typically organized by differentiating it into episodic and systemic forms (Clegg, 1989; Fleming & Spicer, 2014; Lawrence et al., 2001). Episodic power captures deliberate efforts of actors to coerce, influence or manipulate others (Fleming & Spicer, 2014). Systemic power captures how taken-for-granted knowledge structures and individual and collective identities shape the way actors see the world and act; it has a more subtle effect on actors than episodic power (Clegg et al., 2006; Foucault, 1975; Lukes, 1974).

A central issue in the power literature concerns who holds power, if anyone. Critical management scholars often conceive of power in explicitly relational terms, where power always involves a party that is deliberately looking to gain advantage (Fleming & Spicer, 2014). These efforts can be episodic, involving deliberate coercion or influence exerted on others, or systemic, involving development and reproduction of structural sources of power. In contrast to such 'agentic' or 'political' conceptions of power, Clegg et al. (2006) build on Simmel (p. 109) and Foucault (ch. 8) to elaborate power as a ubiquitous force that is neither held nor exercised by particular actors. Rather,

systemic power is imposed on individuals by the society or social system at large and works to conserve established power relations. This perspective, in particular, acknowledges how structures also provide actors with 'the power to' shape outcomes in their favour (Clegg et al., 2006, ch. 7), as summarized by Foucault (1975):

> We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it "excludes," it "represses," it "censors," it "abstracts," it "masks," it "conceals." In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production. (Foucault, 1975, p. 149)

The quote incorporates two important aspects of systemic power that are easily overlooked. First, power does not require an agent as a 'prime mover', as it can also be traced back to discourses that evolve through historical developments. For example, management discourses such as human resource management (Townley, 1993) and strategic management (Knights & Morgan, 1991; Oakes, Townley & Cooper, 1998) arguably constitute systemic power structures that shape thinking in ways that empower executives while disempowering employees. This does not mean that HRM or strategic management was deliberately designed to be disempowering or that managers who use such practices do so to gain power over their employees. Second, power *empowers*. Its impact on individuals is not only negative and constraining, but also positive and enabling (Mantere & Vaara, 2008). The power a teacher has over a student by virtue of their institutionalized roles induces compliance that enables the student to learn. Nevertheless, such power can also be misused.

Episodic power in sensemaking

Several empirical studies illustrate episodic power in sensemaking. Studies of organizational change tend to conceptualize efforts at covert and overt influencing and manipulation as 'sensegiving' (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Gioia, Thomas, Clark, & Chittipeddi, 1994).[1] Sensegiving entails the imposition of certain premises and ideas onto others' sensemaking processes; typical interventions documented in the literature involve top managers imposing salient observations, beliefs and goals that their subordinates need to accommodate in their sensemaking (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Gioia et al., 1994; Sonenshein, 2010). Sensegiving efforts that impose new meanings for sensemaking are often accompanied by 'sensebreaking', i.e. deliberate efforts to invalidate and reject established understandings held by individuals or groups (Mantere et al., 2012; Pratt, 2000).

Collective sensemaking represents an arena for argumentation and therefore also an arena for political influence (Weick, 1995, pp. 135–45). Clark and Geppert (2011) illustrate this perspective by examining how sensemaking provides the political arena through which the subsidiaries of multinationals formulate their identity, influenced by the diverse interests of local actors and the company's headquarters. Representing a different form of political influence, managers may also manipulate a discussion agenda to hide competing viewpoints (Vaara & Monin, 2010). In some cases, the focal process of sensemaking is in itself an act of episodic power that produces accounts for manipulating or influencing others. For example, Brown (2000, 2004, 2005) has examined how public inquiries, as forms of sensemaking, create authoritative texts that seek to influence the general public by legitimizing the established order and institutional positions of power.

Despite growing interest in episodic power, it remains largely exogenous to processual accounts of sensemaking. While authors have recognized the importance of interests and long-term goals, these tend to be relegated to the background as parts of the broader context (Weick et al., 2005). As a consequence, we have limited understanding of the effects that episodic power can have on the process of sensemaking itself (Strike & Rerup, 2016).

Systemic power in sensemaking

Systemic power accounts for how cognitive, cultural and discursive structures work to gain the active consent of dominated individuals and groups, aligning their behaviour with the interests of the powerful actors (Clegg, 1989). In organization studies more broadly, systemic power has been used to explain how employees are indoctrinated to be good workers (Phillips & Oswick, 2012), how their behaviour is made more predictable (Townley, 1993) and why employees conform to radical organizational changes desired by the leadership (Lawrence, Malhotra, & Morris, 2012). At its most extreme, systemic power *subjugates* actors; it shapes their identity as well as their agency and defines their self-understanding and goals in ways that make them likely to act in ways that provide others with power over them (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Foucault, 1975; Townley, 1993). In organization studies, knowledge structures and identities are commonly seen as the two most central conduits of systemic power (Clegg, 1989; Fleming & Spicer, 2014).

Identities represent perhaps the greatest overlap between sensemaking and power scholarship; sensemaking is grounded in identity construction (Weick, 1995), while identity is a central conduit of systemic power (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Foucault, 1975). Because identities incorporate some of the most central and enduring beliefs held by actors, they are often implicated in sensemaking processes. The general need of actors to maintain or preserve their identities means that their interpretations often reaffirm identity-related beliefs (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Elsbach & Kramer, 1996). Threats to identity may lead actors to revise and adjust their individual or organizational identity (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006) or, commonly, to reinterpret their observations (Kunda, 1990).

Knowledge structures influencing sensemaking range from high-level, global knowledge structures that include professional knowledge (Abbott, 1988; Nag, Corley, & Gioia, 2007) and institutional logics (Nigam & Ocasio, 2010) to domain-specific knowledge related to functions such as organizational strategy (Mantere & Vaara, 2008; Rouleau, 2005) and even role-specific understandings (Lockett, Currie, Finn, Martin, & Waring, 2014). Domain-specific knowledge and role-related identities are likely to be particularly potent conduits of systemic power in sensemaking, as actors are likely to first attend to heuristics and the discourses related to the particular situation they consider themselves to be in, potentially precluding attention to more generic knowledge structures.

While the sensemaking literature has often ignored systemic power (Mills et al., 2010; Weick et al., 2005), several exemplary sensemaking studies have touched upon aspects of systemic power that typically conceived it in terms of discourse and legitimation (Abolafia, 2010; Vaara & Tienari, 2008; Vaara, Tienari, & Laurila, 2006; Watson, 1995), and identity (Clark & Geppert, 2011; Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Leung, Zietsma, & Peredo, 2014). Ideologies or 'hegemonic discourses', internalized by actors, shape how they view the world. Such knowledge structures give some accounts and responses a veneer of legitimacy and necessity, while making others appear illegitimate or impossible (Clegg et al., 2006; Ranson, Hinings, & Greenwood, 1980). Mantere and Vaara (2008), for example, show how specific strategy discourses shaped employee sensemaking, making some individuals feel displaced and leading them to withdraw from active participation in the strategy process.

