

Sensemaking Challenges in Dealing with Social Issues Within and Across Organisations

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Abstract

This study synthesises existing research to explore the challenges organisations face in sensemaking when addressing complex social issues. Drawing on a qualitative meta-synthesis of empirical studies published between 2004 and 2024, the research identifies two primary categories of sensemaking challenges: cognition-based and action-based. Cognition-based challenges involve emotional influences, unconscious defence mechanisms, and contextual uncertainty, all of which can impair individuals' capacity to process information and interpret crucial sensemaking cues. Action-based challenges centre on logistical difficulties, including coordination barriers, fragmented knowledge flows, and resource constraints that impede collective action. By categorising and analysing these challenges, this research provides theoretical insights and practical recommendations to enhance organisational sensemaking in addressing societal problems.

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Introduction

In the last few decades, organisations have come under growing societal, governmental and stakeholder pressure to play an active role in tackling a broad range of complex, interrelated and morally significant social issues, such as mental health and suicide prevention, systemic inequality, persistent poverty and the pursuit of racial equity and justice (George *et al.*, 2016, 2024). This growing expectation reflects a broader shift in which organisations are no longer perceived merely as entities driven by economic imperative or focused only on profit maximisation, but rather as influential social and political actors embedded within and accountable to the broader societal fabric (Scherer, Palazzo and Seidl, 2012; Sonenshein, 2016; Gehman, Etzion and Ferraro, 2022). They are increasingly recognised as possessing the capacity, and indeed the responsibility, to shape public discourse, influence policy, promote equity, and contribute to the resolution of systemic challenges that transcend traditional market boundaries (Seidl and Werle, 2018; Gehman, Etzion and Ferraro, 2022). As such, their role now extends beyond economic performance to include active participation in efforts aimed at fostering social justice, environmental sustainability, and inclusive development (Scherer, Palazzo and Seidl, 2012; Sonenshein, 2016; Gehman, Etzion and Ferraro, 2022).

Social issues are frequently referred to as wicked problems (van der Giessen *et al.*, 2021) or grand societal challenges, underscoring their inherent ambiguity, uncertainty, and evaluativity (George *et al.*, 2016, 2024). These characteristics render traditional, technical, or purely managerial responses insufficient and highlight the need for more interpretive, iterative, and socially grounded organisational approaches (Waddock, 2020). For example, a challenge like suicide prevention may intersect with mental health stigma, workplace policy, national legislation, and cultural stigma, each demanding a different interpretive lens (Sutcliffe and Weick, 2013; Hughes and Spanner, 2019).

To understand how organisations navigate such complex, value-laden problems, sensemaking theory provides a particularly useful lens (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014). It highlights how actors interpret ambiguous situations, construct shared meanings, and take action accordingly (Weick, 1995; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). One of the core assumptions in classical sensemaking theory is that actors seek interpretations that are plausible rather than objectively accurate. In this view, sensemaking is oriented toward generating meanings that are coherent, actionable, and socially acceptable within a specific organisational context (Weick, 1995). However, as Christianson (2021) notes, what counts as plausible can vary significantly depending on the context and the actors involved. In some cases, plausibility may align closely with accuracy, while in others, it may serve primarily to reduce discomfort, protect collective identity, or maintain the status quo (Sawyer and Clair, 2021). This variability calls for more nuanced theorising that attends to the different standards and motivations that shape plausibility (Christianson and Barton, 2021).

Recent perspectives suggest that individuals often construct meaning in ways that serve other purposes, such as protecting identity, avoiding psychological discomfort, or preserving legitimacy (Sonenshein, 2006; Pratt, 2000; Christianson, 2020). This form of sensemaking becomes particularly relevant in morally charged or politically sensitive contexts, where contested interpretations, internal tensions, and high stakes can distort the meaning-making process. Rather than fostering learning or institutional reform, such dynamics may lead to symbolic compliance, avoidance, or organisational paralysis (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Iivonen & Moisander, 2015; Nowling & Seeger, 2020).

Although these dynamics have been observed in qualitative studies, the literature remains fragmented and lacks a systematic synthesis of how organisational sensemaking fails, particularly in response to complex social issues. There is a need for deeper theoretical and empirical insight into the conditions under which sensemaking becomes distorted, breaks down, or fails to produce effective organisational responses.

This study addresses that gap by conducting a qualitative meta-synthesis of empirical research on organisational sensemaking and social issues. Thus, the current study asks the following research question:

Research question: How do social issue sensemaking challenges shape failures in organisational attempts to address complex social issues?

The objectives of the study are:

- a) To identify the types of sensemaking challenges organisations face when addressing complex social issues.
- b) To analyse how these challenges contribute to the failure or breakdown of organisational responses.

Based on the systematic literature search, 10 qualitative case studies, English language papers (published in journals ranked three and four stars by the Chartered Association of Business Schools) are synthesised through a transparent process of selection and in-case and cross-case analysis (Hoon, 2013; Habersang and Reihlen, 2024).

This study contributes to our understanding of how the challenges in social issue sensemaking lead to the failure of initiatives aimed at addressing those complex issues. The analysis helps identify two social issue sensemaking challenges (cognition-based and action-based), which lead to failure in addressing social issues efficiently. The following section introduces the theoretical background for the research question and identifies the research gap.

