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**Perceptions of Organization Development in South Korea: The Use of a Sense-making
Approach**

Abstract

This qualitative study explores how employees engage in sensemaking during Organization Development (OD) initiatives in chaebols, that is, large family-owned firms in South Korea. In adopting a case study approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 37 respondents drawn from different levels of a chaebol to address three research questions. First, what key contextual factors are associated with employees' sensemaking at different levels of an organization? Second, how do individuals at different levels of the organization make sense of an OD initiative through the 'searching for plausibility' property of sensemaking? Third, what contextual cues are influential when employees engage in 'identity construction' in sensemaking in response to an OD initiative? The findings and implications of the study demonstrate multiple subjective realities, which employees from different levels construct, indicating that the prevailing norms and practice within the existing culture, which have been influential in constructing the identities of employees should be identified when attempting to implement OD to change the organizational culture.

Keywords: Organization Development, South Korea, Dialogic OD, culture,

sensemaking, chaebols

Introduction

Many global enterprises are working to improve their organizational capabilities through a range of organizational change tactics, so that their employees can both adapt to change and lead it (Balogun and Hope Hailey 2015; Burnes and Jackson 2011; Meaney and Pung 2008; Bond Baker 2009). In line with this focus on organizational change tactics, there has been an increasing demand for Organization Development (hereafter OD) initiatives especially in large enterprises in South Korea (hereafter Korea) (Kim et al. 2017). However, enterprises, which have attempted to implement OD have, at times, encountered challenges in achieving cultural change (Kim et al. 2017; Choi 2012). One of the main challenges has been attributed to the neglect of contextual considerations when implementing OD practices (Klein and Sorra 1996; Rees et al. 2012). Since OD evolved in the context of Western culture, fundamental Western-oriented values and principles have been integrated into OD; these require contextual considerations to ensure that planned OD interventions are suitable for the cultural values and organizational customs of the host country (Blodgett et al. 2011; Cummings and Worley 2009). As Korea has achieved very rapid economic growth in the last 50 years, the history of OD in Korea is relatively short and there is a dearth of research on OD within the Korean context and, more specifically, within chaebols, that is, the large family firms, which have played a pivotal role in the rapid economic growth of Korea and, which continue to exert a major influence on Korean society (Murillo and Sung 2013). In this context of Korea, studies on the contextual considerations associated with OD require focus on individual perceptions in order to identify various influences relating to organizational customs and cultural values (Armenakis et al. 1993; Blodgett et al. 2011; Choi and Ruona 2011;

Cummings and Worley 2009).

The importance of individual perceptions has, to date, been emphasized in research on social constructionism in OD; this approach views organizations as socially constructed entities constantly reconstructed and recreated through the interactions of individuals (Anderson 2016; Campbell 2000). For example, recent studies focusing on perceptions have established the pivotal role played by affective factors such as employees' readiness to change (Jussila et al. 2015; Pierce and Jussila 2011; Pierce et al. 2009; Fiorito et al. 2007; Salminen 2012; Weick et al. 2005). This study focuses on how individuals who are employed by a chaebol engage in sensemaking at different levels of the organization and how these individuals develop their identity for understanding experiences during OD interventions.

At the outset of this paper, we highlight that OD has developed into a wide-ranging term, which can be defined in a plethora of different ways (Schifo 2004). Traditionally, OD has its roots in humanistic philosophy based in the behavioral sciences though, over more recent times, OD theory and practice has widened to include some approaches, which espouse interventions primarily designed to improve the efficiency and financial profitability of organizations (Pasmore 2014; Ruona and Gibson 2008). The existence of a wide range of approaches, which are now labelled as OD (Gillon et al. 2014; Kuna and Nadiv 2018) may be seen to create the potential for paradoxes. For example, there may be situations where certain business-driven organizational change initiatives are presented within organizations using the label and vocabulary traditionally associated with OD as occurred in the case study organization, which is central to this study. Thus, while adhering to the organization's description of the change intervention as an OD initiative, we have, in this paper, sought to confine our own use of the term OD to more traditional humanistically-focused planned interventions; these interventions, led from the top of organizations, facilitate holistic culture

change to improve organizational effectiveness using collaborative, participative and consultative approaches (Burke 1982).

The paper is structured in the following way. In the initial sections, literature on Dialogic OD and sensemaking is reviewed, first, to provide insights into how employees make sense of organizational change, second, to inform a set of research questions, and third, to provide subsequent insights into a specific organizational change initiative, which was presented using the label of OD, within a chaebol. The research context and methods and findings are then presented. Finally, the conclusions drawn from the findings of the study are articulated.

