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Distributed imagining processes in organizational change sensemaking

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Abstract

Purpose – The role of imagination (Gioia *et al.*, 2002; Weick, 1995, 2005, 2006) and the potential of distributed sensemaking (Weick *et al.*, 2005) are highlighted in existing sensemaking studies in a distinct manner. The purpose of this paper is to articulate these two perspectives by observing a specific sensemaking process defined as "distributed imagining process (DIP)" in this paper.

Design/methodology/approach – From an observation conducted in 2016 within a French public organization regarding an operation that invited all organizational actors to imagine the future of their work life, this study analyzed 777 collected texts, through an inductive and qualitative approach, for understanding DIP's functioning and results.

Findings – This study identified that what actors imagine about the future is a self-contextualized observation and an interpretation of the present incorporated into an imagined future. With a distributed modality, individual imagining processes might interact with collective processes for contributing organizational change sensemaking.

Originality/value – Adopting a temporality that positions the future as an imagined interpretative prolongation of the present and the past (Gioia *et al.*, 2002), this study suggests that the combination of self-contextualized imagining process and distributed modality might be inspiring for exploring more inductive and enriched organizational sensemaking through, on the one hand, the reduction of cognitive constraints implicitly imposed by organizational and temporal contexts and, on the other hand, the incitation of interactions in and between individual and collective sensemaking processes.

Keywords Organizational change, Sensemaking

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

From a temporality accentuating the articulation of the past and the present, most sensemaking studies are interested in how organizational actors' sensemaking is accomplished in the past for understanding their enactment in the present. Fully recognizing the relevance of retrospective processes in the construction of "what happened" and in the understanding of "what we did", this research attempts to extend this approach by exploring a sensemaking process based on a temporality that articulates the present and the imagined future (Colville *et al.*, 1999; Gioia *et al.*, 2002; Wright *et al.*, 2013) in the context of organizational change. More specifically, this research is interested in a distributed imagining process (DIP), which the author considers to be a specific sensemaking process.

DIP could be defined, in the sensemaking context, as an inductive interactive process aimed to stimulate individuals' sensemaking regarding to organizational change through their interpretation about imagined future, in order to trigger or enrich collective sensemaking toward organizational change.

Around this definition, the first point to clarify is about the temporality of DIP in this study. The research question of this study focuses on organizational actors' sensemaking at the present through what they imagine and interpret about the future. From this sense, beyond its apparent future-oriented form, DIP is not a prospective process seeking to predict the future from the present or the past. Neither is it a prescriptive process by which actors look to communicate, influence or convince. In a distributed future-imagining process,

there is not a previous dominant story (Näslund and Pemer, 2012). The materialization of the process is more antenarrative (Boje, 2011) rather than narrative. It is composed of different puzzles resulted of an interpretative work (Weick, 2012) accomplished at two levels: the micro level and the meso level. At the micro level, sensemaking is an individual process from which an interpretative work is accomplished through the clues and connections (Weick, 1995) perceived by every individual. At the meso level, organizational actors trigger, conscientiously or unconscientiously, a dominant or sometimes a polyphonic (Cunliffe and Coupland, 2012) interpretation in an organizational context.

Second, this study understands sensemaking as a systemic process constituted recursively by perception, interpretation and enactment. Perception interacts with interpretation and enactment, and enactment interacts with renewed perception and interpretation.

Third, DIP is an intersubjective social process (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014). Subjectivity is present on multiple levels. The imagination and perception of the future are constructed in a subjective and selected way (Luhmann, 1995; Weick, 1993, 1995), while interpretation depends on individual elements like cognitive ability, emotional control or social position (Lockett *et al.*, 2014), as well as organizational and contextual characteristics. Enactment, oriented more or less by interpretation, is also a subjective translation of the interpretation of all the others' enactment. Furthermore, an individual's perception and interpretation are intersubjective, as they are influenced by those of others. In a DIP, intersubjectivity could be considered as a lever for generating various interpretations of a perceived future and creating rich organizational enacting scenarios, especially when this subjectivity is inter-regulated through a distributed modality.

This paper attempts to present how DIP operates and what its specific characteristics are, through an observation conducted in 2016 within a French national public non-profit organization regarding the organizational actors' interpretations about the future of their work. The analysis was based on inductive and qualitative approaches and was accomplished through content analysis and textual analysis through the software R Temis[1]. After presenting the results of the analyses, the potential and limitations of DIP in organizational change sensemaking are discussed.

