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The Power of the Platform: Place and Employee Responses to Organizational Change

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Abstract

This inductive study explores how place influences collective sensemaking and employee responses during organizational change. The empirical setting of our study is an offshore oil platform undergoing changes that involve standardizing operational practices and relocating personnel as two organizations merge. We analyze the narratives of two employee groups and show how employees located onshore construct progressive change narratives, enabling them to adapt to change, while employees located on the offshore oil platform construct regressive narratives leaving them romanticizing the past and struggling to accept change. Our findings illustrate how the manipulation, reconfiguration and exploitation of place has implications for employees' capacities to accept and adapt to change.

Keywords

Employee responses to change, collective sensemaking, change narratives, organizational change strategic change implementation, process study

Introduction

Employees play an essential role in organizational change, as their behavioral responses can make or break a planned change initiative (Sonenshein, 2010). Studies examining how organization members interpret and attempt to make sense of change, as well as their experiences with it, suggest that social aspects of sensemaking can lead groups to develop collective responses that influence the change process and outcomes (Bartunek et al., 2006; Balogun & Johnson, 2005; Balogun et al., 2015; Stensaker et al., 2008). Faced with the uncertainty and ambiguity of change, employees attempt to create plausible explanations and accounts (Matilis, 2005) by discussing and interacting with others. They create change narratives that subsequently come to guide their behavior (Sonenshein, 2010). As such, social interaction and communication is a central component of sensemaking (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005). Existing research on collective sensemaking during change has primarily examined communication and conversational aspects such as competing narratives (Dawson & Buchanan, 2005) and whether change narratives are forward-oriented or past-oriented (Sonenshein, 2010). Although the early work on sensemaking emphasized the context within which it took place (Weick, 1993), later work has not paid much attention to the specifics of the places in which change narratives are constructed.

Yet, physical context can have significant impact on social interaction during organizational change (Langley et al., 2012); limiting access to specific locations and people impacts the availability of spaces for individuals and groups to exchange change narratives (Balogun & Bartunek, 2004; Kellogg, 2009). In Weick's (1993) seminal study of the Mann Gulch firefighters, the specific context was central for understanding behavior: What was going on in the moment? What cues did the firefighters emphasize? And what did the surroundings look like? In studies of organizational change, context has not been emphasized to the same extent, although it is often hinted at. For instance, Dawson & McLean (2013)

found that coal miners located underground constructed distinct change narratives that impacted their behavior, yet the focus of the study was on the stories told rather than the contexts in which they were constructed. In this paper, we examine how physical surroundings impact employees' collective sensemaking, the change narratives they construct and their responses to change.

Our interest in place was triggered by an empirical observation. We set out to explore sensemaking and responses to change in an organization that had merged with a previous competitor. Corporate management wanted to integrate the two organizations by standardizing work practices and relocating people. The change was controversial, as it challenged ingrained ways of working. While conducting fieldwork in one of the business units, we observed that two groups of employees constructed very different change narratives. While one group constructed change narratives that enabled them to accept and adapt to change, another group of employees struggled to accept change. The physical location featured in their change narratives in ways that appeared to influence their responses to change. This empirical puzzle led us to ask: *how does place influence collective employee sensemaking and responses to organizational change?*

Drawing on interviews, as well as observational and documentary data, we show how collective employee responses to change can be understood and explained by analyzing the places within which employees construct change narratives. We theorize about how the physical context in which such narratives are constructed can enable or constrain employees in accepting and adapting to change. We argue and show that three aspects of place matter: physical features, opportunities for interpersonal interaction, and symbolic value associated with a place. Our findings contribute to the sensemaking perspective on change by highlighting the criticality of physical location for collective sensemaking among employees and ultimately for their capacity to accept and adapt to change.

In the next section, we review the literature on collective sensemaking and develop a theoretical foundation for studying the role of place. We then describe the empirical context and methods before turning to our findings, where we introduce the employee groups—the platform employees (PEs) located offshore in the North Sea and the onshore employees (OEs) located on land. We show how their ability to adapt is influenced by different aspects of the physical locations in which their collective sensemaking and construction of change narratives takes place.

Collective Sensemaking and Construction of Change Narratives

Organizational change triggers sensemaking processes at all levels within an organization. Sensemaking can be defined as "the meaning construction and reconstruction by the involved parties as they attempt to develop a meaningful framework for understanding the nature of the intended strategic change" (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991: p. 442). In their seminal study, Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) illustrate how senior management makes sense and gives sense during initiation of change. Subsequent change studies have shown that although senior management may attempt to give sense to others, there is no reason to expect that change recipients interpret and experience change similarly to senior management (Bartunek et al., 2006; Balogun & Johnson, 2004, 2005; Stensaker et al. 2008).

The interpretations and accounts organization members generate are liable to differ due to a number of factors, such as their experiences and backgrounds. *"People in organizations are in different locations and are familiar with different domains, which means they have different interpretations of common events"* (Weick, 1995, p. 53). History, context and identity shape interpretations of events and extractions of cues (Reissner, 2008; Dawson & McLean, 2013). The identities of the sensemakers and the "backgrounds" they are embedded in are important factors suggesting that we need to pay close attention to the

historically shaped identities and habitual responses of embodied actors (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015). Sensemaking and the accounts generated by organization members thus depend on a number of factors in addition to senior management sensegiving.

Sensemaking takes place at both the individual and collective levels. We are particularly interested in the collective level and how social interactions impact employee sensemaking. Organization members interact and collectively attempt to make sense of what is occurring in and around the organization (Maitlis, 2005). As employees share interpretations and stories, a shared understanding may emerge. The cognitive and social aspects of sensemaking have been well documented, while emotional aspects have only recently received attention—for instance—in the Bartunek et al. (2006) study of change recipient sensemaking, which found that there was considerable emotional contagion among work units. The social and emotional aspects of sensemaking surface in the stories and narratives people tell about organization change.

Narratives constitute a device for making sense of ambiguous organizational situations (Weick, 1995; Reissner, 2008; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Employees construct change narratives to communicate about the world, as well as to interpret and make sense of behavior—one's own and that of others (Fisher, 1984). Change narratives are constructed through a continuous process of conversation (Abolafia, 2010). Narratives may be more or less coherent but often include a temporal dimension, connecting the past, present and future. For instance, change narratives can involve conversion stories (Bryant & Cox, 2004) or be predominantly forward-looking or backward looking (Dawson & McLean, 2013). Gergen and Gergen (1997) introduced the notion of progressive narratives as portraying improvements due to change, while regressive narratives primarily depict negative consequences of change. In a study of strategic change implementation, Sonenshein (2010) adopted these concepts and found that progressive narratives were linked with change acceptance, while regressive

narratives were tied to resistance to change. Hence, the stories employees tell about change can be linked to their response and potential to adapt to change at a collective level. The linkage between the stories we tell and our ability to cope with change has also been found at the individual level (Ibarra & Lineback, 2005).

Change narratives inform and constrain behavior, while also incorporating identity and power issues. In a study of planned change in a coal mine in Australia, Dawson & McLean (2013) illustrated how stories enabled the coal miners to not only make sense of their experiences, but also to resist challenges to their collective identity during the contested change. The coal miners constructed stories about ill-informed and arrogant managers. In their stories, they portrayed themselves as hard workers while managers were portrayed as incompetent. These stories allowed the miners to justify their resistance, as well as defend and restore their collective identity (Dawson & McLean, 2013) while changes were being implemented. As such, change narratives can be used as political levers within and across groups. While identity has always been an important property of sensemaking (Weick, 1995), power has been less central, yet is increasingly brought to the table (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005; Hope, 2010).