Literature Review

While a variety of theories and models of organizational change and development support organizational change at enterprises, the actual rate of successful organizational change in practice remains low (Burnes and Jackson 2011; Isern and Pung 2007; Oakland and Tanner 2007). In particular, cultural change is seen as problematic not only because organizational culture is difficult to grasp, but also because it is difficult to distinguish organizational culture from organizational structures or systems as part of a set of changes (Alvesson and Sveningsson 2008). According to Smircich (1983), the research on cultural change is divided into two broad directions, one drawing upon culture as a variable, which the organization has and the other drawing upon culture as the root metaphor of the organization. While traditional OD based on planned change and open systems models tends to treat organizational culture as a variable in more diagnostically-led perspectives on OD (Alvesson and Sveningsson 2008), the emergence of non-traditional approaches and techniques to OD such as appreciative inquiry, the search conference, future search, world café, the conference model, open space, and wholesale change tend to portray an organization as a meaning-making system (Bartunek, Balogun, and Do 2011; Bunker and Alban 2006; Cooperrider and

Srivastva 1987; Holman, Devane, and Cady 2007; Shmulyian, Bateman, Philpott, and Gulri 2010). These dialogic approaches to OD highlight ways in, which social constructionism and complexity theories can be applied practically in organizations, emphasizing dialogue, interpretation, and the existence of multiple realities (Bushe and Marshak 2009).

Dialogic OD

Dialogic OD portrays organizations as complex adaptive systems as well as a meaning-making system and, in doing so, focuses on the perceptions of people regarding their organization rather than focusing on the organization itself. As such, Dialogic OD emphasizes that multiple realities are continuously constructed and changed through daily interactions and conversations of organizational members (Bushe and Marshak 2015). It seeks to unearth changing conversations and narratives, which convey what people believe to be and interpret as true with the assumption that reality is not a single objective reality but multiple subjective realities that might offer alternative understanding of organizational phenomena (Bushe and Marshak 2016). These conversations and narratives influence the mindsets of people, organizational culture, structures and processes by defining the way they are seen and experienced by those involved (Marshak and Grant 2008). Proponents of Dialogic OD assert that organizations continuously change at various rates and adapt their internal practices and behaviors in real time to changing external conditions (Holman 2013). Consequently, it is suggested that Dialogic OD consultants may nudge, accelerate or disrupt the existing narratives in the current power and political processes rather than trying to plan and control change (Bushe and Marshak 2014). Moreover, in line with this view of an organization and organizational change, the change approach of Dialogic OD focuses on changing people's sensemaking and the cognitive maps that guide behavioral responses, rather than focusing immediately and directly on behavior (Bushe and Marshak 2015).

Three underlying change processes have been identified in Dialogic forms of OD (Bushe and Marshak 2014; Marshak and Grant 2008). First, Dialogic forms of OD engage in inquiry, which helps people to increase awareness of the various experiences and different perspectives in the organization (Bushe and Marshak 2009). Second, transformational change impacts the prevailing narratives and stories, which are endorsed by the privileged power (*ibid*). Third, dialogic forms of OD elicit new thinking, images, stories, narratives and sensemaking from people, which, in turn, result in behavioral and organizational change (Maitlis and Christianson 2014). In this respect, Dialogic OD is focused on changing people's mindset by initiating the conversations, which are required for transformational or deep organizational change. Nevertheless, from an international perspective, this does raise questions about the interactions, which occur between cultural phenomena and aspects of dialogically-driven OD, which are focused on individual behavior connected to openness and dialogue (Schein 2015). More specifically, given the influence of culture on behavior, how are employees' sensemaking processes operationalized in different types of culturally-loaded contexts where dialogic OD is taking place?

Sensemaking in organizational change

Sensemaking has been recognized as a useful way to examine how individuals make sense of organizational change (Ala-Laurinaho, Kurki, and Abildgaard 2017; Helms-Mills 2003; Maitlis 2005; Weick et al. 2005; Will and Pies 2018). Organizational change creates disturbances in the organization and consequently forces individuals to alter their perspectives and views; as a result, "*Through sensemaking, people try to construct a coherent account of a situation in order to make it plausible and to be able to decide on actions*" (Werkman 2010, 424). Thus, in confusing and ambiguous organizational change scenarios, individuals seek to make sense of their complex environments using crucial properties of

sensemaking, that is, concern for identity construction, retrospective of experience, enactive of sensible environments, social, ongoing, focused on and by extracted cues, and driven by plausibility. (Weick et al. 2005). Among these properties, ‘searching for plausibility’ and ‘identity construction’ are major properties of sensemaking in organizational change. ‘Searching for plausibility’ means that individuals who are looking for cues that make their sensemaking seem plausible, are likely to focus on certain cues, while completely ignoring others. In this respect, sensemaking is driven by plausibility rather than accuracy, which means that individuals may distort or eliminate what is accurate (Weick 1995). This reflects the observation that different meanings may emerge as different groups and individuals within an organization search for plausibility perhaps about the same event.

