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# **EMPLOYEES' EMOTIONS IN CHANGE: ADVANCING THE SENSEMAKING APPROACH**

## **INTRODUCTION**

The sensemaking approach has been influential in explaining and describing cognitive processes in response to change. Many scholars have used this approach to elucidate how recipients develop understanding of change and the resulting outcome (Aula & Mantere, 2013; Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Maitlis, 2005; Mantere, Schildt, & Sillince, 2012). In general, sensemaking is required when responding to an unknown, unprecedented, and unexpected situation that cannot be interpreted with available schemata (Balogun & Johnson, 2004).

Although most studies of organizational change have explored the role that cognitive processes play in making sense of the change, change can also be affectively laden, which requires an emotional lens. Many studies in recent decades provided evidence that employees react with a variety of emotions towards organizational change (Kiefer, 2005; Huy, 2002; Mossholder, Settoon, Armenakis, & Harris, 2000). Studies indicating the impact of employees' emotions on their perceptions (Lerner & Kelter, 2000), decisions and judgments (Bodenhausen, Sheppard & Kramer, 1994), and behavior (George & Zhou, 2001) emphasize this issue's vital role in organizational life. Management studies therefore indicate increasing interest in the dimensions, mechanisms, and consequences of employees' emotions.

In understanding the reactions of employees towards change, sensemaking research has focused exclusively on the cognitive processes and has largely ignored or underestimated the impact of employee emotions (Maitlis, Vogus & Lawrence, 2013). Thus, researchers increasingly call for an integration of the emotional dimension into the sensemaking model (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010, Liu and Perrewe, 2005). First attempts have considered emotions (e.g., Maitlis et al., 2013; Steigenberger,

2015), but hardly any theoretical and empirically tested integration of the emotional dimension exists in the current model of sensemaking. To contribute to the current discourse, we provide a theoretical integration of employees' emotions to Weick's model of enacted sensemaking by using insights from substantive processing within the Affect Infusion Model (AIM). Furthermore, by transferring the enacted sensemaking model to the context of change, we offer an empirical testable model.

The model of enacted sensemaking that was introduced by Weick in 1988 employs commitment, efficacy, and expectations and has exerted considerable influence (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010) but has not yet been applied to the context of organizational change or to change relevant outcomes, such as employee resistance, although resistance is recognized as one of the most relevant reactions towards change (Bovey & Hede, 2001; Madsen, Miller, & John, 2005; Oreg, 2006; Paterson & Cary, 2002). This study transferred the model of enacted sensemaking to the context of change and therefore examines the combined impact of emotional and cognitive evaluation on employees' intention to resist change.

Finally, this study makes some important contributions to current debates. First, we expand the enacted sensemaking model by integrating the emotional dimension. Second, we transfer the model to the context of change and examine employees' resistance intention, and third, we apply quantitative methods instead of qualitative. We thus examine the direct impact of emotions on employees' psychological resources, which consist of their commitment, efficacy, and expectations, and their indirect effects on resistance intention. In addition, we empirically test the enacted sensemaking in its entirety on employees' resistance intention. This study therefore has significant implications because it offers a sophisticated theoretical and empirically tested model of "emotionally primed" enacted sensemaking. Moreover, because the current literature on

sensemaking is primarily qualitative in nature (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014), this study contributes to current discourse by introducing a new methodological approach.

## **THE IMPACT OF EMOTIONS ON EMPLOYEES' PSYCHOLOGICAL RESOURCES**

The introduction of change can cause a variety of different emotional reactions among affected employees. Some employees might feel anxious, frightened or frustrated, whereas others feel hopeful and pleasant (Bartunek, Rousseau, Rudolph & DePalma, 2006; Mossholder et al, 2000, Huy, 2002). More studies now acknowledge the importance of emotions and indicate their vital role on important outcomes of change (Vuori & Virtaharju, 2012; Liu & Perrewe, 2005; Antonacopoulou & Gabriel, 2001).

Whereas the enacted sensemaking approach developed by Weick discusses the interplay of sensemaking and actions, the emotional dimension has mostly been neglected in prior research. Weick himself considers his groundbreaking 1988 work on enacted sensemaking to be “basically cool and cognitive” (Weick, 2010, p.545). Integrating emotion and cognition, AIM is a comprehensive model of the judgment processes of individuals that describes the circumstances under which affective reactions influence cognitive processing.

