Managerial Equilibrium: Middle Manager Sensemaking during Organisational Change

Shereen Samson
University of South Africa
sherrysamson@telkomsa.net

Charmaine Williamson
University of South Africa
chammie@vodamail.co.za

Annemarie Davis
University of South Africa
davisa@unisa.ac.za

Purpose: Through the theoretical lenses of strategy-as-practice and sensemaking, this research aimed to explore the lived experiences of middle managers within the complex realities of micro-strategising during organisational change.

Study design/methodology/approach: Using a qualitative, intrinsic, single-case study grounded in Weick's sensemaking theory, the sensemaking practices of middle managers during organisational change were explored. Data was gathered through e-mail journals over four months and enabled real-time tracking of micro-strategising after change implementation. An interpretive constructionist form of thematic analysis was adopted and explored middle managers' organisational social reality.

Findings: Sensemaking occurs on a cognitive and emotional level. Participants attached meaning to actions and thereby created a sense for themselves and others towards organisational security and sustainability. Middle managers reframed the constraining organisational context through embodied sensemaking for practical coping, which enabled them to rise above the organisational complexity and contradiction.

Originality/value: These findings affirm the intellectual puzzle which sought to understand and/or restore the balance of the individual within an organisational socio-cultural context to attain managerial Equilibrium after the organisational change. The study offers valuable insight into how middle managers cope with organisational disruptions.

Keywords: middle managers, sensemaking, organisational change, strategising-as-practice, reframing, constraints, restructuring, change implementation, thematic analysis, coping

Introduction

Organisational change is inevitable and no longer considered business *un*usual. Rather, change is associated with *business-as-usual*. Literature on organisational change and change management continues to grow. However, what the anxiety, discomfort, disruption and transition mean in the lives of those individuals who find themselves in the middle of the change remains underexplored. Specifically, middle managers within organisations find themselves not only in the middle of the organisational structure but also in the middle of the organisational change process. We argue that middle managers are tasked with implementing organisational change while they experience stress, uncertainty, disruption and anxiety in the middle of the organisational change process. How they relate to those reporting to them, their accountability to their superiors, the work relationships, and the organisational realities are emotionally charged during organisational change. At the same time, the organisational context may serve to either support or constrain these middle managers. This article describes our research that explores the sensemaking practices of a selected group of administrative middle managers at a private higher education institution during organisational change and how they made sense of

the *new normal*. The new normal of organisational change in the research setting is associated with new relationships, new reporting lines, new lines of communication or new line managers. In this case, the organisational change was informed by cost-cutting initiatives to enhance competitiveness. We maintain that middle managers and their roles are considered key to the success or failure of the change.

Middle managers find themselves amid strategic change that they did not design but are required to execute (Balogun et al., 2004; Lüscher et al., 2008). There are compelling arguments, and evidence that making sense of such a dissonant paradox is challenging (Lüscher et al., 2008; Smith et al., 2012). Considering their crucial position and role in the organisation, also seen as the 'jam in the sandwich', middle managers are exposed to greater pressures from organisational restructuring and stress. In addition, they must deal with increasing requirements to be more resilient and cope effectively with the change (Dixon, 2021). The role of middle managers is heightened in these currently unprecedented times of change in the organisational environment; hence, this study is timely. Considering their middle position, middle managers' role as change agents is critical. Depending on their emotional mindset and wellbeing, middle managers can positively or negatively influence change (Kroon et al., 2021; Nielsen et al., 2021). Given such a continuum, more understanding of the coping practices of middle managers is needed.

For change to be positive and successful, the wellbeing of middle managers must be prioritised. Dixon (2021) argues that middle managers' work stress is related to a lack of coping skills. We, therefore, seek to understand middle managers' coping practices during times of organisational disruption and change, thereby confirming, adding to, or revising Dixons' (2021) thesis. An improved response around personal coping in managerial contexts could, in turn, take care of their wellbeing, resulting in managers being more productive and positive, better able to make sense of their contexts, and consequently performing their crucial role in organisational change (Kroon et al., 2021).

Literature Review

Middle managers

For this study, middle managers are defined as "a manager who reports to a manager and has managers reporting to them" (Jansen Van Rensburg et al., 2014).

The role of middle managers from a strategising-as-practice perspective is one of creators, interpreters, sellers, and communicators of strategy as well as implementers of strategy. Situated in a context-rich private higher education (PHE) institution in South Africa, this research connects to earlier research on middle managers in higher education (HE) settings. While the studies of Deem (1998), Thomas-Gregory (2014), Floyd (2016) and Van Niekerk et al. (2022) focus on middle managers from an academic perspective in public HE, the current study focuses on middle managers from an administrative perspective in a PHE institution. The studies by Szekeres (2004) and Bayat (2012) illustrate how administrative staff is seen as an invisible group within the structure of the HE provider: 'the silence …about the role of administrative staff … is deafening.' Bezuidenhout (2020) was the only study investigating managers at a South African private HE institution. Clegg et al. (2005) and Floyd (2016) contribute a multifaceted analysis of middle management in HE to the discussion around what constitutes middle management in HE institutions. Discussion about management in HE literature has been around the twin discourses of managerialism and collegiality, where middle managers have to deal with their colleagues on the one hand and the demands of senior executives on the other (Clegg et al., 2005; Floyd, 2016).