As noted above, ‘identity construction’ is also an important property in sensemaking (Thurlow and Helms Mills 2015). Individuals come to understand what is meaningful in their own identities and continually redefine their identities through drawing on a variety of cues in their changing environments (Weick et al. 2005). These redefined identities simultaneously influence how individuals interpret and make sense of events in the change process (Weick 1995). Identity construction is central to organizational change as the focus of any change initiative requires individuals to redefine their identity. For example, the construction of identity by leaders, as indicated by their actions and language, may influence the construction of their followers’ identities in the interaction processes involving sensemaking (Thayer 1988; Weick 1995). Thus, it has been argued that in hierarchical organizations followers, when constructing their own identities, may adopt leaders’ spoken intentions and actions to preserve the relationship with leaders (Barrett et al. 1995; Mills 2000; Harkins 1999).

Weick’s approach to sensemaking has been theoretically developed over the last two decades and has contributed to the examination of individual perceptions of organizational change

(Woldesenbet and Storey 2010). Nevertheless, it has been argued that contextual factors that influence sensemaking remain undervalued in Weick's approach (Weber and Glynn 2006, Thurlow and Helms Mills 2015, Helms Mills, Thurlow, and Mills 2010). Proponents of the approach called 'critical sensemaking' argue that sensemaking needs to be explored as a complex process that occurs not only within a social context but also within a broader environment. By introducing Unger's (1987a, 1987b) formative contexts and Helms Mills' organizational rules, the critical sensemaking framework highlights how contextual factors affect the ways in, which individuals extract cues and interpret meanings to create plausibility of sensemaking (Helms Mills, Thurlow, and Mills 2010). Critical sensemaking provides a perspective for exploring how individuals make sense of their environments by acknowledging power relations in the broader context and analyzing the relationship between individual actions and broader societal issues of power and privilege (Aromaa et al. 2018). In emphasizing organizational power and dominant assumptions, which privilege some identities over others within an organization, critical sensemaking provides a lens through, which power relationships between leaders and followers in organizations may be observed. For example, employees may be encouraged to reflect the identity of "good employees" who are privileged within the formal and informal rules and practices of the organization (Helms Mills, Thurlow, and Mills 2010).

In summary, sensemaking provides a helpful way to examine how individuals make sense of organizational change and how they develop their identity during change in a specific context. The concurrent consideration of Dialogic OD and sensemaking offers an opportunity to gauge the importance of the perceptions of individuals involved in organizational change and the extent to, which these perceptions create multiple subjective realities. Nevertheless, the literature review highlights the lack of clarity, which surrounds properties of sensemaking

such as ‘searching for plausibility’ and ‘identity construction’ in specific national and sector contexts. Hence, the following sections of the paper address three main research questions with reference to a case study chaebol organization (Company A). First, what key contextual factors are associated with employees’ sensemaking at different levels of the organization? Second, how do individuals at different levels of the organization make sense of an organizational change initiative through the ‘searching for plausibility’ property of sensemaking? Third, what contextual cues are influential when employees engage in ‘identity construction’ in sensemaking in response to an organizational change initiative, which has been presented to them using the label of OD? Further information about the research context and the methodology used to address these questions is presented below.

Methodology and Research Context

This research adopts a qualitative single case approach to explore how employees at different levels of a chaebol perceived an organizational change initiative, which was presented to them by the owners of the organization as an OD intervention (hereafter referred to as an OD intervention). Notably, the corporate culture of chaebols tends to be relatively hierarchical due to the excessive concentration of power in the family owners (Kim 2013). Hence, the decision was taken to examine phenomena-based interview data obtained from respondents working in various hierarchical positions within the chaebol to explore the multiple subject realities of individuals regarding the same OD intervention in the same context.

Research context

Company A is a global chaebol company with about 40,000 employees in 38 countries, having subsidiaries in locations such as North America, Europe and China. The company

provides diverse products and services in multiple businesses including power generation, desalination, engines and magazines. Owing to Company A's rapid growth as a global company through strategies involving mergers and acquisitions, the top management felt the need for cultural change. Following a diagnostic exercise, facilitated by an external consultancy, the family owners reached the conclusion that the company's core values needed to be changed in order to sustain the company's market strength. In order to promote company-wide cultural change, an internal OD consultant team was created under the direct leadership of the chairman, while at the same time locally-based change agent (hereafter CA) teams were formed with the members drawn from Human Resource departments in subsidiaries.