There are many reasons to expect substantive information processing, a processing strategy within AIM, in the context of organizational change (George & Jones, 2001), and several indicators suggest a conceptual overlap between substantive information processing and sensemaking. Major change initiatives that have personal relevance for the recipient are characterized by uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (Balogun, 2001). All of these characteristics are relevant to substantive processing and to sensemaking. Moreover, substantive processing and sensemaking are associated with high cognitive effort, which is required when

individuals confront atypical and complex circumstances and must develop new interpretive schemata (Forgas, 1995; Weick, 1988, 1995; Weick et al., 2005).

In situations where a substantive processing strategy is needed, emotions have an important influence on the judgment process through affect priming (Bower, 1991; Forgas, 1995). Affect priming suggests that judgments are indirectly impacted by emotions through selective influence on attention, encoding, retrieval, and associative processes (Forgas, 1995; Bower, 1991; Singer & Salovey, 1988). Thus, judgments made using a substantive processing strategy are consistent with concurrent emotions. Consequently, positive emotions lead to more positive judgments, and more positive memories are recalled (Bower, 1981; Douglas & Shepherd, 2000; Forgas, 1990). Consequently, the combination of substantive processing and enacted sensemaking allows us to theoretically explain and empirically examine the role of employee emotions on their enacted sensemaking. The approach of AIM offers distinct cues about basic variables of the enacted sensemaking model and the influence of emotions. Under the role of affect priming, we propose that change recipients' emotions influence their psychological resources to the extent that change commitment, change efficacy, and negative expectations may be adversely affected because of increasing negative emotions. By contrast, positive emotions are more likely to facilitate change initiatives because employees with positive emotions are more likely to believe in the value of the change initiative (affective change commitment) and their ability to adequately master the challenges during the change initiative (change efficacy), in addition to expecting a positive outcome (expectations).

*Hypothesis 1: Employees' positive emotions are positively related to change commitment.*

*Hypothesis 2: Employees' positive emotions are positively related to change efficacy.*

*Hypothesis 3: Employees positive emotions are negatively related to negative expectations.*

## **EMPLOYEES' PSYCHOLOGICAL RESOURCES AND RESISTANCE INTENTION**

Weick (1988) identifies capacity, which we will refer to as efficacy, commitment, and expectations as important variables that facilitate or constrain individual enacted sensemaking. Depending on the level of these variables, individuals will respond differently to given situations. For example, Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010) discuss the implications of these concepts as shared meaning and their either helpful or harmful impact when dealing with change. Following Sonenshein and Dholakia's (2012) approach by examining these variables as individual rather than shared concepts, we refer to these variables as employees' psychological resources for their sensemaking.

Prior studies have highlighted the critical role of commitment, efficacy, and expectation to explain change (Sonenshein and Dholakia, 2012; Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002; Wanberg & Banas, 2000). Each variable is related to employee behavior in different ways: by fostering a desire to perform (affective change commitment), by believing in one's own performance (change efficacy), and by connecting previous and future performances (expectations). Thus far, the questions remain about the combined impact of these three psychological resources on employees' resistance intention, as a central dimensions of employees' reaction towards change. Resistance is a common and unavoidable response to organizational change and is one of the most frequently examined variables of employee behavior (Oreg, Vakola, & Armenakis, 2011; Val, Manuela Pardo del & Fuentes, 2003). Because resistance is highly affected by social (un)desirability, studies on change tend to assess the intention of employees to engage in resistance behavior (Bovey & Hede, 2001; Stanley, Meyer, & Topolnytsky, 2005, see review of Oreg et al. 2011).

