

# When sense bridges cognition, emotion and aims: developing a new framework to study sense in organization research

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## Abstract

*This paper looks at the concept of sense to tackle management and organization science questions. It discusses the theoretical and methodological basis of the concept of sense to provide a new framework to study sense in organizational research. The interest of the new framework is tested in practice through a case study that aims at understanding the suffering of project managers.*

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**Keywords:** sense, project manager, suffering, grounded theory

## INTRODUCTION

While managers and researchers generally agree that sense is critical in organizational life, the reality covered by the concept of sense remains vague. For example, the broadly used Weickian theory of sensemaking provides hints about what is called “sensemaking” but it remains vague about what sense actors eventually give to the situation. “Sense” usually refers to people’s understanding of a situation (e.g. Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Vlaar, Van Fenema, & Tiwari, 2008). This imprecise language makes it difficult for managers to use “sense” as a tool to manage organizations. The vagueness of the concept and the lack of framework for defining “sense” also impede empirical research efforts.

We present an integrated theoretical framework that models the sense actors give to the projects they take part in. We lead a case study through the grounded theory analyzing techniques. Empirical data of shopping center development projects enabled us to develop a theoretical framework of the concept of sense. We define sense as the way people grasp the reality they take part in. What emerges from our analysis is the importance of taking into account cognition, affects and aims simultaneously. These elements interact and build the sense the actor give to the project. Most studies separate cognition, affects and actors’ intentions and focus on one of these elements (e.g. Druskat & Pescosolido, 2002; Dutton, Worline, Frost, & Lilius, 2006; Hill & Levenhagen, 1995; Hoegl & Parboteeah, 2003). We show that focusing on one of these elements is not sufficient to understand the sense actors give to the projects. Sense bridges these elements and provides us with a theoretical framework that helps managers and researchers to understand organizational life.

We suggest ways of using our framework of sense for project managers, company managers or project actors. By describing the story of two actors, we provide evidence that emotions, aims and cognition interact and build the sense these actors give to the project. The use of our framework as a grid of analysis enables us to cope with the understanding of the specific situation of project managers. We show that the way project managers have to make sense of the project they are responsible of lead them to suffer. Three main causes of suffering emerge

from our data analysis: (1) contradictory perceived expectations between stakeholders, (2) incapacity to make personal and organizational aims converge, (3) distance between aims and perceived tools at disposal. These forces create a gap between project managers' hopes about what their job could be and the way they acknowledge it.

Finally, we discuss the implication of our results for re-setting organizational actors model. We suggest moving from the "neuronal man" (Changeux, 1997) to the "comprehensive man" as the prevailing model for actors in organizational research. Marketing research made the shift more than two decades ago (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982). We argue that it is time for organizational research to take massively this trend into account, like few researchers already did (like Magala, 1997; Sherman & Kim, 2002).

## **1. SENSE: A KEY COMPONENT OF ORGANIZATIONAL LIFE THAT LACKS RIGOROUS THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

In this first part, we expose why it is necessary to propose a renewed framework to study sense in organization research. Sense is mostly used in the sensemaking perspective (Weick, 1979, 1995), which enabled new findings in the OS field. It has become a successful approach that is broadly used by researchers. Nevertheless, the concept of sense still relies on fragile bases, both theoretically and methodologically. We explain here the main problems of studying sense through the dominant sensemaking perspective.

### **1.1. THEORETICAL INSUFFICIENCIES OF THE CONCEPT OF SENSE**

The theory of sensemaking developed by Weick (1979; , 1995) has allowed to develop a better understand of intraorganizational experience. As individual and collective psychology have been taken into account (Fiol, 2002), small groups dynamics have been revealed with new insights. The theory of sensemaking found multiple relays in diverse areas like organizational learning (Schwandt, 2005; Thomas, Gioia, & Ketchen Jr, 1997; Thomas, Sussman, & Henderson, 2001), change management (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Gioia & Thomas, 1996), creativity (Drazin, Glynn, & Kazanjian, 1999), power relations (Ibarra & Andrews, 1993), situated cognition (Elsbach, Barr, & Hargadon, 2005), etc. More than the widespread use of sense and sensemaking in organizational theories, the quality of the theoretical breakthrough allowed by Weick's framework has been praised by many reviewers (Van Maanen, 1995).

In the sensemaking theory as developed by Weick and used by his successors, sense is not the central object of the theory. Sense is a mean to study interactions and change in diverse organizational situations. Therefore, little research has been done about the result of the sensemaking process: what is the sense people eventually give to a particular situation? Using sense as a means to access other phenomenon has prevented researchers to address what is the status of sense, its definition and its operationnalization.

Most research use sense as people's understanding of a situation (e.g. Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Vlaar, Van Fenema, & Tiwari, 2008). This definition of sense is vague and does not really fit with the sensemaking theory as developed by Weick, for whom sense is always retrospective. Some research use sense as a way to study the understanding of a situation that is taking place at the same time that the actor is trying to make sense of the situation. We may see here a contradiction between the use of the sensemaking theory and its initial developments. The main cause of this shift may be found in the "lack of sharp definition" for

concepts in Weick's theory. To our knowledge, sense is has never been clearly defined in the weickian theory. It can be addressed as a way to make the reader use practical rationality, in order to grasp the meaning of this concept according to the situation it is used in. Or we may follow Salancik's conclusion that defining a concept in Weick's theory "is missing the point about it [the weickian theory]"<sup>1</sup>. A third solution, (less original, we have to admit) would be to try to develop a clear definition and operationalization of sense that would not have to fit with Weick's preconceptions of the sensemaking theory.

## 1.2. METHODOLOGICAL PROBLEMS OF THE CONCEPT OF SENSE

In addition to the theoretical vagueness that is inherent to the concept of sense, some authors have underlined methodological and epistemological problems related to the use of sense in management research.

Whereas van Maanen (1995) praises the style of the weickian approach in order to think about theories, all his argument for stressing the quality of weick's theory could be taken as critics in other paradigms (that tend toward classical objectivism and positivism). Pfeffer (1995) in his response to Van Maanen's article, argues that the vagueness of the bases of Weick's theory, especially in the definition of the concepts, makes the extension, replication or adoption of Weick's theory more difficult than if having clearer settlements.

Another problem of the use of the sensemaking theory is related to its epistemological backgrounds. Allard-Poesi (2005) mentions that sensemaking theory users often present the results of their research in a way that let the reader think that they could be applied generally, while mentioning at the same time that what they study is local phenomenon which is by nature specific and cannot reach generalization. This problem may be caused by the fact that Weick and its successors tend towards constructivism and sometimes try to repress this tendency (Rojot & Wacheux, 2006).

While scanning the literature about sense, we could not meet any clear operationalization about sense. What kind of elements do researchers try to collect when studying sense empirically? Let's take the example of emotions. The status of emotions seems vague in the studies about sense. Initially, emotions were almost not taken into account in the concept of sensemaking. Through the years, emotions have been stronger related to the sense actors give to a situation, but their status is not clearly defined: are emotions part of the sense actors give to a situation? Do they modify sense without being included in the sense? Are they an element, a cause or consequence of the sensemaking process? In other words, is sense only a cognitive object, or does it include affective elements?