Based on this preparation, a company-wide OD intervention was implemented along with the inauguration of a new chairman drawn from the family owners. The cultural change initiative was introduced by communication, which stated that the company's core values were rooted in a 'human-centric' philosophy, which emphasized 'respecting people', 'developing people' and 'open communication'. The first year of the change initiative focused on understanding new corporate values through company-wide workshops based on Appreciative inquiry, which encourages dialogue among members. This approach to elicit dialogue from employees gave the impression of a new approach to employees who were familiar with the bureaucratic nature of the existing culture. At the same time, leadership training was conducted to change the perspectives of leaders to be linked to new corporate values based on recognition of the importance of leadership in cultural change. From the second year onwards, the change initiative focused on internalizing these new corporate values in everyday work, distributing in-house media communication and newsletters, conducting survey, and checking the change progress in monthly meetings attended by the owner and CEOs of the main

subsidiaries.

Methodology

This research adopted a qualitative single case approach in order to explore deeply how employees at different levels perceive and experience the same change initiative driven in the same context of a chaebol company in South Korea. In order to provide flexibility, the study used a semi-structured interview approach to gathering data (Yin 2003). The researchers purposively selected 37 interviewees working at different hierarchical levels within Company A: 18 interviewees at organizational member level, 10 interviewees at team leader level, three interviewees at CEO level and six interviewees at change agent level. Change agents, selected from the Human Resource team in subsidiaries, are people who played a central role in helping top management drive and manage the change initiative across all subsidiaries.

During semi-structured interviews, the interviewees were asked about their perceptions of the OD change intervention. The questions posed included: *How do you perceive the existing rules and practices as the change context? How do you perceive the OD change initiative? How do you perceive difficulties during change?* Each interview was opened by introducing the researchers and briefly explaining the study. The researchers assured interviewees that their responses would be used for academic purposes only and emphasized anonymity and confidentiality with regard to the data and their analysis. The interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes and were conducted in the Korean language. The process of translating interview quotations into English was reviewed by a professor of sociology of a Korean national university to ensure that the quality of translation work had been undertaken at a professional level.

Data analysis for this study was carried out using thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006)

define thematic analysis as “a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data”, which is seen as a foundational method for qualitative analysis. The researchers followed the basic precepts that Braun and Clarke (2006) proposed and applied them flexibly to fit the research questions. First, the recorded interviews were transcribed, and the data were examined in an active way to search for meanings and patterns. Then, initial codes were generated from the data and matched with codes extracted using ‘Nvivo’ software. The researchers combined the codes to form principal themes with due consideration given to not only word frequency, but also the tone and manner with, which interviewees stressed points. Finally, a thematic map was created, which contained relatively clear distinctions between the emergent themes (see Table 1).

The main ethical issues associated with this study are anonymity and confidentiality. Korean conglomerates have a tendency to manage internal information confidentially and to be reluctant to release data and information. Under such circumstances, it is natural that interviewees want to be assured of anonymity. To mitigate the impact of ethical issues, the data from the interviews were completely anonymized and codes were used to represent interviewees in the findings to protect their identity. Ethics approval for the study was formally sought and gained from the academic institution to which the authors are affiliated.

Findings

This findings section examines how individuals at different level make sense of OD change initiative in relation to the cultural characteristics of a chaebol context, using the framework of sensemaking. First, key contextual factors that are associated with employees’ sensemaking at different levels of the organization are reported. Second, the findings provide insights into how individuals at different levels make sense of the cultural change initiative

through ‘searching for plausibility’ of sensemaking. Third, the findings report how individuals at different levels construct their identity in sensemaking by interacting with each other.

The contextual factors of sensemaking

The interviewees’ perceptions of contextual factors associated with sensemaking are classified into three categories: a hierarchy-based Confucian culture, an excessively result-oriented tendency based on short-termism, and the tendency of leaders to adhere to their opinions.

First, when asked about influential contextual factors linked to the OD intervention, the majority of the interviewees, regardless of their position, referred to the hierarchy-based Confucian culture where people in a lower position find it difficult to express their own opinion freely. This view is exemplified by the following quote:

“In the hierarchy-based Confucian culture, it seems that the way we work does not place much emphasis on capability but rather on the position. At a meeting, people who are in a higher position tend to ignore the opinions of the people in a lower position or pass the buck to others in a lower position”. (Interviewee M01 at organizational member level, male)

Phrases such as ‘*does not place much emphasis on capability but on the position*’ and ‘*ignore the opinions of the people in a lower position*’ reveal the difficulty of people in relatively low hierarchical positions engaging in open communication. Interviewee M14 also expresses the frustration of the younger generation with words such as ‘hard’, ‘reluctant’ and ‘stress’, saying “*When your boss says something, you should listen to him and follow his opinion.*” In line with this, interviewee C1, the CEO at one of the subsidiaries, compared the culture of

silence in Korean companies to the family culture, drawing an analogy between ‘the owner’ in the company and ‘*the oldest senior in the family*’. The use of words such as ‘*irrationally*’, ‘*unreasonable*’, ‘*unconditionally*’ and ‘*absolute*’ indicate the strong influence of the hierarchy-based Confucian culture. At team leader level, interviewee L07 also argued that the excessively hierarchical and authoritarian culture prevented team leaders from expressing opinions like “*no*” or “*difficult*” in any challenging situation because senior managers are reluctant to expose issues or problems to top management. In this culture, even interviewees at CA level, who tended to express a great zest for and pride in the cultural change were also frustrated with driving the change initiative in the extremely hierarchical culture where they could not give proper feedback on the change content.