Overall, systemic power remains an important research opportunity. The integration of power and sensemaking can contribute to the literature by expanding the prior focus on uniformity and regularity induced by power structures to more ephemeral effects of power (Lawrence, 2008). Sensemaking represents an important arena where systemic power is materialized; in sensemaking, power structures impinge upon the formation of new understandings. However, because systemic power works indirectly and over longer periods of time, it can easily pass unnoticed in micro-level studies of sensemaking processes.

Resistance and conflict in sensemaking

Both episodic and systemic sources of power are seldom if ever absolute in their ability to influence actors (Bourdieu, 1991), and this seems to be particularly true in business organizations (Jackall, 1988). As Foucault (1980, p. 142) notes, resistance emerges 'right at the point where relations of power are exercised'. Even seemingly powerless actors in organizations tend to have social capital and expertise they can use to circumvent, ignore or undermine episodic power. Likewise, actors can often circumvent the conservative effects of systemic power (Fleming & Sewell, 2002) by developing the reflexivity of their social positions (Giddens, 1984), drawing on contradictory discourses and knowledge structures (Seo & Creed, 2002) and relying on tactics such as irony (Sewell & Barker, 2006).

Given the limited attention to power in the sensemaking literature, it is hardly surprising that there are only a few accounts of resistance. In a broad sense, processes of sensemaking represent a central avenue for resistance, where actors can collectively formulate understandings that question and challenge systemic power structures (Humphreys & Brown, 2002). Sensemaking processes are also arenas for conflicts, as different actors often formulate opposing narratives (Sonenshein, 2010). In a rare study focusing on power–resistance relationships in sensemaking, Thomas, Sargent and Hardy (2011) explicate how generative resistance within sensemaking processes can lead to new understandings that accommodate the seemingly conflicting interests of managers and employees during organizational change.

In sum, the existing literature suggests that reflexivity associated with greater attention to alternative discourses and knowledge structures helps actors formulate responses to systemic power structures and organize collective resistance (Brown & Humphreys, 2006; Humphreys & Brown, 2002). This suggests that theories of sensemaking should attend both to episodic and systemic power that conserves the position of elites as well as to sources of power that open space for individual and collective resistance.

The Process of Sensemaking as Pursuit of Coherence

The sensemaking literature is not unique in examining the construction of meanings or understandings, but departs from other interpretative approaches through its pragmatist stance (Farjoun, Ansell, & Boin, 2015) which emphasizes the social and enacted nature of cognitive processes (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking is essentially something actors *do* as they engage in practice. Building on Weick's original synthesis of various sociological and social psychological theories (Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005), the established literature conceptualizes sensemaking as an ongoing, situated process that involves creation of coherent understandings through interlinked observation ('extraction of cues'), interpretation and action ('enactment'). As individuals and groups 'enact' order in the chaotic or uncertain situations they encounter through their actions, they generate new observations that trigger interpretation (Rudolph, Morrison, & Carroll, 2009; Weick, 1988, 1995). Taken together, these recurrent, co-occurring and intrinsically interconnected processes (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015; Weick, 1995) explain how understandings evolve over time (Beck & Plowman, 2009; Weick, 1993).

Nevertheless, theories of the process of sensemaking, and particularly the notion of interpretation at the heart of it, remain rather implicit (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015; Weick, 1995). Helpful metaphorical clues are scattered across foundational texts. Daft and Weick (1984) characterize interpretation rather broadly as 'developing models for understanding, of bringing out meaning, and of assembling conceptual schemes' where 'an information coalition of sorts is formed'. Weick et al. (2005, p. 409) note that 'Sensemaking involves the ongoing retrospective development of

plausible images that rationalize what people are doing.' Despite the process focus of sensemaking research, there is a tendency to concentrate on the resulting understandings and accounts, with far less attention on theorizing what understandings are and how they are formed (Louis, 1980; Weick, 1995). A more explicit conceptualization of the sensemaking process itself is vital for theorizing how power influences the understandings that actors create.

The sensemaking literature is grounded in the observation that organizational contexts are open to multiple credible interpretations and that organizational stakeholders gravitate towards specific tacit understandings and shared rationalizing accounts based on their perceived *plausibility* (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick et al., 2005). The perceived plausibility of understandings, in turn, derives from the subjective *coherence* actors perceive among salient cues, beliefs and actions (Weick, 1995). Coherence is a high-level concept that applies equally to tacit cognitive understandings (Rudolph et al., 2009; Weick, 1988), accounts that emerge through dialogue (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis, 2005), as well as to more or less elaborate written narratives (Brown, 2005). Despite their centrality in the sensemaking literature, the concepts of coherence and plausibility have received surprisingly little theoretical scrutiny (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015). Hence sensemaking as a whole can be characterized as individual and collective efforts to connect discrepant observations and beliefs into coherent frames (Weick, 1995), accounts (Maitlis, 2005) or narratives (Brown, 2000). Coherence makes the world understandable by connecting situational observations, beliefs and actions both with one another and with broader belief systems (Maitlis, 2005; Stigliani & Ravasi, 2012; Weick et al., 2005).

Coherence is typically achieved through communication, through 'rational accounts that enable action' (Maitlis, 2005, p. 21). Efforts to formulate coherent accounts and individual understandings take place in the context of pre-existing goals – salient normative beliefs that actors take for granted. Goals in sensemaking tend to be strongly connected to the definition of the sensemaking situation, whether for example involving an organizational change process (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Thomas et al., 2011) or a specific work setting (Weick, 1990, 1993). For example, in a re-analysis of the Mann Gulch fire, Weick (1993) details how the firefighters shift from their initial goal of extinguishing the fire to mere survival as their definition of the situation changes. Sensemaking processes also tend to go through stages where changes occur in what is made sense of, the salient situated goals, and thus what remains to be explained (Beck & Plowman, 2009; Isabella, 1990). Understandings and accounts lack coherence when they entail contradictions, when some observations or beliefs imply the negation of others, when seemingly important observations lack plausible explanations, or when their implications are uncertain (Davidson, 1983/2001; Harman, 1999).

The sensemaking process can thus be theorized as *the ongoing creation of coherence by connecting salient observations, beliefs, and actions as reasons for one another*. As Weick (1993, 1995) has repeatedly noted, these interconnected efforts are often driven by unexpected contradictions and tend to involve creation of new observable phenomena through actions as well as selective attention to the environment when extracting observations or cues. Sensemaking is about 'taming' discrepant events, observations and beliefs by connecting them to plausible accounts.