Constructing social issues: objectivism and subjectivism

Complex social issues have been characterised in divergent ways by scholars (Best, 2017). One approach is objectivist, treating social issues as objective conditions that exist independently of human perception (Best and Harris, 2013; Best, 2017). From an objectivist view, a social issue is a harmful condition in the empirical world that can be identified and measured by experts, even if the public is unaware of it (Best and Harris, 2013; Best, 2017). For example, an objectivist might assert that income inequality is a social issue based on objective indicators (e.g. Gini coefficients or poverty rates) that demonstrate harm to well-being, whether or not society recognises it as a problem (Best, 2017). In contrast, a subjectivist (or social constructionist) perspective argues that social issues are not inherent in conditions themselves but are created through interpretation and claims-making (Sonenshein, 2016). As Spector and Kitsuse (2017, p. 75) put it, a social issue is defined by "the activities of individuals or groups making assertions of grievances and claims with respect to some putative conditions". In this view, an issue like suicide prevention becomes a social problem only when stakeholders actively frame it as one, through media narratives, political debates, and other collective sensemaking activities (e.g., Hansard, 2023). The subjectivist perspective implies that what counts as a social issue is contingent on interpretation and contestation, not just objective harm.

These two perspectives mark a fundamental distinction in how scholars conceptualise organisations' social environment. The objectivist view (similar to a functionalist or realist stance) assumes social issues are external realities that impinge on organisations (e.g. poverty or climate change as factual problems to address) (Sonenshein, 2016). Conventional

approaches to understanding how corporations engage with social issues, particularly those grounded in stakeholder theory, tend to emphasise how senior managers make decisions and determine organisational actions (Freeman et al., 2010; Dmytriyev, Freeman and Hörisch, 2021).

The subjectivist view (similar to an interpretive stance) sees social issues as socially constructed by a meaning-making approach, i.e. an issue exists for an organisation only once people in and around that organisation notice, interpret, and label a condition as problematic (Pervin and Mokhtar, 2022). Prior research swung between treating issues as out there problems to which managers respond versus seeing issues as enacted through actors' interpretations and actions (Sonenshein, 2016). An objectivist might ask, what objective social or environmental problems does this firm face, whereas a subjectivist asks, how do organisational members come to define and make sense of certain events or conditions as social issues (Best, 2017). This sets the stage for applying a sensemaking lens, which aligns closely with the subjectivist view by examining how actors construct the meaning of complex social issues within organisational settings.

Organisational sensemaking

Sensemaking refers to the process through which people interpret ambiguous situations and construct meaning, thereby turning the unknown into something that can be acted upon (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2020). It involves their efforts to comprehend and interpret such situations, allowing them to navigate through the challenges posed by novel or ambiguous circumstances (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014). Weick's (1995) seminal work defines sensemaking as an ongoing, retrospective activity of creating order and making sense of what happens, especially when normal expectations are disrupted. Thus, sensemaking is the process of interpreting and giving meaning to events and experiences (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014). Sensemaking is a social process as individuals engage in "talk, discourse and conversation" to create shared, plausible meanings that make sense of their environment when existing meanings break down (Weick, 1995, p. 4).

Organisational sensemaking is understood as a dynamic, social, and intersubjective process through which members of an organisation collaboratively interpret complex, uncertain, or ambiguous situations in their environment (Maitlis, 2005; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2020; Whittle, Vaara and Maitlis, 2023). This interpretive work enables them to construct shared meanings that guide organisational responses and coordinated action (Maitlis, 2005; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2020). Unlike traditional views that regard organisations as passive entities responding to external pressures, the sensemaking perspective sees organisational actors as active participants who not only respond to but also shape and redefine their environment (Weick, 1995; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015). They do this through dialogue, social interactions, and drawing on cultural and organisational cues to generate actionable meaning in the face of disruption, confusion, or unexpected events (Weick, 1995; Mikkelsen, Gray and Petersen, 2020; Whittle, Vaara and Maitlis, 2023). For instance, when a university is confronted with a sudden cluster of student suicides or when a national report exposes systemic failures in mental health provision, organisational members need to collaboratively make sense of what these events signify and how to act in response (Students, 2019; Tabor, Patalay and Bann, 2021).

A central concept in sensemaking theory is enactment, introduced by Karl Weick (1988), which suggests that organisational actors do not merely respond to a pre-existing environment but actively construct it through their actions. Through decision-making, policy formulation, and coordinated action, they bring into being the very structures and constraints that shape subsequent experiences and guide future organisational response. This ongoing creation of organisational reality is tightly linked to the sensemaking process, as interpretations and actions influence one another in recursive cycles of organising (Weick and Roberts, 1993; Weick, 1995). From this perspective, organisations are not static or fixed entities but are continuously evolving social accomplishments shaped through repeated social interaction and negotiation (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2020)

Organisational sensemaking is also inherently pluralistic and contingent (Kudesia, 2021; Sawyer and Clair, 2021). Members of the same organisation may interpret the same event in very different ways, depending on their role, values, or experiences (Hay, Parker and Luksyte, 2021). For example, one university manager might frame a student suicide as an isolated incident related to personal mental health, while another might interpret it as evidence of a deeper institutional failure requiring urgent systemic reform (Ingemi, 2025). These divergent interpretations are a vital part of the sensemaking process, as it is through negotiation and collective conversation that shared narratives emerge to inform organisational decision-making and response strategies (Seidl and Werle, 2018).

Sensemaking rests on the principle that meaning is not passively received or objectively discovered, but is actively constructed in context through human interaction (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2020). This aligns with a subjectivist view of social issues, which sees them not as pre-defined problems “out there” in the world but as interpretive constructions shaped through claims-making, framing, and collective sensemaking within specific social settings (Sonenshein, 2006, 2016, p. 351; Logemann, Piekkari and Cornelissen, 2019). From this perspective, organisations do not merely recognise social issues as external facts, they participate in defining what counts as an issue and how to respond to it through their internal processes of sensemaking.