Humanising management is increasingly becoming part of the strategic research agenda as organisations are socially constructed realities in the minds of the people who inhabit them (Tsoukas et al., 2002). People are at the centre of strategic activity, as it is the people in the organisation who tend to shape the structure of the organisation. The social organisational structure confirms that managers – in the case of this study, middle managers – exercise and apply their abilities, knowledge and skills to make sense of their daily lived experience within a changing environment (Whittington, 2007). Middle managers, as mediators operating between strategic and operational levels within the social organisational structure (Colville et al., 2011; Rouleau, 2014), use their knowledge of their colleagues and context (Davis, 2013; Vaara et al., 2019) to craft and share messages (Vaara et al., 2021) and to enhance the meanings of those messages to shape organisational change. Through the ongoing, unfolding daily organisational practice of what middle managers do (Rouleau, 2014), organisational restructuring change comes into being. Therefore, the social interaction of middle managers within an organisational setting and the constitutive relationships thereto shape sensemaking around the strategic change in an effort towards stability or Equilibrium (Owens, 2001; Weick et al., 2005; Nicolini, 2012) and sustainability. With this study, we set out to explore this process in-depth.

Our research moved the focus from top managers to focus on middle managers, and we explored their sensemaking during organisational restructuring. Our focus aligned with Burgelman et al. (2018), who advocate for research on strategy from a middle management practice perspective. Within organisational social structures, the various layers of managers manage the day-to-day activities. To achieve a higher degree of reflexivity amongst these actors about what they are doing and their effects as 'do-ers' of strategy, we set out to interrogate this 'doing'. Middle managers are selective in what they reveal and to whom (Bojé, 1991; Fenton et al., 2011), suggesting reflexivity through adaptive sensemaking (Weick et al., 2005). This also implies the power (Weick et al., 2005) that middle managers possess to influence the shaping of organisational life based on their knowledge of the organisational social structure and their colleagues at different organisational levels (Floyd, 2016). Surju et al. (2020) confirm middle managers' sensemaking and sense-giving roles in aligning strategies vertically and horizontally.

Through our research, we endeavoured to link the micro-practices of sensemaking to the organisational social structure through discursive consciousness. Through discursive consciousness, organisational actors use reflexivity to make sense of the organisational reality they live in. In the role of mediator, the middle manager uses purposeful knowledge creation through sensemaking and sense-giving of organisational information to massage and/or manipulate intended strategy (Rouleau, 2005; Maitlis et al., 2007; Jansen Van Rensburg et al., 2014). During the organisational restructuring, the reality of the middle manager is disturbed. The middle manager wishes to restore his/her organisational identity and Equilibrium through purposeful everyday practices to make sense of his/her requisite organised world as both leader and follower. Heidegger (1962) maintains that in moments of organisational disruption (Weick et al., 2005), such as the reorientation of work practices, agents actively 'face down' or confront their way of being or practice or their 'practical coping' (Chia et al., 2006; Segal, 2010). Through practical coping, middle managers frame and reframe their daily organisational experience into reflective awareness – a purposive attempt to make sense of organisational reality through story-telling (Chia et al., 2006).

Strategy-as-practice

Strategy-as-practice theory embeds individual, organisational social behaviour within social, organisational practices where praxis and practices are constitutive of each other. Our research explored the recursive, interdependent relationship between praxis (daily work) and practice

(sustained work) undertaken by middle managers in the minutiae of everyday organisational life. The human actor in strategy-as-practice is never a discrete individual detached from the organisational social context (Vaara et al., 2012). Rather, s/he is a social being defined by micro-level practices (Nicolini, 2012) within which s/he is immersed through time and space. Our research was situated in the lived realities of practitioners who 'do strategy' within a constraining organisational context and, as assumed, through sensemaking, move towards an equilibrium that surfaces concomitant coping and sustained ability to work through change.

Sensemaking

For this research, we followed a sensemaking perspective (Weick et al., 2005). Rouleau and Balogun (2014, 955) define sensemaking as a 'social process of meaning construction and reconstruction through which managers understand, interpret, and create sense for themselves and others of their changing organisational context. The sensemaking perspective affirms that the social roles and relationships within social structures provide organisational Equilibrium and security (Owens, 2001). Sensemaking in organisations is a social process and has tended to be researched from the top or middle management perspectives. The social structure of an organisation is shaped by the sensemaking of the actors within that organisation. In times of crisis (Weick, 1993), like organisational change and restructuring, confusion would reign (disequilibrium and disruption (Chia et al., 2007) and sensemaking would be difficult. Without sensemaking, the organisational social structure could descend into chaos and confusion ((Weick, 1993; Colville et al., 2011), and organisational members could lose their sense of security. The struggle to restore middle manager equilibrium after the organisational change (Sandberg et al., 2011) and its significance in the daily organisational social experience for the individual practitioner is the intellectual puzzle of this current study.

Story-telling

We focused on stories told by individual middle managers to make sense of daily organisational social life. As the practitioners in this study, middle managers used story-telling to make sense of the uncertainty and ambiguity of organisational change through shared meaning creation in daily organisational life (Balogun et al., 2004). Middle managers use many means to communicate. For this study, we focused on their reflexive and retrospective story-telling (Giddens, 1984; Weick et al., 2005) as communicated in their online journals. McDonald (2016) believes that employee story-telling within organisations communicates authenticity and credibility because 'if companies are collections of people working for a common purpose, then telling stories of the people is telling the story of the company.' This is very much in keeping with the 'story-telling organisation' of Bojé (1991). Robichaud et al. (2004) compared an organisation to a 'lamination of conversations,' where the social interaction of middle managers with colleagues, both above and below them, in the hierarchy of the organisational social structure (Davis 2013; Jansen van Rensburg et al., 2014) is what shapes sense-making around strategic outcomes.