A last problem is raised by the access to sense. The methods used to address sense empirically are often presented as unproblematic by researchers. Can be sense inferred from observation of actions? How to rebuild the sense once the action has being done? Is there another way of understanding sense than in depth interview with actors on the field?

We have stated here the main problems in the research based on the concept of sense. Most of it is based on Weick's theory of sensemaking. Even if we do not want to reject what have been developed by previous research, we follow Pfeffer's argument that stronger bases and clearer definition and operationalization could provide better access and a higher degree of usability to research. We propose to use a case study research based on the grounded theory analyzing techniques to try to reach Pfeffer's claim.

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<sup>1</sup> Salancik's remarks actually deals with that concept of enactment. As we have the feeling that the same remark could have been made with the concept of sense, we transposed it to our reflection about sense.

## **2. DEVELOPING A CASE STUDY RESEARCH TO ADDRESS THE SENSE ACTORS GIVE TO A PROJECT THEY PARTICIPATE IN**

### **2.1. A CASE STUDY METHOD**

We used an interpretive case study method to understand how sense was built by projects members. An interpretive method was necessary to address actors' subjectivity of sense making because sense is embedded in actors' own understanding of the situation they face.

This research analyzes the sense that was built by nine project members that constituted the core of three projects of shopping center development in Auchan, one of the leading retail store company in France. We used an embedded case study method (Musca, 2006; Yin, 2003) in order to access variations due to people and projects in the same organizational context that represent the Parisian regional division of Auchan real estate subsidiary, called Immochan.

We used a longitudinal design to address modification of sense as the projects develop. We focused on the project development phase, where people try to fix what the project will be like. This phase was interesting as it is the one where uncertainty is higher in the project life. We expected that sense would change more and we could get variation in the construction of categories to develop a consistent framework to study sense.

We used both interview and meeting observation to address the question of sense. Data collection spanned June 2006 to July 2008. 29 comprehensive interviews (Kaufmann, 2007), lasting from 40 minutes to more than 3 hours constitute the main source of data. The recordings of 17 meetings constitute data to triangulate the information provided by face-to-face interview and to understand the development of the project in order to address real concerns while leading the interviews.

### **2.2. THE USE OF GROUNDED THEORY ANALYSIS METHOD**

We used a framework of analysis provided by the grounded theory method (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Our positioning tends towards Charmaz's (2000; , 2006) constructivist way of developing a theory. More specifically, we used an iterative process to develop and revise our analysis step by step all along the research process (Orton, 1997).

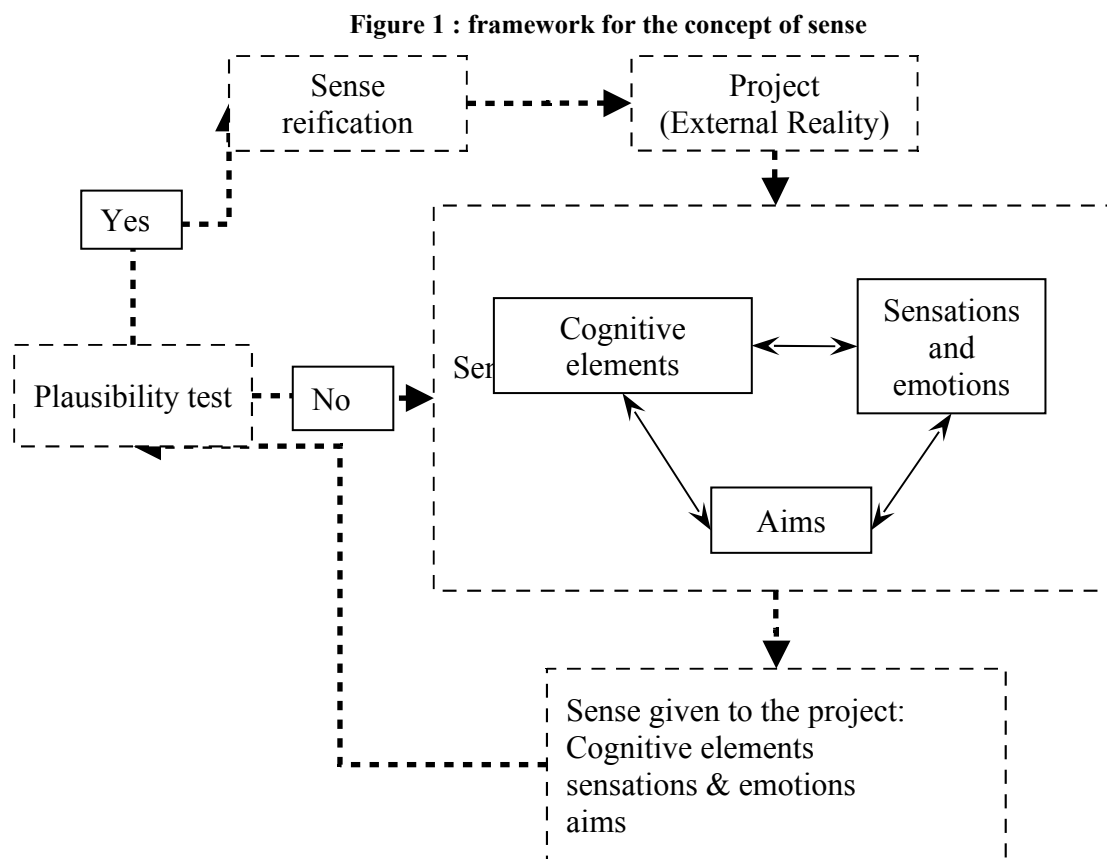
Thus, we used the grounded theory process (open coding, axial coding, selective coding) to develop categories that would create a relevant framework for how people make sense of a project they participate in. We made several attempts to build a framework that would be as relevant as possible. At each stage, we tried to validate the framework while testing it on the data. We had seven steps until the framework obtained the level of relevance that gave us satisfaction according to the adherence criteria between the framework and the data (see Douglas, 2003). While doing so, we alternated inductive parts to build a framework and deductive parts of testing the framework, representing the iterative process described by Orton (1997).

We don't describe here all the steps that have been done and the tests that we applied to each framework. We provide here only the final framework that we used to interpret the data about how actors make sense of projects they take part in.

### 2.3. DEVELOPMENT OF A FRAMEWORK TO STUDY THE CONCEPT OF SENSE

The framework we developed is based on an individual way to explore sense. We don't focus here on inter-individual interactions or actor-context interaction. We try to provide a framework to have a clear representation of what researchers have to take into account while researching about sense, especially which empirical elements are necessary to be collected while trying to identify sense in empirical situations.