Conceptual framework construction

Sensemaking occurs with intrigue and uncertainty. Organizational actors need to understand the sense of a situation if its means of becoming seem puzzling (Weick, 1995) or uncertain. Sensemaking intervenes as a reflex for trying to reduce uncertainty and surmount intrigue.

The construction of the contextual rationality necessary for triggering enactment (Weick, 1993) is based on actors' understanding of uncertain or intriguing situations. Most existing studies analyze sensemaking from prior situations to identify how actors' construction of sense interacted with their enactment and in what chronological order the contextual rationality was constituted. The study presented in this paper is constructed within this framework while trying to prolong the understanding of the sensemaking process with three specificities. The first is a contextual specificity focusing on the context of organizational change. The second is temporal specificity with a focus on the imagined future for constructing a contextual rationality upon the present. The third specificity relates to a functioning modality with a focus on a distributed sensemaking process.

Sensemaking in organizational change

Existing studies explored different organizational processes through which sensemaking is accomplished (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014): strategic change (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991), identity construction (Humphreys and Brown, 2002), crisis management (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010), organizational learning (Patriotta, 2003), managerial sensemaking

(Lüscher and Lewis, 2008), etc. In this study, the analysis focuses specifically on strategic organizational change as it is one of the organizational contexts that is susceptible to arousing deep intrigue and, consequently, generating more necessity to mobilize a profound sensemaking process.

Sensemaking processes intervene when organizational actors realize that their routine reasoning cannot explain what happens and their routine actions cannot resolve the problems they meet. During a period of organizational change, new lenses and organizing processes could arouse actors' intrigue. It is possible that the more strategic the change is, the deeper and more numerous the intrigue will be. To resolve their intrigue, actors might seek cues in their prior experiences in order to construct an understanding model—a contextual rationality (Weick, 1993). If they cannot find cues in prior experiences, their sensemaking process might become hectic with various possible enactment scenarios.

First possible scenario: actors enact without getting an appropriate sense or without realizing conscientiously their appropriate intuition. Their enactment helps them to construct, correct or confirm the sense they make upon experiencing the situation through interaction. In the case of organizational change, this could possibly be a means to organizing but could also generate disoriented organizing, in other words, disorganizing.

Second possible scenario: unable to identify interpretable cues and enation scenarios (if it is possible to consider inaction to be a specific enactment), actors mobilize their imagination to try to make sense of their perception. In this case, imagination is not a totally opening process but a disciplined one (Weick, 1989) that is contextualized, probably unconsciously, by actors' perceptions of the situation. Their imagination contains what they understand of similar situations in the past and what they expect, or sometimes what they fear, the situation to become. In an organizational change context, this way of functioning could be mindful for individuals as well as for organizations, and could also slow the sensemaking process if individuals' imaginations are too paradoxical with organizational goals or if the scenarios resulting from the imagination lack pragmatism (Rhodes and Brown, 2005) for decision making (Ford, 2002).

Third possible scenario: organizational actors, facing a situation that seems totally uncertain or invisible, choose waiting as the enactment scenario and expect an orientation indication from influencing actors or organizations (Boal and Schultz, 2007). This possibility concerns a sensemaking process oriented by a sense giving process (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991). In a sense giving process, the sense of organizational change is communicated by the top management, and the sensemaking process becomes an oriented-interpreting process by which actors try to understand and decide if they adhere to the given sense. If this process could procure efficiency in the implantation of strategic change, it could also be a source of organizational tension if the given sense cannot be adhered to by most organizational actors.

Sensemaking and future-oriented imagination

At first sight, organizations cannot favor imagination. Weick (1993) explained that there are some organizational mechanisms that undermine imagination, especially favors to schema-based perception, deduction and mindlessness. At the same time, some sensemaking processes are systematically, even unconsciously for actors, associated with imagination, in particular when organizational actors attempt to presume the becoming of a situation upon which they are enacting or must enact within an organization.

Imagination is constructed within an organizational context. In sensemaking processes, individuals and groups attempt to rely on structure and to interpret a perceived situation to contextualize their rationality (Weick, 1993). Their imagination is established, thus, through a self-contextualization process conditioned by their self-perception and their perception of the organizational context. This characteristic helps to construct contextual rationality,

which takes into account perceived contextual constraints (Weick, 1993), from which actors try to identify, interpret and organize their understanding (Figure 1).

