From strangers to social collectives? Sensemaking and organizing in response to a pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic temporarily exposed the inadequacy of established institutions and markets to handle a multidimensional crisis, but it also revealed the spontaneous emergence of social collectives to mitigate some of its consequences. Building upon more than 600 responses from an open-ended survey and follow-up qualitative interviews, we seek to understand the spontaneous formation of social collectives in neighborhoods during the initial global lockdown. Applying the sensemaking lens, we theorize the process that prevented the collapse of sensemaking; motivated neighbors to comply with the pandemic-related restrictions; and inspired the development of collective initiatives and the sharing of resources, experiences, and a feeling of belonging. In doing so, we identify mechanisms that allow distributed sensemaking and organizing for resilience: widely shared and accepted cues and frames, simultaneous enactment of practices, embeddedness, visibility of actions, and sense of community. Contrary to the literature on local community organizing and entrepreneurship, which emphasizes the importance of shared values and beliefs, we reveal how the abovementioned mechanisms enable social collectives to emerge and build resilience in times of crisis, even in the absence of pre-existing ties and physical and social isolation. Implications for sensemaking, resilience, organization studies, and community psychology are discussed.

"Power has migrated not just from private money to the state, but from both market and state to another place altogether: the commons. All over the world, communities have mobilized where governments have failed."- George Monbiot, The Guardian, March 31, 2020

1. Introduction

Can citizens rely on traditional forms of organizing, such as firms, NGOs, or governments, to provide emergency solutions when coping with major crises? In this article, acknowledging that such forms often face difficulties in doing so, as experienced in the first phases of the COVID-19 pandemic, we seek to expand our knowledge on alternative forms of social engagement that help societies build collective resilience. In that regard, a significant body of literature has explored such types of questions and revealed the emergence of numerous local groups and organizations during or after economic, political, environmental, or identity crises. These initiatives include the creation of local enterprises (e.g., Peredo & Chrisman, 2006; Williams & Shepherd, 2016) and the

emergence of a set of common practices that seek to mitigate or avoid the consequences of collective turmoil (e.g., Cox, 2012; King, 1995). A common trait observed in such communal responses is that they tend to be built around pre-existing social relationships and face-to-face interactions, which enable individuals to collectively make sense of the crisis and, accordingly, set and enact common priorities, rules, boundaries, and action plans.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting confinement hampered the opportunities for such organizing to take place since roughly half of the world's population was asked or commanded to stay at home (Sandford, 2020), further isolating neighbors that were already seen as identifying less and less with their local community (Bauman, 2001). As a result, societies around the world experienced the need for new and fluid forms of organizing that could bypass physical and social isolation and help citizens cope with the pandemic. Images of neighbors finding creative ways to support each other (e.g., clapping, see McGregor, 2020) populated the media while showing that citizens started developing social collectives even under the constraints set by the severe lockdown.

In the literature, social collectives are considered to emphasize "altruism, public action, and the adoption of innovative practices by the largest number to transform society" (Crespin-Mazet et al., 2017, p. 35–36). Usually lacking formal boundaries, this form of organizing is capable of mobilizing actors from various backgrounds and pursuing different goals (Cohendet et al., 2010), promoting social innovation (Crespin-Mazet et al., 2017), communicating a common identity and a specific set of priorities (Dobusch & Schoeneborn, 2015) and acting collectively, even if independently, sometimes without acknowledging membership to the collective (Wilhoit & Kisselburgh, 2015). Importantly, social collectives are presented as a different form of organizing, an alternative to the more prevalent form of community organizing. Given their fluidity, social collectives might be apt for rapidly organizing and providing solutions without necessarily relying on pre-existing social relationships or face-to-face interaction. Despite their potential, however, their spontaneous emergence in crisis contexts has yet to be explored.

Our paper fills this gap and further substantiates the concept of social collectives by gathering thick descriptions of how individuals experienced the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and by analyzing how they engaged in distributed sensemaking and came to generate such social collectives. For that purpose, data were collected through an open-ended online survey, along with online in-depth interviews. Even if a significant majority of our respondents spent lockdown in Europe and thus replied to our survey and responded to our call for a follow-up interview from there, responses were received from all continents. The findings show that in the initial lockdown, neighbors experienced a gap in meaning and order. Respondents aimed to prevent the collapse of sensemaking by focusing on widely shared and accepted cues and frames, which proved useful in providing meaning to the experience of confinement. Acts of solidarity at the local level, growing embeddedness, and the simultaneous enactment of social practices provided a basis of interaction and interpretation around which members formed social collectives. The visibility of actions, along with widely shared and accepted cues and frames, enabled neighbors to create a new set of "boundaries," which glued social collectives together and cultivated sense of community.

Our findings suggest novel mechanisms to enact effectively distributed sensemaking (Weick et al., 2005), unravel the building blocks of resilience (Linnenluecke, 2017), and contribute empirically to the growing literature on social collectives (Cohendet et al., 2010; Crespin-Mazet et al., 2017; Paraponaris & Rohr, 2015; Simon, 2009) and community psychology (Boyd & Nowell, 2014). The paper concludes by proposing directions for future research.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Social collectives and their relevance in times of crisis

A recent addition to the conceptual repertoire of organization and management theory, a social collective is defined as a partial form of organizing that "emphasizes altruism, public action, and the adoption of innovative practices by the largest number to transform society" (Crespin-Mazet et al., 2017, p. 35–36). Being fluid and unstable because of their partial organizing (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2011), social collectives have emerged in various social contexts and have served diverse purposes. Empirically, social collectives have contributed to enhancing the creative potential of the city of Montreal by connecting established firms and institutions with creative individuals, such as artists (Cohendet et al., 2010); adopting and diffusing novel practices in the field of cardiac arrest in southwest France (Crespin-Mazet et al., 2017); or connecting hacktivists globally to further social and political objectives (Dobusch & Schoeneborn, 2015). Such social collectives can be so fluid that members do not even acknowledge membership in such groups but still jointly produce a public good. As an example, bike commuters promote an alternative mode of transportation, offer a different

conceptualization of the road, bridges, and sidewalks, and attract attention from drivers and policymakers, even if they lack elements of formal organizations (Wilhoit & Kisselburgh, 2015).

The abovementioned examples reveal that collectives can be used as vehicles for achieving diverse objectives. However, before exploring whether they can be relevant in times of crisis, it is fundamental to further substantiate the concept by distinguishing it from a well-established construct, that of local community organizing. Characterized by the physical proximity of its members, local community organizing relies upon frequent face-to-face interaction, and members usually share experiences, meanings, and values that enable them to work together in protecting the community from economic and political stress (Peredo & Chrisman, 2006), sustaining their identity and values (Hertel et al., 2019; Light, 2011), avoiding disasters (King, 1995), or, if unavoidable, managing them (e.g., Cox, 2012; Kendra & Wachtendorf, 2006). However, a number of societal transformations have been used to explain the contemporary decline of communal ties and the deterioration of local communities (Bauman, 2001; Giddens et al., 2018) while exposing the difficulties for local community organizing to provide solutions in times of crisis.