Our operationalization of sense is presented in Figure 1. First, there is an external reality that an individual has to make sense of. In our case, the external reality is the project. Second, actors use cognitive elements, aims and sensations and emotions to make sense of the project. This sense making process can start with cognitive elements (like cognitive dissonance) or emotions and sensations. These elements interact and stabilize. When these elements are stabilized, sense can be formulated through a combination of these elements. The sense making process does not stop here, as the actors apply a plausibility test to her/his sense



Considering our description of how people make sense of a project, we define sense as the way people grasp the reality through cognitive elements, aims and emotions & sensations. This framework is different from the one used in the sensemaking theory. First, in this case, sense is not only a retrospective phenomenon. Actors give sense to situations or a whole set of situations, like a project, that happened, that are happening when they give sense and even that will happen in the future, as they think forward. The second main difference is the systematic use of emotions and sensations to explore sense. Weick and the users of the sensemaking theory have not used emotions and sensations explicitly (Vidaillet, 2003). The results we present here, considering the sense project managers give to the project they manage, demonstrate how important emotions and sensations are in this process.

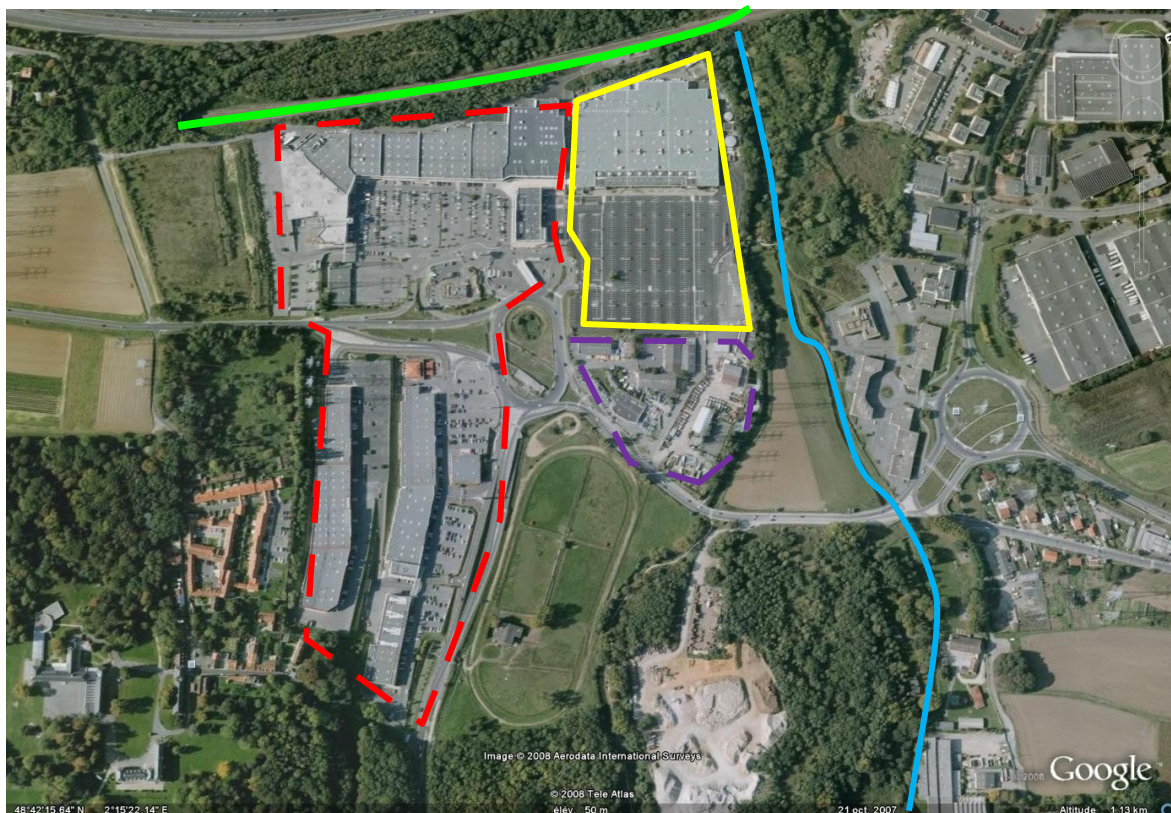
### 3. WHAT SENSE DO PROJECT MANAGERS GIVE TO THE PROJECT THEY PARTICIPATE IN?



In order for the reader to evaluate the relevance of our framework, we will now describe a story of an actor through the sense he gave to the project over seven months. We will use the sense triptych (cognition – aims – sensations & emotions) in order to explain how these elements interact and build sense. Moreover we will see that as one panel of the triptych moves other elements move to adapt and give a new sense to the project.

#### 3.1. PROJECT PRESENTATION


We focus here on Guy Durand, who is a project manager on the Bonneville Project. Bonneville is a small city in the South of Paris, where a shopping center already exists, in a commercial area that is presented in Figure 2. The zone is separated in three parts: the Auchan zone, which is owned by Guy Durand's company, the Bosch zone, which is owned by local entrepreneur, and the Tyres zone, which belongs to a family who runs a car business. As we can see on Figure 2, a train line and a river delimit the area. It is then impossible for Auchan to expand the area without buying Bosch's or Tyres' area.

Figure 2 : Air view of Bonneville site



 Auchan Zone  
 Train line

 Bosch Zone  
 River

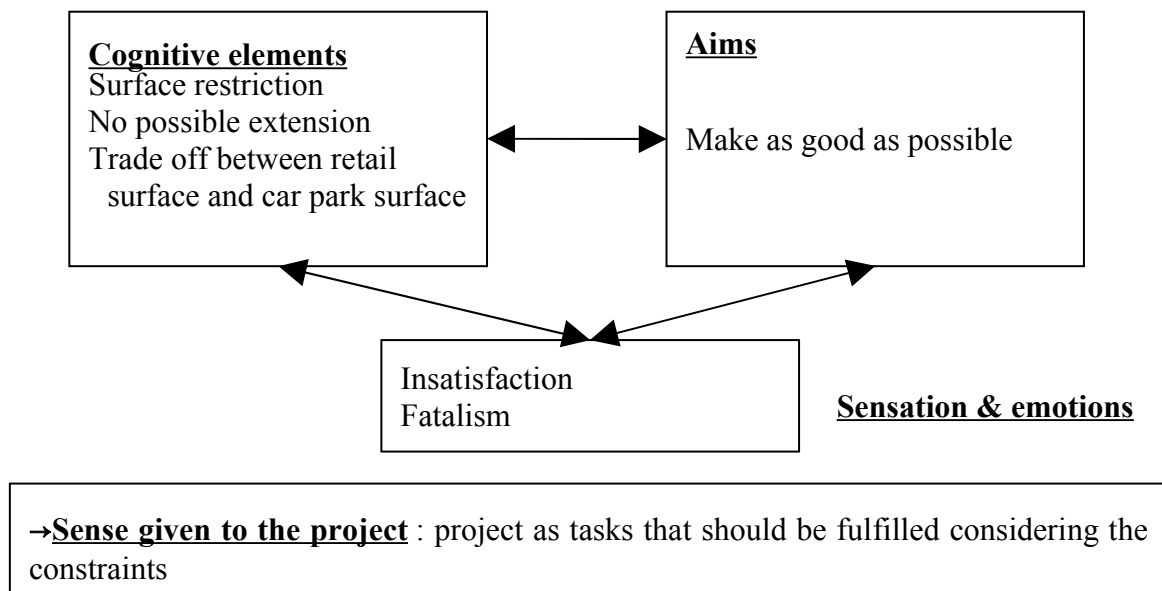
 Tyres Zone

### 3.2. FIRST SITUATION: DEALING WITH THE CONSTRAINTS

Guy Durand is the project manager in charge of developing the surface dedicated for commercial activities on the site. His main ambition is then to deal with the constraints of the site to find a solution to provide the site with additional surface dedicated for retail activities. As the relationship with Bosch has always been very difficult, M. Durand imagines a way to develop profitable square meter on the surface that is at the moment allocated for car parking.