Self-contextualized imagination operates in different ways. It might be based on anterior situations around questions such as "what really happened that day?" or "what would have happened if I had done it differently?" This imagination consists of a retrospective analysis of an anterior situation. Self-contextualized imagination can also occur before or during enactment around questions such as "what would happen if I do this or that?" or "what can I do if my idea does not work?" In this case, imagination is a series of contextualized presupposed consequences upon the becoming of a present or future situation. Whatever the case, imagination mobilizes anterior and present experiences of actors as their perception and rationality construction are directly linked with both what they thought and did in the past and what they observe and think in the present. From this angle, future-oriented imagination is an interpretative development of the present, as an inductive reasoning process (Cornelissen and Clarke, 2010), in which actors enacted or are enacting.

Sensemaking and the distributed process
Weick *et al.* (2005) suggest distributed sensemaking as a process that focuses not on sharing defined meanings in an organization but rather on developing collective inductions for obtaining new meanings. By extending their idea, this study proposes to consider distributed sensemaking as interactive process that is able to stimulate common inductions which might orient organizing process toward an organizational lens. In the context of organizational change, a distributed process could constitute a way to arouse more inductive adhesion and probably less deductive acceptance of change through an interactive process that stimulates common sense between individuals' perceptions and their contextual rationality (Figure 2).

A distributed process is an interactive process like other sensemaking processes. More specifically, interactions in this process might occur in different configurations: between
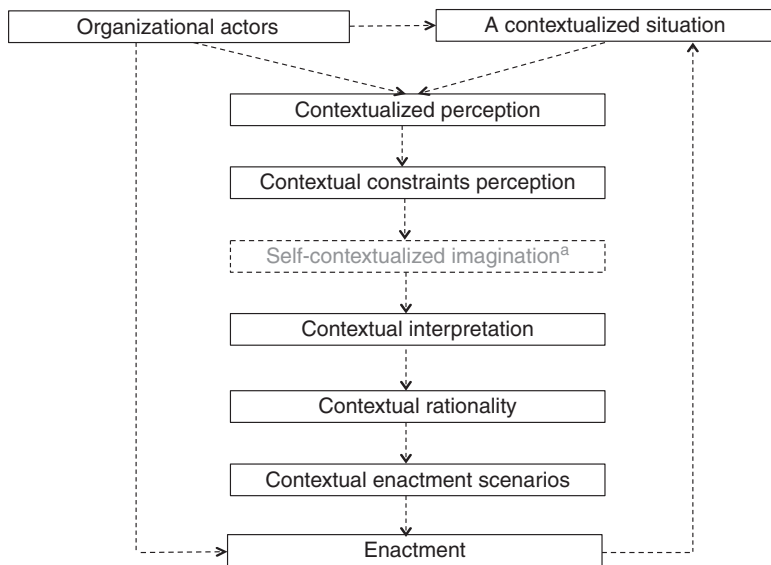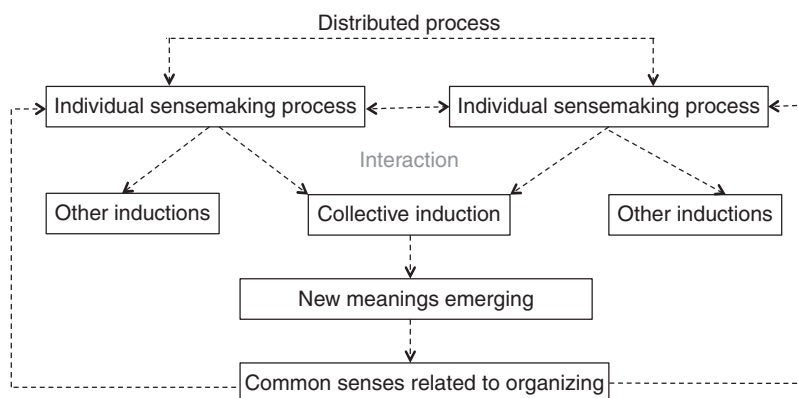

Figure 1.
Self-contextualized imagination integration in the sensemaking process

Note: [a]Non-obligatory process

Figure 2.
Distributed
sensemaking
processes

individuals, between individuals and groups (Stigliani and Ravasi, 2012), between groups, and also between organizations, as today's organizations operate with internal and external partners.

Conceptual framework of DIP

Based on the review of existing studies, this study proposes a conceptual understanding of a DIP in the context of organizational change sensemaking.

