

## Sensemaking challenges in dealing with social issues within and across organisations

Somayeh Taromi-nejad-shirazi, PhD Researcher, Kent Business School

[st679@kent.ac.uk](mailto:st679@kent.ac.uk)

Dr. M. May Seitanidi (Principal Investigator), Reader in Strategy, Kent Business School

[m.m.seitanidi@kent.ac.uk](mailto:m.m.seitanidi@kent.ac.uk)

Dr. Krystin Zigan, Senior Lecturer, University of Applied Sciences Zwickau, Germany

[krystin.zigan@fh-zwickau.de](mailto:krystin.zigan@fh-zwickau.de)

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### **Abstract**

Seminal papers on sensemaking in organisational and management literature have provided explanations for sensemaking failure. However, we still do not understand the sensemaking challenges. We focus on social issue sensemaking challenges, how and why they impact the sensemaking processes. We conduct a systematic review of the literature employing the qualitative meta-analysis methodology, examining the significance of sensemaking challenges in the context of complex social issues within and across organisations. Our preliminary analysis identified two categories of sensemaking challenges, cognition-based challenges and action-based challenges.

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## Introduction

Sensemaking is the process that individuals engage in to make sense of unfamiliar, unclear, or unexpected issues or events (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). It involves their efforts to comprehend and interpret such situations, allowing them to navigate through the challenges posed by novel or ambiguous circumstances (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Sensemaking has been extensively studied in the fields of organizational and management literature, with a particular emphasis on its role in crisis situations (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015).

In the context of crisis, sensemaking takes on heightened importance as individuals and organizations grapple with rapidly changing and ambiguous circumstances. Crisis events and situations disrupt existing mental models and challenge established routines, necessitating a sensemaking process to comprehend the crisis, its causes, and the appropriate course of action (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015; Weick, 1988 ).Research on sensemaking explore sensemaking processes within organisations (Sonenshein, 2007; Hernes, 2010; Clark and Geppert, 2011) as well as the influence of sensemaking on other processes of organisations, such as decision-making (Kornberger et al., 2019; Rearup & Feldman, 2011), learning (Weick, 1988, 1993; Catino & Patriotta, 2013) and innovation (Drazin et al., 1999). Therefore, sensemaking is a crucial activity in organisations and is at the heart of organising (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Kudesia, 2017).

However, despite the considerable attention devoted to sensemaking, the literature still lacks a comprehensive understanding of sensemaking challenges and the factors that contribute to sensemaking failure. Sensemaking failure occurs when individuals or organizations are unable to construct coherent and meaningful interpretations of their environment, leading to misunderstandings, misalignments, and potential negative consequences (Weick, 1988). The significance of studying sensemaking failures lies in their potential to hinder effective decision-making (Kornberger et al., 2018; Van der Gissen et al., 2021), impede organizational performance (Weick, 1988; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015 ), and undermine crisis response efforts (Weick, 1988; Kornberger et al., 2018) .

Therefore, this study aims to address this gaps by focusing specifically on the challenges encountered in sensemaking processes within the context of complex social issues. By conducting a systematic review and employing a qualitative meta-analysis methodology, we seek to identify sensemaking challenges. Through this research, we aim to enhance our understanding of sensemaking challenges, contribute to theoretical advancements, and provide practical insights for organizations grappling with complex social issues.

The paper is organized as follows: First, we provide a background on sensemaking social issue challenges. Next, we outline the methodology employed in this study, including the systematic review process and qualitative meta-analysis approach. Following the methodology section, we presents the observation of the study, highlighting the identified sensemaking challenges within the context of complex social issues. Lastly, the paper concludes by summarizing the key findings derived from our analysis.

### **Sensemaking social issue challenges**

Social issues refer to “Social conditions, processes, societal arrangements or attitudes that are commonly perceived to be undesirable, negative, and threatening certain values or interests” (Jamrozik and Nocella, 1998, p. 1) and they should possess three essential characteristics: a) the condition should have a clear societal source or origin. b) it must pose a threat or be perceived as a threat to specific values or interests and c) the condition should be capable of being resolved, diminished, or at least addressed in some way (Jamrozik and Nocella, 1998).

From a constructionist viewpoint, social issues are determined by people's reactions and interpretations (Best and Harris, 2013). Social issues are situations that are open to different interpretations and are considered troubling by certain individuals (Best and Harris, 2013). These problems are not objective conditions but rather subjective interpretations and the act of drawing attention to a distressing condition, rather than the condition itself, is what transforms it into a social issue (Best and Harris, 2013). Social issues require collaboration of individuals from diverse sectors, and hence, bridging institutional boundaries (George et al., 2016; Farchi et al., 2022). For collaboration to be successful, participants must comprehend and fully support a solution which it may disrupt existing power dynamics and the distribution of resources (Gray et al. 2015; Farchi et al., 2022).