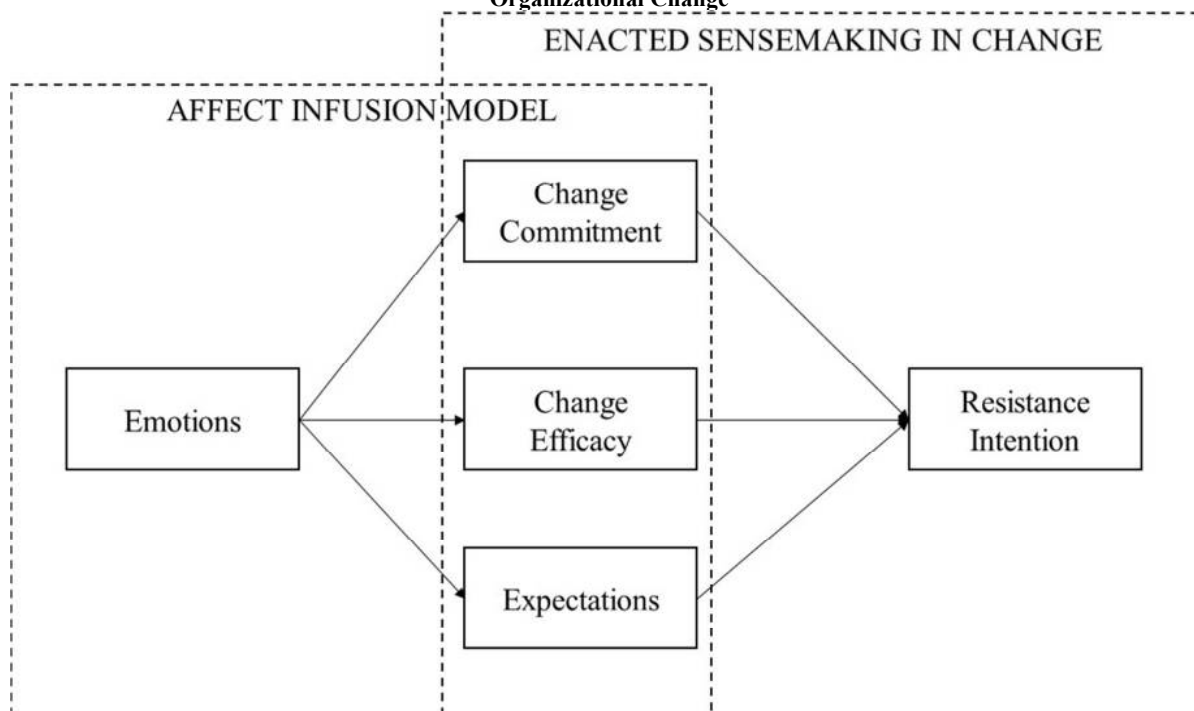
The degree of employees' level of change commitment, efficacy, and expectations will influence their resistance intentions. Commitment to change can increase employees' support for a given change or, in reverse, low commitment can facilitate resistance intentions (Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001; Myer, Becker, & Vandenberghe, 2004). Change efficacy reflects the degree to which individuals believe in their ability to acquire the cognitive and behavioral resources that they must have to successfully navigate organizational change (Gist & Mitchell, 1992; Wanberg & Banas, 2000). Hence, change efficacy can strongly affect enacted sensemaking because it generates the feeling among employees that they can do something about the situation and can contribute to change initiatives (Weick, 1988). Thus, if an employee has low change efficacy, his/her intention to resist will be relatively high compared to an employee with high change efficacy. Weick (1988) compares expectations with assumptions about the events, crises, or changes that "influence enactment in a manner similar to the mechanism of self-fulfilling prophecy" (p. 313). Members of an organization create an environment in which expectations will be confirmed. Consequently, negative expectations about a new or ongoing change are more likely to be associated with resistance behavior, which tends to yield results that match employee expectations, e.g., that a given change initiative is a mistake. Thus, we derive the following hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 4: Change commitment is negatively related to resistance intention.*

*Hypothesis 5: Change efficacy is negatively related to resistance intention.*

*Hypothesis 6: Negative expectations are positively related to resistance intention.*

**Figure 1: Hypothesized Model Combining the AIM and Enacted Sensemaking in the Context of Organizational Change**



### THE MEDIATING ROLE OF EMPLOYEES' PSYCHOLOGICAL RESOURCES

In the first section, we introduced employees' emotions as an important dimension for their psychological resources in organizational change by referring to substantive processing and the result of affect priming. In the second section, we applied the enacted sensemaking model to the context of organizational change by combining the three psychological resources with employees' resistance intention. The combination of these two approaches suggests an emotionally primed enacted sensemaking model in which the psychological resources perform a mediating role. Sensemaking theory suggests that behavior—or action, as Weick calls it—is the result of a previous interpretation of a given situation (Weick, 2010). In addition, the AIM provides conclusive evidence that emotions substantially affect judgment processes before individuals can behave in a certain manner (Forgas, 1995; Forgas & George, 2001). Thus, by combining these models, we propose that employees' change commitment, efficacy, and



expectations will mediate the impact of emotions on resistance intention. Our final hypothesis summarizes this prediction. The overall model is presented in Figure 1.