Relying on the seven properties of sensemaking (Weick, 1995), this study identified five characteristics of DIP. First, DIP is an inductive process. At the beginning of this process, there is no predefined sense to which individuals must adhere. Second, DIP is a composite process that combines individual and collective cognitive functioning. Third, DIP is a real interpretative process based on fictive scenarios given that DIP operates with imagination. And then, DIP is an interactive process because the results of individuals' imaginations, materialized and distributed in a collective context could not only interact among themselves but also generate interaction between individual sensemaking and organizational sensemaking (Stigliani and Ravasi, 2012). Finally, DIP is a systemic process, since DIP generates new meanings for enacting, and in return the results of enactment generate new emerging intrigues for which organizational actors need to start a new sensemaking process (Figure 3).

A further dimension specified in this study about DIP functioning is the temporality on which imagination is based. As discussed above, imagination may focus on the past, the present or the future. Different temporalities are associated with different interpretative approaches. If we consider that the world of everyday life is temporally and spatially (Berger and Luckmann, 1991) structured, we could understand imagination as a kind of social construction functioning with a specific temporality and a specific space, which provides a subjective interpretation based on the meaning of everyday life reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1991) that actors choose, consciously or unconsciously, to make. Even if imagination has gaps with everyday life, it is not totally disconnected from everyday life, because actors, consciously or unconsciously, rely on the meaning provided by everyday life for constructing their imagined reality. The interaction between imagined reality and everyday life reality might impact how actors structure, produce or reproduce actions (Giddens, 1993) or imagined actions in their imagined reality, as well as in their everyday life reality. In this respect, the differentiation of temporality might expand actors' understanding of the changes they encounter. In the event that actors choose the future as their imagination's core temporality, the past and present are not absent in their
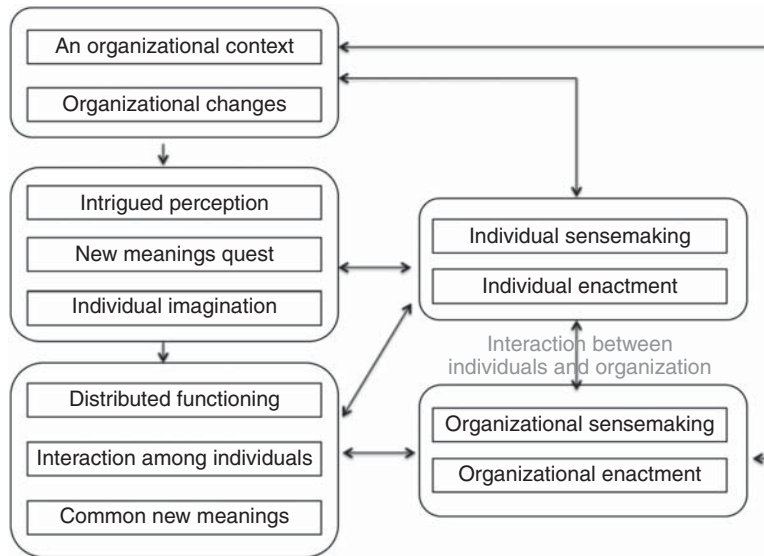
Figure 3.
Distributed imagining
processes in
organizational
change sensemaking

imagination, since their imagination is self-contextualized by what they perceived and what they constructed or experienced in the past or present. From this viewpoint, imagination can never operate in the future since it is an action in the present, and what actors imagine about the future could be a kind of reconstruction of the past and the present. In other words, the future is an imagined perception constructed in the present, so it belongs to the present (Luhmann, 1976). It is a subjective interpretation of the present constructed with a specific temporal and spatial agency.

DIP is one possible but not obligatory process of sensemaking. In many cases, sensemaking operates by reasoning. In some specific organizational contexts, especially for actors with limited visibility toward organizational becoming (Carlsen, 2006; Tsoukas and Chia, 2002) who must nonetheless enact at the present, DIP might provide possible facilities for organizational sensemaking. Among different specific contexts, it is possible to mention in particular contexts related to strategic changes (new strategic orientation), technological changes (digital transformation) and structural changes (merging and acquisition), etc.

