

Filstad, C., Olsen, T.H., & Thomassen, A.O. (2022). When sensemaking remains local: implications for distributed sensemaking in reform implementation. *Journal of Workplace Learning*, published online August 17. DOI 10.1108/JWL-03-2022-0032.

Akseptert fagfelleurdert versjon

When sensemaking remains local: implications for distributed sensemaking in reform implementation

Abstract

Purpose: In this paper, we contribute to the literature on distributed sensemaking by studying how the police establish and develop their new position as police contacts during the police reform.

Design/methodology/approach: We studied how the position of police contact, a cornerstone of the recent Norwegian police reform, was interpreted and practised. We interviewed police contacts at two different times during reform implementation to explore how they made sense of and practised their job.

Findings: We identified three interpretations of the position of police contact and describe them as ideal types: an administrative position, a professional position and a strategic position. The ideal types were reinforced rather than developing towards a shared understanding. Our data demonstrate that the sensemaking processes and experimentation to settle into the new position involved local actors internally in the police and externally in relation to local authorities, and reinforced local interpretations.

Originality: The study supports the notion of sensemaking as distributed but extends previous research by suggesting that “ideal types” help us understand the content of interpretations. It also extends our understanding by showing that distributed sensemaking takes place as individuals make sense of more open-ended problems. This challenges our understanding of the term distributed, because unless challenged, distributed sensemaking in isolated pockets of the organization remain local, and we suggest that the term local distributed sensemaking captures this phenomenon.

Keywords: distributed sensemaking, local distributed sensemaking, ideal types, exploration and exploitation, reform implementation, police

Introduction

Sensemaking research has increased our understanding of how individuals make sense of organizational change initiatives (Gioia and Thomas, 1996; Balogun and Johnson, 2004; Helms-Mills, 2003; Maitlis, 2005; Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010). Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfelder (2005) studied how a crisis can trigger sensemaking across organizations that engage in a joint effort to solve the crisis. They argue that when sensemaking captures the processes of several individuals in several organizations aiming to solve the same problem, it is a question of distributed sensemaking (Weick, 2006). Distributed sensemaking is therefore known to provide a fruitful lens for exploring possible explanations of how and why change is enacted in different forms.

Political reforms are often complex, unpredictable, uncertain, and involve changes in knowledge domains and practices (Dibella, 2007; Fyfe, 2019; Karp, 2021). The implementation of political reforms involves different professions, knowledge and interests in how to change and is thus unclear, ambiguous and subject to agenda-driven (re)framing (Tsoukas and Vladimirou, 2001; Carlile, 2002, 2004; Knight and Tsoukas, 2019), and provides a suitable context for investigating distributed sensemaking. Hence, we find political reforms, and more specifically, the Norwegian police reform, relevant for further studies of distributed sensemaking. The Norwegian police reform aimed at reforming an organization employing about 18,000 employees having their daily work in one of over 200 different locations across the country. To deliver meaningful police reforms involves substantial change in knowledge domains and relies heavily on collaborative work in balancing exploitation and exploration of knowledge within and across organizations (March, 1991; Fyfe, 2019; Filstad, 2022). When it comes to political reforms, the sense of urgency may be more or less prominent and the understanding of what is to be changed and how may not be shared, because stakeholders have diverse professional interests and agendas on how to implement change. Consequently, we contribute with knowledge about distributed sensemaking in interprofessional collaboration that addresses other situations than the solving of a particular problem.

In this paper, we add to the distributed sensemaking literature through studies of how the police establish and develop their new position as police contacts during the police reform. Thus, we explore the following research question: How do police officers make sense of their new position and responsibilities in intra-professional collaboration internally in the police and externally with local authority partners?

Next, we discuss our theoretical framework, the research setting and the research methods we used. We present our findings and discuss our contributions before we conclude and discuss study limitations and theoretical and practical implications.