As shown above, the research on collective sensemaking during organizational change emphasizes the social and conversational aspects through which a shared understanding of change may evolve (Stigliani & Ravasi, 2012). Existing research shows how collective sensemaking is a social process involving the construction of narratives where descriptive constructions of reality embody possible and plausible (though not necessarily accurate) interpretations of events and situations (Weick, 1995; Maitlis, 2005; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007). Although several researchers hint at the importance of understanding the context in which sensemaking takes place, existing research has largely neglected the role of place and

how it can shape collective sensemaking and the construction of change narratives. We turn to this next.

The Role of Place

A physical context can be a powerful resource in the narrative shaping of collective identities (Larson & Pearson, 2012; Whyte, 1943). For instance, in a study of an oil platform, Ely and Meyerson (2010) argue that in dangerous work settings—such as those found on offshore oil platforms, as well as in fire departments, police departments and in the military— the predominantly male employees tend to draw on the physical features of their environments, such as the dangerous workplace, to construct a macho identity. Although their study examined gender issues rather than sensemaking during organizational change, identity is an essential component of sensemaking, hence key features of a workplace, such as distinctive physical features having to do with danger or a macho culture, may also carry symbolic value and thus shape change narratives.

Furthermore, places create physical boundaries that enable or restrict interactions between organization members (Brown & Humphreys, 2006; Langley et al., 2012). In their study of collective sensemaking and storytelling in a coal mine, Dawson & McLean (2013) showed how visible conditions of work in the mine and the social relations that emerged within specific places mattered. The distance between the employees working underground in the mines and the managers working above ground created distinct change narratives that never met: "*The stories of miners and managers remained independent with the aboveground world of managers being a universe apart from the underground domain of coalface miners…"* (Dawson & McLean, 2013, p. 220). The authors refer to the "storying spaces" as important "*to support and sustain the collective identity of miners, even though they were unable to effectively change the views of management"* (Dawson & McLean, 2013, p. 219). Other studies have shown how specific places can create opportunities for resisting change

(Courpasson et al., 2017) or enabling change (Kellogg, 2009). Researchers have discussed the role of interpretive communities, and there is growing evidence in studies of sensemaking and change that broad groupings such as "managers" or "employees" hold particular cognitive frames originating from their particular backgrounds and contexts (Balogun et al., 2015; Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Bartunek & Moch, 1987; Huy, 2011). Co-located peer-based interactions (Bartunek et al., 2008; Sonenshein & Dholakia, 2012; Balogun et al., 2015) tend to lead to group-based interpretations of change with implications for the group's response to change. However, while spaces for interaction appear central to understanding collective sensemaking, the above studies do not elaborate on setting or its significance.

There is, however, increasing interest in the broader influence of spatial aspects in organization studies (Weinfurtner & Seidl, 2019) and the sociomaterial aspects of sensemaking, including the role of place and space (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). For instance, based on a study of group-level sensemaking in a design consulting firm, Stigliani and Ravasi (2012) found that verbal and material aspects function together to create a shared understanding. The authors illustrate how artifacts such as magazine images, cards and sketches allow individuals to amplify cognitive capacity. Yet, the physical environments, boundaries, distances and movements of people—which define spaces within organizations (Weinfurtner & Seidl, 2019)—have rarely been linked to collective sensemaking and employee responses to change. One notable exception is a study of regulatory change in the healthcare sector by Kellogg (2009). She found that although senior management supported regulatory change, middle managers with opposing interests hampered change. To overcome this, a group of employees created relational spaces where employees across various functional domains and organizational levels could come together, undisturbed by the resisting middle managers, to interact and build an identity in support of change. Such relational spaces were essential for the successful implementation of regulatory change.

In summation, there is ample research documenting and theorizing how we can better understand responses to change by looking into the collective sensemaking among organization members. In our analysis, we draw on the notion of change narratives as a device for collective sensemaking and probe what types of narratives emerge; however, in contrast to existing research, we pay specific attention to the places in which the collective sensemaking occurs.

Research Setting

We conducted an in-depth case study of corporate restructuring that was triggered by the merger of two previous competitors in the Nordic oil and energy industry. Before describing data collection and analysis methods, we present the research context.

Research Context

In December 2006, two large Nordic oil companies announced that they would merge in order to strengthen their international growth opportunities, increase efficiencies in the domestic market and improve their ability to develop new and alternative sources of energy. In 2007, the administrative parts of the organizations were successfully merged, and in 2009 the integration moved to the operational divisions, including those operating offshore. For this paper, we focus on one specific offshore business unit that we call Earlybird. We selected this unit as a revelatory case because resistance to change was expected and, based on our historical knowledge of previous changes, it was deemed challenging for employees to step into their new roles.

Earlybird is one of the oldest and largest offshore units in the company, which—prior to the merger—had built its organizational model and reputation on being self-contained and autonomous. Prior to our case study, the unit had had a history of good operational and economic results, hence the need for radical change could be disputed. In general, offshore platforms present a challenging context for organizational change, as these are high-reliability

organizations (Weick, 1987). The consequences in case of an accident can be disastrous, both for the environment and for the workers. It is therefore critical that organizational changes do not compromise safety. Within the company, Earlybird's employees had a reputation for being change resistant and having a strong self-image, and many of them were active union members. While all offshore business units consist of both a platform organization (located offshore) and a support facility (located onshore), a clear separation between offshore workers and onshore workers makes this an interesting and appropriate context within which to explore the collective narratives of employees in the face of change.

The post-merger restructuring involved ambitious and somewhat controversial changes for Earlybird employees, as it required a level of flexibility not previously asked of them and, as we see next, challenged ingrained ways of working.

The Corporate Change: Standardization and Relocation

Two major changes were pursued to facilitate social integration and knowledge sharing in the post-merger integration. First, work practices across all offshore business units were standardized according to a shared operational model. Second, people were relocated; managers and employees from the two merging organizations were mixed according to carefully designed redeployment practices, whereby employees were increasingly moved from offshore to onshore locations.

The standardization of work practices was controversial and had been the source of conflicts between corporate management and union representatives earlier in the transition process. Corporate management argued that a more harmonized methodology for operating the oil platforms would enhance safety and increase organizational flexibility— thus making the merged organization more robust and geared towards growth. Management drew on a rationale bearing upon the high-reliability environment while also introducing future possibilities for the organization and for the employees. Management anticipated that within

the next decade a number of oil platforms would be closed down due to shrinking oil reserves in the North Sea. However, new oil platforms would be constructed—nationally and internationally—thus requiring more flexible employees who could be relocated as new technology allowed for operations to be performed from a distance. Management communicated that employees would not lose their jobs; instead, the expansive growth of the company was emphasized.

Previous attempts at standardizing offshore work had not been particularly successful. Earlybird employees had effectively resisted any changes originating from senior management. Employees kept posters on a wall depicting a graveyard, with previous corporate change initiatives written on the tombstones. Therefore, individuals in management positions—both onshore and offshore—were directed to uphold the restructuring decisions. At leadership summits, explicit statements were made such as "You are a *leader* now!" and the implications of this were discussed. Furthermore, management closely monitored the implementation process by establishing milestones and measuring change progress.