Social collectives come to the fore in such a context. These can be distinguished from communities across multiple dimensions. While community organizing might turn into a formal organization, such as community-based enterprises (Peredo & Chrisman, 2006), collectives usually represent a partial form of organizing. Community organizing usually builds upon the pre-existing local identity, knowledge, and practices (Hertel et al., 2019), whereas social collectives usually mix local and global approaches (Cohendet et al., 2010). Community organizing tends to be inward-looking (Marquis & Lounsbury, 2007), homogeneous, and long-standing (Tönnies, 1887/2017), while social collectives are outward-looking, temporary, fluid, unstable, and invite heterogeneous members (Goglio-Primard et al., 2020), whose participation could be challenged by the collective (Dobusch & Schoeneborn, 2015) or not even acknowledged by themselves (Wilhoit & Kisselburgh, 2015). In contrast to community organizing, which focuses chiefly on supporting its members, social collectives are inclusive in their membership and promote a different, arguably higher, level of sharing (Paraponaris et al., 2013). Table A1 (Appendix A) summarizes the main differences between local community organizing and social collectives.

Why might social collectives be relevant forms of organizing in times of crisis? Crises can be defined as "unanticipated contingent events (as opposed to routines, etc.) that are isolated in space and time, have a discernible source or cause (for classification), and are high impact" (Williams et al., 2017, p. 735), and fundamentally challenge established ways of organizing. Thus, in such contexts, being able to quickly shape, adjust, and readjust organizational elements is fundamental for resolving the crisis. As a result, local community organizing, with its reliance on local and pre-existing identity, knowledge, practices, and strict membership criteria, turns out to be a less flexible and less adaptive form of organizing compared to that offered by social collectives. Despite the unique advantages of social collectives, their spontaneous emergence has not been sufficiently explored in times of crisis. Before unpacking this phenomenon, we briefly introduce the sensemaking lens, which will turn out to be especially relevant when analyzing how societies respond collectively to crises.

2.2. Sensemaking and organizing for resilience through physical and social engagement

Dealing with crises calls for sensemaking (Weick, 1995), as individuals notice that their environment is changing drastically and try to restore meaning and order. In doing so, they selectively attend to specific cues, which are defined by Weick (1995) as "simple, familiar structures that are seeds from which people develop a larger sense of what may be occurring" (p. 50). The cues are interpreted in accordance with pre-existing understandings and frames. After developing an initial

sense of the prevailing circumstances, individuals act to set up a more sensible environment (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Following the literature on sensemaking, the three stages of sensemaking—creation, interpretation, enactment—are reiterated until sense is restored, actors get back to their normal activity (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015), and engage in processes of organizing. Relatedly, organizing relies on three key stages that simultaneously feed each other. The first is enactment, which comprises developing a reciprocal relationship with the environment, collectively acting upon it, and modifying it. The second is selection, in which organizational actors develop rules to reduce cues as well as generate a plausible narrative about the changing environment. The third is retention, which ingrains a collective understanding, connects organizational responses with a collective identity, and guides further action and interaction (Jennings & Greenwood, 2003; Weick et al., 2005). Viewed through this lens, sensemaking builds resilience (e. g., Tisch & Galbreath, 2018), and disasters are considered to result from the inability of actors to engage in effective sensemaking and organizing (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010; Weick, 1993, 2010).

Inquiring more specifically into the concept of resilience, Weick (1993) revealed four sources of resilience: improvisation and bricolage, virtual role systems, the attitude of wisdom, and respectful interaction. The first source refers to the ability of actors to use and creatively combine resources they already have and improvise, while the second centers on the reconstitution of role systems inside one's mind, which helps individuals occupy roles that other group members cannot play. The attitude of wisdom is one that embraces that "ignorance and knowledge grow together" (Weick, 1993, p. 641), while respectful interaction highlights the importance of trust, honesty, and self-respect. The upper part of Fig. 1, inspired by Weick's seminal paper (1993), summarizes the discussed relationship among concepts: Crises trigger sensemaking, which builds resilience. In turn, in contexts of physical and social engagement, improvisation and bricolage, virtual role systems, the attitude of wisdom and respectful interaction develop resilience, which facilitates effective sensemaking. A looming question remains unaddressed: what happens in contexts of physical and social isolation, as in the outbreak of COVID-19? The next section, following the lower part of Fig. 1, aims to provide an answer and guide our subsequent analysis.

2.3. A theoretical puzzle: sensemaking and organizing for resilience in physical and social isolation

How sensemaking emerges depends on the context where human interaction takes place. One can expect a different process to take place in physical and social isolation, such as in the outbreak of COVID-19, because these circumstances naturally inhibit face-to-face interactions, the development of shared understandings, and the establishment of rules, boundaries, and objectives. Add the often lack of pre-existing ties among individuals facing a pandemic, and it becomes unclear how to organize collectively for resilience in such circumstances.

As Weick et al. (2005) argue, when negotiating and sharing meaning with a group remains elusive, equivalent meanings might be a viable alternative to make sense of the world around us and act collectively. Thus, in circumstances of physical and social isolation, sensemaking might emerge in a distributed form. Traditionally, distributed sensemaking has been explored in contexts such as terrorist attacks, the spread of deadly viruses, along with crises related to massive influxes of refugees or the collapse of financial markets. Previous research has highlighted a number of factors or mechanisms that influence and enable distributed sensemaking. Such research explores the type of interdependence, sensitivity, plausibility, hierarchy, and identity of groups (Wolbers, 2022); the presence of an independent central hub connecting stakeholders (Ansell et al., 2010); the use of visual and multimodal text (Höllerer et al., 2018); the logic of tact (Kornberger et al., 2019) and shared knowledge base, norms and culture (Kendra & Wachtendorf, 2006).

Nevertheless, once more, most of these studies assume a minimum of pre-existing organizational structures and relationships among actors, which might not always be possible. The mechanisms that enable distributed sensemaking in physical and social isolation have yet to be fully explored. Turning to the four sources of resilience discussed by Weick (1993), it is unclear whether these are applicable in contexts of physical and social isolation that last for a long period of time, as experienced at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. In such contexts, improvisation and bricolage, usually relevant in crises that occur for a limited period of time (e.g., in a fire), might be less useful for crises that last for months or years. Furthermore, virtual role systems imply the existence of groups before a crisis hits, which is not always the case in more atomized societies. Similarly, when it comes to enacting an attitude of wisdom, it is unclear whether and how this is possible without formal organizations reinforcing such attitudes.