Empirical approach
Organizational context
The empirical work of this study was conducted from April 2016 to August 2016 in a French public organization acting as an intermediary between jobseekers and employers as well as managing unemployment compensation payments. In the context of high unemployment rates and an economic landscape that is unfavorable to job creation, this organization assures its mission for the public with numbers strongly increasing during the last ten years. In spite of important resource augmentation, the organization nevertheless must attempt to articulate resource optimization with performance development. The digital evolution is one of the strategic orientations identified by the organization for improving service delivery to be more effective and efficient. It seems important to clarify that digital technology was progressively introduced to the organization during recent years. The impact of this introduction is one of the frequent matters discussed in social dialogue. For the employees of this organization, the future of their professional evolution seems uncertain, even worrisome. At the same time,

being accustomed to a strong administrative organizational culture, the employees feel constrained for expressing their feelings in and about their work life environment. In this context, the team in charge of work life quality in the organization initiated an operation inviting employees to imagine how their jobs would be transformed in the future by digital evolution. The author was invited to participate in this operation as an academic researcher and also, at that time, as a collaborator (until August 2016) in the HRM field within this organization. It is important to clarify that the author was invited to be a researcher based on past research work about the connection between literature and management.

All employees of this organization were informed of the operation's launch through the institutional intranet. Our research intention was clarified in a launch announcement that included explanations of the data utilization (with respect to anonymity) in our research activities.

Methodology
The observation method utilized in this study could be qualified as participant observation (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000), with an inductive and qualitative analytical approach.

The observation includes five steps. The first consists of global design of the operation, from method definition to communication. The second consists of constructing a narrative data collecting supported by a survey software Isiquest. The third relates to launch data collection. The fourth is data analysis, and the last deals with giving feedback to organizational actors through the institutional intranet.

For collecting narrative data, all employees were invited to imagine and describe the becoming of their work in 2030 around five issues: professional activities, work relationships with colleagues, work relationships with hierarchy, work relationships with external interlocutors (users, partners, etc.) and a typical workday. A total of 777 employees voluntarily joined this operation by sending us descriptions of their imagination. Among these employees, 19 percent were managers working at different management levels (operational management, middle management and top management), 65 percent were more than 40 years old, and 67 percent had over ten years of seniority in this organization. The repartition of respondents' professional profiles (details in Table AI) remains representative if it is compared to the results of the analysis of professional profiles of the totality of employees working in this organization.

Data analysis proceeding
The analysis is undertaken with principally two qualitative methods: textual analysis and content analysis. The choice to associate two analysis methods in the same study aims to obtain more analytical results through possible complementarities and/or interactions between the results emerging from two different analysis processes.

The textual analysis mobilized in this study is supported by the software R Temis. All texts are first classified in five thematic corpora: professional activities, work relationships with colleagues, work relationships with hierarchy, work relationships with extern interlocutors and typical workday. After formatting with R Temis technical criteria, all corpus are analyzed through R Temis to measure their textual richness and then to identify key recurring textual elements and emerging or atypical elements (i.e. Hapax). These key elements provide a textual understanding of the content of five corpora.

Following the textual analysis, the content analysis is undertaken through three steps: analysis and condensation of every text; association of the condensed elements with key recurring elements, resulting in a textual analysis for comparing, completing or sometimes controverting; identification and contextualization of emerging elements; and interpretation of analysis elements.

Results and discussion

The findings of this study are presented on two focuses: the functioning of DIP and its potential contributions to organizational change sensemaking in the observed context.

DIP as a means for interpreting the present through the imagination of the future

The analysis shows that what organizational actors imagine about their work life in the future, is an interpretation of what they perceive and what they interpret about their work life at the present. In this sense, their imagination constitutes a means for them to self-observe (Luhmann, 1995) their current work life and to make sense of what happened and what will happen. The analysis of the texts reveals that the respondents make very various interpretations about the present and their imaged future (Table I). Their interpretations, as a narrative process (Abolafia, 2010; Patient *et al.*, 2003), for making sense of the present, could be categorized under five focuses: inspiration, apprehension, interrogation, evasion and reflection (Table I). When a sensemaking process is triggered by inspiration, respondents' texts adopt an enthusiast narrative tone with agreeable imagined experiences and positive emotions regarding their future work life. With apprehension, the imagination is frequently oriented to negative scenarios, sometimes with "gallows humor." In the case of an interrogation focus, the texts translate an important uncertainty perceived by their authors toward the future. With an evasion focus, respondents seem to attempt to imagine the contrary of their perception regarding their work life at the present, as if they are trying to fill the absence (Weick, 2005) of something they desire at the present. Concerning the reflection focus, respondents provided more reasoning elements and less imaged representations in their texts. As shown in the texts (Table I), this construction or reconstruction of imagined future is frequently accomplished with various emotions such as satisfaction, remorse, worry, fear, enthusiasm, etc.