As the shopping center would then attract more people, Guy Durand imagines a solution with a car park with several layers. This solution is quite expensive but it is the only solution to provide more surface for business and enough room for car parking. Guy Durand works as project manager with a temp composed by an architect, the hypermarket director, a lobbying partners and a commercial director. That solution is not very satisfying but it seems to be the only solution as the area problem prevents any other solution.

Figure 3 : M. Durand sense making of the project at phase 1



At this stage, we see that the equilibrium of the elements of sense articulate around fatalism of having to develop a project with much constraints. The cognitive elements guide the sense making process as the aims and the emotions & sensations adjust to these elements.

### 3.3. SECOND PHASE: HOPE FOR A PARTNERSHIP

As times goes on, the Bosch zone is sold to an international real estate promoter, HSO. Guy Durand got to know that HSO bought the whole zone at a quite expensive price. He has now two hopes. First, that the relationships with HSO would be better than with Bosch, which would help negotiating with politicians for getting the legal agreements necessary to extend Auchan's activities. Second, that HSO would need a partnership with Auchan in order to make their commercial offer more attractive. As partners, Auchan and HSO could increase the commercial offer while reorganizing the shops on the whole area.

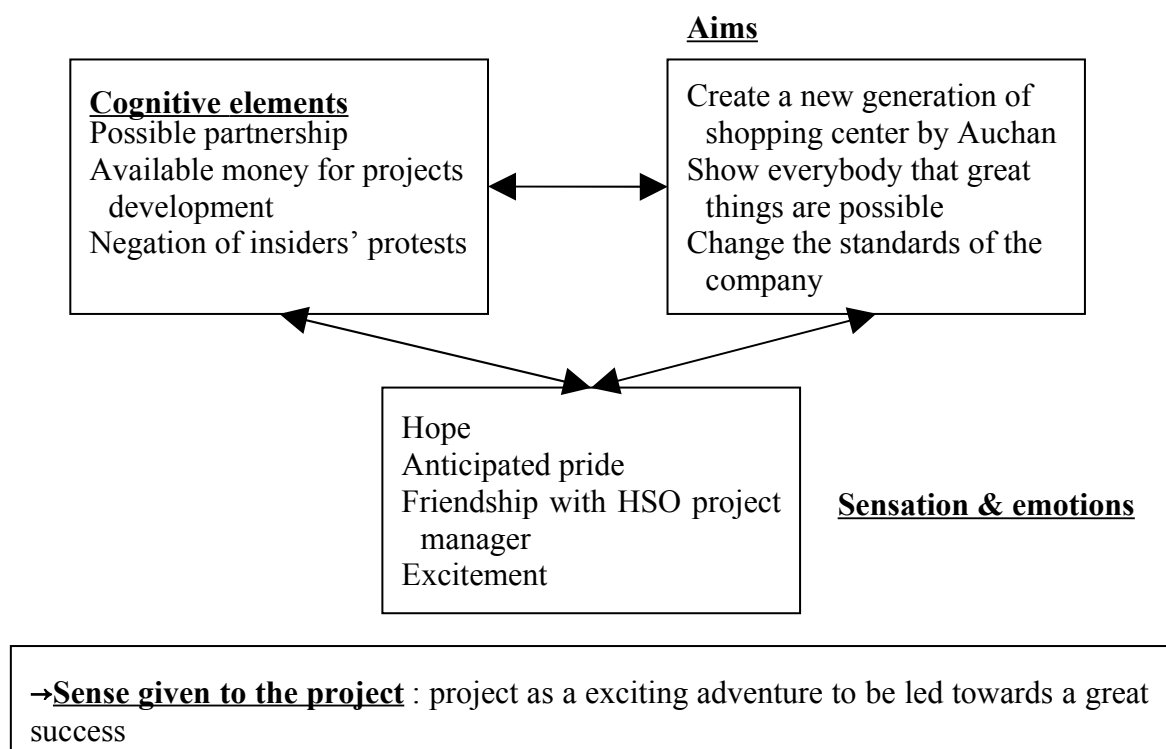
As M. Durand presents this possibility to the project team, some people raise problems for such a partnership. The hypermarket director knows well the actors of HSO and does not

really like them. He says they are arrogant and want to exploit Auchan's position on this area. The real estate subsidiary regional manager also knows HSO Bonneville site's manager. He told us that the last time they talked together they almost fought and that HSO Bonneville site's manager is not pleasant at all. More than these interpersonal conflicts, the exploitation people from Auchan are much worried about the loss of turnover during the works that a large project would require.

Nevertheless, M. Durand thinks that this partnership with HSO could lead the shopping area towards being a reference for the company. He imagines the site with the collective participation of all actors. He anticipates a huge transformation of the site and the development of an innovative shopping center. Moreover, he does not have any interpersonal conflict as HSO Bonneville site's manager. While HSO Bonneville site's manager is very unpopular within projects members, he and M. Durand are good friends. They play rugby together and are former colleagues in another real estate company. M. Durand trusts HSO Bonneville site's manager and thinks that Auchan can rely on him to develop a partnership.

M. Durand is aware of the problems raised by the project teams members. Anyway, he thinks that with such a potential, the problems would be solved naturally. The company has money for investments and would support him for this project. Moreover, turnover temporary decrease and interpersonal conflicts should not be problems compared with the possibilities offered to set new standards for developing shopping centers for the company. Figure 4 sums up the main elements of the ways M. Durand makes sense about the project at this phase.

**Figure 4 : M. Durand sense making of the project at phase 2**



At this stage, cognitive elements and sensations & emotions play a great role as they reinforce each other. When considering the partnership M. Durand gets excited and hopes he can lead the project this way. This leads him to select cognitive elements towards his ambition. Then, he sees the situation a certain way that reinforces hope and excitement. Aims seems here more a rationalization of his attitude rather than something that a guide for sensemaking.