One of the core assumptions in sensemaking theory, clearly articulated in Weick’s (Weick, 1995; Weick and Sutcliffe, 2015) work, is that actors seek plausible meaning, not necessarily precise truth. The meaning constructed needs to be convincing within a social and organisational context in order to enable action. From this perspective, sensemaking does not require cognitive accuracy, but rather aims for plausibility and practical viability (Weick, 1995). However, even this assumption has been challenged in recent studies, which show that actors sometimes construct meanings that are neither accurate nor even plausible, but rather serve purposes such as preserving legitimacy or avoiding responsibility (Nowling and Seeger, 2020). These challenges suggest the need to revisit deeper theoretical assumptions underpinning sensemaking.

This questioning of plausibility as a guiding standard aligns with broader critiques of foundational assumptions in sensemaking theory. Scholars such as Sonenshein (2006, p. 1168) and Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010) have argued that actors do not merely aim to represent social reality objectively, but instead actively “craft” the meaning of social issues through processes such as framing, emotional engagement, and social influence.

Building on this critique, Christianson and Barton (2021) have called for a reassessment of the cognitive assumptions embedded in sensemaking theory, especially the prevailing notion that actors engage in sensemaking to develop accurate or epistemically sound interpretations. While this assumption is central to early accounts of sensemaking (e.g., Weick, 1995; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014), recent studies suggest that, in practice, organisational actors may construct meaning for reasons unrelated to cognitive accuracy (Christianson and Barton, 2021). These may include protecting their self- or group identity, avoiding psychological discomfort, or preserving social cohesion (Sonenshein, 2006, 2016; Christianson and Barton, 2021). This phenomenon, often referred to as motivated sensemaking, is particularly relevant in morally charged or politically sensitive contexts, where meanings are contested and the stakes are high (Christianson and Barton, 2021). In such settings, sensemaking may lead not to deeper understanding but to distortion, avoidance, or symbolic responses (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Nowling and Seeger, 2020). Rather than promoting learning or reform, organisations may respond in ways that maintain legitimacy while failing to address the underlying problem (Iivonen and Moisander, 2015).

Although some qualitative studies have highlighted these dynamics, the existing literature remains fragmented and lacks a systematic analysis of how and why sensemaking fails in organisational engagement with complex social issues. This gap suggests the need for greater theoretical and empirical attention to the motivational undercurrents of meaning construction, especially in contexts where ambiguity, conflict, and value-laden judgments are prevalent.

This study addresses the gap by conducting a qualitative meta-synthesis of empirical studies on sensemaking challenges organisations encounter when addressing social issues and examining how these challenges contribute to organisational breakdowns, inaction, or surface-level responses.

Methodology

In order to enhance understanding and provide a structured analysis of social issue sensemaking challenges within and across organisations, this study identifies and synthesises key themes that underpin these challenges. By doing so, the research offers a refined theoretical understanding of cognition-based and action-based barriers to sensemaking, providing a foundation for future research and practical interventions. To achieve this, we employ a qualitative meta-synthesis research design (Habersang et al., 2019; Hoon, 2013) “A qualitative meta-synthesis is a research design” for combining primary qualitative data from case studies (Hoon, 2013; Habersang *et al.*, 2019, p. 22). It enables the extension, refinement, or creation of new theories by spotting common themes in the reexamined examples (Hoon, 2013; Rauch, Van Doorn and Hulsink, 2014; Habersang *et al.*, 2019).

Locating studies

In order to locate relevant studies, the research question_ (how do social issue sensemaking challenges shape the failure of organisations to address social issues?) _ was used as a guiding framework for the search process in this study (Hoon, 2013). Specifically, this study aims to identify empirical research in which organisational sensemaking regarding social issues is impeded or broken down, leading to failures in effectively addressing these issues. The

following section outlines how the initial broad search results were systematically refined to select a final set of ten case studies.

A systematic search was conducted across two major academic databases: EBSCOhost (Business Source Ultimate) and Web of Science. The search was limited to peer-reviewed academic journal articles published between 2005 and December 2024, written in English, and appearing in journals ranked 3* and 4* by the Chartered Association of Business Schools (CABS) Academic Journal Guide. These criteria were applied to ensure the quality, credibility, and relevance of the selected studies. This decision to limit the search to peer-reviewed published in top-tier journals was made intentionally to ensure methodological rigour, interpretive depth, and the reliability of the findings used in the synthesis. While this approach may introduce some risk of publication bias (Kepes et al., 2012), it enhances the overall credibility of the meta-synthesis by drawing on studies that have undergone thorough peer review (Hoon, 2013). The richness of empirical data and the conceptual clarity in high-ranking journals were prioritised over broader coverage of grey literature or unpublished work. Studies published in top-tier journals often offer the methodological transparency and conceptual depth necessary for meaningful synthesis (Pratt, Kaplan and Whittington, 2020). Their detailed narratives and strong theoretical contributions make them particularly suitable for qualitative meta-synthesis, where interpretive richness and analytical clarity are essential (Pratt, Kaplan and Whittington, 2020).

The literature search covered twenty years starting from 2005 because it marks the period when organisational researchers increasingly began to engage with the role of sensemaking in addressing social issues, and when scholarly attention toward grand societal challenges started to intensify (Waddock, 2008; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; George et al., 2016).

Keywords for the search were developed through a cyclical process of conducting broad searches to locate relevant studies and establishing a comprehensive keyword list. After multiple rounds of experimenting with various keyword combinations to assess the scope and depth of the search results, a final search string was developed, combining three conceptual clusters — social issues, sensemaking processes, and sensemaking failures — using Boolean operators (AND, OR). According to Maitlis & Christianson (2014), researchers have used terms such as “sensemaking”, “meaning making”, “shared understanding”, and “common sense” to describe organisational interpretation processes. Similarly, terms such as “social issue”, “social problem”, “societal challenge”, and “grand challenges” have been commonly used to denote societal concerns addressed by organisations. Therefore, the search string included all the terms listed above to capture as many pertinent studies as possible. Furthermore, to ensure comprehensive coverage of research addressing breakdowns or dysfunctions in organisational sensemaking, additional terms such as “failure”, “disruption”, “collapse of sensemaking”, “breakdown”, “dysfunction”, “dysfunctional organising”, “destruction of meaning”, impediment, “equivocality” and “illegitimacy” (Soneshein, 2016) were included in the database search (Table 1). This search string is used in search fields including title, abstract and keyword.