Often sensemaking can be categorised into individual sensemaking, which arises from individuals engaging in internal “mental dialogues” (Harris, 1994, p. 309) and collective sensemaking. In organisations collective sensemaking occurs when “more influential individuals episodically persuade others to think as they do”(Maitlis and Christianson, 2014, p. 95). Sensemaking occurs through interpersonal discussions, where individuals continuously shape and influence each other's interpretation, leading to the generation of collective sense (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014, p. 95). However, once a sufficient number of people agree on something, collective sensemaking may come to a halt (Maitlis, 2005; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Nevertheless, researchers state that individual sensemaking and collective sensemaking are closely interconnected since collective sensemaking is fueled by individual's ongoing attempts to understand their environment and make sense of the situation at hand (Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld, 2005; Stigliani and Ravasi, 2012). In this study we adopt a collective organisational sensemaking.

Organisational sensemaking is a “social process” (Maitlis, 2005, p. 21) in which individuals within an organization make sense of their surroundings “through interaction with others”(Maitlis, 2005, p. 21). By engaging in these interactions, they construct accounts that enable them to understand the environment and take collective action (Maitlis, 2005, p.21; Starbuck and Milliken, 1988; Weick and Roberts, 1993).

Sensemaking in organisations is triggered by a range of events and circumstances. These include significant factors such as strategy and organisational change (Stensaker and Falkenberg (2007)), critical incidents like organisational crises (Weick, 1988; Dunbar & Garud, 2009; Gephart, 1984; Brown, 2005; Colville, Pye, & Carter, 2013), policy introductions or adjustments (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015), upgrading a designated task to address specific problems or request during meetings involving experts from diverse organisations (Patriotta and Spedale 2009), developmental initiative (Sandberg & Tsoukas (2015), daily activities within organisations where actors may encounter misunderstanding about how to perform certain tasks (Sandberg & Tsoukas 2015).

According to Weick (1979), individuals play an active role in shaping their organisational environment through a process called *enactment*. In this process, individual within an organisation initiate and carry out events and actions that eventually impose limitations or constraints on them (Weick, 1988). Organisational sensemaking, which concentrates on how individuals “give meaning to experience and take action on the basis of that meaning in recursive processes by organising occurs” is essential to enactment (Weick, 1995, 1993 cited by Mikkelsen et al., 2014 p.1375). Therefore, based on Mikkelsen et al. (2020, p.1375), Weick considers organisations as “dynamic intersubjective accomplishments”.

A large number of organisations make every effort to tackle society’s major issues or grand challenges (Sawyer and Clair, 2021), or “meta-problems” that is, “multidimensional problems of strategic significance that often cut across different industries or even different sectors” (Seidl and Werle, 2018, p. 831), such as health inequity, unemployment, climate change and poverty alleviation (Eisenhardt et al., 2016). In this regard, understanding how complex social issues are tackled in and by organisations is becoming an increasingly important component of the work of organisational researchers (Van der Giessen et al., 2021; Sawyer and Clair, 2021).

Further, based on Howard-Grenville (2021), social issues which previously appeared unrelated to the field of organizational studies, will increasingly have an impact on organisations and their work directly.

Some organisations devote their important resources and efforts to address social issues (Sonenshein, 2016; Seidl and Werle, 2018). A complex and chaotic social issue, on the other hand, may encompass several systems as well as a huge network of individuals from both within and across organisations (Gacasan, Wiggins and Searle, 2016). In these situations, the sensemaking processes play an essential role (Weick and Roberts, 1993; Kornberger, Leixnering and Meyer, 2019; van der Giessen *et al.*, 2021) since generating a shared understanding among actors who want to act collaboratively and continuously to overcome the issue is critical and difficult (Maitlis, 2005).

## Methodology

In order to develop process models that examine social issue sensemaking challenges within and across organisations., we utilize a qualitative meta-analysis research design (Habersang et al., 2019; Hoon, 2013) “A qualitative meta-analysis 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).

## Data sources

This is a preliminary study which aimed to identify contextualised social issue sensemaking challenges and inform an extensive 20-year study. In the first step, we carried out a keyword search using the following databases: the ISI web of knowledge and EBSCOhost. We included only peer-reviewed papers. The search was further limited to Academic 4\* journals

based on the impact factor in the CABS list. We ran a Boolean search using the keywords listed below:

‘sensemaking’ AND ‘challenge\*’ OR ‘problem\*’ OR ‘issue\*’ OR ‘solution\*’.