As the formation of understandings involves the pursuit of subjectively perceived coherence it entails paradoxical attainability and elusiveness that make it susceptible to the effects of systemic and episodic power. On the one hand, actors can almost always explain away contradictions and form coherence by focusing their attention on the most salient beliefs and observations; situations very seldom appear entirely chaotic (cf. Weick, 1988). On the other hand, given the complexity of the world and the availability of distinct bodies of knowledge, actors are almost always able to identify contradictions among their beliefs and observations should they attempt to do so. If actors subject their understandings to scrutiny, they will seldom find them entirely satisfactory even from

a subjective standpoint. Because coherence is a continuous and partially subjective attribute, actors settle on understandings that offer sufficient *plausibility* (Weick, 1995).

Scrutinizing plausibility

Actors' perception of understandings and accounts as plausible is centrally connected to their coherence, both internally and with broader observations and beliefs. Weick (1995, p. 57) implies a link between coherence and plausibility: 'The strength of [the] sensemaking perspective derives from the fact that it does not rely on accuracy and its model is not object perception. Instead, sense-making is about plausibility, pragmatics, coherence, reasonableness, creation, invention, and instrumentality.' Analytical philosophy has argued that the plausibility of beliefs derives from coherence, suggesting that the perceived plausibility of claims is a function of consistency within a system of other beliefs (Davidson, 1983/2001). Since coherence derives from the absence of perceived contradiction, we define plausibility as the *perception that an account can explain observations and beliefs that are relevant to understanding a situation, and that the account is unlikely to be contradicted by further beliefs or observations*. These notions of coherence and, relatedly, plausibility are phenomenological in nature because they capture subjective experiences. In most situations, broader and further attention by actors, either through new observations or consideration of existing beliefs, is likely to reveal contradictions that call coherence into question and in turn trigger further observation, interpretation and action in pursuit of greater coherence (Rudolph et al., 2009).

Beyond philosophical works, there is a prominent tradition across social psychology rooted in cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) according to which individuals seek to maintain coherence in their belief systems, in particular those concerning themselves. The psychodynamics literature, in parallel, maintains that contradictions can be painful to the point of inducing identity crises (Erikson, 1968). Both these traditions reinforce the conception that contradictions are common in belief systems; they provide a generative impetus as individuals actively seek to minimize them. This effort leads to change and development in belief systems, which chimes with the idea that sensemaking is 'about continued redrafting of an emerging story so that it becomes more comprehensive, incorporates more of the observed data, and is more resilient in the face of criticism' (Weick et al., 2005, p. 415).

Theorizing the Effects of Systemic and Episodic Power on Sensemaking Processes

While the sensemaking literature has treated plausibility as a largely unproblematic and apolitical phenomenon (see, e.g., Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005), perceived plausibility results in fact from individual and intersubjective evaluations. Since experienced coherence is always precarious and threatened by contradictions, individual assessments of plausibility are readily open to external influences through both systemic and episodic power, with implications for the efforts that actors subsequently devote to sensemaking (Weick, 1988). Plausibility as an evaluation applies equally to understandings of apparently 'realist' phenomena, such as whether a certain person is actually a wanted terrorist (Cornelissen, Mantere, & Vaara, 2014), and to more 'cultural' phenomena, such as whether a strategic plan is appropriate for the organization (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991).

Our review of the sensemaking literature suggests two central dimensions to understanding the varieties of sensemaking processes that may result from such influence. First, actors vary in the extent of *conscious attention* they pay to the formation and plausibility of inferences that link
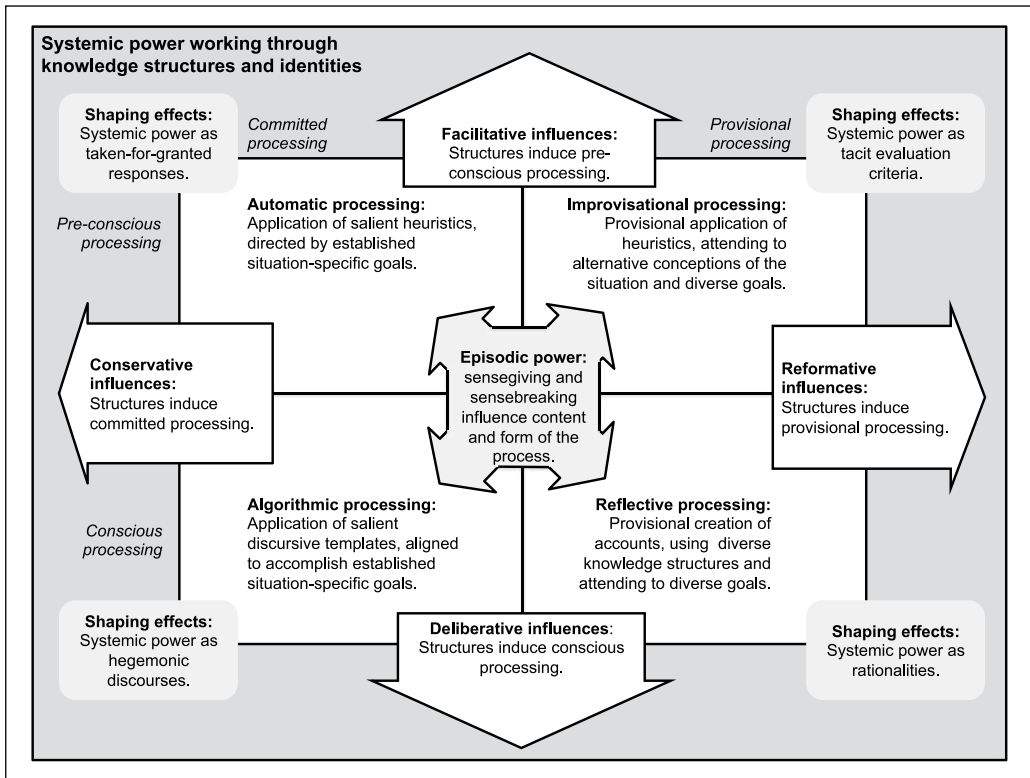
Figure 1. Systemic and episodic power in sensemaking.
The white arrows represent systemic power and the gray arrows in the middle represent episodic power.

observations, beliefs and actions into coherent understandings and accounts. Second, actors can hold either *committed* or *provisional* attitudes towards situated goals and the initial inferences they make, evaluating plausibility either in ways that seek to confirm their initial understandings and situated goals or in ways that challenge and enrich them.

These two dimensions set up four ideal-type sensemaking processes (the four quadrants in Figure 1). *Automatic* sensemaking (committed and pre-conscious) relies on heuristics that connect salient observations and claims to a categorical understanding of the situation with minimal conscious effort or attention (Bingham & Eisenhardt, 2011; Gigerenzer, Todd, & ABC Research Group, 1999). *Algorithmic* sensemaking (committed and conscious) captures the more attentive formation of rationalizing accounts, carried out in a predictable manner according to pre-existing 'algorithms' provided by specific discourses or narrative templates (Cornelissen, 2012). It revolves around an initial commitment to specific inferences or to nascent understandings formed and justified by incorporating new observations and beliefs into accounts. *Improvisational* sensemaking (pre-conscious and provisional) lacks conscious attention to inferences yet involves a continued evaluation of inferences, probing actions, and attention to discrepant cues. Finally, *reflective* sensemaking involves the deliberate consideration of multiple alternative accounts that relate observations, relevant existing beliefs and future or past actions, enabling rich 'generative' sensemaking (Abolafia, 2010).