The heterogeneity in terms of interpretation and in terms of emotion in these narrative texts reveals an important uncertainty perceived by the actors at the present. Actually, dealing with highly uncertain situations, individuals, like organizations, attempt to identify clues by which they can reduce perceived uncertainty (Duncan, 1972) and establish contextual rationality (Weick, 1993). In the observed case, it is necessary to mention that the importance of the uncertainty is accentuated because of the invisibility generated by the evolution of digital technologies and its associated economic and societal impacts.

Interpretation	Textual elements
Inspiration	Ref[a]. 9684089: "(That day), I have a video-conference from my home with my territorial director at 7:30 AM, I manage then my department's issues from my smartphone until 1:00 PM. I spend my afternoon with my newborn daughter. I associate my personal life with my professional life (as) we can choose work time"
Apprehension	Ref. 9684944: "I'm awakened at night by work text messages on my mobile phone integrated with my alarm clock and my coffee maker" Ref. 9682949: "The race for Big-Data for being or staying an efficient manager"
Interrogation	Ref. 9683673: "Will we still be here (with the organization)?" Ref. 9684501: "Work, what will it mean? Will it still exist in that term?"
Evasion	Ref. 9683033: "More confidence and more autonomy […]"
Reflection	Ref. 9683417: "The notion of a hierarchy relationship stays unchanged. Only communication modes will change as there will be a common workplace, all is done with distance" Ref. 9684138: "The notion of enterprise will be replaced by the notion of eco-system: one project mode composed of multi-structures"

Table I.
Five interpretations focus on the imagination of the work life in the future

Note: [a]The text references cited in this table are the numbers directly generated by the software ISIQUEST utilized in this study for collecting data

For making sense of what will happen, the actors need to interpret what happened and what is happening. A perceived future is not the future that will exist but a prolonged representation of the present (Luhmann, 1976). As individuals and organizations cannot really know what they will meet in the future, it is impossible for them to really reason with their future reasoning (Weick *et al.*, 2005). From this angle, imagining the future is a quest to understand the present: it cannot predict the future, but it might, in some cases, impact the becoming of the future. In other words, future-oriented sensemaking is an enactment at the present.

Self-contextualized characteristics in DIP functioning
The finding related to the self-contextualized characteristic of DIP is principally based on the textual analysis.

Relying on R Temis software, this study identified the key recurrent words employed in all texts (Table II). The articulation of these words with the activities of this organization, in particular with the document presenting the organization's strategic projects[2], shows that the respondents' imaginations are strongly self-contextualized regarding organizational strategic change context.

There is probably a systemic relationship between perception and clue selection in sensemaking. The perception of contextual constraints orients more or less clue selection, and clue selection might be done unconsciously in order to relate to that perception. That is probably one of the reasons Weick *et al.* (2005) consider sensemaking to be a systemic process. The systemic characteristic of human cognitive reasoning is also identified from other angles: for example, Luhmann (1995) qualifies this characteristic with the term "self-reference," Giddens (1993) evokes the reproduction of social life, while Kahneman *et al.* (1982) reveal a similar heuristic mechanism in their analysis related to confirmation bias.

Obviously, the self-contextualized characteristic identified in this observation must be nuanced by the fact that the observed DIP is not a totally open imagining process, as the issue is specified in the launch of the operation. However, this nuance might not be determinant because employees are invited to freely imagine and send their narrative texts anonymously, so they do not have to limit their imagination by possible externally imposed constraints.

Distributed modality for triggering collective inductions
The imagining process observed in this study is formed in a distributed way. This modality could be understood as a core for articulating individual sensemaking processes and organizational sensemaking processes. The study identified several elements and confirmed a certain distributed characteristic in the observed process. First, the observed operation is designed to favor ascendant inductions. Certainly, the operation launch is initiated by the