As a result, in the context of COVID-19, respectful interaction seems to be the only possible source of resilience in neighborhoods (see the lower part of Fig. 1). This is the scenario where social collectives become relevant, as their elements (e.g., altruism and the pursuit of social progress; Crespin-Mazet et al., 2017) indicate the enactment of respectful interaction, and their fluidity implies that they can rapidly emerge and take action. Therefore, the spontaneous emergence of social collectives at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic reveals the collective capacity to develop resilience even in the absence of pre-existing ties usually considered necessary (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010; Weick, 1993) and that distributed sensemaking can actually flourish despite the lack of pre-existing structures. This becomes all the more important as scholars call for research on how resilience emerges (Conz & Magnani, 2020; Linnenluecke, 2017) and on the role of local groups in building resilience (e.g., Magis, 2010; Van Der Vegt et al., 2015; Williams & Shepherd, 2016). It is in this interplay that our research question arises: *How did social collectives emerge among neighbors at the beginning of the*
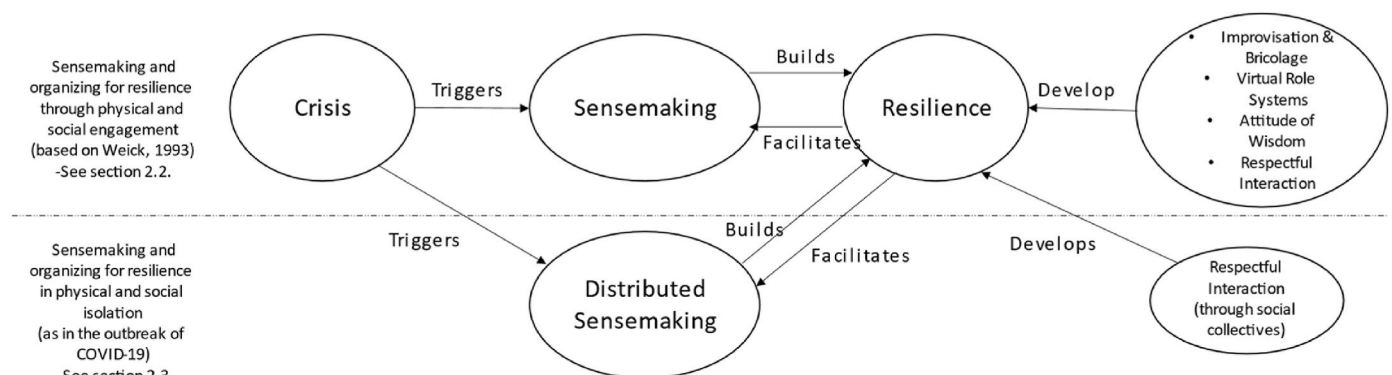

Fig. 1. Sensemaking and organizing for resilience through physical and social engagement versus in isolation.

pandemic? What are the implications of this emergence for the study of resilience?

3. Methods

3.1. Research context

Although a pandemic like the COVID-19 is usually described in terms of its rate of infection and death toll, social scientists must take a closer look at the economic, social, and psychological consequences of the virus. In this regard, consider a few examples of the magnitude of the shock caused by COVID-19. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) consistently reported significantly higher unemployment rates during the first months of the pandemic than before its onslaught (e.g., February 2020). Moreover, OECD economic outlooks during the calendar year 2020 highlighted the risk and uncertainty that the pandemic provoked, mentioning that "the world economy [is] at risk" (OECD, 2020a), we are "living with uncertainty" (OECD, 2020b), and "the outlook continues to be exceptionally uncertain" (OECD, 2020c). The pandemic also exposed and heightened inequalities among social groups (Kim & Bostwick, 2020), revealing that staying at home is not an option for everyone but only for those who can afford it (The Lancet, 2020). At a more psychological level, social distancing inevitably affected individuals who felt increasingly lonely (Gratz et al., 2020), depressed, and indignant (Li et al., 2020).

Considering these insights, one could make a rather gloomy prediction about human relationships during the outbreak of the pandemic. Nevertheless, this collective adversity created an unprecedented wave of interdependence and solidarity. From grassroots organizations that emerged (Matthewman & Huppatz, 2020) to expressions of gratitude for healthcare staff and everyday assistance to elderly neighbors (McGregor, 2020), the onset of the pandemic revealed a new social reality that organization theorists have yet to fully understand.

3.2. Data collection

To navigate through this spontaneous organizing, we started a research project in the early weeks of the pandemic and the global lockdown. Although we had only limited time to formulate our research design and lacked the opportunity to conduct face-to-face interviews or participant observation, we set out to gather individuals' "thick descriptions" (Geertz, 2017, p. 3). After a number of discussions and pilots with colleagues, we launched an open-ended survey in the first two weeks of April 2020—a period when roughly half of the world's population was asked or ordered to stay at home (Sandford, 2020). We then disseminated the survey through personal and institutional networks, a data collection strategy aligned with the exploratory nature of our study (Given, 2008) and with previous research done in the field of sensemaking (e.g., Bartunek et al., 2006). Being self-administered, this type of survey allows individuals to reflect at their own pace and in their own words, eliciting "rich and complex accounts of the type of sensemaking typically of interest to qualitative researchers" (Braun et al., 2021, p. 1).

To avoid bias, we suppressed questions that implied or nodded toward the emergence of organizing or sensemaking. This research strategy does not exclude the possibility of self-selection bias (Lavrakas, 2008) in that some respondents with a propensity for pro-social behavior may have been more willing than others to answer our survey. For this reason, we also conducted 17 in-depth interviews with respondents who responded to our call for a follow-up interview. Interestingly, for the aim of our project, their responses quickly revealed that the emerging feelings and acts of solidarity were not necessarily associated with a pre-existing attachment with or involvement in groups of their local community.

The final sample of the open-ended survey consisted of 623 responses. Leaving aside the sociodemographic parts of the questionnaire, the response rate ranged from 375 to 490 responses for each of the open-ended questions. That is, some respondents answered some, but not all, of our questions. Table A2 (Appendix A) summarizes the sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents. The sample's geographic distribution, which overwhelmingly covers so-called developed regions, proved conducive to the exploration of sensemaking and organizing in contexts where communal ties have weakened the most (Bauman, 2001).

3.3. Data analysis

Our research followed a flexible pattern matching design (Sinkovics, 2018), which compares theoretical and observed patterns and combines elements of inductive and deductive reasoning (Trochim, 1989). This approach allows the researchers to problematize well-accepted assumptions and assess the relevance of established models and theories within a given context. Such methods constitute "an initial tentative analytical framework aimed at providing guidance and some focus for the explorations" (Sinkovics, 2018, p. 474) without limiting theory building and are amply implemented in business and management research (e.g., Bouncken & Aslam, 2023; Lingens et al., 2022).

To analyze our data, we started by delving into thick descriptions of respondents' experiences. Acknowledging the vast literature on sensemaking in our field, applying a purely inductive approach was rejected (see Lingens et al., 2022, for a similar reflection). Following a flexible pattern matching approach, we conducted three rounds of coding (see Appendix B for a detailed description) by independently engaging in an iterative process of comparing theoretical and observed patterns (Bouncken et al., 2021). Focusing on social collectives, we conducted manual coding to ensure that data were to be analyzed in context. After the end of each round of coding, we collectively reflected on the matches and mismatches between theory and data and assessed the need for additional rounds. Adapted from Trochim (1989) and Sinkovics (2018), Fig. 2 illustrates the logic and application of the flexible pattern matching design.