*Hypothesis 7: Employees' (a) change commitment, (b) change efficacy, and (c) expectations mediate the relationship between their emotions and resistance intention.*

## METHODS

### Research Procedure

To empirically test our model, we conducted a vignette study involving specific change scenarios (Devos, Buelens, & Bouckennooghe, 2007; Lau & Woodman, 1995; Thomas, Clark, & Gioia, 1993). In an experimental vignette study, participants are assigned to a scenario and asked to imagine themselves in the described situation. The scenario described the current situation of the fictitious electronics company TECH Inc., the decision of management to restructure the company, and the communication of this change initiative. The applied scenarios were developed based on actual restructuring cases. Participants were asked to assume the position of employees and answer the follow-up questions on the questionnaire.

The manipulation check indicated that 79% of respondents perceived the case studies to be authentic, and 89% said that they were not reminded of any specific company, which might have led to biased data. Emotions “are not diffuse in that they have particular stimuli” (Lundberg & Young, 2001, p. 531). To ensure a stimulus that causes intensive emotional responses by the participants, we decided to focus on company-wide restructuring programs. Because we were particularly interested in negative and positive emotions to change and in creating variance in terms of emotions, we decided to use participatory and programmatic change communication strategies (Russ, 2008; Helpap, 2016). Thus, participants were randomly assigned to responding to a participatory or to a programmatic change.

## Questionnaire and Sample

To collect data, we cooperated with institutions and universities that provide programs for professional development, such as project management seminars. The potential participants were contacted via email. A total of 261 employees participated in the survey. Most participants (77%) had more than 3 years of work experience and were in the lower hierarchical levels; 61% had no managerial responsibilities. Of the participants, 48% were female with an average age of 32 ( $SD=9.1$ ). In addition, 91% had previous experience with organizational changes. Of these participants, 71% were affected by the changes initiated in their companies.

## Measurements

*Emotions* were measured using a six-point semantic differential scale involving five items based on the PANA scale (Watson, Clark, and Tellegen, 1988) and the PAD-scale (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). To select relevant change-related emotions, we followed Kiefer (2005) and Lundberg and Young (2001). For example, two items were “pleased-annoyed” and “hopeful-despairing.” The Cronbach’s alpha value for this scale was 0.91.

*Change Commitment* was measured using two items of the well-established affective commitment scale introduced by Herscovitch and Meyer (2002). The alpha value for this scale was 0.72.

*Change Efficacy* was measured following Ashford (1988) by assessing perceived change-specific self-efficacy with two items that were applied in Wanberg and Banas (2000) and Sonenshein and Dholakia (2012). The alpha value for this scale is 0.60.

*Expectation* was analyzed via a content analysis of answers to an open-ended question. Based on the previous literature (e.g., Haddock, Zanna, & Esses, 1994), we used broad, open-ended questions to make inferences regarding employee understanding and interpretation of organizational change. Although expectations function as important dimensions of psychological

resources in organizational change, few studies examine this dimension. Hence, we chose to evaluate individual expectations by analyzing the answers to open-ended questions. We asked the participants to explain the current change initiative to a former colleague and, in particular, to describe their personal expectations regarding the introduced changes. Following the content analysis procedure (Berelson, 1952), two research assistants analyzed the qualitative data by developing a list of codes. The answers were grouped in two main categories: positive and negative expectations. Because the great majority described negative expectations, we particularly focused on negative expectations and counted the words that participants used to describe their negative expectations. Thus, we were able to assign numeric values to each individual in terms of expectations and include those numbers in the statistical analysis.

*Resistance intention* was measured with the scale proposed by Oreg (2006). Two items were used to determine to what extent participants would engage in resistance behavior. Cronbach's alpha suggests an acceptable internal consistency with 0.75.