Table 1. *Structured process of literature search, screening, and final selection for inclusion in the interpretive meta-synthesis.*

Stage	Criteria/process	Results (n)	Notes
Databases search	EBSCOhost (n=528), Web of Science (730). Peer-reviewed journal articles in CABS 3* and 4*, English language, 2005–Dec 2024	1,248	Search string in Title/Abstract/Keywords
Search string	(‘grand challenges’ OR ‘social issue’ OR ‘social problem’ OR ‘societal challenge*’ OR CSR) AND (sensemaking OR ‘meaning-making’ OR ‘shared understanding’ OR ‘common sense’) AND (failure OR ‘disruption of sensemaking’ OR ‘collapse of sensemaking’ OR breakdown dysfunction OR ‘dysfunctional organising’ OR ‘destruction of meaning’ OR equivocality OR illegitimacy)		
Screening 1	Duplicate removal across databases	111 removed	Remaining: 619
Screening 2	Title/abstract/keywords screened using exclusion criteria (irrelevant topics, wrong methods, outside scope, etc.)	521 excluded	Remaining: 98
Manual search	Citation tracing using "cited in" and "cited references" in both databases	4 added	Final pool:102
Screening 3	Closer reading of abstracts/full-texts. Categorisation into: a) qualitative case studies, b) quantitative, c) reviews, d) conceptual		12 false positives identified
Screening 4	Final inclusion of qualitative case studies meeting full inclusion criteria	10 included	Used for meta-synthesis

The results retrieved from the two databases are merged to create a unified compiled paper. During this process, 111 duplicate records—identified as overlapping entries across both sources—were carefully removed. This refinement step resulted in a preliminary pool consisting of 387 non-redundant studies, which were then subjected to further screening and evaluation. As a result of this evaluative step, a refined sample of 98 articles was identified. These papers were published between 2013 and 2024 and appeared across 10 peer-reviewed journals ranked 3* and 4* by the Chartered Association of Business Schools (CABS) Academic Journal Guide.

Despite the careful selection and iterative refinement of keywords aimed at capturing all relevant studies, it is acknowledged that some pertinent papers may have been unintentionally overlooked during the initial database search. To address this limitation and enhance the comprehensiveness of the literature reviews, which involved tracing citations using the “cited in” and “cited references” functions available in the Web of Science and EBSCOhost Business Source Ultimate databases. This approach enabled the identification of further studies that may have not been captured (Hoon, 2013) through keyword-based search strategies alone but were relevant to the research focus. Through the application of this manual method, four additional studies were identified and subsequently added to the overall compiled papers.

The subsequent phase of the screening process involved a more detailed reading of the abstract and in most cases, a thorough reading of the full-text papers. Following the detailed screening process, the papers were categorised into several broad groups. These categories included: a) qualitative case studies, b) quantitative studies c) theoretical or conceptual papers, and d) literature review papers. During this screening stage, a number of articles were excluded as “false positives” (Hoon, 2013, p. 531). The term “false positives” referred to those papers that while initially appearing to be relevant based on keyword matches or surface-level content in the title and abstract, were ultimately removed after closer examination of their content (Hoon, 2013, p. 531; Albertsen, 2024). Upon detailed reading, it became clear that these studies did not sufficiently address or align with the research question. This study includes qualitative studies if they employed discourse analysis where they offered rich empirical insight into the breakdowns of organisational sensemaking in response to social issues. This decision aligns with Hoon’s (2013) recommendation that the inclusion criteria in qualitative meta-synthesis should be guided by conceptual relevance and interpretive depth rather than rigid methodological protocols. Table 1 provides a comprehensive overview of the search strings used and outlines the selection procedures followed at each stage of the screening process.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

In the process of conducting an interpretive meta-synthesis, the establishment and consistent application of clear inclusion and exclusion criteria are essential for ensuring the selection of relevant and methodologically robust qualitative case studies (Hoon, 2013; Habersang et al., 2019).

Guided by the research questions, a set of inclusion and exclusion criteria was developed to ensure conceptual alignment and methodological relevance. These criteria focused on the empirical nature of the studies, their use of qualitative case study methodology, the interpretive depth of analysis, and their relevance to organisational sensemaking in the context of social issues. Only studies that provided sufficient detail and engaged with meaning-making processes were retained for synthesis. Conceptual articles, reviews, and quantitative research were excluded. In total, 24 papers were read in full to evaluate their alignment with the inclusion criteria. Of these, 10 qualitative case studies met the standards for inclusion and were incorporated into this interpretive meta-synthesis.

The final set of 10 qualitative case studies for inclusion in this meta-synthesis was published between 2018 and 2024. This temporal distribution reflects a noticeable upward trend in scholarly attention to the topic during recent years. It also indicates the emergence of a growing and dynamic body of empirical research, which further justifies the application of a qualitative meta-synthesis method (Hoon, 2013). By synthesising insights from this accumulating body of evidence, the present study aims to contribute to a deeper and more integrated understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

These studies span a range of social issues, countries, and industries. Each case study examined how organisations responded to or navigated complex social issues such as public health care and welfare, human rights, sex trafficking, forced displacement and water scarcity. Therefore,

the data reflected contextual diversity, demonstrating a wide range of applicability of the patterns identified through the cross-case comparative synthesis (Habersang and Reihlen, 2018). All studies clearly articulated their analytic procedures and demonstrated methodological rigour consistent with established qualitative standards in organisational research (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2014). Collectively, these studies form a robust empirical foundation for synthesising insights into the challenges of social issue sensemaking that shape organisational responses to social issues.