4. Findings: the spontaneous emergence of social collectives

Looking through the sensemaking lens, we describe the stages of sensemaking (i.e., creation, interpretation, and enactment) and organizing (i.e., enactment, selection, and retention) that took place in response to the pandemic. In doing so, we seek to flesh out the main interpretations, attitudes, actions, and practices of the respondents at each of the different stages, show how the initially experienced gap of meaning and order was filled through a newly formed engagement with their neighbors, with whom they formed social collectives, and unpack the mechanisms that enabled distributed sensemaking. Fig. 3 summarizes the sensemaking and organizing stages.

4.1. Neighbors as strangers

When proposing that sensemaking facilitated the emergence of social collectives, one must first consider alternative explanations, such as that pre-existing relationships among neighbors played a significant role. If this was the case, we could be informed by the mainstream literature on local community organizing and entrepreneurship, which has explored similar phenomena (e.g., Peredo & Chrisman, 2006). In our survey, however, some respondents appeared not to have a particularly close relationship with their neighbors before the pandemic, as the following excerpts illustrate:

"Sometimes I feel I could also help neighbors, but I don't know them." (ID#316)

"It has become clear that we do not know as much about our neighbors as we should." (ID#179)
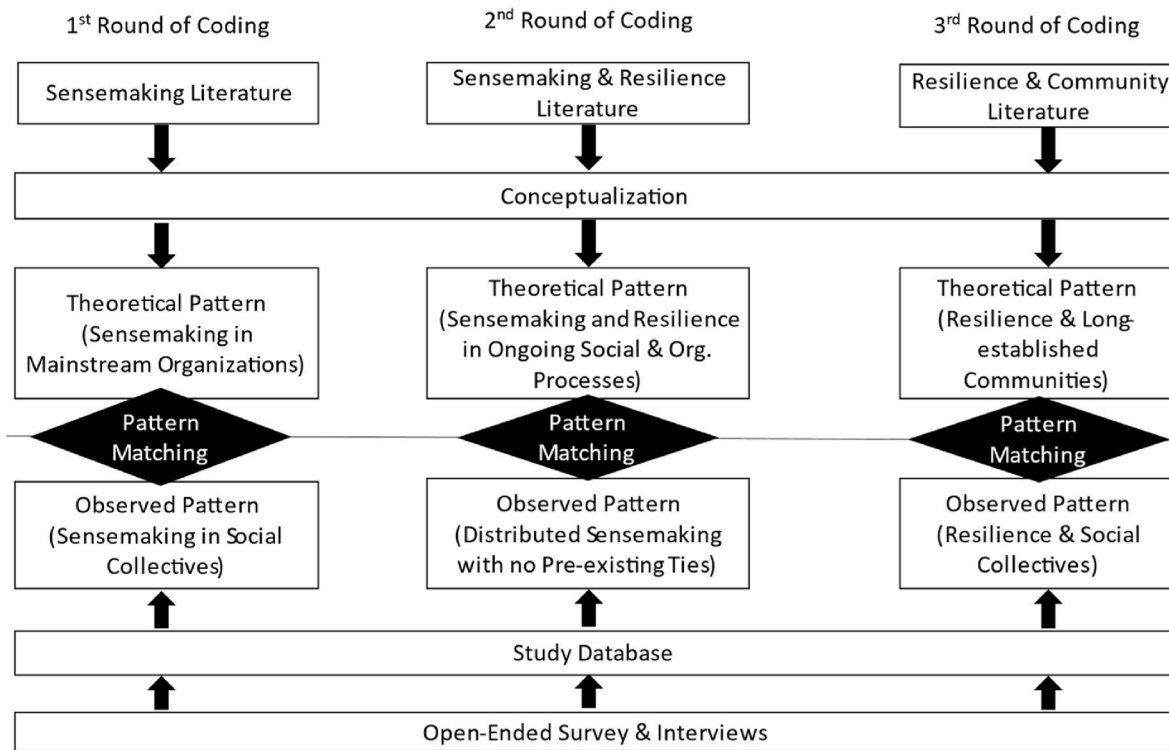
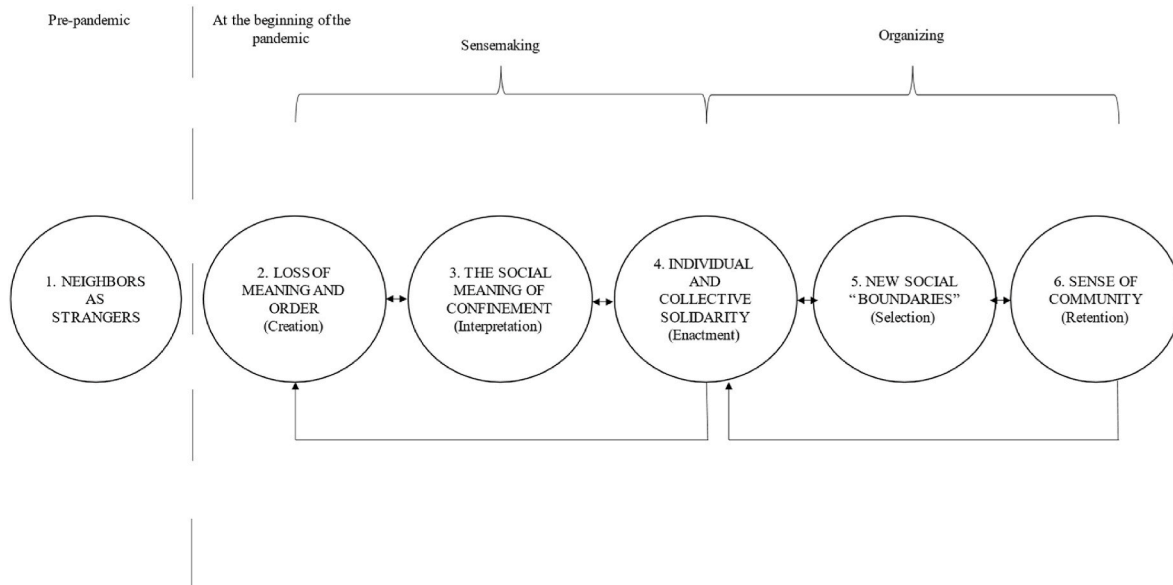**Fig. 2.** Data analysis through a flexible pattern matching design.

Fig. 3. The spontaneous emergence of social collectives.