Sensemaking

Sensemaking is social constructions of people seeking to understand ambiguous, equivocal or confusing events or issues (Weick *et al.*, 2005; Corradi, Gherardi and Verzelloni, 2010; Brown, Colville and Pye, 2015), where people construct ‘realities’ and meaning retrospectively in a continuing dialogue of discovery and invention related to their own practices (Weick *et al.*, 2005; Voronov, 2008; Brown *et al.*, 2015). Equivocality reduction acknowledges both discovery and inventions as aspects of sensemaking, meaning that people generate what they interpret (Weick, 1995), including “the active authoring of the situations in which reflexive actors are embedded and are attempting to comprehend” (Brown *et al.*, 2015, p. 267). A sensemaking approach is concerned with how people negotiate and sustain meaning for equivocality reduction to ensure some form of stability and attribute plausible sense (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2012; Dane, 2013). Exploring sensemaking is about understanding the micro processes that underlie macro processes acknowledged in three sets of interweaving processes of noticing, making interpretations and engaging in actions (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014), for example, in change (Balogun and Johnson, 2004, 2005), learning (Catino and Patriotta, 2013), or in the doing of managing (Mangham and Pye, 1991). Sensemaking is acknowledged as a diagnostic process aimed at constructing a plausible understanding of ambiguous cues providing the possibility of action, but in change individuals have a tendency to normalize the unexpected, and hence ambivalence must be encouraged (Weick, 2006).

The ambiguities and parameters influencing sensemaking processes and how organizational members progressively struggle to gain sense of the changes unfolding in the organizational context, hence the micro sensemaking processes that unfold during change, dominate existing research (Gioia and Thomas, 1996; Helms- Mills, 2003; Maitlis, 2005; Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010). “The deeper mechanisms and processes through which micro-processes of sensemaking are affected... [and]...the dynamics through which specific and dominant ‘micro-level discourses’ shape sensemaking processes remains under researched” (Guiette and Vendenbempt, 2017; p. 65). Consequently, organizational change triggers individual sensemaking across organizations to primarily address engagement in joint efforts to remove puzzlement, with less attention to how sensemaking unfolds collectively and on an organizational level (Weber and Glynn, 2006), and the focus is thus on a narrow domain of

human activity (Brown *et al.*, 2015). Sandberg and Tsoukas (2014) argue that the sensemaking literature focuses on specific episodes, specific processes and specific outcomes influenced by specific situational factors, all as disruptive episodes at the expense of more mundane forms of sensemaking and the ambiguous status enactment implicated in routine activities. The present investigation does not focus on disruptive episodes, instead focus is the implementation of a police reform and a new type of function. Politically initiated reforms are continually implemented, and this case exemplifies mundane forms of sensemaking.

Distributed sensemaking

Sensemaking is, according to Weick (1995), characterized by seven elements developing in a mutual constitutional relationship underlining that sensemaking are complex processes not following predefined patterns. This leaves us with a notion that is dynamic and in constant change, and as socially constructed and therefore moving to the notion of distributed sensemaking. It is argued that distributed sensemaking was introduced by Weick as a response to increasing criticism of not acknowledging sensemaking processes unfolding in organizational contexts (Weber and Glynn, 2006). Weick's (1995, 2006) notion of distributed sensemaking remains mostly on the level of individual sensemaking and related to organizations confronted with a problem which they do not know how to handle. Our research builds on this previous research and aims to add to the local level by grasping the complexity of sensemaking on a large scale, involving an organizational level, and including intra-professional and inter-professional collaboration involved in sensemaking processes, in complex and geographically distanced organizations.

Weick (1995) addresses complexity in the interconnectedness between organizational members, which provides useful meanings about the organizational situation. Weick (1995) thus argues in favour of introducing a processual instead of a structural approach to understanding how social resources are organized to create a plausible meaning/story that facilitates action. The discussion of distributed sensemaking focuses on the characteristics of the relations between the loosely coupled entities/actors. Distributed sensemaking is not only a matter of organizing the assembly of different pieces of knowledge where each part is meaningless until it is related to some other part whose meaning, in turn, is dependent on the meaning of the initial part. Hence, making meaning is an iterative process (Weick, 2006).

Distributed sensemaking provides an opening for exploring sensemaking on an organizational level. Weick (2006) describes the collaboration between different organizations

located in different parts a country in putting together knowledge about an unknown virus. We build on this work when we study sensemaking about a new function as police contact as part of the Norwegian police reform. This function was to be implemented in a several parts of the police service, a large public organization located in different parts of the country, operating under very different conditions, for example regarding the number of employees, the number and type of activities, and the distance from the head office. In contrast to Weick's (2006) illustration of interconnectivity between parts of an organization, our study suggests that distributed sensemaking can remain local. To capture this organizational complexity, we introduce the notion of local distributed sensemaking to explore it as a "unit of sensemaking" evolving due to its specific characteristics, yet constantly interconnected with the overall organizational processes. We argue that local distributed sensemaking provides a lens for developing knowledge about (and a reasonable explanation for) why implementation of large reforms is enacted in diverse forms, despite being part of the same organizational framework.