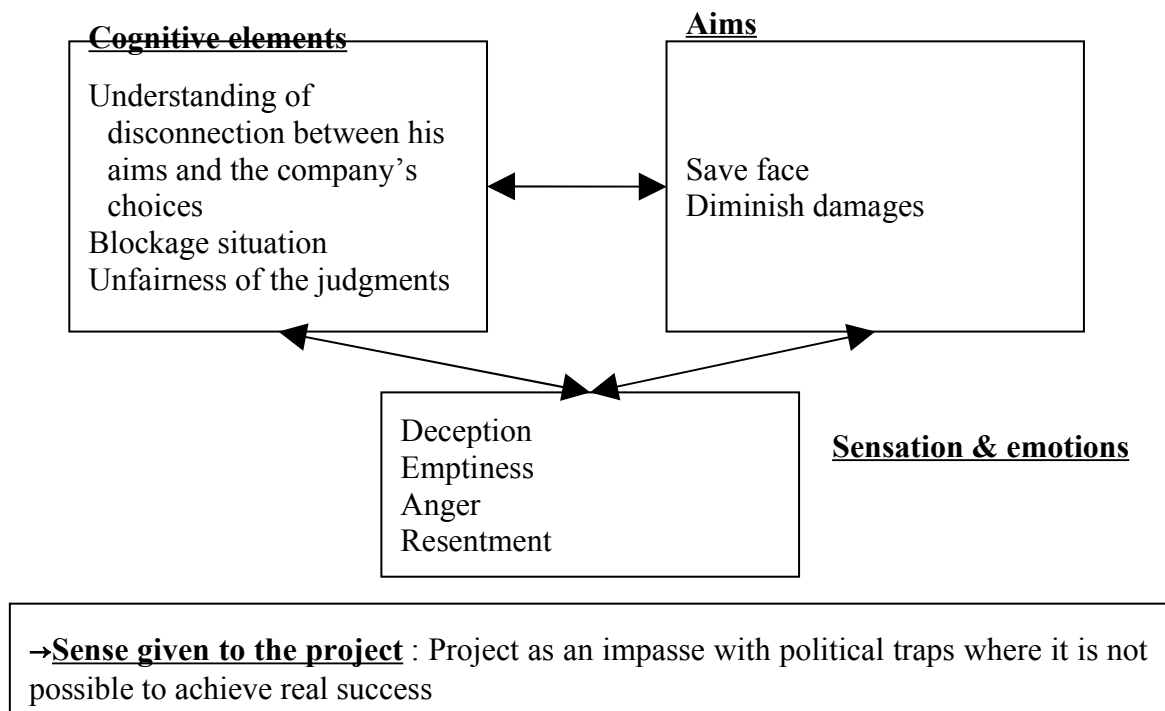


### 3.4. THIRD PHASE: RESENTMENT VIA AUCHAN

The third phase we identified in the sense given by M. Durand to the project took place just before he resigned from his job. When M. Durand presented his project with the HSP partnership to the board in charge of validating the project, he faced highly reluctant people. He got to know that the first people he had to agree with were not HSO but people from the Auchan group. Moreover, the ideas for the shopping center development, even if they might be good, do not seem to fit with the values of the Auchan group. Indeed, the project would require to increase the commercial density of the Auchan zone. Subsequently, Auchan would not own the shops established on its land, which contradicts the dominant logic of the group.

After this meeting, M. Durand decided to resign from the company. He felt that his ambitions and the group's ambition would never fit and he would not be able to enjoy working in this company any more. He felt much deception, because he believed in the project he proposed, and he thought it could improve Auchan's activity, which lacks innovation at the moment. He expressed resentment at being judged as a "traitor" because he tried to find motivated people to run this project. Figure 5 synthesizes how M. Durand made sense of the project before resigning from the company.

Figure 5 : M. Durand sense making about the project before resigning



At this stage, emotions have taken the main role in the sense making process. The personal and emotional engagement of M. Durand does not allow him to fail. When the situation turns out to be an impasse, everything he tried to build collapses. He feels deception and emptiness. Then, when considering backwards what goes wrong in this situation, he can articulate cognitive elements that fit with his feelings. The aims he formulated are a response to the emotions, sensations and cognitive elements.

We described here three main phases in the sense M. Durand gave to the project on a seven months long period. We have shown that at each step of the process, emotions and sensations have played a larger role in the sense making process. Without taking these elements into

account, we could not have presented a sense making process that would adhere to the situations we have witnessed in the development of shopping centers by Auchan.

#### **4. FINDINGS: STUDYING THE CAUSES OF SUFFERING THROUGH THE LENSE OF SENSE**

While studying the sense given to the project by four different project managers on three projects of shopping center development, we could put the stress on the feeling of suffering that they all expressed. We define here suffering as a combination of negative sensations, like stress, pain, isolation, etc. We lead an analysis of the causes of these feelings. We found out that three mechanism linked to the way people make sense about the project are likely to lead project managers to suffering. We show these three mechanisms in the next paragraphs.

##### **4.1. CONTRADICTORY PERCEIVED EXPECTATIONS BETWEEN STAKEHOLDERS**

In Immochan as in many companies, the project manager has no hierarchical link with the people he / she has to work with. In the case of a shopping center Immochan, the project manager has to deal with many stakeholders, both insiders (Expansion/Development Expert, Commercial Manager, Marketing Manager, Hypermarket Director, Lobbying Expert, Juridical Expert, Urbanism Expert, Financial Manager, Technical Manager, Real Estate Economist, Budget Controller, Exploitation Regional director, Real estate subsidiary Regional Director, stockholders) and outsiders (Architect, Designer, Politicians, Roads & Equipment Managers, Future shops managers in the gallery, Future Customers, Co-promoter & partners).

Each stakeholder expresses its own ideas about the project. These ideas are linked to:

- what the realized project should be like
- what are the best means to lead the project toward the desired situation.

The most striking elements when considering the propositions of stakeholders is the large scope of the themes they refer to. If some propositions are made on the same theme, they often seem incommensurable for the project managers. Moreover, some of the stakeholders' expectations are not explicitly formulated and the project manager has to take them into account anyway. For example, future customers can not explicitly formulate their needs or ideas. The project manager has to take them into account anyway.

The situation of Ms. Mitchell is typical for these contradictory perceived expectations. She is in charge of managing a project in order to expand the shopping area on Gervais site. Auchan already owns a hypermarket with a shopping gallery in the front (presented in yellow on figure 3). This hypermarket is part of a larger shopping area that has been developed for more than thirty years (red dotted line). The zone where Ms. Mitchell is in charge of enlarging the shopping area is in purple on the figure above.

**Figure 6 : Air view from Gervais**



Project



Shopping area



Hypermarket  
+ car park

We present here in Table 1 some of the expectations of the stakeholders that we could either hear during meeting or that were explicitly mentioned by the project manager as being stakeholders' expectations.