Prior to narrowing the search in EBSCOhost, the number of papers was 2,762,818 and for Web of Science, 2,659,212. After limiting the search based on inclusion and exclusion criteria (See Table 1), a sample of 25 studies in EBSCOhost and 20 studies in Web of Science resulted (published between 2018 and 2022, in English, peer-reviewed articles, CABS list 4\* ranked journals). The title, abstracts, names of the authors and journal names, keywords, year of publication, theory and findings of the papers were exported to the excel spreadsheet to manage data. Duplicate papers were discarded. Then, titles, abstracts and introduction sections were screened, and articles that were not empirical, did not focus on social issues and did not apply sensemaking were excluded. Afterwards, the full text was read carefully, and four papers were selected for extracting data (Table 2).

**Table 1- Inclusion and exclusion criteria**

| Included                                                          | Excluded                                                                     |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Academic 4* Journals                                              | CABS 1*, 2* and 3* journals and other journals not included in the CABS list |
| From 2018 to 2022                                                 | All other years                                                              |
| English language articles                                         | All other languages                                                          |
| Peer-reviewed papers                                              | Non-peer-reviewed papers                                                     |
| Empirical papers                                                  | Conceptual papers                                                            |
| Papers that focus on social issues                                | Papers that do not focus on a social issue                                   |
| Papers that use sensemaking theory to make sense of social issues | Papers that do not use sensemaking theory                                    |

Inclusion and exclusion criteria are employed (Hoon, 2013) to assure the “quality of the case data basis” (Habersang *et al.*, 2019, p.23). We included qualitative and empirical papers that focus on social issues within and across organisations from a sensemaking perspective. Articles were excluded if they were conceptual or not focused on social issues. Based on Hoon, (2013, p. 544), “rather than meta-analyzing quantitative findings in an additive logic, the meta-synthesis seeks to move a body of knowledge forward by interpreting primary qualitative evidence across different contexts to come to a higher replicability of theory”.

**Table 2- Overview of studies included in our study**

| Authors                     | Social Issue                         | Sub-categories                                                        | Setting                    | Participating Actors                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Kornberger et al., 2019     | Forced displacement (Refugee crisis) | Providing accommodation, food, health service, education for refugees | Regional (Vienna, Austria) | 9 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            | –                                                                     | Regional (Denmark)         | Hospital staff and Community organisations staff – Public and community sector                                                                                                                                                                       |
| Sawyer & Claire, 2021       | Sex trafficking                      | –                                                                     | 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 inhabitants, professionals, international NGOs                                                                                                                                                                                                 |

The included articles represent various social issues, organisational sizes, sectors, and countries. In this sense, our database has sufficient variety in the phenomena of interest (Maxwell, 2012; Habersang *et al.*, 2019). The diversity of participating actors in the case studies also provides role variety in sensemaking processes.

Analysing data: The descriptive features of each study were coded (Hoon, 2013), such as type of research design, setting, data sources and settings. Then, an analysis within each case was conducted by comparing and categorising data (Habersang *et al.*, 2019) to find challenges that hindered the sensemaking process.

### Data analysis

We used an inductive approach to analyse individual case studies, coding them line by line. We focused on two key sections: the findings section and the discussion/contribution section. Through this process, we identified a total of eight first-order concepts.

To develop categories from the initial concepts, we employed axial coding. This process involved connecting the first-order concepts to higher-level themes that represented emerging patterns and more abstract categories in the data (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). For instance, concepts like 'identity threat,' 'anxiety,' and 'lack of hope in pursuing goals' were associated with the second-order theme 'psychological challenges' (See table 3)

When examining the interconnections among codes, we establish a chronological link to construct a coherent narrative of events in the context of a sensemaking challenge (Habersang et al., 2019). 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 defense mechanisms. These

defense mechanisms, impact sensemaking and can potentially result in "dysfunctional organizing." (Mikkelsen et al., 2020, p. 1360).

In accordance with Miles and Huberman's (1994) suggestion, we developed a case-specific causal network. By mapping each case within this network, we gained a clear understanding of the connections between first-order concepts and were able to pinpoint the dominant concepts that influenced a specific sensemaking challenge case.

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). 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).