Research setting

The Norwegian Police Reform was passed by the Norwegian parliament in 2015, and consisted of two parts: (1) A structural reform reducing the number of police districts from 27 to 12, and harmonizing the organization of the police service across police districts. (2) A quality reform to ensure the development of knowledge-based police services through standardization of police work nationally. The reform was to be implemented over a four-year period from January 2016.

The reform came to be known as "Nærpolitireformen", a "community policing reform", indicating that police services of the same high quality should be available regardless of geographical differences. To balance the centralization of geographical units with community policing including the rural areas of Norway, each local authority in Norway was assigned a police contact. In line with key trends in public reforms, preventative work was highlighted; the police contacts were mostly organized in the crime prevention units. The police reform document (Ministry of Justice and Public Security, 2015; p. 26) described requirements for police preventative work in general and for police contacts in particular as follows: 1) The Norwegian Police Service will provide active crime prevention work internally and in close cooperation with relevant others. 2) Each local authority must have at least one police contact, either in a local police station or a police station in the same geographical area. The police contact assists the police council. The police council is a forum where the police and the local authority(ies) collaborate to implement crime prevention work.

Thus, the reform explicitly defined a new position as “police contact” and tied this position to local crime prevention. However, the reform documents only vaguely described the substance of the position. Politically, the police contact position was important because it signalled a continued local commitment of police services. Because of the structural change in the reform where several small police stations had been closed and merged into larger police districts, the leadership position in the small police stations, the "lensmann", disappeared. The "lensmann" had a high status in the police and in the local community and cooperated closely with the local authority. The police contact was to maintain the close relationship with the local authority.

The Agency for Public Management and eGovernment (Difi) (2017) concluded in their status report after the first year of implementation that there was considerable uncertainty regarding the development of the role of police contacts. Their evaluation indicated that the role was vaguely perceived and that there were unclear boundaries and interfaces with other established areas of cooperation between the police and actors in the local community. The context in which the new police contacts were to find their place was characterized by uncertainty and ambiguity, which makes this an interesting and relevant research setting to explore local distributed sensemaking.

Methodology

The data consist of 24 interviews with police contacts, 14 of which were conducted in summer 2017 (T1) and 10 in autumn 2018 (T2). During the period between the interviews, some interviewees had transferred to other jobs in the police and others had retired. Thus, in the second round of interviews, nine of the informants had also been interviewed in the first round and one newly appointed police contact was included. This made it possible to study how sensemaking about the new position evolved over time. The selection of interviewees was strategic in the sense that we aimed to cover police contacts in medium-sized towns, large cities and rural areas. Thus, interviewees from three different police districts were selected, reflecting various geographical challenges in policing. All interviewees had long experience as police officers, ranging from 8 to 38 years. They had either worked with preventative police work or had several years of leadership experience. Eight of the informants were former “lensmann”. At T1, our informants explained that there had been no or very limited intra- and interdepartmental conversations about the police contact. At T2, they explained that there had been several changes in leadership positions, and such conversations had just started. So, in effect, the police contacts were left to themselves in their interpretations at the time of our study.

The study followed guidelines for research ethics and was approved by the Norwegian data protection official for research.

In both rounds, the interviews were semi-structured. The first round of interviews was conducted at the interviewee's place of work, while the second round took place online. The first round focused on who the police contacts were (their background, competencies and motivation), how they understood their new role, the tasks they performed or were expected to perform, their expectations for the role of police contact, who their external partners were, and the preliminary results of establishing police contacts. The first round of analysis revealed several issues and topics which were used in preparing the interview guide for the second round of interviews. However, as the objective was to conduct an explorative investigation, the interview guide was not restricted to the topics revealed during the first round of data collection. The purpose of the second round of interviews was to learn more about what had happened since the first round, the current situation regarding the police contact position, and the police contacts' expectations about how the position would develop in the future.

The analysis of the empirical data was inspired by Amadeo Giorgi's (1985) phenomenological four-step approach during both the first and the second round of analysis. First, the researchers read the fully transcribed interviews to gain a general sense of the content. Second, the material was re-read to inductively determine meaning units. Third, the material was transferred to NVivo and divided into meaning units. Fourth, "the researcher synthesizes all of the transformed meaning units into a consistent statement regarding the subject's experience" (Giorgi, 1985, p. 10). The output of the analysis process was the identification of the three ideal types 1) administrative position 2) professional position 3) strategic position. See Figure 1 for an illustration of how we developed these ideal types based on the data. This follows Weber's line of thinking that ideal types are homogeneous structures of ideas and thus an artificial construct. Ideal types are thus not empirically visible in their purest form (Kuckartz, 1991), but are a way of summarizing empirical tendencies. As the analysis progressed it became increasingly clear that the interviewees seemed to follow three different lines of thinking regarding the police contact position. The three ideal types were developed after the second round of data collection, as it was the iterative analytical process between the totality of the data and the researchers' ongoing analysis of the data that made it possible to elucidate the categories. The ideal types are thus based on the phenomenological analysis and not on theoretically informed pre-defined categories. When these ideal types had been identified, we re-examined the meaning units to extract possible steps of the sensemaking process leading up