Second, many of the interviewees cited the excessively results-oriented tendency based on short-termism as another influential contextual factor associated with the OD intervention. Interviewee CA3 described how much the company has emphasized short-termism for its rapid growth and how exhausted the employees were in the process, saying, “*Leaders don’t care how the subordinates are squeezed in the process.*” Similarly, at team leader level, interviewee L4 expressed concern that people would be exhausted and good people would leave this company, saying, “*The performance orientation itself is not wrong. The problem is that we are too focused on short-term performance and profit, possibly even ignoring the right way*”. In recognizing features of the existing culture where values of devotion and sacrifice were prevalent, interviewee M08 at organizational member level observed, “*Leaders tend to ask their subordinates to sacrifice their personal lives as much as the leaders have sacrificed themselves so far.*”

Third, in a context where the hierarchy-based Confucian culture and result-oriented tendency based on short-termism are combined, the interview data provide indications of a commonly

held perception that the leaders tended to adhere to their own ideas and opinions rather than listen to the opinions of their staff. It was the perception of a group of the interviewees that this phenomenon emanated from a combination of the leaders' confidence in the value of their own experiences and an authoritarian approach to leadership. For example, interviewee M06 at organizational member level highlighted this view, saying, *"Although the context has changed, the team leader insists on the importance of his past experience"*. Similarly, other interviewees stated,

"My team leader never looks at me as a partner. She looks at me as someone who needs to be taught and corrected. She has already had her own answer in her mind, and she believes that only her answer is correct". (Interviewee M05 at organizational member level, female)

"Most power and authority in the company are weighted towards top management so that everybody, whether they are team leaders or senior managers, tend to care only about the top management's attention. However, the actions from top management do not correspond with their words. They just pretend to know the philosophy rooted in human-centricity". (Interviewee L02 at team leader level, male)

Thus, the responses obtained from not only interviewees at organizational member level (M05 and M06) but also at team leader level show a general perception among the interviewees that leaders, when already having their own solutions in their mind, expected their staff to guess and then agree with their solutions.

The perceptions of the change initiative introduced

The interview data reveal that interviewees at all levels of the company were generally positive about the OD values that top management were promoting and viewed these newly

stated corporate values as an appropriate foundation for cultural change. The interviewees at all levels recognized implicitly that the OD change initiative was based on a humanistic philosophy, which emphasized ‘respect for people’ and ‘a win-win approach’. For example, with reference to the new values associated with the OD intervention, interviewee L03 at team leader level expressed the view that, *“The corporate values are based on being human-centered. It means that the company respects me as a human being not as machine”*. Interviewee M14 at organizational member level also expressed a perception of the change initiative, saying, *“I feel that it is not for the purpose of exploiting and manipulating employees but for the performance of a company.”* Similarly, interviewee C1 at CEO level expressed a positive perception that the OD values formed a strong basis for the change, saying, *“The values, which are based on human nature have the power to draw employees’ consent to accept the change message”*. All the interviewees at CA level evaluated the content of the corporate values as being in the right direction for the change initiative and, in various ways, expressed pride in being a part of promoting change in the right direction. In summary, interviewees at all levels expressed views to indicate that the newly stated corporate values were viewed positively. The next section of the findings explores how individuals at different levels search for plausibility through the extracted clues within the existing contextual conditions.

Searching for plausibility in sensemaking

From the perspectives of individuals at the organizational member level of the hierarchy, the interview data reveal two main types of sensemaking relating to the cultural change initiative. On the one hand, organizational members expressed hope for the cultural change initiative, alongside their expressed dissatisfaction with the existing culture. That is, the stated humanistic approach of the change intervention was one of the cues for the plausibility

associated with the OD change initiative. For example, organizational member level interviewees such as M02, M06 and M14 talked positively about the OD change initiative, using phrases such as ‘*very attractive*’, ‘*really good content*’ and ‘*a good direction*’. In addition, the open commitment from the owner, described with words and phrases such as ‘*huge*’, ‘*strong*’ and ‘*really powerful*’ by organizational member level interviewees M02, M04 and M12, was an extracted cue for the positive perception of the change intervention.