Restructuring involved relocating approximately 30% of the workforce. Corporate management argued for the feasibility of the change by referring to the current practice of hired consultants and contractors, who walked on and off different oil platforms integrating with the different platform teams as they conducted their work. The idea of the change process was summed up in the metaphor that offshore platform teams were to be like airline teams, with people capable of walking onto and operating any oil platform, just as an airline crew works in any aircraft. It was argued that the previous way of working—with a variety of operational models, each customized for a specific platform—had created closed cultures around each platform, hampering change and the transfer of best practices across platforms, and ultimately compromising safety. The relocation was controversial, as many employees were attached to a particular platform. Moving people onshore was even more problematic,

as it involved the loss of status—and lucrative wages—tied to offshore work. To remedy the situation, management introduced extensive support, as well as financial incentives for employees who were willing to relocate—either to another platform or onshore.

The change initiated by corporate management thus involved relocating people and introducing standardized work processes. Managers at various levels were expected take on an active roles as change agents, while employees needed to become more flexible in terms of their work practices and their workplace locations.

Methods

Data Collection

In this paper, we draw on documents, observations and interviews collected at Earlybird in 2009. We designed our study to capture collective sensemaking through the change narratives constructed by Earlybird organization members. Narratives organize our experience and memory (Bruner, 1991) and resemble stories with plots involving a number of people with various interests and motives (Watson & Watson, 2012). Consistent with the sensemaking perspective, we are not concerned with the extent to which the stories are true, but rather with the ways in which people cast themselves and others in the stories they tell about change (Brown, 2006) and how this links to their behavior.

Our primary source of data consists of 24 interviews with employees working on the offshore platform and in the onshore support facility. Sixteen platform employees were interviewed offshore and eight onshore employees were interviewed in their onshore offices. All of these employees had offshore work experience. Four of them had applied for positions on the platforms during the change process, yet had been relocated to the onshore offices. We selected employees based on their disciplines (engineers, automation technicians, electricians, mechanics) to uncover potential variations tied to professional backgrounds; however, our analysis did not uncover any such differences. Initially our interest was primarily in the PEs,

as their high-reliability context had historically created challenges when implementing change. However, observations of distinct differences between responses to change of platform employees and relocated onshore employees led us to probe the role of physical location. As such, the OE group can be viewed as a control group, which we draw on to highlight the centrality of place.

In addition to platform and onshore employees, we interviewed five managers: the Earlybird leader, who was located onshore, and four offshore managers. Offshore platform management was responsible for offshore operations and reported to the Earlybird leader. These interviews were essential to obtaining a complete picture of the change process, such as the alignment of OEs' and senior management's change narratives.

In the interviews, we asked organizational members about the organizational changes that were taking place: what was being changed and for what reasons, how the changes impacted their work practices and roles, and their thoughts on and reactions to change. We also probed the reasoning behind the actions and reactions they described. Each interview lasted approximately 90 minutes, and all interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed.

The data also consist of observations—in the form of field notes—recorded in a journal, which includes details about an emergency situation the first author experienced while conducting fieldwork on the platform. The activation of a gas alarm resulted in evacuation into lifeboats. That Saturday night in a lifeboat with a helicopter circling above made manifest the high-reliability context on the platform, and gave the author a new understanding of the expression "we are all in the same boat out here."

Our larger data set includes observations from leadership summits involving both offshore and onshore leaders from various platforms, as well as interviews with corporate leaders and union leaders before, during and after the introduction of change at Earlybird and other offshore divisions. While these data provide limited insights into the collective

sensemaking and change narratives among the employees at Earlybird, they demonstrated how leaders spoke about the change and provided important contextual insight into the broader change process. The study is further informed by a large collaborative longitudinal project conducted over three years, as well as the first author's prolonged exposure (over ten years) to the oilrig environment, which serves to increase the trustworthiness and soundness of the interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Balogun & Johnson, 2004).

Data Analysis

In our data analysis, we first examined the individual level narratives and how employees described their understanding of the change, as well as their behavior and role in the change process. There was a clear distinction between the narratives of platform employees and onshore employees. Within these two groups, employees appeared to be telling largely similar stories about the change and their positions and roles within it. Hence, we concluded that it would be more useful to treat the employee narratives as collective stories at the group level rather than singular stories at the individual level.

While the onshore employees constructed a more future-oriented and positive narrative, the platform employees reflected mostly on the past. For the purposes of distinguishing between them, we adopted the existing labels of progressive versus regressive narratives (Gergen & Gergen, 1997; Sonenshein, 2010) and also began to suspect that the divergence of narratives could be linked to the physical contexts in which they had emerged.

We then conducted a content analysis of the two collective narratives (Pentland 1999; Balogun, Bartunek & Do, 2015), specifically looking for connections between employees' physical locations and how they made sense of the change. We proceeded to develop our understanding of the role of place in the change narratives through iterations between our data and existing literature and probed our data for clues on the underlying mechanisms within place. Our final step was to link the narratives to employee behavioral responses to

change. We searched for alternative explanations to why one group adopted a progressive narrative while the other group took on a regressive narrative and iterated between working inductively, carefully grounding our explanations in the data, and drawing on existing literature of employee responses to change.

The authors took on different roles while performing their analyses. The first author, being intimately familiar with the research context, coded and analyzed the data in the native language, while the other researchers challenged emerging interpretations (Louis & Bartunek, 1992) by taking on the role of devil's advocate, probing for additional information, actively contributing to emerging interpretations, and checking for consistency between the data and claims made.

Place, Collective Sensemaking and Responses to Change

In this section, we present two employee groups—the platform employees (PEs) located on offshore platforms and the onshore employees (OEs) located in office buildings on land. The analysis shows that the PEs adopt a regressive narrative and thus struggle to accept change, while the OEs construct a more progressive narrative, allowing them to adapt to change. We show how their physical locations impact their sensemaking and capacity to adapt to change. With regard to employees' construction of collective sensemaking narratives, our analysis points to three determinative aspects of place: physical features, interpersonal interactions, and symbolic value. Key findings are illustrated in Table 1.

--- table 1 about here -

Platform Employees (PEs) Located on the Offshore Oil Platform

PEs work on offshore platforms in the North Sea that can only be reached by helicopter. Both the transportation to the platform and the actual location on the platform entail danger.

Offshore work is structured in 12-hour shifts, with cycles of two weeks on the platform, followed by four weeks off. This creates what is referred to as an "on-off culture". While working offshore, there is limited opportunity for interaction with family and friends. For safety reasons, a number of restrictions apply, such as no personal computers or cellular phones, and no locking doors. The dangerous and isolated workplace, coupled with the limited but intense interactions with others, creates a strong bond between offshore workers. The offshore platforms are known for their distinctive cultures, with close ties between management and employees. Despite the danger, platform work is considered attractive due to its lucrative pay—which is about three times that of onshore work—and the abovementioned long periods off work. Their high salaries and the notion that PEs do important, value-creating work has historically provided this employee group with status and power, both within the company and the nation.