to the three ideal types. As we will show in more detail in the findings section, local resource allocation, local needs, and personal preferences and experiences served as sensemaking cues and influenced the interpretations and practice of the ideal types of the police contact position.

Insert Figure 1 here

Findings

In this section, we describe three different interpretations of the position of police contact that our informants revealed. Second, we describe the sensemaking processes leading to these interpretations.

The police contact: an administrative, professional or strategic position?

We identified three interpretations of the position of police contact (see Table 1 for illustrative quotes): an administrative position, a professional position and a strategic position. While different interpretations may be expected at an early stage of a reform (T1), we found that they persisted during our second round of interviews later in the reform process (T2).

Insert Table I here

The administrative position highlighted work such as directing inquiries from the local authority to the relevant officers in the police service, developing collaboration agreements with the local authority, drawing up action plans, and coordinating preventative work within the police service and between the police and the local authority. At T1, we categorized the person performing these tasks as “coordinator” or “contact person”. At T2, the category “contact person” was less visible in the data, but the interpretation of the “coordinator” seemed to be reinforced, see Figure 1.

The professional position highlighted the professional requirements for doing good preventative police work at different levels. At T1, the informants tied this to the professional enactment of preventative police work in general and specifically in cooperation with the local authority. At T2, this was reinforced but the data also revealed that it was possible to define the position as that of an operative field worker, for example by actively engaging with teenagers or parents, see Figure 1. On both occasions, informants highlighted the professional skills of preventative policing.

The strategic position was related to the police contacts’ place in the police service hierarchy and to their level of working, distancing the work from the operative field worker, regarding both the kind of work they did and the persons they cooperated with. At both T1 and

T2, interpretations based on the old position of “lensmann” were visible in our data. This represents an interpretation of a new position based on a known position with long traditions in the police service. At T1, the informants highlighted the importance of police contacts’ rank and external networks in the local community. At T2, the informants in addition explained that it was important for the police contacts to be proactive and not wait for queries from the local authority.

Even though the interpretation of the police contact position seemed less ambiguous at T2, the three interpretations were still consistent in our data at T2. This finding contrasts with findings in previous studies suggesting that interpretations and understandings will be shared over time (e.g. Balogun and Johnson, 2005; Voronov, 2008; Brown *et al.*, 2015; Filstad, 2014) and make collective action possible. We therefore explored our data for sensemaking cues that could explain why the ideal types of interpretations and practices of the police contact position persisted.

How the interpretations emerged through sensemaking

The reform documents gave few explicit guidelines as to how the new police contact position was to be implemented. We found that this served as a cue for sensemaking among our informants. Our data suggest that the efforts to make sense of this new position were affected by local resource allocation, adjusting to local needs, and personal preferences and experience. Thus, these practices served as local sensemaking cues and affected the interpretation and practice of the police contact position.

Local resource allocation

Despite the focus on preventative work throughout the reform, the informants questioned this priority as they experienced how resources were allocated in practice. One example is the large variation in percentages of full-time equivalents allocated for police contacts. We identified several different solutions in our data: (1) a full-time position devoted to police contact work, (2) a part-time position for police officers, and (3) a part-time position for managers. As a result, police officers with their main responsibility for preventative work explained that they had to postpone this work when there was a lack of resources in other departments:

I find that we’re being assigned other tasks. I’m sceptical to this, because the preventative work gets swallowed when they lack people for preparedness. (I10, T1)

There's not enough money in the organization. That makes it very easy to give less priority to preventative work. (I3, T1)

Resource allocation, in terms of both percentages of full-time equivalents and managers' persistently difficulties of protecting resources allocated to prevention, thus served as important cues for sensemaking. When resource allocation did not communicate clear expectations, this invited individual interpretations about the new position.