Methodology

We adopted a qualitative, social constructionist approach to interpreting middle managers' lived realities amid the organisational change in a constraining organisational setting. In this study, qualitative research involves studying the 'meaning of people's lives under real-world conditions' (Yin, 2010) to gain insights into existing or emerging theories that could explain human social behaviour within organisational social contexts. We explored individual meaning construction in organisational social reality around change over time through the micro-

strategising practices of agency and sensemaking. Social constructionism is about constructing knowledge and meaning through social processes and actions (Gergen, 1985).

Using a single intrinsic case study, we set out to explore the individual interpretation of organisational life during the programmed change over a period of four months. The unit of analysis was the sensemaking micro-practices of strategy practitioners in their roles as middle managers. The subjective meaning of lived, organisational experience through stories told in e-mail journals was explored. The use of e-mail journals is a communication technology (Salmons, 2011) to gain an in-depth understanding of actual language use (Vaara et al., 2021) in contemporary organisations. The methodological choice of e-mail journals (Jones et al., 2015; Filep et al., 2017) lends itself to the real-time tracking of individual sensemaking during the strategic implementation of work experiences (Rouleau et al., 2011) over four months.

In choosing the first quarter of the year from March to June as the duration of the research, the study represented a viable amount of time to explore the research questions. However, it is also a time in the research setting (private higher education institution) when the participants have to contend with time-tabling, student-orientation workshops, registration of new and returning students, parent consultations, and lecturer queries, to name but a few responsibilities within their daily organisational reality.

Sample selection

A convenient, purposive sampling strategy (Moser et al., 2018) was employed to select seven participants from a population of ten middle managers. Participants were included in the study based on their role as middle managers in administrative positions from the operations division. The seven participants were deemed an adequate sample to represent the potential for authentic data from a lived, organisational experience through the intermediate, embedded nature of their hierarchical position in the research setting.

Ethical considerations

Ethical principles of confidentiality, informed consent and no harm to participants were upheld by reporting on the data thematically. Pseudonyms are used to protect the privacy and anonymity of the participants. Our research was approved by the case organisation and was conducted in accordance with the research ethics provisions of our institution. Furthermore, the study was conducted in accordance with the principles espoused in the Declaration of Helsinki.

Data gathering

We held preliminary briefings with the individual participants to establish credibility and rapport to nurture their participation. Data gathering was used to capture micro-strategising in two phases of primary data gathering (Kohtamäki et al., 2021). In Phase 1, open-ended data was generated through the primary data gathering method of text messages through the question: "In a text message on your smartphone, how would you best describe the strategy in practice as experienced by you on a daily basis? Start your descriptive short text message using these words: 'I would best describe the educational brand's strategic practice as ….'". In e-mail journals in Phase 2, the same single, open-ended question was e-mailed to each participant for them to respond to over the four-month period from March to June. The question was: "Tell me about your experience and involvement in the operations division and the significance of that experience and involvement for you in the organisation on a daily basis". In the search for meaning, inter-coding between manual and electronic coding was employed to establish the credibility and reliability of qualitative findings.

Research quality

The use of e-mail records provided verifiable data that we could analyse according to the methodological norms of dependability, authenticity, and credibility that qualitative research requires. Using a co-coder in the data analysis process, we rendered transparency and reliability to the qualitative research study. A consensus-based discussion with the co-coder provided better confirmability and transparency of data analysis.

Data analysis

Qualitative content analysis is 'a method for systematically describing the meaning of qualitative material' (Schreier, 2012, 1). Through storied narratives sourced from the participants' e-mail journals, we explored the subjective meaning of lived organisational experience through thematic content analysis. We adopted the thematic analysis of narratives to interpret meaning from raw data through a process of coding and identifying themes (Friese et al., 2018; Hsieh et al., 2005). Manual and electronic coding (using ATLAS.ti™ Version 8) was used to derive codes from the raw data inductively and deductively through first and second-cycle coding (Fereday et al., 2006) to establish the 'bones' of the analysis. In the first cycle coding, the researcher created 468 open codes manually, which were then aggregated into 66 codes which were further aggregated into 50 codes of micro-strategising practices. The co-coder generated 84 open codes manually aggregated to 26 because of the repetition of codes in Cycle 1. In the second cycle coding, based on consensus, the co-coder's 26 codes were synthesised into the 50 codes manually to reveal an aggregate of 28 codes (Barbour, 2001). The 28 aggregated codes were grouped into 15 sub-themes in the theme-ing of the data, which were shaped into central clustered patterns using the participants' responses. Through lamination of layering and re-thinking the meanings (Williamson, 2013), five firmed-up themes in Table 1 were conceived as the outcome of the analytical processes outlined above. The analytical journey covered semantic and interpretation levels (Braun et al., 2006; Galle, 2011).

Table 1: Five firmed-up themes as the outcome of the analytical processes

Theme number	Practice (as themed)	Micro-practices (as coded)
1	Organisational culture through communication	Lack of trust, Compliance, and Disempowerment
2	Constraining relationships	Bullying, Unhealthy culture, and Blame game
3	Bureaucracy	Mismanagement, Accountability, and Co-existence of strategy and policy
4	Sensemaking (individual and team)	Stress, Burnout, Abuse, Contradiction of feeling empowerment, and Teamwork
5	Agency	Reframing as a coping mechanism, and Relationships to empower and support

Findings

From the basis of coding, we took codes and quotations and interrogated them for the meaning they suggest and the depth of sense inherent therein.