These four processes vary in the way actors' situated goals and broader interests are implicated in evaluating plausibility, and thus in ways that power structures shape interpretation. In pre-conscious sensemaking processes, plausibility depends on the resonance with pre-existing heuristics and a largely tacit understanding of priorities and goals (Weick, 1988; Whiteman & Cooper, 2011), while in conscious processes it depends on drawn-out rationalizing accounts based on more explicit knowledge structures and discourses (Brown, 2000; Cornelissen, 2012; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). The sense of plausibility likewise differs, depending on the doubts of sensemakers. In committed processing, plausibility is related to the ability to match existing explanations with salient observations and to satisfy immediate salient goals (Cornelissen et al., 2014; Mantere & Vaara, 2008). In contrast, plausibility in provisional forms of sensemaking derives from a comparison of multiple alternative accounts or understandings, often through a creative synthesis of pre-existing heuristics or discourses that not only meets situated goals but also helps justify their relevance in the light of actors' broader interests (Christianson, Farkas, Sutcliffe, & Weick, 2009; Uberbacher, Jacobs, & Cornelissen, 2015).

Shaping effects: How systemic power influences the content of sensemaking

Knowledge structures and identities continuously shape the content of sensemaking processes in ways that are dependent on the form of the sensemaking process. In Figure 1 these shaping effects are depicted at the corners of the four quadrants, corresponding to the distinct forms of sensemaking. By differentiating the ideal typical forms of sensemaking, we can distinguish diverse ways in which systemic power embedded in knowledge structures and identities influences the formation of coherent and plausible understandings and accounts. The duality of systemic power as both constraining and enabling actors (Clegg et al., 2006) is evident in sensemaking. Knowledge structures and identities on the one hand constrain the situated formation of new understandings, but also provide actors with an enabling 'toolkit' of potential beliefs and inferences through which new situations can be made sensible and responded to (Stigliani & Ravasi, 2012). The more committed forms of processing (automatic and algorithmic) are associated with structures holding greater constraining power over actors, while provisional sensemaking (improvisational and reflective) is associated with the enabling effects of structures that empower actors to form rich understandings.

Knowledge structures influence the observations and beliefs that actors attend to and deem relevant, either constraining or expanding the set of possible understandings. They supply some of the 'raw material' from which plausible coherent understandings are to be constructed (Weber & Glynn, 2006). Moreover, systemic power supplies the 'background knowledge' that dictates which inferences actors make and may accept (Searle, 1995) and the criteria according to which they evaluate the plausibility of their understandings. The process is akin to 'priming', as discussed by Weber and Glynn (2006), but broader in scope. As Foucault (1975) notes, established knowledge structures make the world orderly and known to actors, thereby shaping what they attend to (see also e.g. Oakes et al., 1998). We next examine how each ideal-type sensemaking process is affected by systemic power.

Automatic processing and taken-for-granted responses. The effects of systemic power on automated processing rely on salient and taken-for-granted heuristics that provide stock interpretations and responses to the situation, pre-empting active efforts to pursue new understandings. Pay systems provide an example of such heuristics, producing systemic power effects on middle managers and employees, as they impose standardized categories, criteria and heuristics that induce predictability and legitimize managerial control over the workforce (Quaid, 1993; Townley, 1993). As Lukes (1974, p. 24) notes, actors are often subjugated to such established power structures 'either because

they see or imagine no alternative to it, or because they view it as natural and unchangeable, or […] beneficial'.

Research has documented how identity can shape such rapid responses, as actors gravitate towards heuristics that help reaffirm their identity and ignore issues that contradict their deeply held beliefs. Identification with an organization represents a central part of an individual's identity and a key mechanism of systemic power, as actors tend to dismiss negative cues and beliefs concerning organizations with which they strongly identify (Pratt, 2000).

Algorithmic processing and hegemonic discourses. Systemic power in algorithmic processing is largely similar to that of automatic processing, providing more explicit but equally taken-for-granted understandings. The systemic power over actors engaged in algorithmic sensemaking relies on the availability of salient and coherent bodies of knowledge or discourses that provide them with plausible rationalizing accounts of what is happening and why (Fiss & Hirsch, 2005; Fiss & Zajac, 2006). Established discourses or rationalities provide ready-made hegemonic templates or narratives through which actors can elaborate and 'normalize' the situation. Domain-specific discourses, in particular, provide salient resources for actors to articulate and evaluate explicit understandings of situations (e.g. Mantere & Vaara, 2008), thereby ordering an otherwise disorderly world. Other conceptions of knowledge include professional and vocational expertise (Lockett et al., 2014; Nag et al., 2007), institutional logics (Nigam & Ocasio, 2010) and managerial knowledge (Rouleau, 2005). Established categorizations, such as threats and opportunities, and related domain knowledge can have significant influence on the formation of rationalizing accounts (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1997; Thomas et al., 1993).

Identities provide a particularly potent conduit for systemic power in algorithmic sensemaking processes. Actors often craft and commit to coherent identity narratives (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010), which can even incorporate normative or moral frameworks (Creed, DeJordy, & Lok, 2010; Creed, Scully, & Austin, 2002). Identities shape interpretation as actors compose rationalizing accounts or narratives that help maintain their identity-related beliefs (Hart & Nisbet, 2012; Kunda, 1990). The concept of social position captures a combination of localized domain knowledge, identity and social ties that can bind actors' sensemaking to certain salient viewpoints and priorities (Lockett et al., 2014).

Improvisational processes and tacit criteria for evaluation. Improvisational processing might at first appear to be immune to systemic power, as actors are unconstrained by taken-for-granted heuristics or specific situational goals. However, knowledge structures and identities can influence improvisation by providing actors with tacit evaluation criteria ranging from underlying values to tastes (Bourdieu, 1984). These heuristics shape improvisational sensemaking, not because they are the only conceivable solution, but because they appeal to actors in the light of some taken-for-granted evaluation criteria (on institutionalized evaluation criteria, see also Lounsbury, 2007). Bechky and Okhuysen (2011) use the term 'sociocognitive resources' for the rich knowledge structures that actors use to draw inferences about a situation. Illustrating a similar approach, Stigliani and Ravasi (2012) use the concept of 'sensemaking resources' (Gephart, 1993) to describe how diverse knowledge empowers actors. Because actors try out heuristics or frames, i.e. use them as plastic resources (Cornelissen & Werner, 2014) to form understandings, systemic power is likely to affect improvisation through the internalized evaluation criteria and goals that actors use to discriminate between alternative framings rather than by providing a specific taken-for-granted frame.