"Now it was more distant, definitely yeah … I was not able to go to the stable [riding club] anymore. If I stayed in contact with other people from the stable and asked what they are doing or if they can send me some pictures or whatever, I would be constantly thinking about it and feeling sorry about it." (Interview#10)

Although we cannot exclude a close interconnection between some individuals and their local communities, a significant number of respondents reported not sharing close relationships with their neighbors and, in some cases, not even knowing each other before the pandemic. In some instances, even those who reported pre-existing affiliation with

local groups (e.g., sports and cultural groups) did not feel particularly connected with other group members during the lockdown. Hence, local communities seemed largely absent before the COVID-19 crisis. Nevertheless, the pandemic was poised to trigger sensemaking and the emergence of social collectives. The different stages exposed below try to make sense of this process.

4.2. Creation: loss of meaning and order

The pandemic emerged as an unexpected phenomenon and disrupted the normal course of events. Individuals had to change their daily

routines and stop engaging, at least physically, with social groups. As such, they started "bracketing, noticing, and extracting cues" (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015, p. S14) from their experience and tried to make sense of a very uncertain sequence of events. We can almost feel the disruptive nature of the pandemic in the following excerpts:

"As I was born in 1996, I have never consciously lived through a crisis that has threatened the world and brought it to a stop as the pandemic right now is [doing]." (ID #186)

"My life has changed drastically in a time laps of a week so I take it [the pandemic] very seriously." (ID #152)

Simultaneously, the onslaught of the pandemic raised a great deal of uncertainty around its social, health-related, political, and economic consequences. Its global scale, the inability of established institutions to stop or control the spread of the virus, and the lack of information about the amount of time required to restore normality heightened this uncertainty.

"Now we have [a] world problem that affected almost 90% of [the] world population and nobody knows when [it] will end and what will happen after we curb Covid-19" (ID#143)

"We are worried for our loved ones and ourselves. It is difficult to understand how we will go through all this process … how we will behave after all this? Too many questions that nobody knows the answer to …" (ID# 108)

During this phase, respondents reacted to uncertainty and disruption by blaming established institutions and markets: the former for inadequacy and complacency and the latter for their excessive orientation toward profit. From a psychological perspective, their reactions entailed intense emotions, worry, and a feeling of disempowerment, which are usually perceived as leading to the collapse of sensemaking (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010).

"[The pandemic is] very serious indeed. My mind is still trying to come to grips with the magnitude of the situation globally." (ID#291)

"It [the pandemic] is quite serious, perhaps the worst in my lifetime." (ID#19)

To summarize, this phase can be characterized by disruption, uncertainty, intense emotions, and utter lack of collective solutions. Individuals at this point started realizing that they could not engage in their ordinary activities and social routines anymore. Moreover, they were unsure who would solve the problems caused by the pandemic or when or how. The "normal" ceased to exist. This realization triggered a loss of meaning and order, elicited sensemaking, and motivated an effort to fill this gap.

4.3. Interpretation: the social meaning of confinement

A significant number of respondents seem to have managed, at the beginning of the lockdown, to reduce the multiple cues that were available around them. For instance, they sought to use some measurable criteria to assess whether the pandemic would become more severe, and they selectively attended to specific issues. In our survey, two main problems clearly came to the fore: health-related and economic issues.

"I look at the mortality rates across different countries, the R_0 [the rating of the coronavirus's ability to spread], and government actions to determine how serious the pandemic situation will be in a given country." (ID #447)

"[I assess the pandemic] very, very seriously. On the one hand, loss of human life, collapse of health system, long-term risk to health even among those that show no symptoms. This will alter medical services

for decades to come. On the other hand, economic consequences will be unlike we could have imagined in this day and age." (ID#76)

Cues can become meaningful when they are attached to a relevant frame (Weick, 1995). Sustaining faith in science, individuals appeared to be turning to the medical staff to fight the virus with their expertise, dedication at work, and even heroism. The new social role of healthcare personnel became not only the incarnation of an imperiled (and in some cases collapsing) healthcare system but also the representation of those who served society with altruism and specialized knowledge. Respondents seemed to show appreciation and understanding of the importance of healthcare workers' roles, internalize their arguments, and view them as role models.

"[Staying home] is the least I can do for the doctors, nurses and other scientists that work nonstop against the virus and for the ones that are actually in danger if they get covid-19. I can work and study from home so I don't see much harm if I stop going out for fun for some time. It's for a good reason." (ID#240)

"[I stay home] to flatten the curve, to protect those who are more vulnerable, to not saturate the hospitals. I don't see how people are not doing confinement, when it is the one and only way to stop this." (ID#71)

In short, this stage provides evidence of how individuals started coming to grips with the situation by ascribing a social meaning to confinement. First, they identified cues to assess the gravity of the pandemic, such as the R_0 and the mortality rates. These cues were widely shared and accepted by the general public. These enabled respondents to direct their attention toward them even though they could not physically come together with their neighbors and collectively decide to do so. Next, they connected these cues with a relevant frame: science (Weick, 1995), whose role was visible and well recognized. Therefore, widely shared and accepted cues and frames were crucial for interpreting the circumstances in a context of physical and social isolation. A plausible explanation of confinement started forming, associating it with an effort to support the healthcare system and, relatedly, vulnerable groups. Confinement ceased to be meaningless. Rather, it redirected individuals toward increasingly pro-social considerations.

4.4. Enactment: individual and collective solidarity

This initial feeling of responsibility was enhanced by engaging in individual and collective initiatives in and for the neighborhood and, as a result, by forming social collectives. People extensively used enactment as a means to clarify a situation, fill the gap of meaning, and create a new order (Weick, 1995) while in confinement. More than just staying home and avoiding the spread of the virus, respondents acquired resources for elderly neighbors, trying to shelter them from the virus. They also created moments of collective experience, motivation, and entertainment and simultaneously engaged in social practices (e.g., balcony clapping). The following excerpts are revealing:

"Every day I call one of my neighbors, a very old widow. I make sure that she is fine, that she does not need help to take out the garbage or that she needs some food, etc." (ID #117)

"I have to mention the clapping every night on the balconies. It's a symbol of unity and I love it." (ID#95)

"My brother for example has a projector which he used the other day so that all neighbors could watch a film on their balconies." (ID#150)

We notice increasing embeddedness, defined as "the nature, depth, and extent of an individual's ties into the environment" (Jack & Anderson, 2002, p. 468). Respondents committed to purchasing from local businesses because "we saw how dead our streets are without

them" (ID#332). They also gave money to homeless people or fed stray cats. Thus, the final stage of sensemaking, enactment, comprised a myriad of initiatives that sought to empower the neighborhood and enable a better understanding of its needs.

Stepping from sensemaking to organizing, previous research (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015; Weick, 1979) has revealed that organizing might start when individuals fulfill to some degree their need to re-create meaning and order through sensemaking, thereby habilitating the processes of enactment, selection, and retention (Weick et al., 2005). In our research, we have already illustrated how individuals interpreted confinement as a socially responsible course of action, how they became concerned with their neighborhood needs, and how they engaged with their neighborhood. However, thus far, most of these processes reside at an individual level.