The findings were organised in response to the research questions to make sense of organisational reality through reflection as the study followed a Weickian sensemaking

perspective (Weick et al., 2005) in its exploration of how practitioners make sense of their daily, lived organisational social experience over time. The first level of analysis was directed at the lived realities of the middle managers. The research question asked whether the organisational social structure was an enabling or constraining environment for the middle manager to shape and influence strategic outcomes. The rich descriptions of the participants, coupled with the insider perspective, pointed towards a constraining environment marred with conflict, pressure, and negativity, as shown in the practices in Table 1. Therefore, we coded for evidence of chaos and disruption (the constraining environment) and processes of sensemaking of the same, and then the generative abilities of the managers to seek security and Equilibrium. We iterated between attribute coding and more holistic or axial coding (Saldaña, 2015).

From the onset, the organisational context reflected a disruptive environment characterised by confusion and frustration. Evidence of this was reflected in the detailed descriptions of the organisational realities in which the participants functioned. Additionally, there were perceptions that senior managers discarded policies (and the predictability that comes with policy) when it suited them. The participants described this as a lack of accountability, an unhealthy organisational culture, bullying and a disempowered workforce. Based on the coded data, some participants reflected a sense of depression around organisational inconsistency and uncertainty. The consequences of bullying behaviour can be damaging to individuals on a psychological level (Keashly et al., 2010). They knew that things needed to change within their daily organisational work environment. Some participants felt a sense of worthlessness and of not being appreciated: 'Nothing that you do is enough or good enough…' and 'as long as you can do their work for them and they can abuse you, then you are okay' (Participant 2).

This depressive state was further affirmed by the misery of some participants at the hopelessness of their daily work experience: 'Today, I went to work feeling very discouraged and off. It was another day at the same office with the same people hearing and doing the same thing once again' (Participant 5). In their depressive state, participants expressed fear for their job security: 'writing about it makes me fearful about my job' and 'job in jeopardy'. Participants also expressed fear about their performance: 'the fear of "failing" is intensified and pressured further' (Participant 4). The consequences of bullying proved damaging to the participants' physical health (Keashly et al., 2010) and impacted the time spent with their families (Ilies et al., 2009). The stressful work environment had taken its toll on the participants, as various participants expressed:

'I am exhausted from working all hours and having so much on my plate…' (Participant 2)

'I feel like I can breathe again and finally get some rest. My family and my life were on hold for over two months; my mind is what I think was affected the most; the sleepless nights coupled with the 15-hour work days, 6 days a week, with no breaks, sure was taxing.' (Participant 3)

'This has been the most challenging time for me, physically, mentally and spiritually.' (Participant 1)

The bullying took an emotional toll (Keashly et al., 2010) and was aptly expressed by a participant: 'Emotions felt: Anger, ashamed of coworkers, confused by managers, depressed by the situation, disgusted by the way students are treated, exhausted, frightened that if I don't fix it, I will lose my job…' (Participant 2)

The second level of analysis was directed to the actions or practices of these middle managers to cope with the contradictory and constraining environment. The research question asked how middle managers, as agents of change, shape strategic outcomes within an organisational social structure. The findings confirm two specific sets of practices from their sensemaking efforts: reframing their context to cope and forming relationships to support (Flotman, 2021). Amid the

dysfunction and inconsistency, some participants felt a sense of accomplishment in their work: 'I believe this experience…has made me stronger. I am proud to say it did not break me, given all the work…' (Participant 3)

Another participant shared that 'I loved the fact that I stuck it out…'

Another participant affirmed: 'It's my favourite event…it's what the purpose of what we do achieves.' (Participant 4)

Outcomes

The prevalent logic of organisational theory and practice is that an organisation is shaped by rationality and order. But in the turbulent and complex environments where contemporary organisations operate, the organisation and its organisational members or employees often move in different and competing directions.

Structural organisational processes by senior management, like a communication plan, were needed to facilitate strategic change to lend predictability and stability (Weick et al., 2005; Mantere, 2008). Without this guidance, the individual participants recognised the contradiction between organisational and individual communication practices, creating confusion for them in their quest for balance and consistency in communication practices (Maitlis et al., 2007; Mastio et al., 2021). This lack of guidance pointed to a constraining organisational context. The participants felt a sense of worthlessness and of being unappreciated. This left them feeling discouraged about their daily grind. The adverse, stressful working conditions rendered them fearful and emotional.

Amidst the perceived constraining organisational context, there were enabling elements as well. The data revealed that participants recognised that a supportive work environment created an enabling work environment. A participant attested that a supportive work environment would improve performance: 'I felt that when given the right support, any employee will blossom and prosper, but an overwhelmed and unappreciated employee will often not take pride in his/her work…' (Participant 5)

Amidst this constraining work environment, some participants felt a sense of achievement and pride in their work and daily accomplishments. A supportive work environment also made for feelings of appreciation in the workplace: 'You can do it. We know you can…The faith in me is appreciated and feel good.' (Participant 4)