On the other hand, the interview data reveal that some of the respondents were skeptical about the cultural change initiative, mainly due to their interactions with leaders who displayed peremptory and authoritarian leadership styles. For example, at organizational member level interviewee M15 said, “*Even though I acknowledge the sincere drive of the owner in his speech, it is my leader who has the most influence on me*”. This comment highlights the view, expressed by a group of interviewees that their immediate managers exert more influence over them than the owner of the chaebol.

From the perspectives of team leaders who had immersed themselves in the existing culture, plausibility of sensemaking was often associated with a tendency to perceive the OD intervention using extracted cues such as the strong drive of the owner for the cultural change, the requests for team leaders to change their leadership style and performance pressure in short-termism,

“My boss has not made an effort to change himself but asked me to change my leadership style”. (Interviewee L02 at team leader level, male)

“I am under the pressure to get results fast. In reality it is hard to change my leadership style. Listening to team members’ opinions is not only time consuming but also unfamiliar to me”. (Interviewee L03 at team leader level, male)

Many of the team leaders (for example, interviewees L02, L03, L05, L06, L07 and L09) used words and phrases such as ‘*perfunctory*’, ‘*steamrollered*’, ‘*inefficient*’, ‘*like homework*’, ‘*too many*’, ‘*too hasty*’, ‘*as fast as*’ and ‘*rush too hastily*’ in response to questions about how they were seeking to make sense of the OD intervention. In an indicative statement, one of the team leaders said,

“In the threatening atmosphere of the change initiative, most of the team leaders seemed to take care not to be obtrusive, just doing perfunctorily what they should do”.

(Interviewee L05 at team leader level, male)

Nevertheless, despite some team leaders pretending to participate in the OD intervention, some team leaders expressed more accommodating views, which placed the OD intervention within a broader macro context of socio-cultural change in Korea,

“As leaders, we cannot deny it. We should inevitably change the leadership in this changed environment despite the difficulty of changing our leadership style”.

(Interviewee L01 at team leader level, male)

Further, the data reveal a tendency among the interviewees to offer plausible explanations of the change initiative by referring to the burden of responsibility, which had placed on those at CEO level. For example,

“Looking back on my own experience as a subsidiary CA, it seems that less than 10% of energy was used for the employees to change the corporate culture and I think that most CAs’ energy was spent on how my CEO would not get in trouble with the owner in the monthly meeting. How could the organizational culture change in such a way?”

(Interviewee CA 6 at change agent level, female)

In summary, in seeking to offer plausible explanations of the OD intervention, the

interviewees tended to highlight that the philosophy of short-termism, which emphasized quick results was running contrary to the philosophy of the OD initiative, which emphasized the importance of the process and the development of people. In the case of CEOs specifically, they were perceived by staff at other levels of the organization to be carrying a huge burden for the cultural change within their own subsidiaries, yet they were under pressure for short-term performance outputs.

Identity construction in sensemaking

The literature review highlighted that those involved in organizational change are required to engage in identity construction (Helms Mills et al., 2010; Weick, 2005). From the perspectives of organizational members in the current study, the findings reveal that they perceived their identity in the existing culture as followers who were required to fulfil faithfully the dictates of their superiors. For example, some of the organizational member level interviewees (M05, M08, M09 and M16), when asked about their identity within the chaebol, cynically about the informal definition of ‘a good follower’, which is widely accepted and encouraged to follow by leaders,

“The definition of a follower who works well in the minds of many leaders is ... a person who is 100% consistent with a leader's thoughts, who represents the leader's thoughts, or even intensifies those thoughts and makes plans for their execution”.

(Interviewee M16 at organizational member level, female)

The tendency to engage in followership behavior appeared to be prevalent in the context of this hierarchy-based Confucian culture; it discouraged followers from expressing their opinions if they disagree with their leaders. In contrast, the OD-focused cultural change initiative emphasized the importance of open communication through the company-wide

campaigns. It thus encouraged employees to participate proactively in the decision-making and to express freely their own opinions rather than to just acquiesce to the demands of their leaders. As such, the OD change initiative tended to reflect the values of openness, autonomy, and flexibility (Rees 2008), which have not, traditionally, been associated with the culture of chaebols or of wider Korean society (Kim 2013). The data indicate that the interviewees recognized that, in order to change their identity as followers, leaders, with vested rights, were also required to change their perspectives on the nature of ‘a good follower’. For example, one organizational member stated,

“My team leader gave me feedback that I don’t have proper ‘followership’. I was just telling him that there was a risk ahead ... According to his criteria for ‘a good follower’, a person who did not follow his word has no ‘followership’.” (Interviewee M09 at organizational member level, female)