Features of the platform are mobilized as historical resources by PEs

Earlybird was among the first oil platforms established in the North Sea. Its historical significance has allowed Earlybird PEs to distinguish themselves from employees at other oil platforms and those working onshore. Earlybird PEs emphasize the unique features and work practices of their platform.

> *I am experienced. I know my job and my platform. .... I need to collaborate with a person onshore. He's never been at Earlybird. He has experience from another platform, but they had a completely different philosophy.*

The Earlybird PEs construct their identities in terms of historical importance, as powerful value-creators who have contributed to building the country's oil-based wealth. The high-reliability context involves danger: *"it is like going to work every day with a bomb under the building"*. Despite the danger, the significance and success of the platform and the platform-specific practices feature in their narratives.

> *Some people believe that one platform is similar to another, but it's not like that....we have specialized*

expertise honed and developed over years.

Change brings new standardized practices, which means the oil platforms are becoming more similar to each other and less distinct from onshore work. In addition, change implies that tasks will increasingly be moved onshore. The PE narratives suggest that platform-specific knowledge is no longer imbued with the same value. As standardized practices are implemented, the PEs express concern about losing their specialized competencies ("*I am a mechanic!*") and argue that, since each platform is different, standardization will compromise safety.

Their narratives suggest that PEs *used to be* seen as important and knowledgeable; they used to be regarded as people close to the problems, with good solutions, now under-valued and under-represented.

> *The reason that Earlybird has been so successful is because we have been allowed to think for ourselves. Those who are the closest to the problem are often the best at solving them. And we have been allowed to do so—we have been heard.*

As such, the standardization of work practices reduces the distinctive physical features and practices tied to the platform; hence they become a historical resource in the PE change narratives.

The platform restricts interaction and exacerbates distance to change agents

The physical features of the platform impact interactions in several ways. Isolation and the distance from others in the organization creates a closed-off context. Employees explain: *"there is nowhere to go—colleagues have to be friends."* Being in a high-reliability context, failure to do one's job properly can result in disaster. The danger, isolation and long shifts (day and night for two weeks) produce conditions for intense interactions and strong in-group identity regulation. PEs refer to their colleagues on the platform as a "second family", or buddies who hang out together. *"…You work here, you get colleagues; this is your second home, you have a social life out here."* Upon arrival, new employees and managers (and even researchers doing fieldwork) quickly become members of the platform family.

A new guy came out here for a new position and he had gotten a bad rap without anyone ever meeting him before...and he comes out here and it takes three or four days and then people start saying: "hey, this is really a good guy." Another guy who was new this trip—well everyone thought he was too young and he came from the wrong department...it didn't take more than two days before they started saying: "we have to be sure that we are able to keep this person at Earlybird.".

On the other hand, once you leave the platform to work onshore, even after 20 years of offshore work, you are no longer part of the family. When confronted with the fact that people in the onshore support team (whom PEs regularly refer to as incompetent) actually have been working offshore up until recently, several offshore employees explain that it is simply not the same, because even with long offshore experience and fancy new technology, when you are onshore you cannot see, hear and smell "the system", thus pointing back to the specific physical features of the platform.

You really have to be out here [on the platform] to know what's going on. They can sit onshore and do the job, but it is the people out here who operate the system, and these are people who have the competencies; they have been here since day one!

Planning is supposed to take place onshore, but it requires knowledge of the platform.

Hence, the specific location at which work is conducted has not only distinguished PEs from others but has also created strong in-group affiliation.

On the other hand, the platform's location imposes a spatial distance from senior management and change agents who are typically located onshore. Research documenting previous change processes, suggests that senior management negotiated closely with PEs because they were concerned about safety and relied on their expertise (authors withheld). During this particular change, however, rather than attempting to reduce distance, senior management exacerbated it by avoiding meetings with the PEs. The PEs interpreted this as meaning that they are not important.

[The Earlybird leader] has told me "I respect your opinion, but I don't quite believe your arguments.". What the heck, if we can't sit down and discuss these things. [What he is saying is]: I am not interested in talking with you. He did not make the effort to come to the meeting because he had...It was he himself who had called the meeting, but it didn't suit him [to show up].

In their change narratives, PEs speak of senior management as becoming increasingly

top-down and controlling.

> *There used to be a little democracy in the [company], but now you feel that there is dictatorship. There is no room to do anything any longer. It gets pushed down from above, all of it…*
>
> *When we provide good input, which is well-argued, then we are used to being heard.*

Many of the PEs reiterate the same stories about senior management not listening and not acknowledging their platform expertise. PEs frequently refer to an incident in which a senior corporate manager visited Earlybird and said that he would be a good leader, that he would listen to people and be inclusive, but then proceeded to say *"but I make the decisions!"* (emphasizing the "I"). Employees perceive this as undemocratic and as violating their identity as highly competent specialists who should be listened to.

Another frequently cited incident was a meeting between PEs and senior management, wherein PEs perceived that management signaled that they were not important by sending a junior person to the meeting:

> *We had a meeting…with senior management…The top manager [at Earlybird] did not have time to meet so he sent someone else….he sent a young girl. When we asked her questions, she was fidgeting with her cell phone under the table and then while we were talking to her, she left the room. We asked her to come back in again and then she disappeared—three times during the discussion. She could make no promises or decisions. Then one of my colleagues said "this is the wrong person we have here.…" If you are going to have trust, then you can't tell people that you don't give a shit about them by chatting on your phone or sending messages or whatever she did.…At least she should have some social intelligence to understand the need to be present.*

PEs interpreted the behavior of both the senior manager who refused to meet and the female manager that was sent in his place as showing a lack of respect and interest. Hence, the (limited) interactions between PEs and senior management were interpreted as a lack of respect for Earlybird's specific capabilities.

In their narratives, PEs cast senior management as the perpetrators. The PEs mobilized discourses about undemocratic processes and senior management was said to be lacking in disciplinary knowledge and technical training, while enforcing decisions and being unwilling to consult those (i.e. the PEs) with the knowledge.

> *"…we are like hostages…you are involved in pretend-processes. People are not stupid. You have a right to voice, you have a right to argue, but when decisions are made, the agenda is already made. [Management says] this is how we want the model to be—and then they are done with that! Then they [management] can say to the media that yes—employees have been involved in the process.*

Management does not have the disciplinary skills. They [senior managers] are not technically trained. So, we feel that if they are not willing to listen to the technical people, then whom do they trust?

Earlybird is known to be difficult…[but] they [senior management] will not be allowed to bully us.

Although PEs attempted to create an alternative discourse, claiming that the senior managers were bullies and excessively controlling, other groups in the organization did not adopt this line of argument.

Immediate managers (the platform management) were cast as "muzzled" and unable to resist change in the PE narrative: "*[The offshore platform managers] can agree with us, but they cannot express this to their superiors because they would spoil their own careers*".

Yes, your work pride gets shot down….Nobody likes that. You feel—you want to be useful, you want to be appreciated. My closest manager sees this and is close and sticks up for me, but they encounter the same problems above them.

In contrast to their historically tight bond with platform managers, the platform employees could no longer rely on their support, which exacerbated the notion that they were being victimized and on their own.

The symbolic value of the platform diminishes

The PE narratives illustrate how the platform previously provided symbolic value in terms of status, identity and power, yet that this has diminished following organizational change. Distinctive features are lost due to standardization and, when people relocate, the PEs lose members of the platform family. Their narratives suggest that they are also concerned with losing some of the historical power tied to possessing platform-specific competencies in a high-reliability environment. The symbolic value of the platform diminishes partly due to the change content (standardization and relocation) but also due to the process and how change is managed.