Key recurrent textual elements resulting from employees' imagination description	Textual elements resulting from Chapter 4 of the Document "Strategic project 2015–2020"	
Work, employment, job interview, job search, physical reception, advice, unemployment compensation, performance, relationship, communication, information, automatization, digital, home, distance, control, supervision, responsibility, collaborative, network, interactivity, telephone, electronic message, video-conference, flexibility, work time, work place, collective, human, exchange, instantaneous and immediacy	Digital revolution, job researcher, expectation, dematerialization, platform, 100% Web, online services, collaborative, job advisor, public service, Emploi Store (a digital platform created for job searching), exchanges, competences, virtual training, in distance, develop	**Table II.** Association between textual elements of employees' imaginations and those of the strategic project document

top management of this organization, but the core operations depend on employees' voluntary involvement without a schema-based (Morandin and Bergami, 2014) scenario of the contents in waiting. Second, the operation is opened, in a collaborative way, to all collaborators. The transmission of their narrative texts does not follow hierarchical lines. Furthermore, the results confirm that the respondents are situated at different organizational levels, from frontline operations to top management. Third, in a distributed way, the resume of narrative texts was shared in the form of six professional summaries between all collaborators through the institutional intranet. In addition, an existing collaborative digital platform—"InnovAction"—continues to collect feedback on thematic issues. From the viewpoint of sensemaking analysis, the first point deals with the identification of an intriguing issue of which the organization wants to make sense through the involvement of voluntary collaborators. The second point constitutes an incitation to raise individual sensemaking processes toward the identified intriguing issue. The third point attempts to trigger collective inductions for organizational sensemaking through interactions between individual inductions materialized by the imagining process and the narration of imagination. This modality might provide not only interaction between individuals, but also between individuals and groups or organizations. The characteristics identified in the observed process correspond to several points mentioned in the definition of distributed sensemaking proposed by Weick *et al.* (2005).

Discussion and conclusion

This study tries to explore, conceptually and empirically, how an imagining process based on distributed modality functions in sensemaking and what potential contributions this process could provide to organizational change sensemaking.

It proposes a possible conceptual understanding of DIP sensemaking, based on a review of the existing research related to a Weickian sensemaking model (Weick, 1988, 1993; Weick *et al.*, 2005). In its analytical framework, this study also integrates a temporal dimension (articulating the imagined future and the perceived present) in the sensemaking process analysis. According to this study, DIP sensemaking processes could be understood as retrospective processes if the imagined future is considered as a prolonged representation of the present. What actors imagine about the future is a self-contextualized interpretation of the present and even of the past. This understanding implies that DIP sensemaking might constitute a means for understanding highly uncertain situations at the present, as in the case of strategic transformational change, through articulations between the imagined future and the perceived present as well as between individual sensemaking and organizational sensemaking.

In parallel, this study reveals some methodological questions relating to the analysis of the link between subjectivity and objectivity through interpretative approaches. As explained by Giddens (1986), subjectivity and objectivity are seemly opposable but are in fact complementary. An actor's interpretation might lend structure to that person's actions and vice versa. In practice, interpretative approaches need to overcome the dominance of the subjective dimension by contextualizing the meaning that actors construct upon their environment as well as their actions. As a subjective approach, DIP encounters similar difficulties in terms of articulating the relationship between imagined realty and everyday common sense (Berger and Luckmann, 1991). If every actor might have multiple realities, his or her actions need to be tangible in the same organizational context. As a subjective approach, DIP needs to consolidate its output through a strengthened contextualization aimed at giving a sharable interpretation for most actors implicated in the same organizational context.

The empirical work undertaken in this study completes this conceptual understanding by providing the findings related to DIP's sensemaking functioning. More particularly,

first, for organizational actors facing organizational strategic change, DIP provides, with a specific temporality and an imagining process, heterogeneous sensemaking results. This heterogeneity might be a source of enrichment for organizational sensemaking by generating a polyphony (Cunliffe and Coupland, 2012) composed of different voices and/or instruments around organizational themes. It also could arouse creative or original clues for interpretation and enactment. Second, DIP functions with self-contextualized characteristics. Actors' imagination and sensemaking processes are self-contextualized by their perceptions and experiences. In a certain sense, imagination is a partially opened interpretation of actors toward an organizational situation. With a future-focused temporality, self-contextualization might facilitate contextual rationality construction in a systemic functioning. The third point of our findings relates to the distributed modality. The observation revealed an empirical function of this modality suggested by existing reflection (Weick *et al.*, 2005) and identified the potential interests and limits of distributed materialization through imagining processes in an organizational change context in which uncertainty seems to be important.

Placing DIP in the context of a public non-profit organization, this approach might have a specific significance. Actually, the perception of most of the employees in this organization of their work has particular characteristics. Given the nature of their organization, they know that their activities do not aim to directly create commercial profit. In parallel, some of them consider their professional activities as more of a vocation and less as a simple job. This distinction accentuates the complexity in analyzing their perception of the organizational change, as a vocation is linked with the profound intrinsic dimension of individuals. This dimension is not always directly expressed by actors. Through a specific temporal and spatial agency (as a fictive framework), the expression of these intangible elements might become more perceptible. In this regard, the sector in which the observation has been conducted has specific signification to DIP.