**Table 1 : List of main stakeholders' expectations in the Gervais project**

Stakeholders	Expectations
Town Mayor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Developing a “sustainable development” activity zone</li> </ul>
Department authorities for retail activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The project should be realized with a local partner that has failed developing a project previously</li> <li>The zone should not reinforce too much competition with competitive zone that are located about 15 km away</li> </ul>
Real estate subsidiary regional Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Focus on innovative activities based on internet and new information and communication technologies</li> <li>Develop the project on our own, with no partner, in order to be free to develop our own concepts</li> </ul>
Marketing Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>As we start from scratch, the site should be taken as a mean to develop our new marketing concept, i.e. a promenade area. It implies small and diversified shops</li> </ul>

**List of main stakeholders' expectations in the Gervais project (continues)**

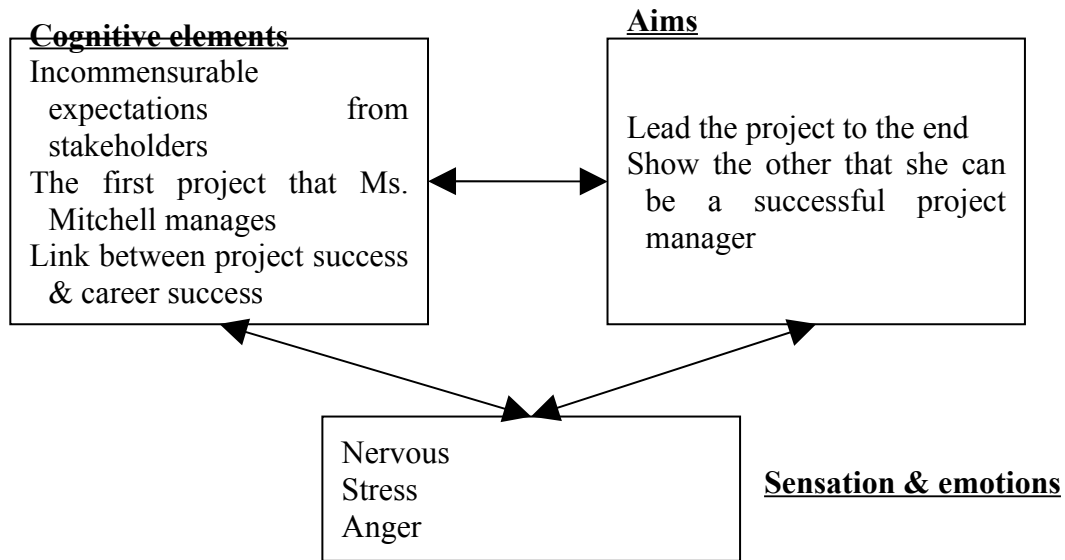
<b>Stakeholders</b>	<b>Expectations</b>
Sales Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The department area is overcrowded with shopping areas. Almost not potential left for growth.</li> <li>• We do not have the competencies for developing a “promenade like” zone</li> </ul>
Hypermarket Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The first step before any other project should be an enlargement of both the hypermarket and the gallery in front of the hypermarket</li> </ul>
Exploitation Regional director	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There should not be any inconvenience caused to the hypermarket activity (Turnover) due to any new project works</li> </ul>

As we can see in this table, some of the stakeholders' opinions about the project are opposite. The main feeling we get while considering the expectations is that the new project has almost no commercial potential but should be used as a launching road for new marketing and commercial activities. Moreover, exploitation partners (regional manager & hypermarket manager), who both have to agree on the project, focus on the hypermarket activities. But Mrs. Mitchell's mission is to develop a project to enlarge the shopping zone. Even the expectations of the department authorities and Ms. Mitchell's boss (real estate subsidiary regional manager) differ about the required association with an external partner. And what about the expectation of the mayor? Ms. Mitchell admitted she did not really understand what “sustainable development” shopping area means... Does the mayor want shops that provide sustainable goods? Or does the project have to respect some sustainable development criteria for the buildings? Or both? Or something else? These contradictory expectations from stakeholders led Ms. Mitchell to a high degree of confusion that mixed with her own aims for the project.

Indeed, Ms. Mitchell joined the company just as the idea of developing a new project appeared. This project is the first one she leads and she would like to use it as a launching ramp for her career. In the real estate field, the manager that leads such a project to the end enjoys a great reputation. Her / his quotation on the real estate managers market raises a lot as soon as the project opens. But when considering the diverse and incommensurable expectations of the stakeholders, she becomes nervous, highly stressed and sometimes angry with people when expressing new difficulties for the project from their own point of view.

Figure 7 shows that the sense Ms. Mitchell gives to the project is based on a tension between cognitive elements and aims that creates suffering. On in this situation, the sense she gives to the project is created out of these rather negative elements. She expressed us that she did not expect such difficulties while managing this project. When the project started, she seemed motivated and full of goodwill. When considering the tensions between stakeholders' expectations, she feels confused. She considers now the project as something that should be done rather than something that would make people realize themselves through the project.

**Figure 7 : Giving sense to the project: tensions from stakeholders' expectations**



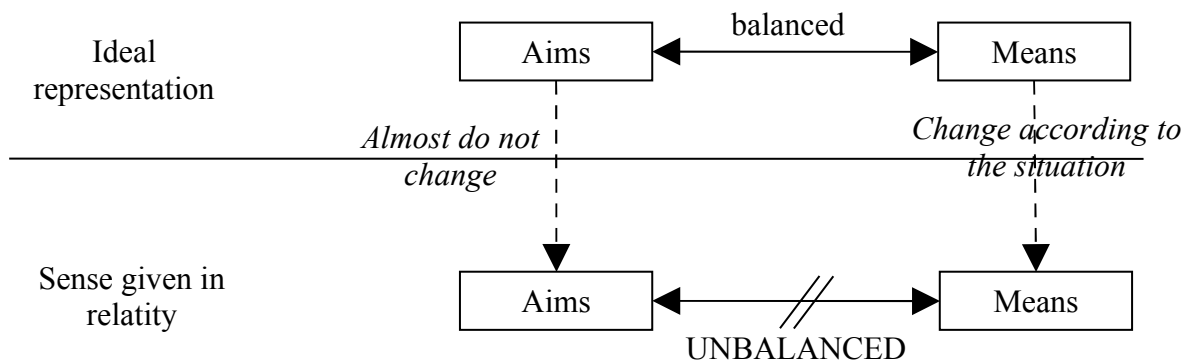
The case of Ms. Mitchell has been chosen as it is the most significant for our study. Nevertheless, the same phenomenon of being confused and stressed because of contradictory stakeholders' expectations has been found for all projects managers that we studied. Suffering from having to deal with double bind is not new. It is interesting to notice that in the literature about paradoxical injunctions and double bind communication, the actor that receives this message is described as a victim (Bateson, 1969). Our framework describes here how paradoxical injunctions that emerge from stakeholders expectations lead the project manager to suffer.

#### **4.2. DISTANCE BETWEEN AIMS AND PERCEIVED MEANS AT DISPOSAL**

A second source of suffering has been identified in the distance between the aims that the project managers follow and the means at disposal to reach these aims. As we have seen for M. Durand and Ms. Mitchell, project managers have to develop project that are not well structured. They have to define what the project will be like and implement the project. In order to manage the project, they would use some means in order to implement what they identify as the best options. In reality, they suffer from not being able to implement the "best options" because they lack means to be able to implement them.