The change narrative furthermore reveals that PEs felt unable to speak up against corporate change in the same way they used to, suggesting that senior management had taken

on a new role during organizational change. This is also corroborated by our observations of

leadership meetings, in which middle and senior managers were encouraged to take on clear

leadership positions and take on the change agent role (i.e. "you are a leader!").

> *In [Company name] it has been the case that you can say what you think….A colleague of mine explained to me as he retired: "Now you can only say things once, then you shut up. Do not raise the issue again, [because] then they [senior management] will follow you."*

Management's narratives about future possibilities due to the change are not

recognized in the PE narrative. Instead, managers are typically referred to in a negative

manner as not understanding the specifics of the place in which work is performed.

> *The management just views a head as a head….This ruins the morale for the man who has spent a fortune on training and then he's sent to a place where they don't need that kind of competence. His competence is worthless in a new context.*

> *[There is an idea among senior management that] a computer engineer is a computer engineer…But you need to <u>know</u> the platform.*

The platform and place-specific work practices have historically constituted a source

of power, allowing PEs to resist change. Yet, with experienced "family members" being

relocated and new workers coming to the platform, it became risky for PEs *not to* implement

change. New PEs are rapidly integrated and new operational practices must be followed for

safety reasons. As a result, the PEs feel unable to resist change. In contrast to previous

corporate change processes, wherein PEs had collectively taken on the role of fighters against

change, the PEs now present themselves as victims of change, forced to implement

standardized operational practices without being consulted.

> *Management says that this [the new model] will work. Then we, the employees just have to say okay— what can we do? We really don't have any choice. We just have to do what management decides. And then…we are told that we are sabotaging.*

PEs can neither escape the platform with its high-reliability environment nor resist

changes as they used to, but they find solidarity in their victimhood. In informal

conversations, they often repeat the expression *"we are all in the same boat out here."* They

feel forced to contribute to the implementation of change, but they do not like it. Our analysis of their collective narrative shows that the symbolic value (status, identity and power) of the platform diminishes during change. Indeed, the platform appears to have shifted from being a source of power for the PEs to a tool of senior management. When platforms and practices become similar across the firm, PEs can no longer mobilize arguments of safety tied to platform-specific features. Instead management can treat the platform like any other platform and move people between locations.

PEs construct regressive narratives and struggle to accept change

The above analysis has shown how the PEs struggle to accept change. They construct regressive narratives and reluctantly implement change due to safety reasons, while romanticizing the past in which the platform had provided them with distinction, identity, status and power. The physical features of the platform (danger, a closed-off environment), the restricted and intense interactions among PEs, combined with a lack of interactions with senior management and other change agents, and the diminishing symbolic value of the place are critical components of their collective sensemaking.

Employees Located in Offices Onshore (OEs)

We now turn to the OEs. Before illustrating the collective change narratives constructed by this employee group, we describe their work conditions and initial situations. Onshore work follows a more typical structure with regular hours (7.5-hour shifts) five days per week. Unlike PEs, OEs are not isolated in their workplaces, and can lead more normal lives, with evenings and weekends off work. Although they have similar educational backgrounds and training to PEs, onshore workers earn considerably less—almost one third of an offshore salary. The onshore location has historically entailed lower corporate status and less recognition. Their lower salaries factor into this, but their responsibilities, are traditionally

related to technical support, planning and administration more so than hands-on operations. The primary task of onshore workers has been to support the operations conducted offshore. However, with technological advancements, work tasks are increasingly moved onshore to reduce risk, which entails more high-tech operations from onshore. The expectation is that this trend will continue.

Half of the OEs we interviewed had applied for positions on the platform rather than onshore. As such, the relocation was involuntary:

> *Nobody wants to work onshore. We have to draw [a lottery] to determine who will work on land. It's tied to the salary and off-time. Compared to those working offshore I have to work really hard all of the time and I make 40,000-50,000€ less [per year] than they [PEs] do…"*

One might expect employees who had been moved to a lower-status and lower-salary position to resist change, yet somewhat surprisingly, the OEs collectively constructed progressive and future-oriented narratives, rather than romanticizing the past. We show how the onshore location facilitated this due to its physical features, the types of interactions it fostered and its enhanced symbolic value.

OEs draw on the features of place as resources for the future

The collective OE narrative emphasizes the more positive aspects of being onshore, such as having more time and opportunities to develop a deep understanding of the change as well as new competencies, and the benefit of being closer to family and friends. One employee explains how working onshore is more convenient than working offshore, as it allows him to balance work and family life:

> *I have worked offshore at Earlybird for 16 years…I didn't want to relocate to a different platform…I have a 7-year old son, so I wanted to try onshore work. I felt bad having to leave him [to go offshore].*

OEs explain that they are taking part in important work. They are needed at the onshore location to get the job done, as many tasks do not get the same attention offshore. In their narrative, the OEs position themselves as special and as developing new and important

competencies. Working on land also provides them with an opportunity for personal and

career development.

> *I think [the change was successful] because you are on the right arena. You get information, you get responsibilities. Each individual is taking part in building something, developing something new….Darn, we're gonna do this [implement change]!*

> *My most important task will be to travel out to all shifts and be a "missionary", but without seeming like a "teacher". I just want to tell them [the PEs] simple things and show them how to use the new system and so on.*

The onshore location facilitates broad interactions and entails proximity to change agents

While the OEs' collective narrative can be characterized as progressive and future-oriented, it

appears looser with somewhat more individualized aspects as compared with the PE

narrative, suggesting these employees do not regulate each other as heavily as the PEs. For

instance, some OEs construct individual level narratives where they position themselves as

especially selected by senior management for relocation because of some favorable aspects,

such as possessing particularly relevant competencies:

> *I applied for another job as my first choice and then one of us had to begin onshore, and that was me. I know the new IT system well and there's lots to be done; they wanted me to take care of this.*

> *Since I have chosen to accept the position onshore for one year, I am the first one doing this and so it's important that I do a good job and make this work for the next people coming in.*

For those who have been relocated to onshore work, this allows them more discretion to

develop their sense of self both individually and as a group. Being spatially separated from

the platform means they can avoid the intensity of in-group identity regulation from the PE

group. The OEs see benefits in the possibility to develop new networks, despite the loss of

the platform family:

> *It's difficult to move people out of the platforms. PEs establish very close ties to each other….but when you get new colleagues, you all of a sudden have a new network of people ….and most of the relocated people I've talked to say it's not so bad after all.*

By distancing themselves from the PEs and attending to their new work roles, the OEs feel

competent and appreciated.

The OEs and PEs interact through daily meetings as new technology allows for

"integrated operations" in which work increasingly can be done onshore. In these meetings, OEs find that PEs consistently complain about the onshore support system.

> *The PEs complain no matter what changes are made…especially when it comes to manning offshore. ..When they say that the changes are making people sick, I simply don't believe them…important changes that need to be made are crowded out by all of the complaints....I hope the platforms are not allowed to do as they please….I will try to do my best to inform PEs at Earlybird.*

However, PEs continue to portray offshore work as being more important and valuable than the work taking place onshore, as illustrated by statements made by PEs below:

> *The disciplinary center onshore doesn't have the right competencies. You need at least a year on the platform to have the competencies. (PE about OEs)*

> *We feel that those on land, that's them, out here you have us. You are not really…we don't always speak the same language. (PE about OEs)*

While acknowledging that PEs attempt to brand them as less important and valuable, the OEs write it off as frustration among offshore workers.