Table 2- Overview of studies included in the study

Authors	Social Issue	Sub-categories	Setting	Participating Actors	
Ivonen et al. (2015)	Public health	Obesity	US	American Association	Beverage
Dwyer & Hardy, 2016	Bushfire response	Crisis response and learning	Australia	Community firefighters, agencies	members, government
Kornberger et al., 2019	Forced displacement (Refugee crisis)	Providing accommodation, food, health service, education for refugees	Regional (Vienna, Austria)	Key actors including, the administration of the city, the city's agency responsible for coordination of social services, the local rescue service unit, police, military, Austrian federal railway, 2 major NGOs, the civic start-up Train of Hope	
Mikkelsen et al., 2020	Public mental health care	Intergroup conflict	Regional (Denmark)	Hospital staff and Community organisations staff – Public and community sector	
Sawyer & Claire, 2021	Sex trafficking	Hope culture, emotional contagion	Regional (United States)	A social service organization	
Van der gissen et al., 2021	Refugee crisis	Providing accommodation and food for refugees	Regional (Lesbos, Greece)	Local professionals, NGOs	inhabitants, international
Hauser et al., 2023	Corporate Social Responsibility		Latin America	Firm leaders, suppliers, distributors	managers,

Authors	Social Issue	Sub-categories	Setting	Participating Actors
	(CSR) in developing economies	CSR challenges, justification, powerlessness		
George et al. (2024)	Healthcare	healthcare delivery of HIV	India	Public (e.g., NACO) and private healthcare actors across national, state, and district levels
Jalonen et al. (2018)	Public welfare	NA	A Finnish city	City administration and politicians
Seidl & Werle (2018)	Critical resource	Water scarcity	NA	12 orgs across various industries

Data analysis

We used an inductive approach to analyse individual case studies, coding line by line, as outlined by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014). This process included mapping the causal networks for each study, a technique described by Miles and Huberman (1994) and Hoon (2013), to uncover the relationships between identified variables and their influence on sensemaking. We specifically focused on key sections of each study, such as the findings and discussion/contribution sections, to extract relevant causal links related to social issue sensemaking challenges (Hoon, 2013). The descriptive features of each study were coded (Hoon, 2013), such as type of research design, setting, data sources and settings. Coding different study characteristics was beneficial as it not only informed us about the specific nature of the body of studies under synthesis but also sensitised us to potentially relevant contextual factors. A causal network technique, as described by Miles and Huberman (1994) and Hoon (2013), was used to visually map the relationships between concepts within each case study. Causal networks are useful for mapping how specific conditions influence one another, making them particularly valuable for understanding the interconnected dynamics of sensemaking challenges in organisational contexts. This method was chosen since it allows us to trace interdependencies between cognition-based and action-based challenges. The case-specific causal networks served as the basis for examining the relationships and discrepancies among the studies included in the synthesis (Hoon, 2013). For instance, in the study by Mikkelsen et al. (2020) on public mental health care, the inability to manage boundaries, which is a significant source of anxiety, leads to a ‘sense of powerlessness’ (Mikkelsen, Gray, & Petersen, 2020, p. 1371). Consequently, individuals strive to understand the nature of the problem at hand. To cope with the anxiety arising from threats to their identity, they unconsciously employ defence mechanisms, such as rationalisation and projection. These defence mechanisms hinder individuals' ability to collaboratively make sense of their environment, leading to disjointed actions and misaligned priorities. This ultimately results in 'dysfunctional organising,' where organisational efforts become fragmented, decision-making is impaired, and effective action is obstructed (Mikkelsen et al., 2020, p. 1360). In the context of public mental health care, this dysfunction manifests as a failure to coordinate intergroup efforts, further exacerbating

sensemaking challenges and undermining organisational performance. Below Figure 1 provides an example of a causal network by Mikkelsen et al. (2020). By employing causal networks, we were able to identify recurring barriers, map their interconnections and uncover systematic patterns in how organisations experience and respond to sensemaking challenges.