All project managers have an idea of what a project manager should be. The role they think they have to play is partly determined by what they should achieve and how they can manage the project they have to develop. Sometimes, the image projects managers have about what they should do as project manager is different from the reality of their situation. What diverges most between their ideal representation and the actual sense they give to the situation is not what they should achieve as project managers but the way they have to manage the project. In their ideal representation, aims and means are coherent so that the project manager has the tools at disposal to manage the project and achieve a satisfying result. In reality, the equilibrium between what they would like to achieve as an ideal and the means at disposal is broken, which make them feel they cannot manage the project and achieve what they would like. Figure 8 describes this process.

**Figure 8 : From ideal representation of a the role of a project manager to reality**



We identified two “lacking” means that the project managers would like to have in their ideal representation of their role and that they express lacking in the actual situation: real influence on project members and investment budget decisions.

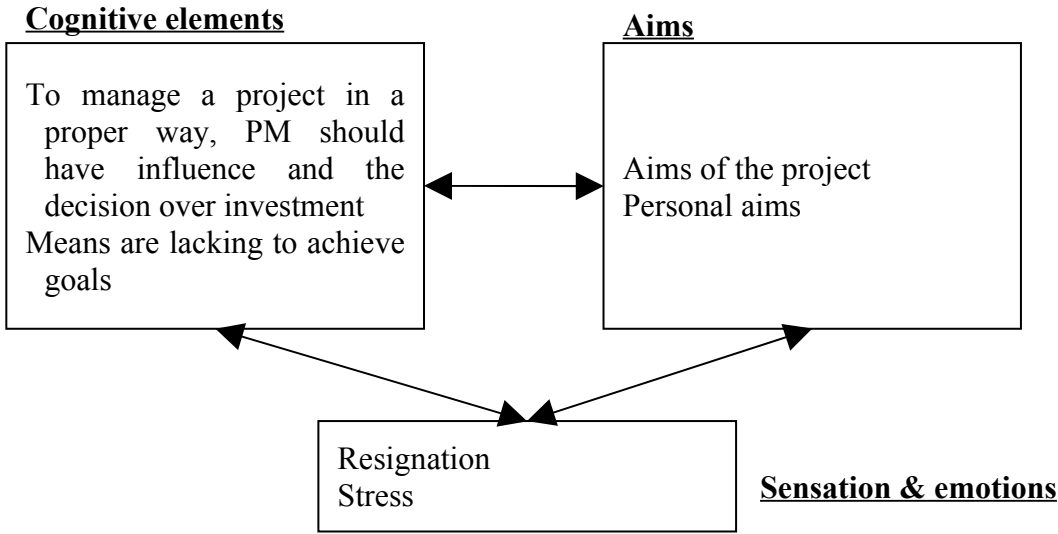
In the ideal representation of project managers about their role, the project manager influences the project members so that all members follow her / him in order to achieve the project. Influence can come from formal systems, like authority, or informal system like leadership. In the situations we have witnessed, the project managers of the real estate subsidiary that have to develop shopping centers have no authority implement no leadership on project members. Each expert is responsible for his / her own area. The project manager has no authority. He / she should coordinate members so that each one agrees about the decision taken in his / her field. Moreover, a power struggle makes the exploitation departments (management of the hypermarket) stronger than the development department (where the project managers come from). This leads to a situation where the leadership that should be implemented by the project manager is sacked by members from the exploitation departments. Any people coming from the exploitation department (hypermarket director, regional director, lobbying expert) has a veto when taking decisions about the projects developed by the real estate subsidiary. The project manager faces problems to influence people as they all know he does not have the power to engage the project without a total agreement of exploitation actors. The project managers feel this situation and feel that they do not express leadership on the project members. They have the feeling that they act more as coordinators than project managers.

Moreover, the second mean the project managers express lacking is the possibility to take some investment decisions. As project managers, they have the feeling that they know what should be done for leading the shopping center to a real success. Nevertheless, even when they are able to make expectations partly converge, they are not authorized to take investment decisions. Formal meetings are planned for each project, where the project manager exposes his / her ambition about the project. Considering his / her arguments (commercial, competition, budget, innovation, brand equity, etc.) a committee may allow him a certain amount of money to lead the project. Whereas we, as external observer, may consider this procedure as legitimate, we identified that project managers self-censored for these meetings. As they have the feeling that they beg for money, they diminish as low as possible the budget in order not to risk a refusal from the committee at the meeting. They have the feeling that the board during meeting does not trust them in their investment decision. When they face a

refusal from the board, they take it personally and have the feeling to be defeated. In order not to lose face, they prefer to self-censure and avoid taking risks. But while doing this, they cut their ambitions for the project and their own ambitions through the achievement of the project. Although they recognize that procedures are necessary for huge investment decisions, they suffer not being able to take part of the investment decisions themselves. They act then with resignation and suffer from not being able to manage the project the way that would provide the greater success for project members and for the company as a whole.

Figure 9 illustrates, through our framework of sense, the fact that project managers suffer from feeling that they do not have the required means to achieve the aims that they have for the project and for them through the project.

**Figure 9 : Giving sense to the project: the broken balance between aims and means at disposal**



The sense project managers give to the project is impregnated with this everlasting tension between deal achievement that people want to obtain and actual means at disposal. Their living of this situation increases the suffering of project managers as they do not have the feeling to be in capacity of managing the project properly. They think they undergo the project rather than manage it like they would like in their ideal situation.

This second source of suffering by project managers may be widespread in companies. Allard-Poesi & Perret (2005) show that project managers have to face role conflicts in their actual management. We add that project manager have to face role conflicts between the role they would like to play as project managers and the role they have to play, with the means at their disposal.

**4.3. FEELING OF AN OPPOSITION BETWEEN PERSONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL AIMS FOR THE PROJECT**

The third mechanisms that we identified in the way project managers make sense about the project, which lead them to suffer is the incapacity to make personal and organizational aims converge. In all four cases, project managers expressed the fact that they could not achieve their own goals for the project through the aims expressed by the headquarters of the company.

Table 2 shows that for each project, the two project managers that we interviewed<sup>2</sup> on each project have different aims for the project. Moreover, we see that project managers always feel an opposition between what they aim at and their interpretation of the headquarters' aim for the project.