Empirically, the results of our study suggest some possible leads in organizational change management. First, mobilizing an actor's imagination upstream of organizational change facilitates the actor's perception evolution. At this step, imagination is used both for anticipation and for scenario preparation. Actors express and reason by contextualizing what they imagined and what they understand of the reality of common sense. This cognitive process favors sensemaking. Second, a distributed process might defuse the possible tension caused by the uncertainty felt by individuals through interactions between them. Indeed, understanding the perception of others helps to relativize the tension felt by oneself. Third, introducing the imagining process in organizational change management stimulates the development of creativity in organizations, and therefore transforms actors from a passive role (in which they adapt to change) to an active role (in which they want to change).

Beyond these findings, this study has several limitations. First, the analysis is principally based on the narrative texts submitted by respondents. The participant observation undertaken in this study certainly provided multiple sources for understanding and contextualizing, in a relatively appropriate way, the content of the texts, but it would have been preferable to integrate respondents' explanations about what they felt, in addition to what they imagined and what they wrote, in order to multiply our DIP sensemaking observations. Second, the observations do not collect feedback from organizational collaborators after the dissemination of the text summaries via the institutional intranet. In fact, this potential feedback would have permitted this study to pursue reflections related to the systemic characteristics of distributed sensemaking processes. Third, the findings of this study must be contextualized and relativized by taking into account the organizational context as well as the economic, political and cultural contexts. The fourth limitation concerns the consideration of respondents' job positions in the interpretation of their responses.

It would be interesting to explore the possible correlation between a respondent's job position and the content of that respondent's imagination. As this study opted for a qualitative approach, this limitation could be considered an issue to explore in future studies, particularly with a possible quantitative approach. The last point regarding the limitation of this study relates to the possible impact of the author's role on the interpretative analysis. This point might be identified in several studies based on interpretative approaches, especially if observation is conducted through participant observation or using an action-research method in which researchers interact directly with the subject of their observation. In our research, the author worked in this organization at the time the observation was conducted. Despite the fact that the author was implicated in this process in the role of researcher, there is certainly some subjectivity on the part of the author with respect to his understanding and interpretation of what the actors imagined and what they described. At the same time, the presence of this subjectivity needs to be nuanced. In fact, the author's knowledge of the organizational context also facilitated the integration of the common-sense knowledge of ordinary members of the organization (Berger and Luckmann, 1991) in the analysis. In this way, the role of the author is both constraining and beneficial to the objectification of the subjective interpretation in the analysis. This limitation is, therefore, relative. These limitations might generate new issues for future research.

In conclusion, organizational change generates uncertainty. When change is perceived as important, imperceptibility about the future might increase, and organizational actors may attempt to perceive additional clues for constructing a contextual rationality in order to make sense of what they experience. At the same time, individuals' heuristic mechanisms limit, consciously or unconsciously, their perceptions, interpretations and integrations of perceived opportunities and perceived constraints. Imagining processes could momentarily help individuals to partially (not totally) reduce perceived constraints and thereby surmount, more or less, some heuristic limits (Kahneman *et al.*, 1982) in sensemaking. Distributed modalities could also provide a complementary remedy through interaction between the individuals' perceptions and interpretation and those of the organizations. Beyond some incentive mechanisms that organizations could mobilize for encouraging organizational change sensemaking, the substantive matter is probably situated in permanent organizational development aimed to intensify mindfulness norms (Weick, 2005), to enable harmonious polyphonic sensemaking (Cunliffe and Coupland, 2012) and to stimulate common sense inductions.

Notes

1. The text references cited in this paper are the numbers directly generated by the software ISIQUEST utilized in this study for collecting data.

2. Source: Document "Strategic Project 2015–2020" of the organization.

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Appendix

	Percentage
Job position	
Job research advisors	53
Back office activities	8
Professionals in functional services	20
Operational management	9
Middle management	7
Top management	3
Total	100
Age	
18–30	6
31–40	26
41–50	38
51–60	27
60+	3
Total	100
Seniority (year)	
0–10	33
11–20	38
21–30	20
31–40+	9
Total	100

Table AI.
Profile of 777
respondents

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