The study of the Stockwell shooting by Cornelissen et al. (2014) suggests that systemic power can shape improvisation by providing definite goals for the situation. While their study did not explicitly address power (focusing on the triad of emotions, communications and embodiment

instead), it shows how the police engaged in provisional sensemaking in situations, but the very focus on eliminating the suspected terrorist guaranteed that their interpretations and actions were aligned with those of their superiors. Likewise, while improvisational sensemaking by designers (Stigliani & Ravasi, 2012) is enabled by various knowledge structures related to artistic and commercial ideals, these ideals also constrain the range of problems that designers attend to and the goals through which they evaluate potential outputs.

Reflective processing and rationalities. Discursive structures that constrain algorithmic sensemaking can become enabling and empowering resources for reflective sensemaking. The ability of actors to attend to and critically reflect on diverse knowledge structures allows them to craft new understandings that transcend prior consensus (Jay, 2013). Actors' provisional attitudes limit the impact of knowledge structures as conduits of constraining systemic power. While specific prescriptions and narratives can define the content of algorithmic sensemaking, they are less likely to impact reflective sensemaking. Reflective sensemaking can also appropriate identity narratives as sources of diverse stories and ideas that empower actors to craft rich compelling accounts (Corley & Gioia, 2004), mitigating the constraining power effect of identity regulation. Established identities often contain many contradictory elements that can be appropriated through reflective sensemaking to articulate and justify various appealing accounts of the situation (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). In short, rich narrative identities empower sensemaking by providing resources for creative accounts (Creed et al., 2002; Schultz & Hernes, 2013).

Despite its creative nature, reflective sensemaking does not make actors immune to the effects of systemic power. Townley's (1993) discussion of human resource management shows how systemic bodies of knowledge shape actors' reflective reasoning. Systemic power works through comprehensive 'rationalities' with broader evaluative frameworks or 'logics' (Nigam & Ocasio, 2010; Townley, 2002). Rationalities do not simply provide actors with taken-for-granted beliefs, but with a system of thought that justifies and legitimizes the appropriateness and importance of those beliefs (Foucault, 1975). When the middle managers studied by Rouleau and Balogun (2011) reflectively draw on their discursive competence to fulfil their strategic role, the efforts are shaped by a taken-for-granted strategy discourse. The 'bottom-line culture' noted by the authors represents a conduit of systemic power that directs managers in understanding and evaluating their work. The disciplining effects of knowledge structures can equally influence advantaged and disadvantaged actors by shaping what they consciously conceive of as rational (Ainsworth & Hardy, 2012; Townley, 2008).

Empowering and constraining influences on the form of sensemaking

While different aspects of systemic power consolidate each of the four sensemaking processes, systemic power can also influence transitions from one process to the next. Many sensemaking processes in organizations follow automatic processing, as organizations minimize the effort required by routine issues. Established taken-for-granted understandings, feelings of familiarity and hierarchical communications reinforce automatic processing in common issues such as failures to meet organizational targets, unexpected customer complaints, setbacks in projects, new initiatives by competing organizations, or staff turnover. Routinized sensemaking processes help actors deal with unexpected events and potentially disruptive information. Conscious and open-minded consideration of such unexpected events could raise questions of occupational, functional and hierarchical division of responsibilities; the very act of sensemaking can threaten the legitimacy of established power relations.

Indeed, systemic power, embedded in organizational context, can often be expected to drive the organization towards committed and/or pre-conscious forms of sensemaking. However, contextual

Table 1. The effects of systemic power on the form of sensemaking.

Structural effects	Effects	Drivers
Conservative influences	Systemic power induces more committed forms of sensemaking	Salient coherent knowledge structures or identities Hierarchical communication practices Temporal structuring
Reformative influences	Systemic power induces more provisional forms of sensemaking	Plural knowledge structures and identities Dialogical communication practices
Facilitative influences	Systemic power induces more pre-conscious forms of sensemaking	Feelings of familiarity and predictability Temporal pressure, hurry
Deliberative influences	Systemic power induces more conscious forms of sensemaking	Experienced accountability Persistent attention to competing demands or tensions

factors may also drive more provisional and/or conscious forms of sensemaking that help call into question the established routines and power structures. These influences are depicted as horizontal and vertical arrows in Figure 1 and summarized in Table 1.

The more committed the sensemaking process is, the less likely actors are to question understandings implied by the established knowledge structures, identities and episodic interventions of powerful agents. Thus, structural conditions that invoke greater commitment to emerging understandings represent *conservative influences* of systemic power on sensemaking, whereas contexts that induce a more provisional attitude in sensemaking represent *reformative influences*. Likewise, pre-conscious processing may prevent actors from attending to and articulating contradictions, paradoxes and tensions that would lead them to question established power relations. Systemic power can thus constrain sensemaking through *facilitative influences*, whereas empowering conditions that increase conscious attention to inferences represent *deliberative influences.*

Conservative influences. Systemic power structures can dampen the perceived incoherence between observations and actions by making routine responses appear compelling and plausible and thereby inducing more committed processing. Our review of the literature highlights three main sources of conservative influences: coherent and salient knowledge structures or identities, hierarchical communication practices and temporal structuring.

Prior literature has highlighted the ability of salient heuristics and discursively articulated explanations to preclude reflection by offering immediate understandings of new issues and events that cast them as familiar and comprehensible (Weick, 1988, 1993). Brown's (2000, 2004, 2005) work on inquiry sensemaking makes a strong case for the commitment-inducing power of a compelling and coherent discourse. His work elaborates how normalizing narratives construct a plausible account of events in ways that reaffirm the status quo and inhibit doubts and uncertainties that would otherwise trigger further reflection. Such reports lie at the boundary of episodic and systemic power; while their production is an episodic effort at influence and manipulation, they can equally be seen as products of systemic power and pre-existing rationalities (Townley, 2008). The plausibility created by coherence explains why powerful actors whose interests align with hegemonic discourses try to hide or dismiss other knowledge structures as irrelevant or less valuable (Vaara & Monin, 2010). Nevertheless, the effectiveness of knowledge structures is always at risk as hegemonic discourse can be challenged, and also because every discourse contains grounds for its own immanent critique (Bourdieu, 1991).

Identity is a particularly strong driver for committed sensemaking, because there is hardly anything that feels as plausible and certain to actors as their own established identities. Challenges to individual and collective identities typically lead actors to reaffirm prior identity-related beliefs (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996; Weick, 1995, p. 21) and involve commitment to initial understandings that preserve central aspects of their identity (e.g. Humphreys & Brown, 2002; Nag et al., 2007). This idea is central to cognitive dissonance theory and has been subsequently elaborated in self-affirmation, self-consistency and self-standard theories (Cooper, 2007). Identity-related beliefs are also potent motivators for action due to self-regulation processes – with actors enforcing internalized demands and aspirations for themselves (Thornborrow & Brown, 2009). In sum, systemic power is embedded in identities when actors substitute conscious evaluation of plausibility with the self-evident plausibility provided by their identity, creating a shift towards more committed and more pre-conscious processing.