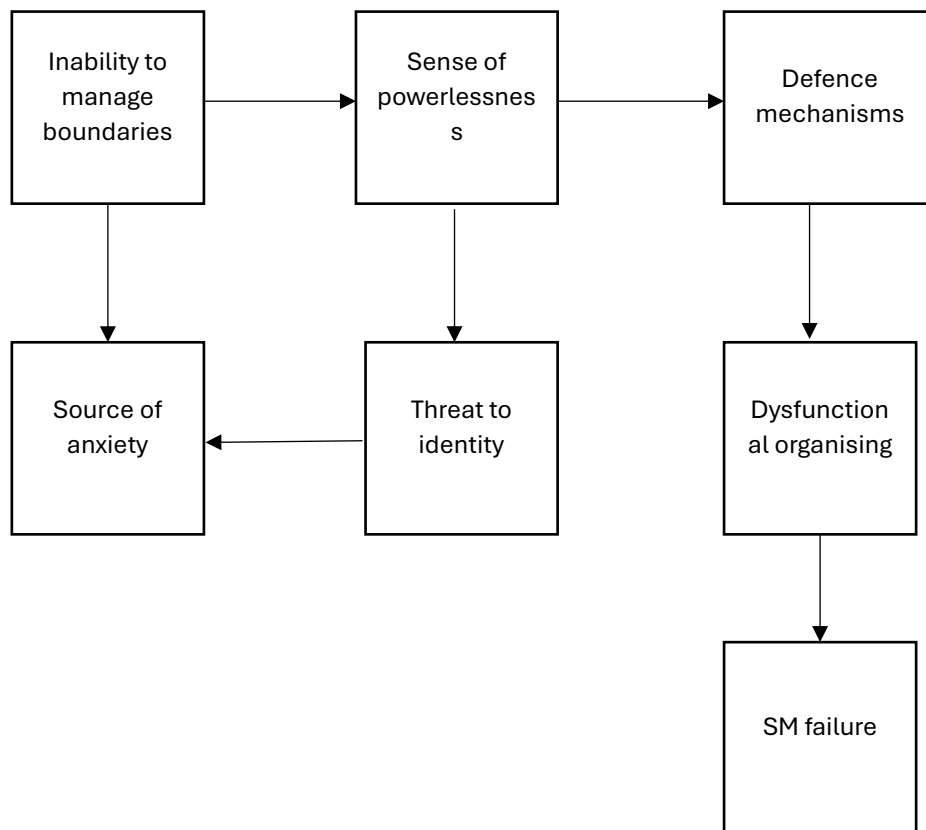


Figure 1: Causal Network for Mikkelsen et al. (2020) – Unconscious Processes and Sensemaking Challenges in Public Mental Health Care

In order to transition from the analysis at the case-specific level to a broader cross-study level, we proceeded to combine the themes identified in each of the case-specific causal networks into a meta-causal network (Hoon, 2013; Habersang et al., 2019) (See Table 3). The case-specific networks served as the basis for examining the relationships and discrepancies among the studies included in the synthesis (Hoon, 2013). Through a comparative analysis across cases, we explored how the studies are interconnected or divergent (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

Findings

In this section, we explore the sensemaking challenges identified across the studies included in the analysis. The sensemaking challenges identified across the studies can be categorised into **cognition-based and action-based challenges** (Table 4). This categorisation is informed by existing literature that emphasises the dual nature of organisational challenges: cognitive barriers, which pertain to the mental processes of interpreting complex situations, and action-based barriers, which involve the practical implementation of coordinated actions (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015). By framing the challenges within these two categories, we aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of both the interpretive and operational barriers organisations face when addressing social issues.

This classification highlights both the mental processes of interpreting complex situations and the practical challenges of implementing coordinated actions, which are critical for achieving collective goals in organisational contexts (Weick, 1988). Coordinated actions are essential in social issue sensemaking because these issues often require collaboration across multiple stakeholders and sectors. Without effective coordination, organisations face fragmentation and inefficiencies, which can exacerbate the challenges they seek to address (Kornberger et al., 2019; Van der Giessen et al., 2021). Sensemaking challenges cannot be precisely defined, but drawing upon sensemaking literature, we can characterise them as situations that diminish individuals' cognitive capacity for information processing and hinder their ability to perceive and extract critical cues (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015).

Cognition-Based Social Issue Sensemaking Challenges

Cognition-based social issue Sensemaking challenges refer to how individuals and groups process information, interpret cues, and generate meaningful understanding in complex and uncertain environments. These challenges are primarily influenced by emotional and psychological factors that diminish cognitive capacity. These challenges were identified by systematically reviewing the findings and discussion sections of the included studies, focusing on recurring themes and key barriers described by the original authors. Specifically, we analysed how the studies described impairments in cognitive capacity and linked these to emotional and psychological factors. For example, Sawyer & Clair (2021) highlighted how negative emotions, such as the collapse of hope, hindered collective sensemaking efforts, while Mikkelsen et al. (2020) discussed how unconscious defence mechanisms, triggered by identity threats, disrupted cognitive processing. By synthesising such evidence across multiple studies, we derived key themes, including emotional influences, unconscious defences, and contextual uncertainty, which collectively represent cognition-based challenges. While these challenges are not quantified numerically, they are characterised qualitatively by their consistent impact on cognitive capacity and organisational outcomes.

a) Emotional Influences on Sensemaking

Emotions, particularly negative ones, play a critical role in sensemaking processes. Sawyer & Clair (2021) emphasised how the collapse of hope and the spread of emotional contagion within an organisation undermined its collective sensemaking efforts. The pervasive negative emotions led to a decline in organisational morale and a reduced belief in the organisation's mission, ultimately hindering the group's ability to make sense of the issue of commercial sex exploitation. This finding aligns with existing literature that highlights how emotions,

particularly in crisis situations, can impair cognitive sensemaking by overwhelming individuals' abilities to process information and make decisions.

Similarly, Mikkelsen et al. (2020) highlighted the role of unconscious emotional processes in hindering sensemaking in the context of intergroup conflict within public mental health care. The inability to manage intergroup boundaries led to anxiety and a sense of powerlessness among actors. These emotions triggered defence mechanisms, such as rationalisation and projection, which impaired the cognitive aspects of sensemaking and contributed to dysfunctional organising. This suggests that emotional resilience and the management of unconscious psychological defences are crucial to maintaining effective cognitive sensemaking.

b) Unconscious Defence Mechanisms and Identity Threats

Unconscious defence mechanisms, triggered by identity threats, play a crucial role in hindering cognitive sensemaking. Mikkelsen et al. (2020) explored how actors in public mental health care organisations respond to intergroup conflict and boundary management issues. When actors perceive threats to their professional identity, anxiety and a sense of powerlessness often follow. These emotions trigger unconscious defence mechanisms such as rationalisation and projection, which actors use to cope with the anxiety. However, these defences impair the cognitive processes necessary for effective sensemaking, leading to dysfunctional organising. This highlights the importance of addressing unconscious emotional processes and promoting psychological resilience to preserve cognitive sensemaking in complex social issue settings.