In addition to showing support from senior management, the data also revealed that participants were supportive of each other (Lumby, 2003) when they needed each other the most: 'With the help of my colleagues, I managed to carry on' (Participant 1) and 'This I cannot do without assistance from my colleagues' (Participant 1). Another participant affirmed that 'Team cohesion…can be difficult to achieve, but when it does happen, what a beautiful thing it is' (Participant 3). The data revealed that the relationships shared among colleagues within this dysfunctional environment were treasured: 'The team really banded together, we laughed, we moaned, but we persevered, and it was glorious…This left me feeling better about my workplace and colleagues, that this was not only my job but also a place I could enjoy and build friendships' (Participant 3). The participants exercised functional control when they empowered themselves in the workplace by gaining a different perspective on things, taking responsibility for their own deadlines, building supportive networks amongst themselves, and building relationships with their colleagues.
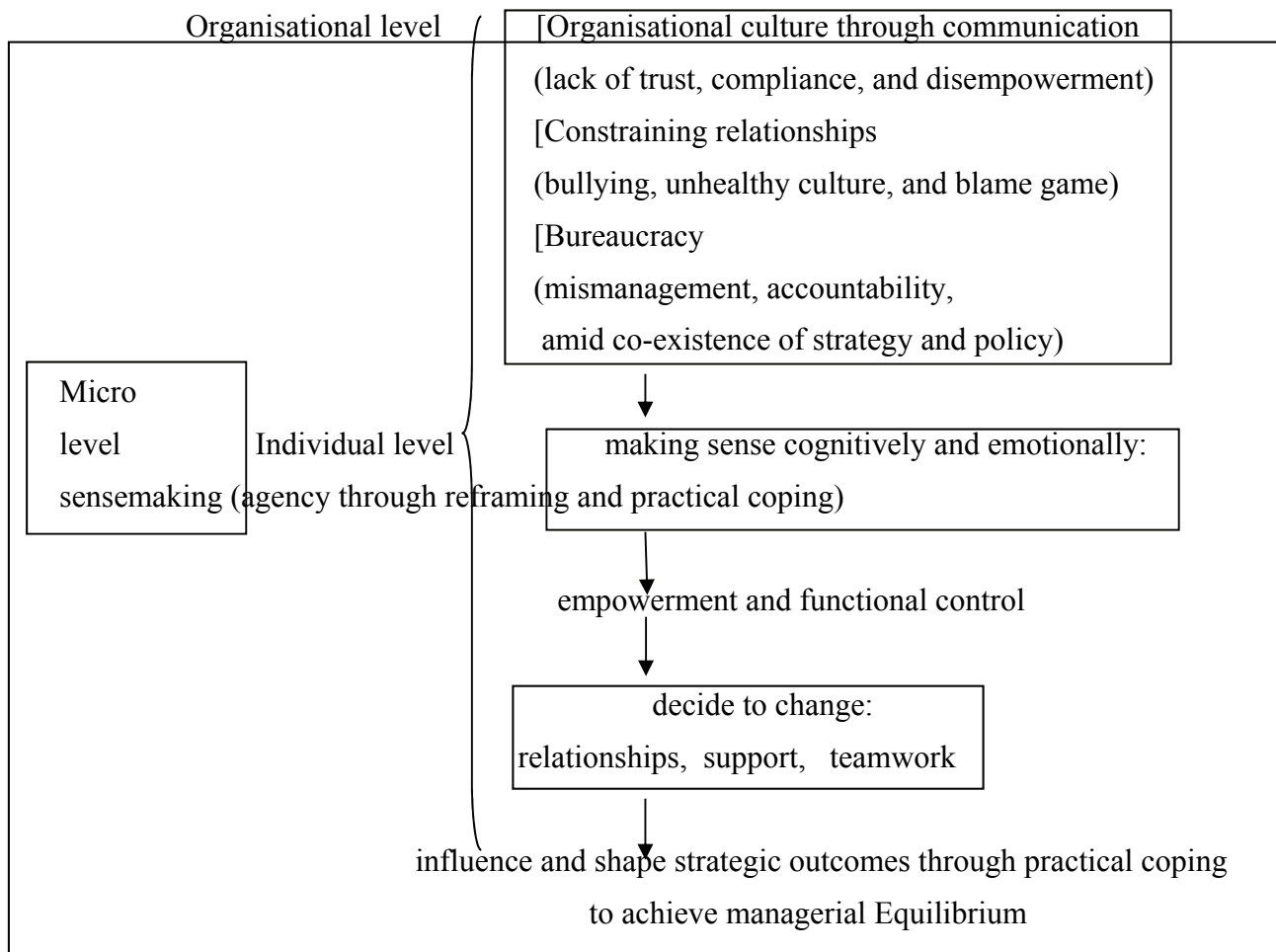
Some participants rationalised the adverse organisational environment by reframing (Colville et al., 2016) its significance in coping. Through sensemaking and reframing, employees could cope practically with their constraining organisational reality (Chia et al., 2006; Segal, 2010;

Colville et al., 2016; Flotman, 2021). Their embodied sensemaking through an agency was a conscious decision to assume power within a disempowering organisational social structure (Chia et al., 2007; Thompson et al., 2009; Colville et al., 2016; Van Niekerk et al., 2022). This reframing meant accepting their situation to provide internal coherence for themselves as they made sense of their lived, organisational space. Some participants felt empowered when they embraced negativity in the workplace as a coping mechanism (Chia et al., 2006): 'I am proud to say it did not break me…I still didn't reach my limit, showing I am capable of more; I actually feel stronger from this experience' (Participant 3) 'I…keep calm under these situations and if I do not manage, I ask for assistance…to resolve and achieve for the day' (Participant 1). A participant felt empowered by looking at a situation differently: 'I decided to change my mindset to accept a new dimension of my role' (Participant 2).

The organisational social structure is revealed in the social and relational areas of the individual and team as a collective, enabling them to make individual and communal sense of their organisational reality.

Figure 1 presents the visual abstraction of how middle managers cope with organisational change.

Figure 1: Visual abstraction of how middle managers cope with organisational change

Organisational level   [Organisational culture through communication

(lack of trust, compliance, and disempowerment)

[Constraining relationships

(bullying, unhealthy culture, and blame game)

[Bureaucracy

(mismanagement, accountability,

amid co-existence of strategy and policy)

Micro

level   Individual level

sensemaking (agency through reframing and practical coping)

making sense cognitively and emotionally:

empowerment and functional control

decide to change:

relationships, support, teamwork

influence and shape strategic outcomes through practical coping

to achieve managerial Equilibrium

Discussion

Middle managers' coping practices were revealed during organisational disruption and change to achieve managerial Equilibrium. The retrospective nature of sensemaking (Colville et al.,

2016) is highlighted by the participants in the current study making sense of their daily organisational and social reality through social constructionism (Braun et al., 2006) by assigning meaning to their lived organisational socio-cultural experiences. Their everyday organisational reality was one of burnout and disillusionment in a dysfunctional organisational space that proved to be constrained. They experienced this reality as individuals, but they also shared it relationally with the other participants in the case organisation.