A focus on the organizational context shows that hierarchical (i.e. vertical) ties in an organization can induce more committed processing. Past studies show how exposure to the sensemaking processes of superiors reduces uncertainties and induces more committed processing (Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Hardy & Thomas, 2014), thereby accentuating the effects of systemic power. In other words, sensemaking processes of hierarchical superiors influence the sensemaking efforts of subordinates by implying the heuristics and discourses through which issues and events should be made sense of (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis, 2005) and reducing perceived uncertainties. Such effects are particularly strong when superiors are also present at meetings where subordinates engage in sense-making (Hardy & Thomas, 2014; Maitlis, 2005; Thomas et al., 2011); the physical presence of superiors influences subordinates even without explicit sensegiving (Bean & Hamilton, 2006). Moreover, even the knowledge that the same issues or events are being made sense of by superiors in a position of authority can discourage actors from engaging in reflective sensemaking (Tourish & Robson, 2006), as they may expect their own interpretations and choices to be overruled. Weick's (1990) study of the Tenerife disaster elaborates how the subordinate position of the co-pilot in relation to the captain (who had given a qualification check to the co-pilot two months earlier) led to more committed sensemaking by the co-pilot and made him suppress his initial doubt.

Many organizational routines entail 'temporal structures' that create pressures for closure (Orlikowski & Yates, 2002), potentially undermining reflective sensemaking. Meetings and plans represent typical sources of temporal structuring that impose rhythms and expected timelines of events on members of the organization. When actors enter a meeting assuming that shared understandings and/or decisions have to be made, these assumptions can act as a conduit of systemic power that induces committed sensemaking and inhibits reflection (Karreman & Alvesson, 2001). As strategies often emerge through consecutive meetings (Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2017), the temporal pressure associated with each meeting can help explain the ability of actors to reflect on and question emerging understandings. This is dramatically illustrated by Garud's (2008) analysis of industry conferences as temporally bounded events that forced the field of cochlear implants to formulate and commit to a consensus understanding. Granqvist and Gustafsson (2016) scrutinize the instigation of a university merger to show how powerful actors construct expectations of urgency and inevitability, pressuring less powerful actors to focus on planning the merger implementation rather than questioning the appropriateness and value of the merger. In our terms, the elites induced a shift in sensemaking from reflective towards algorithmic processing.

Reformative influences. The structural context can also induce more provisional processing by accentuating feelings of incoherence and drawing attention to the inadequacy of present actions as plausible solutions to the issues at hand. We call these effects of the structural context 'reformative

influences' and highlight two: plural knowledge structures and identities and dialogical communication practices.

A greater diversity and pluralism of knowledge structures can induce increasing doubts and uncertainties, leading to more critical evaluations of plausibility and instigating creative agency (Seo & Creed, 2002). Contradictions and tensions instigate dialectical and dialogical processes (Putnam, Fairhurst, & Banghart, 2016) that are often associated with doubt and uncertainty about pre-existing understandings. Thus, even legitimate knowledge structures and identities do not necessarily guarantee the effectiveness of systemic power. In fact, actors are likely to face the greatest uncertainty or doubt when they consider credible contradictions or threats to deeply established ideas (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Sonenshein & Dholakia, 2012). Strong identities can induce intense, provisional and empowering periods of sensemaking when they are contradicted. As Weick (1995, p. 23) notes, '*intentional* [i.e., more conscious] *sensemaking is triggered by a failure to confirm one's self*,' suggesting that events or observations conflicting with one's established identity can become a potent source of doubt leading to formulation of entirely new understandings and even identity change (Christianson et al., 2009; Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Elsbach & Kramer, 1996).

Collegial (i.e. horizontal) connections among peers' sensemaking processes can call into question the coherence and plausibility of established understandings and help actors escape the constraining effects of systemic power, thus facilitating resistance. Past research suggests that collegial connections between actors and their sensemaking processes (Balogun, Bartunek, & Do, 2015) can diffuse perceptions of doubt and uncertainty, decrease the perceived plausibility of established understandings, and thereby facilitate provisional sensemaking and reduce the hold of systemic power. Individuals and groups are likely to attend to various sensemaking processes taking place in the organization. Importantly, feelings of uncertainty are likely to be more contagious than feelings of certainty among peers. Doubt makes actors question, reorder and revise their beliefs and actions in ongoing situations (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). A recent study by Balogun et al. (2015) shows how lateral connections within country-level top management teams and the absence of connections with headquarters led to generative sensemaking where local managers developed understandings of their situation that were effective but also highly critical of their superiors. Likewise, Humphreys and Brown's (2002) study of resistance through dis-identification and schizo-identification suggests that the doubts of peers can induce more provisional sensemaking.

Facilitative influences. Systemic power may help reproduce established power relations by inhibiting subordinated actors' conscious attention to new issues. The literature suggests that pre-conscious processing can be induced by feelings of familiarity and predictability as well as temporal pressures.

The effects of familiarity and a sense of predictability as a basis for routinization have been widely noted in both generic psychological research (Gigerenzer et al., 1999) and sensemaking in particular (e.g. Weick, 1988). Familiarity and predictability often derive from established work roles related to common sensemaking situations. Pre-conscious processing plays a substantial role in experts' decision-making, as elaborated by the naturalistic decision-making literature (Day & Lord, 1992; Klein, 2008). This literature shows that pre-conscious or 'intuitive' decision-making is particularly suited for utilizing tacit knowledge accumulated by experts over the years. For example, one study found that experienced firefighting commanders drew on their experiences to form a single plan of action rather than multiple options (Klein, Calderwood, & Clinton-Cirocco, 1986). Pre-conscious interpretation processes can be highly successful even in complex environments, if

the environment is stable and actors can draw on accummulated experiences, as for example in chess (Kahneman & Klein, 2009).

Many case studies suggest that temporal pressure or hurry (Weick, 1993) can lead actors to engage in less conscious sensemaking processes (Cornelissen et al., 2014). The most memorable example is provided by Weick's (1993) retelling of the Mann Gulch fire. Actors that were in a hurry to escape the rapidly advancing wildfire did not elaborate their reasoning, justify their inferences, or demand others to do so. While actors may articulate rationalizing accounts under time pressures, they are unlikely to consciously consider the underlying justifications or to allow others to question the reasoning behind the choices they make (Weick, 1990).

Deliberative influences. Finally, the structural context can also induce more conscious processing, accentuating the perceived need to explicate inferences and justifications to resolve contradictions and incoherence in pre-conscious sensemaking. We highlight two such 'deliberative influences': experienced accountability and persistent attention to competing demands or tensions.