> *The people offshore sometimes sound as if they had snake soup for breakfast. It's a way for them to blow out their frustrations, but it's a pity that they take it out on us all of the time.*

The significance of the platform is well recognized among OEs: "*Earlybird is very special. Try to tell your grandfather who is 76 years old that what he has done for 50 years is no longer to be done in that way….He would explode, you know….*", yet OEs also point to negative aspects of the encapsulated "system" on the platforms:

> *Earlybird has struggled with very narrow competences. Now we are standardizing and generalizing, but at the same time lifting the competencies of individuals. Younger people will [now] get a better chance of developing themselves….young and ambitious people have been kept down by "the system—this is how we do it here and this is none of your business." But if you let people contribute, then they will blossom!*

Hence, the OEs point to the systemic regulatory power among PEs and argue that organizational change will create more opportunities for individual differences on the platforms as well.

The physical location onshore provides relocated employees with new opportunities. The onshore location also involves greater access to managers and other change agents.

Senior management does not feature extensively in the OE narratives, but our broader data set and observations of leadership summits include senior management change narratives. We observed a tight alignment between the OE narrative and that of senior management. OEs echo senior management sentiments, arguing that innovative technology and new operational models allows them to do more work onshore.

> *The need for onshore support becomes very visible when you are here. You get contacted for a whole bunch of things.*

> *Personally, I think the new model won't work until all employees have had a rotation onshore. So, it will take four years. Everyone must be onshore to understand it.*

Senior management had previously made similar arguments, illustrated in the quote below:

> *Sending people offshore is impractical, expensive and inefficient, and should be avoided if possible…we've chosen a model where onshore work will secure continuity and most of the preparatory work will be moved onshore…The possibilities to learn and develop are restricted offshore. PEs are offshore nine times per year, and they then do routine work during 12-hour days. There is not much time to learn new things….(Senior Manager)*

Senior management further argued that the offshore context with its high-reliability environment and the relatively few but highly intensive shifts favors operational regularity and safety, while hampering learning:

> *If you stay put in the same place, day after day, year after year, then you stagnate a bit. But if you relocate, then you lift yourself up a bit. You have to stay sharp, start from scratch, and demonstrate your competencies ….(Senior Manager)*

Furthermore, the OE narrative appears to be aligned with senior management's arguments that the changes will serve to strengthen the collaboration between those working onshore and offshore, and that OEs play an important role in securing this.

> *The collaboration between PEs and OEs was not strong before….which is why we have chosen to strengthen the onshore organization. The OEs are responsible for making this new model work and to make the collaboration work. (Senior Manager)*

The symbolic value of onshore work is elevated

While the symbolic value in terms of distinction, identity, status and power historically privileged offshore work rather than onshore work, the OE narratives suggest that the relationship is becoming more balanced, and increasingly shifting to the advantage of

onshore workers. In their narratives, OEs make clear distinctions between themselves and the PEs, presenting themselves as important and more on top of change.

> *Every day that passes, offshore workers take one step forward, while we take two. This is perfectly natural. They are running behind and struggling to keep up with us.*

> *Compared to those who work offshore, I have to work really hard all of the time and I make less money ….and I am the one who stands in front and takes all the blame.*

The OEs present themselves as enabled and as further *"ahead of"* and increasingly *"more competent"* than the PEs. They largely ascribe this to the physical location, as being away from day-to-day operations on the platform allows them to meet, learn and reflect more frequently.

> *We have an advantage relative to those offshore….We have a number of meetings each week with lots of people involved and we digest things and have much greater possibilities of working on the integration than those out there….It means that the knowledge level here is much higher than offshore.*

OEs construct progressive narratives allowing them to accept and adapt to change

The above analysis suggests that the OEs' capacity to adapt is enhanced by place in several ways. The relocation onshore creates proximity to change agents who provide alternative discourses and practices as compared with the offshore platform location. OEs draw on the change-related discourses available onshore to reorient themselves in ways that allow them to accept and adapt to change. Importantly, the relocation also creates physical distance to the platform and the PEs, and thereby relieves the OEs from both the safety issues involved in working offshore and the in-group identity regulation of the PEs.

Three Aspects of Place

Existing research has shown that the narratives people construct to make sense of change are linked to their responses to change (Sonenshein, 2010). Progressive narratives tend to be coupled with the capacity to adapt, while regressive narratives emphasize the negative consequences of change, thus making it more difficult to adapt. Our findings support this. However, while previous research has focused on the social and conversational aspects

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through which a shared understanding of change is developed (Bartunek et al., 2006; Maitlis,

2005), our findings extend current knowledge by showing how the context in which

collective sensemaking occurs matters. Based on our analysis of the change narratives of two

groups of employees, we argue that understanding different responses to change requires

looking into what happens to various aspects of place during organizational change. In this

section, we discuss the three determinative aspects of place with regard to employees'

construction of collective sensemaking narratives in response to change: (1) physical features,

(2) interpersonal interactions, and (3) symbolic value. We argue that together these function

in ways that shape collective sensemaking as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1 about here

Physical features of place

Our analysis suggests that the physical features of a particular place can be important for

collective sensemaking. This is particularly the case if the place (or the work practices within

that place) are distinctive, thus allowing employees to draw on specific features as a resource

for their collective identity (Larson & Pearson, 2012; Halford & Leonard, 2006; Ely &

Meyersen, 2010). In our study, the dangerous and isolated workplace and the platform-

specific work practices shaped the collective PE identity and hence their sensemaking

processes. Place is particularly important for the identities of low-level employees, who

advance their knowledge via local experiences and the histories of particular sites (Rooney et

al., 2010). The distinctive features of the platform diminished when a standardized operating

model was introduced. Although many of the physical features remained the same (isolation,

danger), the work practices lost their distinction and became similar across all platforms.

Hence, the place became a historical resource in the change narratives; it had previously

provided distinction that also held symbolic value (which we discuss further below), but no

longer did so. In contrast, the onshore location was not particularly distinctive in terms of its

physical features, and the employees did not identify to the same extent with their location. As such, the place did not carry the same distinction and historical value. This group of employees (which included those employees who were relocated from the platform) did not romanticize the past; instead they identified opportunities that came with change and used the onshore location as a future-oriented resource in their narratives.

These findings suggest that the reconfiguration of a place (or the work practices tied to a particular place) impacts collective sensemaking in several ways. If change implies a loss of distinctiveness, and particularly if collective identity is tied to place-based distinctions, then employees are liable to construct regressive change narratives oriented towards the past, making it more difficult to accept change. On the other hand, change may bring new opportunities, as we observed in the onshore location, but this had more to do with the interpersonal interactions within that place.

Interactions within places

Place also regulates interactions between groups and their abilities to influence each other. Existing research has shown that interaction among peers who are co-located leads to similar interpretations of change (Bartunek et al., 2008; Sonenshein & Dholakia, 2012; Balogun et al., 2015), but without specifying the underlying contextual aspects. Our findings support and extend this research by pointing to three important aspects of the interactions: proximity/distance, intensity, and how people exploit place to facilitate or block interaction.