c) Contextual Uncertainty and Crisis Response

The context in which sensemaking occurs significantly influences its outcomes. Both Kornberger et al. (2019) and Van der Giessen et al. (2021) explored how uncertainty, unpredictability, and a lack of control affected sensemaking in the refugee crisis. In the study by Kornberger et al. (2019), the extreme time pressure and absence of clear information led to confusion and paralysis within organisations, impeding their ability to respond to the crisis effectively. Van der Giessen et al. (2022) further demonstrated how prolonged exposure to uncertainty caused actors to experience a growing sense of helplessness and powerlessness, as they struggled to understand the evolving nature of the refugee crisis. These findings underscore the importance of understanding the temporal dynamics of sensemaking, particularly how long-term uncertainty erodes cognitive capacity and motivation over time.

Table 3- Cognition-based and action-based challenges

Description	Theme	Category
Emotional contagion and collapse of hope hinder cognitive processing in high-stakes settings. For example, emotional contagion in commercial sex exploitation cases diminishes collective sensemaking efforts (Sawyer & Clair, 2022).	Emotional influences on sensemaking	Cognition-based challenges
Unconscious defence mechanisms such as rationalisation and identity threats trigger dysfunctional organising and inhibit cognitive sensemaking in public mental health care (Mikkelsen et al., 2020).	Unconscious defences and identity threats	Cognition-based challenges
Uncertainty and prolonged exposure to crisis lead to helplessness and powerlessness, weakening actors' ability to make sense of evolving situations, as in the refugee crisis context (Van der Giessen et al., 2021).	Contextual uncertainty and crisis response	Cognition-based challenges
Fragmented knowledge, time pressure, and geographic distribution hinder coordination and real-time sensemaking in fast-response teams, as seen in police work (Schakel et al., 2016) and refugee crisis response (Kornberger et al., 2019).	Coordination and knowledge flow challenges	Action-based challenges
Limited financial resources, weak external stakeholder pressure, and deficient infrastructure obstruct CSR implementation, impeding practical sensemaking in resource-constrained environments (Hauser et al., 2023).	Resource constraints and organisational barriers	Action-based challenges

Action-Based Social Issue Sensemaking Challenges

Action-based challenges focus on the practical difficulties organisations face when attempting to implement decisions and coordinate actions in response to complex social issues. These

challenges often arise from logistical constraints, coordination failures, and resource limitations.

a) Coordination and Knowledge Flow Challenges

Effective coordination and knowledge flow are essential to action-based sensemaking, especially in high-pressure settings. Schakel et al. (2016) examined the difficulties faced by police teams in fast-response situations. The fragmented knowledge among team members, combined with relational ambiguity and geographic distribution, created significant barriers to timely and effective action. The study highlighted how incomplete information, time pressure, and disjointed communication hindered the team's ability to synchronise their actions and make sense of the unfolding events. These findings suggest that organisations must develop stronger mechanisms for real-time communication and coordination, particularly in distributed teams.

Similarly, Kornberger et al. (2019) explored how organisations in Vienna faced significant obstacles in coordinating their responses to the refugee crisis. The distributed nature of the crisis response, combined with extreme time pressure and unpredictability, made it difficult for organisations to synchronise their actions and mobilise resources. This distributed sensemaking process required continuous adaptation and coordination, which was often impeded by the lack of real-time information and the complexity of the situation.

b) Resource Constraints and Organisational Barriers

Studies identified resource constraints as a major impediment to action-based sensemaking. Hauser et al. (2023) explored the challenges faced by organisations attempting to implement Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives in developing economies. Limited financial resources, weak infrastructure, and insufficient external pressure hindered these organisations' ability to act on their sensemaking processes. The study found that when organisations are resource-constrained, they may adopt justifications for suboptimal actions, which perpetuates ineffective strategies and further impedes progress. This suggests that organisations operating in resource-scarce environments must seek innovative solutions to address social issues, including building stronger external partnerships and leveraging low-cost interventions.

The findings of this study highlight two broad categories of sensemaking challenges: cognition-based and action-based. Cognition-based challenges are predominantly influenced by emotional and psychological factors, such as emotional contagion, unconscious defence mechanisms, and prolonged uncertainty. These challenges hinder the ability of individuals and organisations to generate meaningful interpretations of complex social issues. In contrast, action-based challenges are centred around practical barriers, such as coordination difficulties, and resource constraints in crisis contexts. Both categories underscore the need for organisations to develop adaptive strategies that address both the cognitive and practical aspects of sensemaking.

Discussion

This study examined the sensemaking challenges organisations face when addressing complex social issues, categorising these challenges into two interrelated groups: cognition-based and

action-based. Cognition-based challenges involve the mental processes of understanding and interpreting complex, ambiguous issues, often hindered by factors like emotional overload or cognitive biases. Action-based challenges, on the other hand, reflect practical barriers that obstruct the translation of these interpretations into collective action, such as resource limitations or coordination failures. This dual framework provides a nuanced lens for understanding how barriers at both the interpretive and implementation stages hinder organisational responses to social issues.

Cognition-based challenges relate to how individuals and groups process information, interpret cues, and generate meaningful understanding in complex and uncertain environments. These challenges are influenced by both emotional factors, such as fear, anxiety, or hopelessness, which directly affect individuals' immediate reactions, and psychological factors, such as unconscious defence mechanisms and cognitive overload, which shape broader interpretive processes. Together, these factors impair cognitive capacity, disrupting individuals' ability to process information and engage in effective sensemaking.