The individuals made sense of adverse working conditions cognitively and emotionally (Thompson et al., 2009). Cognitively, the individual participants had to implement the reorientation of working practices as intermediaries 'jam in the sandwich' between top management and lower-level management (Floyd, 2016). The participants had to make sense of the organisational contradiction and embody their way into meaning through practice (Thompson et al., 2009; Colville et al., 2016) for Equilibrium. Emotionally, their sense of worthlessness discouraged them from their daily work practices in a constrained environment. The individual participants made sense of strategic change in the operations division through practical coping (Chia et al., 2006; Segal, 2010). Emotionally, the integration of work and family life was impossible for them due to the adverse working conditions (Ilies et al., 2009). A relationship exists between job satisfaction and productivity. If this relationship is disturbed through bullying behaviour, productivity will be affected adversely for the individual and the organisation (Keashly et al., 2010). For the participants, their job satisfaction was a stressful experience.

However, findings indicate that through sensemaking and reframing (Colville et al., 2016), they could practically cope with their constraining organisational reality (Chia et al., 2006; Segal, 2010). The participants consciously embraced their constrained, lived organisational socio-cultural experience in a homage to the ontological posture that Chia et al. (2007) prescribes: 'Changes are only brought about through the active, deliberate intentions and actions of individuals.' Action is integral to sensemaking as the participants move from retrospective sensemaking to prospective sensemaking in an embodiment of action (Thompson et al., 2009; Colville et al., 2016) through their micro-strategising practice of agency. As agents within the organisational social structure (Colville et al., 2016), participants frame and reframe their daily organisational experience into reflective awareness. Through their practical coping (Chia et al., 2006; Segal, 2010), they assume agency in their daily organisational lives to carve out a new way of doing things within the organisational social structure to achieve Equilibrium. Their new practice makes more sense to them without direction and strategic realignment from senior management (Weick et al., 2005; Maitlis et al., 2007). They were able to step back from what they routinely do to critically reflect upon themselves and their practices to potentially reveal their logic of practice (Colville et al., 2016).

Reflection on practice through story-telling also affirms the assumption that story-telling, as a sensemaking practice, has the potential to shape participants' strategy-embodied sensemaking (Thompson et al., 2009; Colville et al., 2016). This encompassed empowering themselves to make decisions about their functional roles and their ability to support and cooperate with each other (Lumby, 2003) when their workloads became too much to bear. They consciously decided to assume power within a disempowering organisational social structure (Chia et al., 2007). The 'invisible workers' (Szekeres, 2004) were no longer invisible. They had stepped into their light and assumed agency through their micro-strategising sensemaking practices to bring Equilibrium into their lived organisational social reality. Their reflection on their practice has allowed them to change situations through their sensemaking.

The study's outcome is that the findings are not generalisable to all middle managers worldwide. Furthermore, the findings are bound in time and space to the situation in the research setting where the study was conducted.

Conclusion

Organisational managers need to acknowledge employee cognition and emotions for successful change management, as planning change affects employees and their wellbeing (Thomson, Rank & Steidelmüller, 2021). However, much of the influential literature on strategy, vital as it is, has left middle managers bereft of manager insights, let alone guidelines for action, at this micro level. Even though organisational contradictions provided a constraining organisational social context for administrative middle managers, the study found that middle managers, through the micro-strategising practice of sensemaking, were able to rise above adversity through functional control and practical coping. This re-established an ethos of Equilibrium.

Future research may include the study of administrative middle managers in public institutions or engage in more phenomenological approaches to explore micro-level sensemaking from cognitive and emotional perspectives and how these influence middle manager strategising.

References

Balogun, J., & Johnson, G., (2004). Organisational restructuring and middle manager sensemaking. *Academy of Management Journal, 47*(4), 523–549. https://doi.org/10.2307/20159600

Barbour, R.S. 2001. Checklist for improving rigour in qualitative research: a case of the tail wagging the dog? *British Medical Journal*, 322, 5 May.

Bayat, A. (2012). The spatial practices of school administrative clerks: Making space for contributive justice. *Perspectives in Education, 30*(4), 64–75, December.

Bezuidenhout, G., (2020). *Social interactions shaping strategy* [Unpublished doctor of commerce thesis]. University of South Africa.

Bojê, D.M. (1991). Consulting and change in the story-telling organisation. *Journal of Organisational Change Management*, *4*(3), 7-17. https://doi.org/10.1108/EUM0000000001193

Bourdieu, P. (1990). *The logic of practice*. Stanford University Press.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101. 10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Burgelman, R.A., Floyd, S.W., Laamanen, T., Mantere, S. Vaara, E. & Whittington, R. (2018). Strategy processes and practices: Dialogues and intersections. *Strategic Management Journal*, Special Issue Article. 1–228. https://doi.org/10.1002/smj.2741

Chia, R., & Holt, R., (2006). Strategy as practical coping: A Heiddeggerian perspective. *Organisation Studies*, *27*(5), 635–655. https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840606064102

Chia, R., & MacKay, B. (2007). Post-processual challenges for the emerging strategy-as-practice perspective: Discovering strategy in the logic of practice. *Human Relations 60*(1), 217–242. https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726707075291

Clegg, S.R. & McAuley, J. (2005). Conceptualising middle management in higher education: A multifaceted discourse. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management, 27*(1), 19–34. https://doi.org/10.1080/13600800500045786

Cole, M., John-Steiner, V., Scribner, S., & Souberman, E. (Eds.). (1978). *Mind in Society: The development of higher psychological processes*. *L.S. Vygotsky*. MIT Press.