## RESULTS

### Construct Validity

Following the recommendations of Anderson and Gerbing (1988), we first tested the quality of our measurement model and then tested the proposed conceptual model. We tested the quality of the measurement model with a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). The model with its five latent constructs and 14 measures was built for CFA. The AMOS (22) software was applied to develop and test the CFA and the structural equation model (SEM) using the maximum likelihood estimation procedure. The CFA revealed that the model fit the data well. The goodness-of-fit statistics were as follows:  $\chi^2 = 73.59$ ;  $df = 45$ ;  $p = .005$ ;  $\chi^2/df = 1.64$ ; GFI = 0.95; AGIF = 0.92; CFI = 0.98; RMSEA = 0.049. The t-values for the items were acceptably high,

suggesting that the items reflected their respective underlying constructs; the t-values ranged from 16.77 to 5.01. Discriminant validity was obtained for all variables because the variance extracted for each construct was greater than its squared correlations with other constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

To determine the extent of a common method bias, we applied the Harman single factor test. The single-factor model indicated that  $\chi^2 (90) = 1,098.1$ . We calculated a  $\chi^2$  difference test against the six-factor measurement model to assess the impact of common method variance. This test revealed a significant difference between the  $\chi^2$  values of the two models ( $\Delta\chi^2 = 947.16$ ,  $\Delta df = 23$ ,  $p < .001$ ), suggesting that the single-factor model had a significantly worse fit than the measurement model for this study. Descriptive statistics and correlation coefficients of the main variables are reported in table I.

**Table I: Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations among Study Variables**

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Age	32.35	9.06							
2. Tenure	2.60	1.27	0.72**						
3. Change Experiences	1.53	0.64	-0.61	0.12*					
4. Emotions	2.01	0.96	-0.26**	-0.29**	0.14*				
5. Commitment	3.71	0.96	-0.52	-0.08	-0.04	-0.07			
6. Efficacy	5.74	0.99	-0.11	-0.12*	-0.01	0.07	0.61**		
7. Expectations	5.22	1.10	0.37	0.00	-0.08	0.03	0.28**	0.36**	
8. Resistance Intention	14.21	25.28	-0.12	-0.14*	-0.03	0.01	-0.20**	-0.14*	-0.06

Note: \*  $p < 0.05$  and \*\*  $p < 0.01$  (two-tailed),  $n = 261$ .

### Test of Hypothesized Relationships

The second step of our analysis involved testing the hypothesized structural model presented in Figure 1. In the structural equation model, all variables were included and analyzed together. The fit statistics of the hypothesized model ( $\chi^2 = 78.36$ ;  $df = 46$ ;  $p = .002$ ;  $\chi^2/df = 1.70$ ; GFI = 0.95; AGIF = 0.92; CFI = 0.98; RMSEA = 0.05) are well within the acceptable range, indicating a good model fit.

### *Test of direct effects*

The analysis revealed that the emotional reaction had significant positive effects on commitment ( $\beta = 0.75$ ;  $p < .001$ ), supporting H1. The relationship between emotions and efficacy is also positive and significant with  $\beta = 0.38$ ;  $p < .001$ , supporting H2. Finally, the results indicate a significantly negative association between the occurring emotions and the quantity of negative expectations among employees ( $\beta = -0.22$ ;  $p < .001$ ), supporting H3.

The following hypotheses are related to the enacted sensemaking theory. The SEM revealed that the path from change commitment to resistance ( $\beta = -0.79$ ;  $p < .001$ ) was negative and significant, which supported H4. The path from efficacy to resistance intention was negatively significant ( $\beta = -0.25$ ;  $p < .017$ ), supporting H5. The path analysis measuring the relationship between expectations and resistance was not significant, indicating no relevant prediction of resistance intention by the expectations of the recipients. Consequently, H6 is not supported by this study.

**Table II: Results of Mediation Analysis**

Path to be tested	Mediation Variable	Effect without Mediator	Effect with Mediator	Indirect Effect	Interpretation
Emotions → Resistance	Commitment	-0.41**	0.24	Significant (**)	Full Mediation
Emotions → Resistance	Efficacy	-0.41**	-0.27**	Significant (**)	Partial Mediation

Note: Standardized coefficients are provided. 5,000 bootstrap samples. \*  $p < 0.05$  and \*\*  $p < 0.01$  (two-tailed).