Collective enactment, on the other hand, exposed neighbors to one another and made them realize that they could achieve a higher impact through collaboration. This transition became evident when respondents, in isolation, reported enacting some embryonic yet important modes of organizing.

"I take part in a new organization that has been created in my neighborhood to help the most vulnerable people, buying them groceries and going to the pharmacy in their name" (ID#84)

"The basic idea was to just share important ingredients for the Portuguese cuisine, like rice and potatoes, so that everybody would still have access to something during this time. Basically the way it is organized is that there are different boxes around the neighborhood and they are called solidarity boxes …. There is coordination in terms of the location of the boxes and [people] going and checking the boxes." (Interview#16)

Individuals turned their attention toward their neighborhood, identified local issues, and took action to address them. In doing so, the simultaneous enactment of practices (e.g., balcony clapping) and the increasing embeddedness proved fundamental in the generation of distributed sensemaking and the development of social collectives. It is important to note that the simultaneously enacted practices did not hold the same meaning for every respondent. For instance, some considered balcony clapping as a symbol of unity with the neighborhood, whereas others saw it as an opportunity to show support for the healthcare system. Still, these equivalent meanings—instead of a common and shared one—usually associated with distributed sensemaking (Weick et al., 2005) led to the simultaneous enactment of balcony clapping and prepared the ground for the emergence of collective initiatives. Although physical distance hindered the emergence of mainstream forms of organizing, the very same distance played a key role in bringing people together. Individuals could have disagreed on several pandemic-related interpretations if they were to have the opportunity for frequent and face-to-face interaction, but unequivocally the distributed nature of sensemaking allowed them to think and act as a collective.

4.5. Selection: new social "boundaries"

Visibility of actions enabled individuals to observe behavioral patterns. They were able, for example, to check whether others were confined, whether they adhered to the spirit (or the letter) of confinement, and whether and to what extent they contributed to the common goal of coping with the pandemic. We observed a situation where behaviors could be labeled and categorized collectively (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002), where similarities and differences among neighbors became exposed. As a result, organizing, in practical terms, was strengthened by creating new social "boundaries" (Stephens et al., 2009). Such "boundaries" were, needless to say, suggested or enforced by health authorities and governments, revealing once again the importance of widely shared and accepted cues and frames. Equally important, neighbors internalized and applied these guidelines in

assessing each other's behavior. Neighbors were expected to stay home, comply with government measures or recommendations of health authorities, and avoid hoarding resources. Contributions to the neighborhood were appreciated, and neighbors felt inspired to follow such examples. In this regard, one is surprised by the intensity of sensemaking and the strong language that respondents used to express the new "boundaries" and criticize inappropriate conduct.

"[An example of altruism/care is] neighbors popping notes through the doors of everyone in the neighborhood offering to do shopping for those who are vulnerable." (ID#28)

"[An example of individualism is] those provocative people who walk down the street or do sports with no justified reason. Those who use the dog for continuously exiting home. We all wish to go out and push ourselves to stay in to help control the virus." (ID#36)

"[An example of altruism/care is] people who stay indoors and either do not go outside at all (not even to shop) or who just go to the supermarket when needed. I find that altruistic because it's a bloody pain to be indoors the whole day. We all want to enjoy the sunshine outside!" (ID#250)

Organizing usually requires setting "boundaries," even if these are implicit and not discussed and negotiated. Once again, widely shared and accepted cues and frames became important for enacting the "new normal." However, the visibility of actions became crucial for assessing whether some neighbors were toeing the line of appropriate behavior. When appropriate, respondents would become appreciative, replicate the same pattern of behavior, and engage with them as much as possible. When inappropriate, respondents expressed a feeling of betrayal. Distributed sensemaking through widely shared and accepted cues and frames and visibility of actions, thus, allowed individuals to set criteria for membership in the emerging social collectives, even if implicit, and identify with those that fulfill these criteria.

4.6. Retention: sense of community

This process was further solidified through identity construction. The new social collectives-in-the-making (i.e., groups emerging from neighbors), even at a very primitive stage and small scale, facilitated emotional connection and satisfaction of psychological needs and provided a sense of belonging. The simultaneous enactment of practices (i.e., balcony clapping or showing up on the balcony at a specific time of day) was to be seen as an opportunity for socialization.

"I can't wait to be around humans again after living alone for over 20 days! I live for 8 pm to go to my balcony to see/hear people!" (ID#128)

"The neighbors (including me) singing "Happy Birthday" to an old lady who lives in a building in front of me." (ID#367)

Interestingly, a significant number of respondents did not use "I" for expressing opinions and practices during the lockdown but used a plural "we" instead, highlighting this communal feeling. Becoming active members of a social collective served to satisfy the need for social engagement and identification at times of loneliness and desperation. It engendered a situation in which individuals could, beyond satisfying their own needs, show examples of caring about or feeling responsible for the well-being of their neighbors.

"I am not really worried about myself, but rather about my family and my neighbors, who are mostly aged people. I don't want to be responsible for their suffering or even death." (ID#92)

"I go to the window and clap every day, which is a nice way to motivate each other and get to know who lives near you. We are in this together." (ID#43)

Connecting our findings with insights from community psychology,

we can observe how sensemaking and organizing inspired sense of community. As a socio-psychological construct, established by McMillan and Chavis (1986) and further elaborated by Boyd and Nowell (2014), sense of community refers to "a member's feeling of being part of an *interdependent* community, a feeling that one is part of a larger *dependable* and *stable* structure that will meet key needs, and a sense of responsibility for the well-being of that community and its members" (Boyd & Nowell, 2014, p. 109). Thus, sensemaking and organizing enabled individuals to "switch" from being practically strangers to each other to feeling and becoming part of a more connected group. Even at a distance, individuals restored meaning and order through developing a new logic of action and interaction. Sense of community allowed them to rethink their belonging to the locality and the emerging social collectives. In turn, distributed sensemaking solidified social collectives by allowing equivalent meanings to flourish. Accordingly, such meanings were never challenged since face-to-face interactions and mainstream organizational processes simply stopped working (or never started). Table 1 summarizes the main dimensions of the five stages of sensemaking and organizing (i.e., stages 2–6 in the analysis above, since we considered the pre-pandemic circumstances as stage 1), reveals how these were enacted by the respondents, and offers illustrative quotes that showcase the distinctiveness of each stage.

5. Discussion and future research

Although the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted societies at a magnitude still difficult to comprehend for organization and management scholars, it has also shed light on how individuals in physical and social isolation re-create meaning and order, prevent the collapse of sensemaking, and develop new social collectives. This became possible through several mechanisms that enabled distributed sensemaking and a number of stages that helped neighbors to think and act collectively.