From the perspectives of leaders, the OD cultural change initiative required them to reconstruct their identities, which had been constructed on experiences throughout their careers. At team leader level, the interview data reveal that this identity reconstruction was proving to be problematic. For example,

“For most of the leaders, the new approach based on the corporate values is like wearing clothes that do not fit”. (Interviewee L07 at team leader level, male)

“Such an approach based on the respect for the human might be seen as the opposite to the ways of pushing people for performance we have used so far”. (Interviewee L03 at team leader level, male)

Upper management tends to push to get results faster, but the organizational members want a balance between work and life along with the cultural change

initiative. Therefore, team leaders must play a coordinating role in the middle, which is the hardest job for me. (Interviewee L09 at team leader level, male)

In effect the team leaders were asked to play a coordinating role, which required them to reconcile two different messages, that is, the message from senior executives to adhere to the norms of the existing culture and the message from organizational members who were eager to change the culture. The ambiguities and conflicts associated with this new coordinating role were summarized as follows by one team leader,

“In reality, when under the pressure to get results fast, leaders may think that it is better to stick to their own opinion based on their own experience rather than to listen to the opinions of their staff. Some leaders tacitly imply that the ideal and reality are different. So, they ask their staff to accept the reality. Then, their staff probably perceive the communication as discrepant and hypocritical and as having double standards during the change initiative”. (Interviewee L03 at team leader level, male)

Hence, the interview data reveal that, while the OD change initiative was in full flow, team leaders could not ignore the strong drive for change from the owner and the desire for change from organizational members. At the same time, the pressure on short-term performance coming from their own line managers presented a real challenge for team leaders in their daily working life. In addition, organizational members were cynically looking at the leaders who stick to their own idea, with both the hope for cultural change and frustration over the existing culture. At the same time, team leaders experienced fear arising from their incapacity to change their identity mainly due to pressure for short-term performance from CEOs in subsidiaries who felt burdened with the responsibility of promoting organizational change. In this situation many leaders, including CEOs in subsidiaries tended to endorse their existing

identity with reference to the prevailing rules and practices with, which they are familiar. Correspondingly, it proved extremely difficult for organizational members to change their identity in response to the OD change initiative particularly as they perceived their line managers to be more influential in their daily working lives than the change initiative being driven from the top of the organization.

Discussion and Conclusion

This research set out to explore contextual considerations in OD with reference to South Korea. The adoption of a social constructionist perspective focuses on the interactive sensemaking process between individuals at different levels and the identity construction required by OD interventions. The findings reveal that the chaebol encountered various problems when attempting to implement OD to change the organizational culture (see Table 1). First, as a result of examining the sensemaking of employees at different levels of the chaebol, the major presenting challenge to OD was found to be the influence of the prevailing norms and practices, which can be classified broadly into three categories: a hierarchy-based Confucian culture, an excessively result-oriented tendency based on short-termism, and the tendency of leaders to adhere to their opinions. When searching for plausibility, the cues associated with these norms and practice led to the tendency for employees at all levels of the chaebol to view the OD intervention negatively (see Table 1).

[Take in Table 1 about here]

CEOs and CAs in subsidiaries tended to perceive the OD change initiative as a great burden owing to the pressure placed upon them to show tangible results over the short term. Team leaders tended to perceive the OD change initiative with fear and participated in the OD intervention in a perfunctory and absent-minded way. Organizational members continued to

describe themselves overtly as followers and tended to perceive the reality of the OD intervention with skepticism and doubt. This self-identification of organizational members as followers is particularly notable given that, *“What people say can be considered as an insight into their sense-making processes, for how they use language and words is action in itself”* (Sambrook 2000, 162); it has the potential to provide further insights into the association between identity, sensemaking and resistance to change within this context (Mills and Helm Mills 2004).

In addition to the influence of the prevailing norms and practices in the existing culture, a further challenge to OD was that, from the employees’ perspective, the attempt to promote cultural change created a ‘hyperculture’, that is, *“... a cut-out representation that is loosely related or even quite unrelated to the complex and mixed meanings, ideas and orientations characterizing organizational everyday life* (Alvesson and Sveningsson 2008, 128). The findings indicate that employees’ sensemaking in this context led them to the view that, through the use of ceremonial language and practices such as value statements and team briefings, the OD initiative had been instrumental in creating a hyperculture, which had conflated *“... ideals and what exists with ‘target culture’ – used to signal ideals and values, which are clearly not realized, but, which are important to strive for and embrace”* (Alvesson and Sveningsson 2008, 126).