Spatial proximity typically implies more direct interaction, as well as opportunities to exchange and shape change narratives among groups. For instance, the PEs who were co-located on the platform constructed similar narratives. The OEs were also co-located, but were also closer to senior management. Our analysis shows that this employee group developed change narratives that aligned with senior management's. Hence, employee sensemaking and responses to change are liable to be influenced by other spatially proximal

groups. Specific locations can also entail spatial distance. The onshore location entailed spatial distance from the PEs, who historically had been quite powerful and influential. While existing research suggests that spatial distance can produce a sense of autonomy (Gastelaars, 2010) and create opportunities for groups to develop distinct change narratives either in support of (Kellogg, 2009) or in resistance to change (Dawson & McLean, 2013), our findings show how distance can also release groups for the regulation by others and allow groups to disregard or block influence from other powerful groups in an organization. Paying attention to the proximity and distance of an organization's groups can thus generate a deeper understanding of the change narratives that emerge, as well as subsequent employee responses to change.

Interactions can also be more or less intense. Our study illustrates how the co-location on the isolated platform created very intense interactions and a strong sense of solidarity among PEs. Intense interaction and social bonding (such as the notion of the platform family) can create strong in-group regulation, making it difficult for individual employees to hold dissenting opinions. The physical features (high-reliability context) meant that people were restricted from moving on and off the platform freely, hence the restricted access and distance to other groups in the organization limited exposure to alternative narratives. Collective sensemaking can then become encapsulated, with narratives being continuously repeated and reinforced without being challenged by or negotiated with other groups in the organization. While offshore oil platforms constitute an unusual work context, other types of workplaces may also involve intense and restricted interaction, leading to encapsulated sensemaking. Some examples of these are coal mines (i.e. underground versus aboveground as illustrated by Dawson & McLean, 2013), militaries, emergency rooms, trading rooms, prisons, cornerstone businesses in remote places (for instance on islands) or remote subsidiaries in multinational firms. Employees who work in isolated places with restricted

interaction may develop distinct change narratives that become as isolated as the employees are. The positions they take towards change—whether in favor or in opposition—then become more difficult to influence.

While proximity and distance may appear to be objective measures, place can also be exploited by people to influence interactions. For instance, in our study, senior management, which was located onshore, exploited the distance to purposefully restrict their interactions with PEs, thereby blocking PEs' attempts at influencing (e.g. PEs criticized senior management by stating "you are undemocratic bullies!"). Senior management could do this because the competencies of specific employee group was no longer as important as they had been in the past. Hence interactions are not merely a result of proximity, distance and intensity (i.e. who can come and go to a specific area), but also how people exploit place to create proximity or distance.

In summation, the second aspect of place thus shows how interactions influence collective sensemaking in three ways: first, through the ways in which proximity or distance enable and/or restrict direct interactions; second, through the intensity of interaction, which is linked to the openness or restrictedness of an area; and third, through people's use and manipulation of place to create proximity or distance.

The symbolic value of place

The third aspect of place has to do with its symbolic value, referring to the socially constructed meanings that go beyond the intrinsic content or function of an object (Morgan, Frost & Pondy, 1983; Zott & Huy, 2007). Objects, such as places, can display both intrinsic and symbolic properties. Above we discussed the objective, tangible and physical features of the platform, while we also alluded to the symbolic aspect in terms of place being an identity resource. In addition to representing symbolic value for identity, our study suggests that a place can be a source of status and power. Standardization not only diminished identity

distinctions, it also impacted the status and power tied to the platform. Our study supports existing literature suggesting that a place can be an important source of power (Dale & Burrell, 2008) and resistance (Courpasson et al., 2017). At the platform, power was tied to the danger and the distinct competencies connected with the place. Indeed, the PE narratives show how the platform-specific knowledge had been used by employees as a weapon to fight change. They were used to being listened to. Our findings also show how a specific place, such as an offshore platform, can shift from being a source of power for employees to one for senior management. Following standardization, Earlybird employees no longer had rare place-based operational knowledge. Hence, organizational change represents an opportunity for symbolic "ownership" and the power of a place to be taken over by other groups in the organization. Importantly, our study also shows how changes in the symbolic power of a place may shift the balance between different groups in an organization. Our findings show how change may also elevate the status and power of a place (and employees located in that place), as illustrated by the OE employees whose relative power vis-à-vis the PEs increased during the change.

Three aspects of place interact to shape collective sensemaking and responses

The three aspects of place are described separately above even though, empirically, these function together to shape collective sensemaking and responses to change. Physical features create specific conditions for interaction and carry symbolic meaning. As Figure 1 shows, introducing changes involving standardization and relocation impacts the three aspects of change in various ways, leading to two alternative paths. On one path, which we observed among the PEs, employees make sense of change by constructing regressive narratives. Although they comply with change (not doing so would be dangerous), the regressive narratives leave them struggling to accept change. The other path, which we observed among the OEs, involved progressive change narratives leading to acceptance and adaptation to

change. As such, our model shows how place impacts employee responses through collective sensemaking. The two distinct change narratives differ not only in their orientation—being either oriented towards the past or the future—but also in the agency the employee groups assign themselves. In the progressive narratives, employees represent themselves as agentic. In contrast, in the regressive narratives, employees represent themselves as victims, which essentially absolves them of responsibility (Garcia & Hardy, 2005) while putting the agency and responsibility on others, such as senior management. As such, our group level findings conform to existing research on the individual level, which suggests that—when faced with transitions that they experience as undesirable—people create narratives that place the burden on someone else (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). Being agentic rather than passive has been found to be important for the capacity to adapt to change (Ibarra & Lineback, 2007).

Conclusion

This study set out to explore how place influences how employee groups make sense of and respond to organizational change. While existing research has linked sensemaking to employee responses (Sonenshein, 2010) and probed the social and discursive aspects of collective sensemaking (Bartunek et al., 2006; Balogun & Johnson, 2005; Balogun et al., 2015; Stensaker et al., 2008), our findings contribute by detailing how context and place influence the collective capacity a group has to accept and adapt to organizational change. The unusual context for our study—an offshore oil platform—allowed us to uncover how place matters for sensemaking and responses to change. We developed a model illustrating three important aspects of place that shape employee change narratives: 1) physical features, (2) interpersonal interactions, and (3) symbolic value.

While the unusual research setting constituted a strength in that it allowed us to investigate the role of place, it also created potential limitations on the transferability of our

findings and model. An offshore platform is unique in terms of the danger, isolation and intensity of interaction, yet—as previously mentioned—other workplaces that exhibit some similar characteristics and collective sensemaking dynamics include coal mines (Dawson & McLean, 2013), police departments (Van Maanen, 1998), militaries, emergency rooms, and prisons (Rogers et al., 2017). Cornerstone businesses or MNE subsidiaries in remote places may not involve danger, but workers do experience isolation and intense interaction in ways that influence collective sensemaking processes. Even in more normal workplaces, organizational changes involving standardization and relocation can create similar dynamics, as they necessarily alter one or several of the three aspects of place.