Our findings can be seen as a response to the call by Weick et al. (2005) to shed light on distributed processes of sensemaking. Despite physical and social isolation and the proliferation of diverse understandings, individuals managed to experience similar sensemaking processes and enact shared, imitated, and reinforced practices. Reflecting on our findings, distributed sensemaking and organizing becomes possible through widely shared and accepted cues and frames, the simultaneous enactment of practices, embeddedness, visibility of actions, and sense of community.

Considering that the literature on distributed sensemaking has focused on cases in which a minimum of organizational structures and/or social relationships existed before a crisis hit (e.g., Kendra & Wachtendorf, 2006; Wolbers, 2022), the abovementioned mechanisms serve to explore cases in which these conditions do not hold. The findings also demonstrate that social collectives might be a promising form of organizing for resilience and facilitating distributed sensemaking because they have the potential to tap into respectful interaction where other sources of resilience are not applicable (Weick, 1993). Contributing to the broader literature on sensemaking, we explore what determines the restoration of attention and why people attempt to make sense in the first place. In response to the recent call by Christianson and Barton (2021), we show that widely shared and accepted cues and frames serve to focus actors' attention on resolving the crisis and demonstrate that developing sense of community might be a desired outcome in a context where social order collapses.

Furthermore, our study addresses one of the most underexplored sources of resilience, respectful interaction (Weick, 1993). Even during the crisis and in the absence of pre-existing ties, individuals can develop respectful interaction when they engage in sensemaking, at least under the abovementioned mechanisms. Moreover, the spontaneous emergence of social collectives makes us reflect on which organizing principles help build resilience (Linnenluecke, 2017). At least in the context of this study, social collectives spontaneously emerged and were not aimed at achieving specific ends. In such cases, social collectives bear

Table 1

Summary of the main dimensions, expressions, and practices that underpin the emergence of social collectives.

Stage of Process	Main Dimensions	Main Expressions and Practices	Illustrative Quotes
Creation	• Disruption of routines • Uncertainty	• Criticism toward markets and governments • Near-collapse of sensemaking	"History-altering, borderline apocalyptic" (ID#129) "A very serious fact that is difficult to see as real. More like a sci-fi movie." (ID#97) "The failure of world leaders in Italy, Spain, UK, China and the US to be adequately prepared, inform the public in a timely manner and to provide first responders and health care professionals with the materials and tools necessary to do their jobs in the most basic way is inexcusable and is a dereliction of their duties as leaders. History will not be kind to these men." (ID#128) "It can be an opportunity to change the scale of values of a world with unbridled economies in which the public was not given the place it deserves." (ID#565)
Interpretation	• Selective attention to cues • Connection between cues and frames • Widely shared and accepted cues and frames	• Measurable criteria • Connection between criteria and medical staff (i. e., as frames and key actors in solving the problem) • Interpretation of confinement as a social responsibility	"[I assess the seriousness of the pandemic by] the number of increase of patients, percentage of death toll, type of symptoms, how easily it can be infected." (ID#67) "[I assess the seriousness of the pandemic by] the given data from authorized websites and new, and the vibes you feel around your surroundings." (ID#365) "The most urgent issue is definitely the potential collapse of the healthcare system. Thus, it is key to flatten the curve of newly infected." (ID#58) "In the news I see every day so many altruistic behaviors but one of them that is very shocking is the one from all the doctors, nurses, cleaners, etc. They are our heroes." (ID#145)

Table 1 (*continued*)

Stage of Process	Main Dimensions	Main Expressions and Practices	Illustrative Quotes
			"I am trying to protect and make for instance doctors and nurses work less. I chose not to buy masks and gloves so that people who actually need them can access them." (ID#43) "If I collaborate by staying at home, I can save more lives than I have ever imagined." (ID#90) "We are doing that to give our people the medical attention they need because our medical system cannot endure all the sick people." (ID#118)
Enactment	• Simultaneous enactment of practices • Embeddedness • Emergence of social collectives	• Clapping • Volunteering to buy groceries • Entertainment & information sharing • Supporting local businesses • Addressing the needs of multiple neighborhood actors	"At my neighborhood, we have opened an Ig account to share activities we do all together for entertainment in our balconies at 8 p.m." (ID#281) "I have offered to throw the trash away in my apartment building (they can leave the bag at the door) and do groceries." (ID#65) "The corner store owner up the street from me is feeding a homeless man who comes to our church, and would not let me give them money to help pay for the food they give him daily." (ID#332) "[The practices I have put in place to support small businesses are] buying (online) from local shops, paying local health providers (personal trainers etc.) online for their service." (ID#123) "To support the neighborhood, I assist as a coordinator a Support Net in my district, which means that I go to supermarket and pharmacy for old people who are prohibited from going outside." (ID#369) "Here in Barcelona I saw a story about people living in apartment complexes who are taking turns shopping for each other so there are less

Table 1 (*continued*)

Stage of Process	Main Dimensions	Main Expressions and Practices	Illustrative Quotes
			[fewer] people out and about." (ID#128) "We have set up a volunteer network of individuals who are young and healthy who are willing to do grocery shopping for senior citizens. There is a map of homes that are willing to help on our town's internet chat group." (ID#337) "I'm also in a neighborhood social network to help our older neighbors (that live alone) or those who have some chronic diseases or belong to risk group of contagious."(ID#347)
Selection	• Visibility of actions • Widely shared and accepted cues and frames • New set of appropriate behaviors	• Appreciation & criticism of neighbors • Feeling inspired by neighborhood initiatives • Replicating appropriate behaviors	"When I was jogging in my neighborhood I saw an old woman dropping off groceries at another even older women's door. I think being an individual in this time means stepping up to take care of those who can't or shouldn't help themselves. It's taking on responsibility outside of required work duties." (ID#245) "[An example of altruism/care is] a neighbor who came to the neighborhood store and gave the cashier a mask and gloves to protect herself." (ID#117) "[An example of altruism/care is the] huge amount of volunteers in my Support Net who are willing to help their neighbors even without knowing them." (ID#369) "[An example of altruism/care is a] local greengrocer providing free delivery of fresh fruits and vegetables in any quantities to those homebound." (ID#237) "[An example of individualism is] walking the dog for an hour because they say that sport is essential when they never do sport." (ID#137) "My husband saw a man in the supermarket deliberately coughing

Table 1 (*continued*)

Stage of Process	Main Dimensions	Main Expressions and Practices	Illustrative Quotes
			in the direction of others and saying, 'I have Corona, and I'm going to infect you all, haha.' My neighbors in the house opposite hosted a 'Fuck Corona' party. That was one of the stupidest things I've seen." (ID#207) "There is a little choreography of exchanging understanding looks when you pass someone, both parties stepping to the side to avoid getting too close." (ID#283)
Retention	• Sense of community • Simultaneous enactment of practices • Solidifying social collectives	• Emotional connection • Fulfillment of needs • Perception of unity with the social collective (From I to We) • Responsibility toward neighbors	"I talked to kids age [approximately] 9 when I walked my dog yesterday. Asking if they were OK if they felt safe at home and supported. They were OK, and we walked them to their door. We have to care. I support local restaurants and small firms since I have an income and can work fully from home. We will do this." (ID#487) "We are all aware of how [much] we depend on each other." (ID#343) "I hope people will come to love community and kindness more than chasing after money and status. That we will come to love neighborhood more than rushing off to somewhere else all the time." (ID#337) "I feel the responsibility to support my family, my neighbors, and my community." (ID#95)

more resemblance to natural platforms for organizing (Scott & Davis, 2016). Not being constrained by pre-determined goals, actors appeared to be better able to grasp the complexity and remain adaptive and creative in providing support to each other.