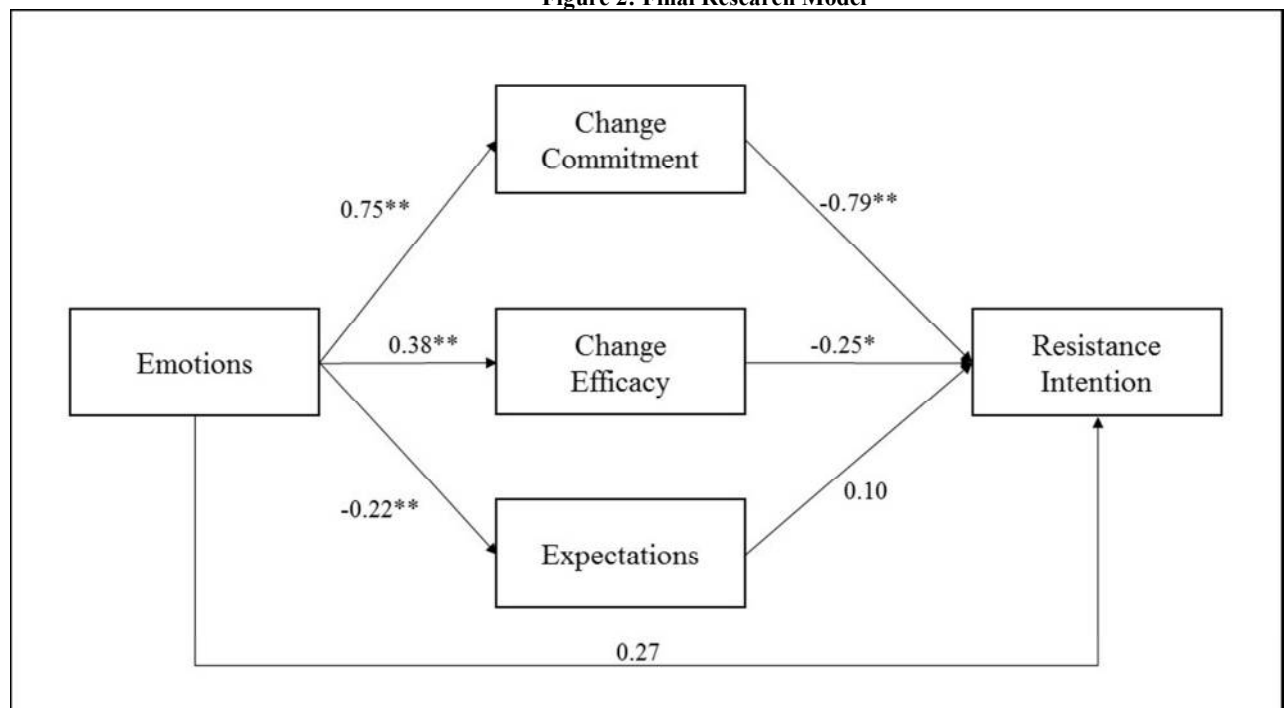
### *Test of indirect effects*

We applied a mediation effect analysis in AMOS using a path analysis, examined the standardized correlation coefficient of the direct path with and without mediators, and compared these two models. In addition, we used bootstrapping to examine the indirect effects and assess the mediation estimates (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). According to the recommendations in the literature, we applied a 95% bootstrap confidence interval using 5,000 bootstrap samples (Hayes

& Preacher, 2014; Preacher & Hayes, 2008). Because expectations were not significantly related to resistance intention, we did not conduct a mediation analysis on this variable. Table II summarizes the results of the two tests.

The analysis reveals a full mediation of employees' change commitment on the relationship between their emotions and resistance intention. The results on employees' change efficacy suggest that the direct path with the mediator drops in value and significance but remains significant at the 5 percent level, which suggests a partial mediation. Hence, the data support Hypotheses 7a and 7b but not Hypothesis 7c. Figure 2 presents the final research model with key empirical figures.

Figure 2: Final Research Model



Note: Standardized coefficients are provided. \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$  (two-tailed).

## DISCUSSION

The interplay of employees' cognitive processes and emotional assessments during organizational change have received considerable attention in recent years (Bartunek, Balogun & Do, 2011; Maitlis et al., 2013). However, the model of enacted sensemaking "was basically cool

and cognitive” (Weick, 2010, p. 545) when it was introduced and largely ignored individual emotions during times of change. To address this significant gap, we expanded the enacted sensemaking model by integrating employee emotions based on the insights concerning substantive processing provided by the AIM. Further, we applied employee-enacted sensemaking on organizational change by examining employees’ resistance intention. Finally, we tested the indirect impact of employees’ emotions on their resistance intention via their psychological resources.