Table: Axial coding

| <b>First-Order Concepts</b>          | <b>Second-Order Theme</b>                                        | <b>Aggregate dimension</b>    |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Identity threat                      | Psychological challenges                                         | Managing unconscious emotions |
| Anxiety                              | Psychological challenges                                         | Managing unconscious emotions |
| Being at the bottom of the hierarchy | Organizational challenges that provokes psychological challenges | Managing unconscious emotions |
| Lack of hope in pursuing goals       | Psychological challenges                                         | Managing unconscious emotions |
| Lack of information                  | Resource-based challenges                                        | Contextual disturbance        |
| Time pressure                        | Temporal challenges                                              | Contextual disturbance        |
| Unpredictability and uncertainty     | Issue-characteristic challenges                                  | Contextual disturbance        |

## Observations

In the following paragraphs, we introduce sensemaking challenges that are identified among the papers studied. Sensemaking challenges cannot be precisely defined, but drawing upon sensemaking literature, we can characterize 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).

## Sensemaking challenges

In this section, we will explore the challenges encountered when making sense of social issues. Through our analysis of the reviewed articles, we have identified several key aspects that contribute to these challenges. One significant aspect involves managing unconscious emotions, which can influence the sensemaking process. Additionally, the scarcity of information, time pressure, and the unpredictable and uncertain nature of social issues further

complicate the sensemaking endeavor. By examining these factors, we aim to provide an understanding of the sensemaking challenges associated with social issues.

*Emotions in sensemaking:* There is a growing recognition that emotions play a role in the process of sensemaking (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010; Maitlis, Vogus, & Lawrence, 2013; Weick et al., 2005).

Sensemaking often involves the presence of negative emotions, especially when regular routines are disrupted, leading to a loss of certainty (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015). Negative emotions become particularly prominent during crises and organisational changes, where fear, desperation, anxiety, and panic can significantly hinder the sensemaking process (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). These emotions have the potential to impair individuals' cognitive abilities to process information and extract important cues (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010).

In our reviewed papers, Sawyer and Clair (2021) emphasize the role of emotions in organisations' efforts to address persistent complex social issue of sex trafficking and maintain progress towards their objectives. They highlight the concept of "hope culture," which encompasses a set of "beliefs, norms, and practices" that foster "hopeful thoughts and behaviors in pursuit of organisational goals" (Sawyer and Clair, 2021, p. 1). A strong hope culture facilitates engagement and participation in tackling social issues, improves the well-being of organisational members, and fuels ambitious pursuit of objectives (Sawyer and Clair, 2021).

In another paper among our reviewed papers, Mikkelsen et al. (2020) focus on unconscious emotional processes and their effect on sensemaking in situation of conflict between organisations required to collaborate. When boundary management seems unattainable, it can lead to a sense of powerlessness and anxiety (Mikkelsen et al., 2020). Consequently, actors strive to identify the problem at hand and may resort to unconscious defence mechanisms, such as "rationalization, projective identification, and fantasy", to reduce anxiety stemming from threats to their identity (Mikkelsen et al., 2020, p.1360). These self-defence strategies, according to the systems psychodynamic approach, can influence sensemaking processes and potentially result in "dysfunctional organising" (Mikkelsen et al., 2020, p.1360).

*Context in sensemaking:* The process of sensemaking is always embedded within specific contexts and is influenced by them (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015). The "immediate action context" in which an activity is heavily interrupted plays a pivotal role in sensemaking processes (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015, p.S16). It affects how individuals bracket their experiences, perceive and extract relevant cues, and interpret them (Weick, 1995). Similarly, the "immediate social context" holds great importance in sensemaking efforts (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015, p.S16). It binds individuals to actions that require justification, influences the relevance of information, and provides the norms and expectations that shape and constrain explanations. (Weick, 1995).

Our reviewed papers emphasize the critical role of context in the sensemaking process. In their study, Kornberger et al. (2019) focus on collective decision-making and mobilizing collective action under extreme pressure imposed by the context. They investigate situations (i.e., refugee crisis in Vienna, Austria) where actors face the challenge of understanding, making decisions, and acting in the face of significant time pressure. Also, relevant organisations lost control over the crises and national authorities were paralysed. This loss of

control and the resulting paralysis further accentuate the complexity and challenges of sensemaking. The lack of information, time pressure, and unpredictability and uncertainty further compound the difficulty of sensemaking in these contexts (Kornberger et al., 2019, pp. 11–12).

However, despite these challenges, Kornberger et al. (2019) find in their study that actors employed specific strategies of action. These strategies, identified by the researchers, played a crucial role in synchronising action and cognition (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015). The use of these strategies helped actors navigate the complex context and make progress towards collective goals.