**Table 2 : Comparison between project managers aims for the project and project manager's perception of headquarters' aims for the project.**

<b>Project</b>	<b>Project manager aim for the project</b>	<b>Headquarters aim for the project (expressed by project managers)</b>
Bonneville: reorganization of the shopping area	<u>Project Manager 1</u> Partnership with HSO for an innovative shopping center	Reorganize primarily with internal partners
	<u>Project Manager 2</u> Slow down project development for being in a powerful positing towards HSO	Increase area's profitability as soon as possible
Gervais: extension of the shopping area	<u>Project Manager 1</u> Develop the zone as simply as possible: fill the empty space	Be innovative in the commercial offer
	<u>Project Manager 2</u> Develop an innovative shopping area (commercial offer + architecture)	Control budget as much as possible to decrease project risk: high competition in the area may decrease project profitability
Mouzon: development of a leisure park	<u>Project Manager 1</u> Develop the project as quick as possible	Secure the project development. It is the first project of this type and it should be successful with the image of the company in this area
	<u>Project Manager 2</u> Secure commercial development of the leisure park as the rest is on rails	Secure commercial development of the leisure park as the rest is on rails

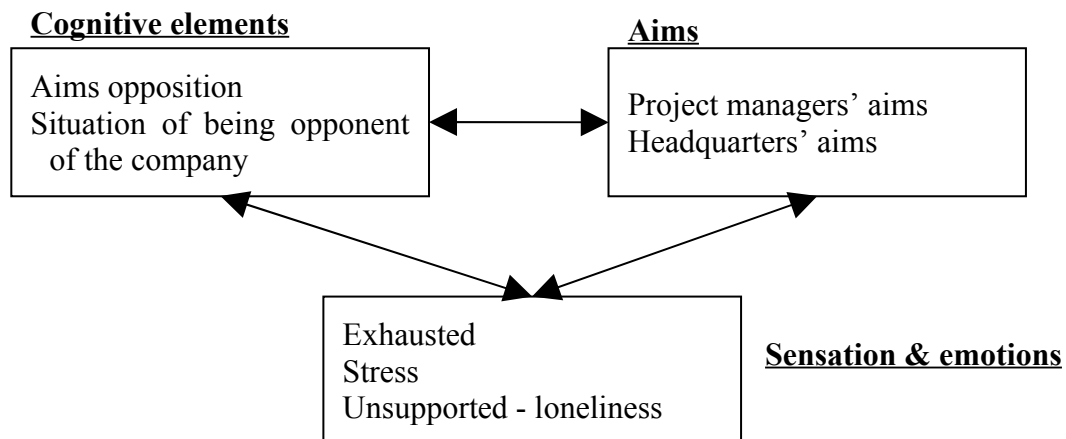
We can see in this table that, apart from the second project manager on the Mouzon project, each situation shows an opposition between what project managers aim at and their interpretation of the headquarters' aim for the project. This constant opposition leads the project managers to have the feeling to fight against the company. They suffer from this situation because they get exhausted by always trying to argue why they propose something different than the headquarters ask for.

We may here wonder if the perception of the managers is legitimate. In our sense, the company leaves space for the project manager to lead the project as they want. Members of the board express, during validation meetings and sometimes more informally, some elements to think about in the project. They seem to try to counter balance project managers' enthusiasm towards one direction by expressing other points of view to be considered. These elements are interpreted by project managers as aims for the project. Indeed, the personal implication required for project managers to be able to lead the project prevents them from standing back and analyzing the situation. Each element that seems not to reinforce their

<sup>2</sup> Project Manager 1 is the same for all projects. As he resigned, a new project manager replaced him to lead the project further.



position is interpreted as a new barrier towards their aim. Eventually, they suffer from the feeling of being an opponent of the company.



As a result of this perception of aims opposition, project managers feel exhausted by having to fight against their own company. The situation increases stress as people feel that they do not get support from their hierarchy. The projects they manage weigh dozens of millions euro. They impact citizens of customer catchment areas, future employees, future entrepreneurs who develop commercial activities. The weight of such projects is all the heavier that they feel they do not act in line with their headquarters demands.

We have explored three mechanisms that lead project managers to suffer in our case study. These three mechanisms have emerged from the systematic use of the sense framework to explore the suffering of project managers. We show here that suffering is both an input in the way people make sense about the project and an output of this sense making process. We see here that the framework previously exposed enables us to analyze in depth specific situations of project management. Emotions, cognition and aims interact in the way people make sense of a situation (here, a project). The systematic use of the sense triptych enables us to explore the interaction between thinking and feeling in the way people act in organization science.

## 5. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

### 5.1. CONTRIBUTION AND LIMITS

Our study reveals that an operationalization to identify sense in empirical situation is feasible. Our framework has been used to 1) describe step by step what is the sense one actor give to a project as well as to 2) analyze project managers' suffering in a transversal way. We provide here clear bases for understanding sense and using the concept of sense with rigorous bases. Nevertheless, our framework is only a first step that was required in the journey towards clear identification of sense mechanisms and toward a possible theory of sense.

When analyzing the sense one actor gives to situation, our framework seeks to provide a higher degree of validity than the sensemaking process as described by Weick (1995). First, because Weick focus on the inter-individual process of sensemaking. Thus, the produced sense is not of primary importance in the sensemaking paradigm. Second, because we take explicitly account of emotions and sensations. As shown in the story of M. Durand, we could

not understand how M. Durand makes sense of the project without considering the affective part of sense making.

In the other hand, our framework is has a lower degree of validity than the sensemaking theory when analyzing inter-individual processes of sense making. We focused here on identifying the elements that enable an actor to make sense about a project. We did not focus on sense negotiation, sense breaking down, etc. We have seen that project managers use elements from headquarters' discourse to make sense of the project. We imagine that further use of this framework can mobilize the resultants of interactions as an input in the sense triptych (cognition – aims – emotions & sensations) in order to tackle inter-individual processes of sense making.

Our study suffers other limitations. First, the framework that was built on this study requires further validation on other empirical situations. The case study enabled us to get in depth into data and analyze all interview and meeting transcription line by line. This process led us to propose the framework as presented above. Nevertheless, the quality of this framework to analyze sense has to be proved by further use in research. We will see then is the framework is robust enough and provides a useful point of view to tackle organizational phenomenon. To do so, we think it would be necessary to propose a better definition than the one we proposed. We moved forward in the operationalization of the concept but the definition still suffers from language unclarity and imprecision.

## **5.2. FROM THE “NEURONAL MAN” TO THE COMPREHENSIVE MAN?**

The most widespread model of actor in organization research has been the neuronal man, as described by Changeux (1997). Researchers have funded a lot of their interpretation of the human activity on the superiority of cognition over all other elements of the human being. Starting from the concept of sense, which is traditionally based on cognitive elements, we proved that emotions and sensations play a huge role in the way actors of project behave. The stake here is no more to focus either on cognitive elements or emotions and sensations but trying to deal with both simultaneously. We suggest, like other researchers have done before us in other research field (for example Damasio, 1999; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982) to move from a conception of the actors as a neuronal man to a conception of the actors as a comprehensive man, only made of neurons (i.e. knowledge, rationality, representations, beliefs) to the conception of the actors as a comprehensive man, made of body and soul (i.e. knowledge, rationality, representations, beliefs, as well as sensations, emotions, preferences, etc.). Organizational Research seems to be reluctant about taking emotions and sensations into account. Nevertheless, some signs of this trends have emerged during the lasts years, like the aesthetics paradigm in organization studies. No doubt the spread of emotions as a central element in organizational research will occur sooner or later. But to do this, researchers have to accept their inability to understand and explain every phenomenon with logical rational explanations.

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