The results of this study suggest that the emotional responses of employees are significantly related to change commitment, change efficacy, and expectations involving organizational change. In addition, emotions indirectly affect the level of intentional resistance behavior through change commitment and efficacy. A substantial body of evidence supports the assumption that emotions represent a source of information in complex and novel situations (Clore & Parrott, 1991; Clore, Schwarz, & Conway, 1994; Schwarz, 1990). This study provides support for this argument and transfers it to the sensemaking process. In this sense, negative emotions are more likely to constrain psychological resources because employees will feel less desire to perform (commitment), believe less in themselves (efficacy), and have more negative predictions (expectations). By contrast, employees’ positive emotions in organizational change are more likely to positively influence psychological resources. This relationship suggests an “emotionally primed” enacted sensemaking by these employees. Thus, emotions appear to be a crucial factor in shaping, directing, and priming individual sensemaking. As previous studies indicate, emotions have increasingly been acknowledged to explain important individual developments on a cognitive level and social process in the context of organizations, such as in the revision of beliefs (Hodgkinson & Healey, 2011; Lieberman, 2000), the interpretation of events (Schwarz & Clore, 2007), decision making (Forgas, 1995), and/or strategy implementation

(Huy, 2011). This study adds to this growing body of scholarship by offering a nuanced perspective on the role of emotions in enacted sensemaking during times of change.

Furthermore, we examine the sensemaking approach with its psychological resources in its entirety on the change critical aspect of employees' resistance intention. We provided an integrated model by including all three psychological resource variables and by focusing on resistance intention in the context of organizational change. Previous studies either provided theoretical approaches to this relationship or empirically examined the relationship between one of the psychological resource variables, such as commitment and behavioral responses (e.g., Ford, Ford & D'Amelio, 2008; Jimmieson, Terry & Callan, 2004). This study emphasizes the importance of considering sensemaking as an integrated model with different interrelated and mutually influential variables.

Our study reveals that employee change commitment and change efficacy are significantly related to resistance intention, a result that suggests a direct and negative relationship between these variables. Conversely, we found no significant statistical relationship between expectation and intentional resistance. These results provide empirical support for the critical relevance of these variables as levers of sensemaking (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). The relevance of commitment and efficacy in relation to sensemaking in particular has previously been discussed and examined in the literature (Grant, Dutton, & Rosso, 2008). Sonenshein and Dholakia (2012) regard change commitment and efficacy as critical resources for sensemaking in response to change and provide empirical evidence for their impact on employee behavioral responses to change. However, expectations seem particularly important in regard to selecting, framing, and connecting cues to establish sense (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). Expectations appear stronger in the interpretative stages and in situations characterized by a discrepancy between current circumstances and expectations and by disruption (Weick et al., 2005). The



relationship of a person's expectations to the capacity to derive a specific set of actions is not as clear as the variable between commitment and efficacy. In addition, whereas efficacy and commitment are related to past events and affect an interpretation of the present moment, the variable expectation, by its very definition, involves the future, which is uncertain and not strongly consolidated.

Overall, this study transforms the theoretical and partially abstract model of enacted sensemaking into an empirical and testable model. Thereby, we apply the model to the context of organizational change and introduce a new methodological approach by using vignette study (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014). Because the current study of sensemaking is predominantly qualitative in nature (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014), this study makes the important contribution of a new methodological approach to study and apply the sensemaking theory. Hence, this study successfully expands the model of enacted sensemaking that accounts for employee emotions by integrating the concept of sensemaking with the substantive processing within the AIM.

### **Limitations and Further Research**

As scholars have noted, sensemaking is an iterative process, which implies that sensemaking changes over time during organizational change and at different stages in a change process (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Weick, 1995). This study focused on one specific moment in the early stages of a change initiative; therefore, we only considered employee evaluation at one time. However, employees' emotional state and psychological resources are likely to change over the course of time in response to an evolving change, and future studies on sensemaking in response to organizational change must analyze and compare the responses of employees to different stages of a given change initiative. In addition, sensemaking is a process that occurs in a social context and is predicated on interaction with the environment (Aula & Mantere, 2013; Maitlis, 2005). A study of how individual emotions are influenced by the reactions of their

surroundings—and how this influence affects sensemaking—is an interesting area for further research.

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