These findings draw attention to the need for clarity surrounding the nature and purpose of OD interventions when used in specific organizational contexts particularly given the wide range of approaches to change management, which now fall under the umbrella of OD (Kuna and Nadiv, 2018). Some of these approaches may draw heavily upon the humanistic philosophy, which has traditionally been associated with OD but other approaches are more closely associated with performance and efficiency and what Pasmore (2014, 33) terms

“immediate bottom-line results”. In this case, OD was portrayed as humanistically-oriented, yet its associated activities mainly involved top-down communication and hierarchically-based performance monitoring. The interview data highlight that this discrepancy was widely recognized by the employees leading to issues about the authenticity of the intervention and those leading it (Lui, Cutcher and Grant 2017). Hence, one of the observations that can be drawn from the interview data is that this was not a Dialogic OD intervention. Referring back to the earlier explanation of our own use of the term OD, we found sparse evidence that the intervention was 'collaborative, participative and consultative'.

Emphases found within Dialogic OD did, however, prove extremely helpful in providing insights into sensemaking in this context. Employees constructed multiple subjective realities between the message of the existing culture and the new message of OD change initiative, differentially accepting the change message in accordance with their position and role in the organization. Moreover, Dialogic OD emphasizes that messages from the existing culture should be disorganized and disrupted as a prerequisite process for transformational change (Bushe and Marshak 2015); as such, it is recognized that messages associated with existing cultures exert great impact on the perceptions of employees towards OD interventions. Through the use of a sensemaking lens, the findings of this study support this standpoint, that is, that a crucial consideration in OD is to identify the prevailing cues within the existing culture and to take these cues into account during OD interventions. Further, the study offers confirmatory evidence that, to bring about culture change, OD practitioners need to weaken the prevailing messages of the existing culture using organization-wide collaborative initiatives involving all levels of staff (Cameron and Quinn 2006; Meister and Willyerd 2010; Ye and Chin 2009). Nevertheless, while the research questions confirm that this study is focused upon sensemaking at the individual level, rather than the feasibility of top-down

culture change, the findings do tend to offer support to Schein's argument that: "*The biggest misperception is that you can produce changes that run counter to some of your deep cultural values*" (Schein and von Ameln, 2019, 143). It is concluded that, in the case of this chaebol, it is essential for OD interventions to recognize hierarchically-specific identities given the existence of culturally-loaded environmental cues, which have been influential in constructing these identities (Weick et al. 2005; Ford and Ford 2008).

Nevertheless, the findings demonstrate that, given the influence of these cues in sensemaking processes, it is extremely difficult for employees in this chaebol to reconstruct their identities to embrace values such as openness, autonomy and flexibility, which are traditionally associated with humanistically oriented OD. Although company-wide workshops in the first year of the cultural change were designed using an Appreciative inquiry approach and encouraged dialogue among members, organizational everyday life outside of the workshops was filled with the norms and practices of the existing culture. For instance, most leaders including CEOs in subsidiaries continue to exercise power, which is reflected in the prevailing norms and practices of the chaebol. In the specific case of this chaebol, the excessive concentration of the owner's power highlights the importance of the owner 'leading by example' to weaken the prevailing messages of the existing culture. In this case study, it was found that even the way of implementing the OD intervention was based on a 'push strategy', which was more aligned with the chaebol's existing norms and practices than with the stated values of the OD intervention. In this respect, it is concluded that initial discussions with the leaders of the chaebol about how OD should be implemented may well provide an early and relatively accurate indication of the likely success of the OD intervention in question.

It is evident that these findings support calls for the role of emotions to be accentuated further

in both OD and sensemaking research (Baumgartner et al. 2008; Shin 2012; Steigenberger 2015). Organizational change inevitably triggers emotions like fear, anger or hope, with the corollary that, in sensemaking processes, individuals experience emotions, which may hamper or drive organizational change (Antonacopoulou and Gabriel 2001; Bartel and Saavedra 2000; Bartunek et al. 2006; Huy 1999; Vaara 2000). Although emotions such as fear and anxiety tend to discourage people from taking an active role in a discourse process, emotions like hope need to be fostered in sensemaking that takes place during OD initiatives (Shin 2012).

In conclusion, this study has contributed to literature on employees' perceptions of OD interventions in Korea. The research has moved the paradigm forward by using sensemaking to generate and explore employees' perceptions of an OD intervention within a chaebol. By integrating themes found within writings on Dialogic OD and sensemaking, it is envisaged that the study will be of interest to both academic and practitioners in these fields. The authors intentionally chose the single case study approach to explore the perceptions of individuals at different levels about the same OD intervention in the same context. While the findings are likely to be of interest to researchers and practitioners working in other contexts, it should not be assumed that the findings and conclusions are generalizable to other chaebols, sectors or countries; nevertheless, the study provides some evidence that further research with more diverse industry groups and a larger number of cases would enrich the contextual consideration of OD in Korea and more widely.

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