Colville I., Brown, D.A., & Pye, A. (2011). Simplexity: Sensemaking, organising and story-telling for our time. *Human Relations, 65*(1), 5–15. https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726711425617

Colville, I., Pye, A. & Brown, A.D. (2016). Sensemaking processes and Weickarious learning. *Management Learning, 47*(1), 3–13. https://doi.org/10.1177/1350507615616542

Davis, A. (2013). *Exploring the strategising practices of middle managers – a case study at a South African University.* [Doctoral thesis, University of South Africa]. https://uir.unisa.ac.za/handle/10500/10454

Deem, R. (2000). *New managerialism and the management of UK universities, end of award report on the findings of an Economic and Social Research Council funded project October 1998 – November 2000.* Lancaster, UK: Lancaster University. ESRC award number: ROOO 237661.

Dixon, S.M. (2021). *The stress coping skills middle managers need for century life: An interpretive phenomenological analysis* [Unpublished Doctoral dissertation, Colorado Technical University].

Dobson, I. R. (2000). Them and us – General and non-general staff in higher education. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management, 22*(2): 203–210. https://doi.org/10.1080/713678142

Fairclough, N. (2003). *Analysing discourse: textual analysis for social research.* Routledge.

Fenton. C. & Langley, A. (2011). Strategy as practice and the narrative turn. *Organisation Studies, 32*(9), 1171–1196. https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840611410838

Fereday, J. & Eimear Muir-Cochrane, E. 2006. Demonstrating Rigor Using Thematic Analysis: A Hybrid Approach of Inductive and Deductive Coding and Theme Development. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods,* 5(1):1-11.

Filep, C.V., Turner, S., Eidse, N., Thompson-Fawcett, M. & Fitzsimons, S. (2017). Advancing rigour in solicited diary research. *Qualitative Research, 18*(4): 451–470. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794117728411

Flotman, A.P. (2021). Work as meaningful and menacing phenomenon for South African middle managers during the Covid-10 Pandemic: The role of self-transcendence in cultivating meaning and wellbeing. *Frontiers in Psychology.* https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.650060

Floyd, A. (2016). Supporting academic middle managers in higher education: Do we care? *Higher Education Policy, 29*(2), 167–183. https://doi.org/10.1057/hep.2015.11

Friese, S., Soratto, J., & Pires, D.E. (2018). Carrying out a computer-aided thematic content analysis with ATLAS.ti.

Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/knowledge: selected interviews and other writings, 1972-1977.* Pantheon Books.

Galle, P. 2011. Foundational and Institutional Design Theory. *Design Issues*, 27(4):
81–94.

Garfinkel, H. (1967). *Studies in ethnomethodology.* Prentice Hall.

Gearing, R.E. (2004). Bracketing in research: A typology. *Qualitative Health Research, 14*(10), 1429–1452. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732304270394

Gergen, K. J. (1985). The social constructionist movement in modern psychology. *American Psychologist, 40*, 266–275. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.40.3.266

Giddens, A. (1984). *The constitution of society.* Polity Press.

Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and time.* Blackwell.

Hsieh, H.F., & Shannon, S.E. (2005). Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qualitative Health Research, 15*(9), 1277–1288. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732305276687

Ilies, R., Wilson, K.S. & Wagner, D.T. (2009). The spillover of daily job satisfaction onto employees' family lives: The facilitating role of work-family integration. *Academy of Management Journal, 52*(1), 87–102. https://doi.org/10.5465/AMJ.2009.36461938

Jansen van Rensburg, M., Davis, A. & Venter, P. (2014). Making strategy work: The role of the middle manager. *Journal of Management and Organisation 20*(2), 165–168. https://doi.org/10.1017/jmo.2014.33

Jarzabkowski, P. & Seidl, D. (2012). Introduction to strategy-as-practice. Strategy-as-practice series, August. Viewed on 1 May 2022 from https://hstalks.com/t/2375/introduction-to-strategy-as-practice/

Jones, A. & Woolley, J. (2015). The e-mail diary: A promising research tool for the 21st century? *Qualitative Research, 15*(6): 705–721. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794114561347

Keashly, L. & Neuman, J.H. (2010). Faculty experiences with bullying in higher education: Causes, consequences and management. *Administrative Theory & Praxis, 32*(1), 48–70. https://doi.org/10.2753/ATP1084-1806320103

Kohtamäki, M. Whittington, R. Vaara, E. & Rabetino, R. 2021. Making connections: Harnessing the diversity of strategy-as-practice research. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 1-23. https://doi:101111/ijmr.12274

Kroon, D.P. & Reif, H. (2021). The role of emotions in middle managers sensemaking and sensegiving practices during post-merger integration. *Group & Organization Management, 0*(0), 1-143. https://doi.org/10.1177/10596011211037789

Lumby, J. (2003). Distributed leadership in colleges: Leading or misleading? *Educational Management & Administration, 31*(3): 283–293. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263211X03031003005

Lüscher, L.S. & Lewis, M.W. (2008). Organisational change and managerial sensemaking: working through paradox. *Academy of Management Journal 51*(2), 221–240. https://doi.org/10.5465/AMJ.2008.31767217

Maitlis, S., & Sonenshein, S. (2010). Sensemaking in crisis and change: Inspiration and insights from Weick (1988). *Journal of Management Studies 47*(3):551-580.