Organizations are full of accountability pressures that call for actors to offer explicit justifications to their superiors and peers (Cornelissen, 2012; Lerner & Tetlock, 1999). Such accountability pressures may stem from internalized roles, social conventions, or common agreed-upon auditing and accountability regimes (Cornelissen, 2012), and generally make individuals and groups more conscious of the reasons underlying the interpretations they form and the actions they take – in order to meet such accountability demands. Hierarchical relationships do not necessarily imply greater attention to reasoned forms of accountability. However, superiors may often be more interested in the mere compliance of their subordinates rather than in the quality of their reasoning (e.g. Balogun et al., 2015). Indeed, the greatest need for accountability may stem from the perceived need to justify interpretations and actions to unspecified external stakeholders (Basu & Palazzo, 2008) and as part of increasing external pressures for organizations to comply with auditing regimes and standards (Power, 1999).

The structural contexts in organizations and organizational fields can also accentuate attention to competing demands or tensions, thereby inducing more deliberate attention, particularly when actors feel personal responsibility for the issues (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007). The literature on institutional complexity, for example, has noted how structural positions at the intersection of multiple knowledge structures, fields or logics can expose actors to tensions (Furnari, 2014; Greenwood, Raynard, Kodeih, Micelotta, & Lounsbury, 2011). Such tensions and unresolved issues induce actors to patch over their differences and arrive at settlements (Putnam et al., 2016). Organizations can even design 'hybrid spaces' that maintain persistent attention to paradoxes and competing goals as a structural influence inducing conscious attention (Perkmann, McKelvey, & Phillips, 2019).

Episodic power and the ideal-type forms of sensemaking

Whereas systemic power captures the effects of surrounding contexts on actors' sensemaking, episodic power is relational; it captures the deliberate efforts of an individual to shape the sensemaking of other individuals or groups. Research has traditionally focused on the way authoritative sensegivers provide observations and ideas as content for sensemakers, including salient goals, observations and governing principles (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Sensegiving has also been used to conceptualize the efforts of subordinates to influence their leaders and peers (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007). We build on our four ideal-type forms of sensemaking to elaborate sensegiving and sensebreaking (Pratt, 2000) as central forms of episodic power. We outline distinct sensegiving

	Induce committed processing	*Induce provisional processing*
Induce pre-conscious processing	**Suppressive sensegiving:** Normalize the situation to encourage the application of pre-existing heuristics to make sense. *Sensebreaking* aimed at dismissing divergent responses and observations.	**Inspirational sensegiving:** Encourage improvisation and experimentation to explore alternative tacit responses. *Sensebreaking* aimed at questioning established situated responses and salient goals.
Induce conscious processing	**Authoritative sensegiving:** Impose a specific narrative, discourse, or articulated goal into the sensemaking process. *Sensebreaking* aimed at discrediting established understandings and competing accounts.	**Expansive sensegiving:** Induce a richer understanding of the situation to encourage critical evaluation of situated goals and relevant knowledge structures. *Sensebreaking* aimed at questioning initial explanations and salient goals.

Figure 2. Forms of episodic power associated with the ideal-type forms of sensemaking.

and sensebreaking practices corresponding to ideal-type processes that influence both the content of sensemaking and the process through which it operates, as summarized in Figure 2.

The types of sensegiving-based forms of episodic power on the left-hand side of Figure 2 work to 'close down' and constrain recipient sensemaking. These interventions provide actors with ready-made solutions and reduce doubt, with sensegiving aiming to provide a coherent understanding and sensebreaking aimed at reducing doubt. In contrast, the forms of episodic power on the right-hand side of Figure 2 work to 'open up' and empower recipient sensemaking. These induce doubt and provide actors with the divergent ideas needed to instigate more provisional processing and foster creativity.

Importantly, the four types of episodic power are not confined to powerful actors (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Gioia et al., 1994), but also represent a key tool for resistance (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007). Sensegiving and sensebreaking are broad enough concepts to be useful in describing and theorizing the efforts of disempowered actors to influence collective sensemaking, resist the episodic and systemic power of organizational elites, and mobilize political coalitions (Balogun et al., 2015; Glynn & Lounsbury, 2005; Maitlis, 2005; Sonenshein, 2010).

Suppressive sensegiving. This form of episodic power aims to introduce coherent framings of the situation among sensemakers. Sensegivers can highlight certain observations, heuristics and choices as relevant in an effort to categorize the situation in an unequivocal manner, impose a specific situational goal or induce a related response. Suppressive sensegiving silences opposition and precludes careful consideration by imposing a taken-for-granted tacit understanding of the situation. The instruction given by the leader of the firefighting team to start an 'escape fire' in the seminal Mann Gulch study (Weick, 1993) exemplifies an unsuccessful attempt at suppressive sensegiving, as he called his group to simply follow his lead in lighting a patch of grass instead of fleeing the approaching fire.

Suppressive sensegiving can be accompanied by conscious efforts to destroy meanings that challenge the desired framing and response to a situation. Such 'suppressive sensebreaking' aims

to discredit, dismiss or disregard observations, ideas or goals that are incongruent with the desired response. This is exemplified by the recent study of the Stockwell shooting (Cornelissen et al., 2014), which shows how repetition and reinforcement of a specific understanding created an environment in which the officers dismissed divergent observations and alternative tacit understandings, even when these were warranted by the situation at hand. For example, the officers ignored the fact that the suspect had picked up a newspaper, which should have made them ask whether he was indeed a terrorist suicide bomber.

Authoritative sensegiving. Classic studies of sensegiving and sensebreaking conceive of the process as involving the imposition by organizational elites of desired authoritative meanings on their subordinates and destabilization of established meanings that contradict the intended message (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Mantere et al., 2012). Such authoritative sensemaking relies on a compelling narrative that provides a central goal, highlights specific observations and established beliefs, and lays out a clear action path, coherently bridging the past, the present and the future in a plausible progression (Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013).

Authoritative sensegiving is often associated with sensebreaking efforts that question the established understandings that contradict the intended understandings, portraying the prior identity or strategy as undesirable (Pratt, 2000) or impossible (Mantere et al., 2012). Moreover, sensebreaking may be aimed at downplaying competing observations and interpretations that challenge the desired narrative, a tactic labelled 'sensehiding' (Vaara & Monin, 2010).

Inspirational sensegiving. Actors may also use episodic power to instigate and shape improvisational sensemaking by introducing divergent situational framings and goals into the sensemaking process to feed the formation of tacit interpretations and responses. Such episodic interventions provide groups with the 'power to' (Clegg et al., 2006) overcome established routines and instigate change. Although the sensemaking literature provides limited insights into inspirational sensegiving, there are some examples of concerted efforts to provide actors with new observations and ideas that facilitate reframing of the existing situation both in the sensemaking literature (e.g. Stigliani & Ravasi, 2012) and outside it (Harrison & Rouse, 2015).

Inspirational sensegiving can utilize sensebreaking to problematize established routine responses. This can involve calling into question the appropriateness of salient observations, ideas and goals that are typically associated with a sensemaking situation, pushing actors to abandon their pre-existing frames. Such sensebreaking practices are often associated with brainstorming and other management practices related to management practices (Harvey & Kou, 2013; Sutton & Hargadon, 1996).