One of the key findings of this study is the critical role of emotions in sensemaking. Sawyer & Clair (2021) demonstrated how negative emotions such as hopelessness and emotional contagion hindered the organisation's ability to maintain collective sensemaking when dealing with the persistent challenge of commercial sex exploitation. The collapse of hope led to a decline in morale and reduced confidence in the organisation's mission, ultimately impairing their ability to make sense of the evolving social issue. This aligns with existing literature that highlights how emotions, particularly in crisis situations, can overwhelm cognitive processes, making it difficult to extract relevant cues and generate coherent interpretations (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010).

The role of unconscious defences and identity threats adds a psychological dimension to the challenges of cognitive sensemaking. Mikkelsen et al. (2020) showed that actors in public mental health care organisations, faced with threats to their professional identity, often resort to unconscious defence mechanisms such as rationalisation and projection. While these defences help mitigate personal anxiety, they also inhibit cognitive sensemaking by fostering dysfunctional organising. This suggests that emotional resilience and the management of unconscious psychological defences are crucial to maintaining effective cognitive processes in organisational settings.

Another key aspect of cognition-based challenges is the contextual uncertainty that persists in crisis situations. Both Kornberger et al. (2019) and Van der Giessen et al. (2021) demonstrated how prolonged uncertainty in crisis environments, such as the refugee crisis, exacerbated feelings of helplessness and powerlessness. These emotions degraded the cognitive capacity of actors to make sense of the evolving situation, further complicating their ability to respond effectively. The findings highlight that sustained exposure to uncertainty can erode the ability of individuals and organisations to process information and adapt to changing circumstances.

Coordination and knowledge flow are central to action-based sensemaking. Schakel et al. (2016) explored how fragmented knowledge and relational ambiguity impeded the coordination efforts of police teams in fast-response settings. Time pressure and geographic distribution further hindered the ability of teams to synchronise their actions and make sense of unfolding events. Similarly, Kornberger et al. (2019) demonstrated that in the context of the refugee crisis, the distributed nature of crisis response and extreme time pressure impeded organisations' ability to coordinate effectively. This suggests that organisations operating in

high-pressure environments must develop stronger real-time communication systems and mechanisms for coordinating distributed teams to overcome these challenges.

Resource constraints also play a significant role in action-based sensemaking. Hauser et al. (2023) examined the challenges faced by organisations attempting to implement Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives in developing economies. In these contexts, limited financial resources, weak infrastructure, and insufficient external pressure hindered organisations' ability to execute their CSR strategies effectively. The study found that resource-constrained organisations often resorted to justifications for suboptimal actions, perpetuating ineffective practices and further obstructing their sensemaking efforts. This highlights the need for innovative approaches to overcoming resource-based challenges, particularly in developing regions.

These findings reinforce the dual nature of sensemaking challenges in organisational responses to social issues. However, this categorisation is not absolute and many challenges are interrelated. For instance, unconscious defence mechanisms (Mikkelsen, Gray and Petersen, 2020) were classified as cognition-based, but they also resulted in dysfunctional organising, a feature of action-based barriers. This suggests that psychological and structural barriers are deeply intertwined in organisational sensemaking. Coordination failures in crisis response teams (Schakel, Van Fenema and Faraj, 2016) were categorised as action-based, yet they stem from differing cognitive interpretations of a situation, reinforcing the idea that coordination issues often originate from cognitive misalignment rather than purely logistical constraints.

This indicates a need for greater theoretical refinement in understanding how cognition-based and action-based challenges interact. Future research should explore whether some challenges should be seen as hybrid barriers, requiring integrated interventions that address both mental processing and organisational execution. Additionally, while this study examined barriers to effective sensemaking, further research could investigate sensemaking enablers—factors that help organisations overcome these challenges. Doing so would provide a more balanced and actionable perspective on sensemaking complex social issues.

Conclusion

This study identified two broad categories of sensemaking social issue challenges in addressing social issues—cognition-based and action-based—that hinder organisations' ability to address complex social issues. Cognition-based challenges are predominantly influenced by emotional and psychological factors, such as emotional contagion, unconscious defence mechanisms, and prolonged uncertainty. These challenges disrupt the ability of individuals and organisations to process information, interpret cues, and generate meaningful understandings of social issues. On the other hand, action-based challenges focus on practical barriers, including coordination difficulties, fragmented knowledge flows, and resource constraints, which hinder organisations from implementing effective responses.

The findings of this study have several practical implications. First, organisations should prioritise the management of emotional dynamics within teams, particularly in crisis contexts. Emotional resilience, support systems, and the promotion of psychological well-being are essential to preserving cognitive sensemaking in high-stakes environments. Second, addressing coordination challenges requires investing in robust communication mechanisms that facilitate real-time information sharing and decision-making, particularly for distributed teams operating under time pressure. Furthermore, organisations operating in resource-scarce environments

should seek innovative partnerships and strategies to overcome financial and infrastructure limitations.

In terms of future research, this study opens up several avenues for exploration. Further research is needed to examine the long-term effects of emotional contagion and hope dynamics on cognitive sensemaking, particularly in crisis settings where actors face sustained uncertainty. Additionally, future studies should investigate how organisations in developing economies can overcome resource-based challenges through innovative approaches, such as building stronger external partnerships and leveraging new technologies to support low-cost interventions.

In conclusion, This study advances sensemaking research by systematically categorising cognition-based and action-based barriers in social issue contexts, moving beyond traditional organisational settings. Unlike previous research, which often examines sensemaking success, our focus on barriers and breakdowns provides new insights into why organisations struggle to construct shared meanings in complex, multi-stakeholder environments. These findings inform both theory—by integrating cognition and action-based perspectives—and practice—by offering strategies to enhance inter-organisational collaboration. Addressing these sensemaking barriers is crucial to improving collective responses to today’s most pressing social challenges.

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