The lack of commitment to restricting goals and frames, which are usually considered problematic for sensemaking (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010), might serve as a way to distinguish social collectives from other forms of organizing. In turn, sense of community seems to be a flexible organizing logic, suitable for accommodating change and necessary for collective resilience since it mainly seeks to keep the collective alive and adaptive to a changing environment. This conceptualization allows us to reconsider the role of local groups in resilience building (e.g., Magis, 2010; Van Der Vegt et al., 2015; Williams & Shepherd, 2016). We find that local groups can emerge naturally and therefore propose that natural forms of organizing may be a better fit than traditionally structured

ones in times of crisis.

Our study also contributes to the growing literature on social collectives (Cohendet et al., 2010; Paraponaris & Rohr, 2015; Simon, 2009) and sense of community (Boyd & Nowell, 2014). Regarding the former, we reveal that their formation does not necessarily require intentional work by key actors (Crespin-Mazet et al., 2017) but can be spontaneous and the result of distributed sensemaking processes. Without assuming a set of pre-existing values, beliefs, and experiences, as is usually the case in the community organizing and entrepreneurship literature (e.g., Hertel et al., 2019; Peredo & Chrisman, 2006), social collectives emerge as an alternative communal platform to address common challenges.

As our findings reveal, the fluidity of social collectives allows such groups to build upon equivalent meanings instead of relying on shared meaning. This is especially important not only in cases of physical and social isolation but also when and where it is unclear whether people will agree on a common understanding or potential disagreements might eventually dissolve a group. Therefore, given that crises usually cause ambiguity and conflicts, we believe that social collectives could play a fundamental role and hope that future research further delves into this form of organizing in crisis contexts. Turning to the latter stream of the literature, we demonstrate the process through which sense of community (Boyd & Nowell, 2014) is created and the role of sensemaking in facilitating this sense.

Based on our findings, future research could explore some of the following themes that now seem to be pertinent: How does sensemaking proceed in rational versus natural forms of organizing (Scott & Davis, 2016)? Do the abovementioned mechanisms enable distributed sensemaking in mainstream organizations? Acknowledging that our study did not trace additional stages of the organizing process beyond its initiation, how do sensemaking and organizing in social collectives occur as time passes? How do sensemaking and organizing among neighbors proceed in everyday life (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015), particularly when the decay in the sense of urgency causes the wave of solidarity to wane (Sennett, 2012) or when neighbors become less engaged with each other (Cohn et al., 2004)? How do citizens mobilize their previously developed sense of community in future endeavors (Williams & Shepherd, 2016) and create formal organizations? Table A1 reveals the main differences between local community organizing and social collectives. How do groups move from the latter to the former type, and which factors contribute to a successful transition? Last but not least, how do outsiders to collectives engage in effective sensegiving (e.g., Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991)?

6. Conclusion

As crises of all kinds (e.g., climate change, migration, and wars) are bound to continue rearing their heads, organization and management scholars should explore organizing forms that provide solutions and mitigate their consequences. In this study, we unpacked the spontaneous emergence of social collectives in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, despite confinement and the perceived erosion of communal ties (Bauman, 2001). As we have shown, social collectives, as an alternative form of organizing, can prevent the collapse of sensemaking, keep individuals active and in solidarity, and re-create meaning in the midst of collapsing order. Even at a distance, a number of mechanisms enabled individuals to conduct distributed sensemaking and collectively build resilience, offering lessons and opportunities for future research. Exploring the formation and endurance of social collectives can prove to be a valuable path for building resilience even in the absence of pre-existing social and organizational processes.

Appendix A

Table A1
Main differences between local community organizing and social collectives

Point of comparison	Local Community Organizing (e.g., Georgiou & Arenas, 2023; Marquis & Lounsbury, 2007; Marquis et al., 2011; Peredo & Chrisman, 2006; Tönnies, 1887/2017)	Social Collectives (e.g., Cohendet et al., 2010; Crespin-Mazet et al., 2017; Goglio-Primard et al., 2020; Paraponaris et al., 2013; Simon, 2009; Wilhoit & Kisselburgh, 2015)
Form of organizing	Partial and formal organizing	Partial organizing
Source of identity	Pre-existing local identity	Identity building in the process of organizing
Membership	Well-defined criteria (e.g., only open to citizens of the same local community), homogeneity of members	Fluid, unstable, prone to be challenged, determined by material and spatial practices, heterogeneity of members
Orientation toward non-members	Inward-looking, raises borders	Outward-looking, crosses borders, altruistic, and usually plays a brokerage role
Temporal dimension	Requires a long-term horizon	Temporary
Main Goals	Benefit community members and satisfy their needs	Adoption of innovative practices by the largest number, high level of sharing, public action, broader interests
Orientation toward the locality	Follows local pre-existing understandings, knowledge, and practices	Mixes global and local approaches

Table A2
Socio-demographics of survey respondents

Characteristic	Percentage
Country of Residence (During Confinement) *	
Spain	53,6%
Europe-Other**	31,4%
America	12,6%
Asia, Africa & Oceania	2,4%
Age	
18–24	30,9%
25–34	27,4%
35–44	16%
45–54	16,7%
55–64	6,2%
65–74	2%
75+	0,8%
Medical Conditions in the Household	
Yes	23,4%
No	76,6%

*Excluding responses that mentioned two or more places or no specific place.
**Including Russia and the UK.

Appendix B. Pattern matching analysis

Three rounds of coding were conducted:

1) First Round: Devoted to classifying participants' responses on the basis of the five stages of the sensemaking and organizing process (i.e., creation-interpretation-enactment-selection-retention). Given that the dynamics of social collectives differ significantly from those of mainstream organizations, we set out to explore whether the process was similar to the one expected in the literature. The results suggested a very similar pattern. However, in the absence of ongoing and meaningful social and organizational processes, it was not clear how individuals avoided the collapse of sensemaking.

2) Second Round: Devoted to identifying mechanisms that enable effective distributed sensemaking and resilience building. Importantly and interestingly, this round demonstrated effective sensemaking even in the absence of pre-existing ties among neighbors, thus contravening the mainstream literature on local community organizing and its focus on tight and long-standing relationships.

3) Third Round: Involved comparing theoretical insights on resilience in long-standing community forms with the observed pattern of social collectives. We endeavored to unpack how sense of community is created even during a crisis and how organizing occurs under these circumstances.

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