Expansive sensegiving. Expansive sensegiving captures episodic interventions aimed at increasing reflexivity and critical thinking in a group (Strike & Rerup, 2016). It provides actors with competing ideas that spur reflection and open up new avenues for articulated reasoning and deliberate action (Seo & Creed, 2002). While the literature has not explicitly associated sensegiving with increased reflexivity, the concept of resourceful sensemaking documents efforts of specific team members to provide new meanings and open up the conversation for alternative viewpoints, for example by setting up a focus group (Wright, Manning, Farmer, & Gilbreath, 2000). Christianson et al. (2009) document how the museum curator Courtney Wilson reframed a catastrophic accident as an opportunity to renew a railroad museum, calling on his subordinates to imagine what an 'ideal museum' would be like. The classic article of sensegiving by Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) can also be interpreted to involve expansive sensegiving in the initial phase of organizational change. In the case featured in that paper, a university president called upon the top management

team to imagine what a 'top ten public university' would look like, spurring reflective sensemaking concerning key strategic goals and priorities.

Sensebreaking has a productive role in expansive sensegiving. It can involve discrediting past narratives and understandings as well as triggering ongoing questioning that prevents premature commitment to emerging accounts of the situation. Whereas the goal of sensegiving in authoritative interventions is to reduce doubt, its purpose in expansive interventions is to induce doubt.

Competing influences on sensemaking and the interaction of systemic and episodic power

Systemic power originating from organizational and institutional structures tends to interact with individual-level episodic power in relation to specific organizational issues (Maitlis, 2005; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007). Because actors often face multiple and competing effects of systemic power, there are dialectical tensions among stability and change. These contextual tensions may create room for episodic interventions. For example, persistent ambiguity and unresolved problems can be central triggers of sensegiving (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007).

Research has suggested that sensemaking episodes lead to adaptive organizational changes when there is a transition towards more provisional sensemaking, often due to a combination of systemic and episodic influences. Strike and Rerup (2016) show how organizational 'entrapped frames' can create conservative influences on management teams of family enterprises, preventing them from addressing persistent issues facing their organizations. Expansive sensegiving by a trusted advisor represented benign episodic power, countering the effects of systemic power. Interventions that transitioned the sensemaking process towards more reflective sensemaking helped form 'an expanded frame'.

The influences between systemic conditions and episodic interventions are mutual and thus recursive. Systemic power associated with structural conditions may either suppress and confound or trigger and enable sensegiving, while sensegiving may can increase or decrease the hold that systemic power has upon others. Maitlis and Lawrence (2007) show how persistent issues can lead to formation of a 'sensemaking gap' that motivates individuals to engage in more deliberate sensemaking and thus induces sensegiving efforts. Such sensegiving efforts accentuate and build on systemic power structures, such as pre-existing ambiguities or contradictions. In other cases, systemic power may compel actors to engage in authoritative sensegiving that reproduces established structures. In sum, systemic and episodic power exist in a dialogue where neither is independent of the other.

While we have focused on how actors make sense, it is important to recognize that structural and episodic power may also hamper formation of coherent and plausible understandings and accounts altogether. Ham-fisted efforts to impose beliefs that contradict established understandings prevent formation of coherent understandings (Mantere et al., 2012). Uniform knowledge structures may leave actors confused in ways that lead to the 'breakdown' of collective sensemaking. One answer to such breakdowns is to engage in sensemaking at the individual or sub-group level. Weick's (1993) study of Mann Gulch exemplifies how the team leader's failure to provide a plausible shared understanding led individual firefighters to formulate private understandings. Similarly, Mantere et al. (2012) document how rejection of managerial sensegiving led subordinates to engage in sensemaking in smaller sub-groups.

Concluding reflections

The purpose of this article is to advance the theoretical understanding of power in sensemaking processes. By so doing, we expand the largely institutional conception of power as persistent

structures and relationships (Clegg et al., 2006; Lawrence, 2008). The sensemaking literature is uniquely positioned to explain how power is implicated in actors' interpretations of unfamiliar, unexpected and idiosyncratic events and issues. By so doing, sensemaking processes show how 'reasonability' may be re-established after disruptive events (Schildt, Mantere, & Vaara, 2011), thus explaining how the existing order adapts in response to deviant events (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991) or, alternatively, how new observations are normalized and rationalized in ways that retain the status quo (Brown, 2000, 2005). Such analysis of systemic and episodic power can enrich existing views on organizational adaptation to environmental changes, a central concern in sensemaking research (Christianson et al. 2009; Thomas et al., 1993). The constraining effects of systemic power suggest that organizations could become 'emancipated' and escape otherwise constraining taken-for-granted understandings if they were able to induce more provisional sensemaking processes (e.g. Porac, Thomas, & Baden-Fuller, 1989; Thomas et al., 2011). At the same time, organizational success can depend on power structures that induce uniformity by constraining and directing individuals. The established literature implies that organizational adaptation benefits from initial expansive sensegiving efforts (Christianson et al., 2009; Thomas et al., 2011), but may subsequently require authoritative or even suppressive sensegiving to align organizational actions (Gioia et al., 1994; Huy, 2002).

Beyond the focus on power, our process conception of sensemaking can help integrate and explicate findings from prior studies, bridging three key dividing lines in the sensemaking tradition: (1) individual and collective sensemaking; (2) cognitive, discursive and narrative forms of sensemaking; and (3) crisis and organizational/strategic sensemaking (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). The pursuit of coherence among observations, beliefs and actions takes place both in individual cognitions and in discourse among actors. We thus suggest that individual and collective processes ought not to be conceived as distinct 'ontological assumptions' (cf. Maitlis & Christianson, 2014) but rather as deeply interconnected empirical phenomena. This should encourage researchers to further integrate key insights from psychological (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Bartunek, 1984; Thomas et al., 1993), hermeneutic (Lueger, Sandner, Meyer, & Hammerschmid, 2005), narrative (Brown & Humphreys, 2003; Sonenshein, 2010), phenomenological (Cunliffe & Coupland, 2012) and discursive (Rouleau, 2005; Vaara & Monin, 2010) traditions of sensemaking.

Weick (2001, p. xii) has noted that sensemaking 'is not particularly tidy, which means that attempts to portray it may also sprawl'. We hope that future research can build on our framework to better integrate the underlying interests, power structures and the actual exercise of power in particular sensemaking scenarios, illuminating the social dynamics of sensemaking that can either maintain or shape organizations as they face unexpected events and issues. In seeking to explain how individuals and groups answer the questions 'what is going on here?' and 'what should I do next?', the sensemaking literature provides excellent tools for analysing how systemic and episodic power shapes understandings and collective action in organizations. Theories of sensemaking and theories of power are more powerful together.

Note

1. Gioia et al. (1994) suggest that sensegiving and influence are distinct concepts. However, sensegiving is typically used in the literature to capture deliberate attempts to influence sensemaking, i.e. as instances of episodic power.

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