These findings can inform practitioners who are implementing organizational change. It is well-known that managers should assess the specifics of the organizational context in which they are operating and adjust their change management practices and processes accordingly (Hailey & Balogun, 2002). Existing research has, for instance, illustrated managements' role in sensegiving, referring to how managers support and facilitate employee sensemaking (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Our findings suggest that management must also pay attention to how planned organizational change, such as standardization and relocation, manipulate key aspects of places, as the context in which sensemaking occurs matters. Management in the organization we studied was not ignorant of the power of the platform. Indeed, senior management was well aware of the challenging context due to safety concerns, close-knit ties between offshore management and employees, and platform-specific capabilities. In many ways, management designed the change process with these key contextual features in mind. However, it is relevant to ask if the changes could have been implemented without triggering such regressive narratives among PEs. Senior management could for instance have shown more understanding and respect to the strong identification employees had with the platform. In retrospect, a senior manager expressed surprise at how

closely PEs identified with their place of work. Management could also have interacted with the employees in a smoother manner; however, this particular context was one with a history of extensive resistance to change. Nevertheless, managers need to seek knowledge about the symbolic value of place and understand not just the objective effects of proximity and distance, but also how people can manipulate place to facilitate or block influence. On a more positive note, our study also showed how place-based changes can create new opportunities for previously underprivileged groups of employees.

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	Platform Employees (PEs)	**Onshore Employees (OEs)**
Physical features of place	Offshore platform location: ✓ Distant and isolated workplace in North Sea ✓ 2 weeks of 12-hour shifts, then 4 weeks off work ✓ Dangerous workplace; therefore, higher salary ✓ Challenging context to implement change due to high-reliability context and shift work The features of the platform shape collective sensemaking and change narrative: ✓ Platform and specific work practices creates distinction ✓ Notion that oil platforms created national wealth ✓ Features of place are a historical resource in narratives	Onshore location: ✓ Offices located in city ✓ Regular working hours 5 days a week ✓ No direct danger; increasingly high-tech work allowing tasks to be moved onshore away from danger ✓ Few practical and safety-related challenges involved when implementing organizational change The features of the onshore location shape collective sensemaking and change narrative: ✓ Onshore work is not bound by danger and isolation; hence not conflicting with implementing change ✓ Onshore location creates new work opportunities ✓ Features of place are a future-oriented resource in narratives
Type of interactions within place	Platform restricts interactions: ✓ Isolation limits interactions to "platform family" ✓ Intense 24/7 interaction for 2 weeks offshore Restricted and intense interaction shapes collective sensemaking & change narratives: ✓ Strong collective narratives; in-group regulation ✓ Encapsulated and repetitive narratives ✓ PE narratives conflict with senior management narratives, yet limited negotiation of narratives; PE narratives exist in isolation on platforms	Onshore location facilitates interaction across levels & groups: ✓ Interactions with other employee groups, managers, change agents, family, friends Broad and open interaction shapes collective sensemaking & change narratives: ✓ Relocated employees are released from in-group regulation on platform ✓ Loose and somewhat more varied collective narratives ✓ OE narratives aligned with senior management

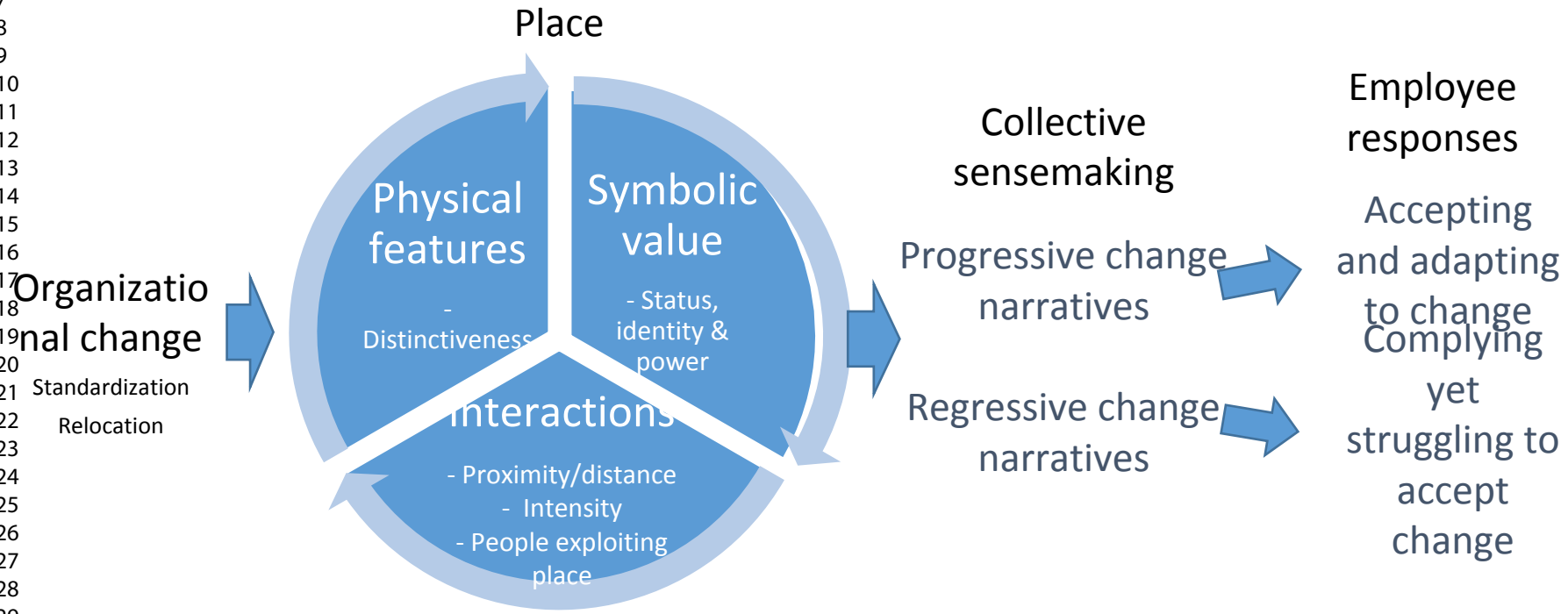| **Symbolic value of place** | Historical status, identity and power tied to the platform are challenged by standardization and relocation:
✓ Platform loses distinction and power due to standardization
✓ Platform-specific knowledge and capabilities among employees no longer carry the same value and power
✓ Senior management exacerbates distance to platform by staying away and not listening to PEs

Symbolic value shapes collective sensemaking & change narratives:
✓ Loss of distinction and value
✓ Breaking up the platform family, yet find solidarity and shared identity in victimhood
✓ Notions of "us" (PEs) vs "them" (senior management) increases; senior management cast as perpetrators
✓ The power of the platform shifts hands from employees to senior management | Standardization enhances the onshore location relative to offshore location:
✓ Status of onshore location elevated during change partly because distinction between platforms is diminished due to standardization
✓ Senior management acknowledges importance of onshore work in discourse

Symbolic value of place shapes collective sensemaking & change narratives:
✓ OE identity increasingly linked to change agency
✓ New networks are developed
✓ Proximity and alignment between OEs and senior management
✓ OEs' relative power vis-à-vis PEs' increases |
| **Collective employee sensemaking and responses to change** | **Regressive change narratives**
Employees accepting and adapting to change | **Progressive change narratives**
Employees complying yet struggling to accept change |

Table 1: Place and Employee Responses to Change

Figure 1: How place influences collective employee sensemaking and responses to change