Mastio, E.A., Clegg, S.R., Pina e Cunha, M. & Dovey, K. (2021) Leadership Ignoring Paradox to Maintain Inertial Order, Journal of Change Management, DOI: 10.1080/14697017.2021.2005294

Mantere, S. 2008. Role expectations and middle manager strategic agency. *Journal of Management Studies*, 45(2): 294–316.

McDonald, R.M. (2016). *How to elicit and use employee stories in your content marketing.* MarketingProfs Today. https://www.marketingprofs.com/articles/2016/30100/how-to-elicit-and-use-employee-stories-in-your-content-marketing

Moser, A., & Korstjens, I. (2018). Series: Practical guidance to qualitative research. Part 3: Sampling, data collection and analysis. *European journal of general practice*, 24(1), 9-18.

Nicolini, D. (2012). *The social theories of practice underpinning the strategy-as-practice series*. HSTalks. https://hstalks.com/t/2376/the-social-theories-of-practice-underpinning-the-s/

Nielsen, K., Dawson, J., Hasson, H. & Schwarz, U.V.T. (2021). What about me? The impact of employee change agents person-role fit on their job satisfaction during organisational change. *Work & Stress, 35*(1), 57-73. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6486.2010.00908.x

Owens, R.G. (2001). *Organisational behaviour in education: Instructional leadership and school reform* (7th ed.). Pearson Education.

Polkinghorne, D.E. (1995). Narrative configuration in qualitative analysis. *Qualitative Studies in Education, 8*(1), 5–23. https://doi.org/10.1080/0951839950080103

Robichaud, D., Giroux, H. & Taylor, J.R. (2004). The metaconversation: The recursive property of language as a key to organising. *Academy of Management Review 29*(4):617–634. https://doi.org/10.2307/20159074

Rouleau, L. (2005). Micro-practices of strategic sense-giving and sensemaking: How middle managers interpret and sell change every day. *Journal of Management Studies, 42*(7), :1413–1441. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6486.2005.00549.x

Rouleau, L. (2014). *Middle managers and their strategy work. Strategy-as-practice series*. HSTalks. https://hstalks.com/t/2723/middle-managers-and-their-strategic-work/

Rouleau, L., & Balogun, J. (2011) Middle managers, strategic sensemaking, and discursive competence. *Journal of Management Studies, 48*(5), 953–983.

Saldaña, J. (2015). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Sage Publications.

Salmons, J. (2011). *Designing and conducting. Cases in online interview research*. Sage Publications.

Sandberg, J. & Tsoukas, H. (2011). Grasping the logic of practice: Theorising through practical rationality. *Academy of Management Review*, 36(2): 338–360. https://www.jstor.org/stable/41318004

Schreier, M. (2012). *Qualitative content analysis in practice*. Sage Publications.

Segal, S. (2010). A Heideggerian approach to practice-based reflexivity. *Management Learning, 41*(4), 115–128. https://doi.org/10.1177/1350507609346367

Smith, W.K., Besharov, M.L., Wessels, A.K. & Chertok, M. (2012). A paradoxical leadership model for social entrepreneurs: challenges, leadership skills, and pedagogical tools for managing social and commercial demands. *Academy of Management Learning & Education II*(3), 463-478. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23412378

Surju, J., De Metz., N & Davis, A. (2020). The strategising roles of public sector middle managers. *Acta Commercii, 20*(1). http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ac.v20i1.804

Szekeres, J. (2004). The invisible workers. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 26(1), 7–22. https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080042000182500

Thomas-Gregory, A. (2014). Professional identities of middle managers: A case study in the faculty of health and social care. *Educational Management Administration and Leadership, 42*(5), 620–639. https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143213513186

Thompson, E. & Stapleton, M. (2009). Making sense of sensemaking: Reflections on enactive and extended mind theories. *Springer Science Business Media 28*, 23–30.

Tsoukas, H. & Chia, R. (2002). On organisational becoming: Re-thinking organisational change. *Organization Science, 13*(5), 567–582. https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.13.5.567.7810

Vaara, E. & Fritsch, L. 2021. Strategy as language and communication: Theoretical and methodological advances and avenues for the future in strategy process and practice research. *Strategic Management Journal*, 43(6):1170-1181.

Vaara, E. Rantakari, A. & Holstein, J. 2019. Participation research and open strategy. In: D. Seidl, G. von Krogh, R. Whittington (Eds.) *Cambridge Handbook of Open Strategy*, Cambridge University Press, pp. 27-40.

Vaara, E. & Whittington, R. (2012). Strategy-as-practice: taking social practices seriously. *Academy of Management 6*(1), 285–336. https://doi.org/10.5465/19416520.2012.672039

Van Niekerk, K. & Jansen Van Rensburg, M. 2022. Middle managers' strategising practices to effect strategic change. *Journal of Change Management*.1-19. https://doi.org/10.1080/14697017.2022.2040572

Weick, K.E. (1993). The collapse of sensemaking in organisations: The Mann-Gulch disaster. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 38(4), 628–652. https://doi.org/10.2307/2393339

Weick, K.E., Sutcliffe, K. & Obstfeld, D. (2005). Organising and the process of sensemaking. *Organization Science 16*(4), 409–421. https://doi.org/10-.1287/orsc.1050.0133

Whittington, R. (2007). Strategy practice and process: Family differences and the sociological eye. *Organisation Studies, 28*(10), 1575–1596. https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840607081557

Williamson, C. 2013. *"Strategy in the skin: Strategic practices of South Africa' Official Development Assistance"*. Dissertation. Pretoria: University of South Africa.

Yin, R.K. (2010). *Qualitative research from start to finish*. Guilford Press.