In the same context of the refugee crisis, Van der Gissen et al. (2021) conducted a study in a different setting (Lesbos, Greece). Their research focused on examining the sensemaking processes of local individuals, professionals, and organisations involved in the crisis. These actors actively position themselves and take action to address the challenges posed by the crisis. Professionals in organisations, as highlighted by Van der Gissen et al. (2021), often experienced a state of confusion and uncertainty regarding how the situation might unfold in the future.

In both studies, conducted by Kornberger et al. (2019) and Van der Gissen et al. (2021), the nature of the social issue is persistent and the context is extreme. (Van der Gissen et al., 2021). Also actors are highly diverse and they had no prior experience of working with each other.

Both studies conducted by Kornberger et al. (2019) and Van der Gissen et al. (2021) focus on social issues characterized by their persistent nature and extreme contexts. One notable aspect across both studies is the high diversity among the actors involved in terms of their values, motives and structures and perspective, who often have no prior experience of working together, which add to the complexity of sensemaking in these issue contexts.

In conclusion, the sensemaking process in relation to social issues presents various challenges that impact decision-making and solving the problem. These challenges encompass the management of unconscious emotions, such as identity threats which can provoke anxiety and hinder rationality in sensemaking. Also, lack of hope which emerges from not getting the desired result from efforts poses challenges. Moreover, the scarcity of information, lack of time, and the unpredictable and uncertain nature of social issues further compound the sensemaking difficulties. The context in which sensemaking occurs, including the immediate action and social contexts, significantly influences the sensemaking processes.

**Table 4- sensemaking challenges**

| <b>Authors</b>              | <b>level</b>                                                  | <b>Concepts</b>                                                      | <b>Sensemaking challenges</b> | <b>Action-based/ cognition-based challenges</b> |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| Mikkelsen et al. 2020       | Inter-organisational level (Intergroup)                       | Identity threat, anxiety, being at the bottom of the hierarchy       | Managing unconscious emotions | Cognition-based                                 |
| Sawyer & Clair, 2021        | Organisational                                                | Lack of hope in pursuing goals                                       | Managing unconscious emotions | Cognition-based                                 |
| Van der gissen et al., 2021 | Individual and Inter-organisational level (formal & informal) | Lack of information, time pressure, unpredictability and uncertainty | Contextual challenges         | Action-based challenges                         |
| Kornberger et al., 2019;    | Inter-organisational                                          | Lack of information, time pressure, unpredictability and uncertainty | Contextual challenges         | Action-based                                    |

## Conclusion

This study is motivated by two social issues sensemaking impediments that are introduced in a conceptual paper by Sonenshein (2007). Our reviewed papers shed light on these challenges. Understanding and addressing these challenges in the sensemaking process related to social issues are crucial for organisations involved in decision-making and problem-solving. By acknowledging the influence of emotions and context on sensemaking and posed challenges to its process, strategies can be developed to foster effective sensemaking and facilitate progress toward collective goals.

We can divide sensemaking challenges into two categories, including a) cognition-based challenges that actors try to make sense of the situation by asking temporal questions in their minds about their organisational identity to find “forms of memory” to make sense of the situation (Schultz and Hernes, 2013), and b) action-based challenges which are those that occur in implementing strategies to make sense of the situation. This classification is shown in Table 4.

Cognition-based challenges allow us to understand better how emotions unconsciously prevent individuals in organisations from making sense of the issue while they want to make sense of an issue collectively and collaboratively across organisations. Actors across

organisations blame others to separate off unpleasant aspects of their professional identities unconsciously to protect against the threat to their identities. Thus, it prevents them from making sense of the issue collaboratively. Also, the lack of hope in organisations can make sensemaking challenging when actors put in place some strategies in order to address social issues, but they cannot attain successful results. They unconsciously lose their hope and withdraw from bracketing the cues. Therefore, organisations that tackle social issues in their activities should be aware of the role of hope in the culture of their organisations.

Action-based challenges in extreme contexts occur when time pressure, lack of information, unpredictability and uncertainty of the situations prevent actors from implementing proper strategies to make sense of the issues. As the case study by Kornberger et al. (2019) demonstrates, the issue (such as the refugee crisis in Austria) is evolving and organisations who are responsible to solve the problem, lack the time to fully comprehend the scope of problem in order to implement actions that would help them to make sense of the issue, such as the number of people (who arrive continuously) that need to be accommodated.

Our study identified case-study-based examples of sensemaking social issue challenges in the literature, including managing unconscious emotions and contextual disturbance that prohibit clear understanding of the social issue. The study contributes a dual classification of action-based and cognition-based challenges in organisational and inter-organisational contexts. Our classification presents an initial framework for identifying challenges.

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