In addition, the informants described challenges relating to adjusting their new organization in accordance with the intentions of the police reform, in terms of e.g. working hours and workload. This was important because it affected the conditions offered to fill the police contact position and to meet expectations from the local community. Key aspects were rotas and the allocation of day and night shifts. The police contact demanded day shifts to cooperate with the political and administrative parts of local authorities (the administrative position). Other parts of their job, such as youth outreach, required night shifts (the professional position). Thus the existing rota systems were challenged by different interpretations of the position.

I think it's about saving money. We've got fewer evening shifts and more day shifts, and they save lots of money with that. They claim that it's to make us more available to our local authority partners. But I think they've missed something. Yes, we're very available one week, but we're completely unavailable the other two weeks when we have one week of evening shifts and some time off. (I10, T1)

The informants explained that the new position involved new tasks but not necessarily a reduction in their old tasks. Also at T2, they talked about the need to be protected so they could fulfil their new role. This protection included both allocation of resources to the new tasks and redistribution of tasks.

We need to be protected and free to follow up inquiries that we get from parents and schools. There are many hotspots, you know, teenagers hanging about in the skate park, the shopping centre, all those places we can't visit when we're assigned other duties. (I10, T2)

Resource allocation is a powerful symbol of what counts in an organization and our data suggest that this affected sensemaking about the new police contact position. The informants' accounts

illustrate the classic resource allocation dilemma between preventative work and emergency response.

Local needs

Even though the intentions of the police reform were to standardize police work nationally and to harmonize the organization of the police service, the informants explained that local needs differed significantly. These local needs reflected the crime situation and local expectations for the police force.

The challenges related to youth crime in a city and in a rural community vary greatly. Thus, to make sense of the police contact position, local needs played an important role and can explain why this position was interpreted differently across police districts. An illustrative example is:

The police contact is the main contact and driving force in the cooperation between the police and local authorities in implementing the decisions of the police council. The position will therefore vary in content according to the needs of the local authority. (I14, T1)

This is important and may explain why local resource allocation varied and why some police contacts had their entire position tied to this work, while for others, only parts of their job involved police contact work. However, some informants described how expectations from local authorities sometimes clashed with the time they had available. The following quotes illustrate this challenge and explain it by the time available when the police contact position was a part-time position for a manager:

I was a police contact in my job as manager for more than a year, and I wouldn't have been able to do the police contact work properly if I'd continued in that kind of double position. I wouldn't have been able to have the required frequent contact with local authorities. (I13, T2)

I think that expectations for the police contact indicate a full-time job, and I haven't got that. In that respect, the description of the position is not adapted to the situation we're in... We've received feedback that we're not good enough at contributing to intelligence, gathering intelligence and sharing information. People have greater expectations to police contacts than we've been able to deliver. (I4, T2)

Other informants felt that some local authorities were rather passive in establishing cooperation with the police and in committing themselves to this relationship.

Well, [the local authorities] are a bit on the defensive. But I participated in an emergency preparedness exercise and in the break, I was approached by top managers from the local administration and the mayor who had a lot of questions about it. I think that we in the police hold the key. If we do a good job, we get things as we want. But I think that the local authority has been on the defensive. (I3, T1)

In [an urban local authority] they have no expectations for the police contact. We have given [a rural local authority] information about the police contact but so far they haven't specified any expectations or requested action... In [the rural local authority] they haven't established the same interdisciplinary meetings at lower levels that we have a long tradition of in [the urban local authority]. (I13, T1)

The data thus show that local needs played an important part in making sense of the police contact position. However, even though the local authorities were important partners, the informants felt that the police contact took the lead in this work. This suggests that the police contacts' sensemaking about the contents of their new work were not challenged by their local authority.

Personal preferences and experience

Our informants described receiving few specific central guidelines as to how they should interpret and implement the new role. In addition, the above quotes show that they perceived little sensemaking support from their leaders and from their local partners. Instead, they relied on their own interpretations. Inspired by the calls for local adjustments, this sense of agency was visible in our data in two ways: (1) making sense of the new in light of the old and (2) making sense of the new in light of their individual motivations.

Several examples in our data suggest that change initiatives may serve to preserve rather than change as individuals make sense of the new in light of the old. For example, our informants who were former "lensmann", prolonged their old position as part of their new job as police contacts. This was reinforced because the police contact position became a political symbol covering up the loss of the local police station:

It's difficult to free oneself completely from the role as "lensmann". I feel it's very similar to the role I had as "lensmann". I've inserted this role into the role of police contact. (I4, T1)

While this was perhaps natural at T1, it is interesting to observe that this interpretation persisted at T2. This implies that, if not challenged, individuals' interpretations of new positions could facilitate status quo rather than change:

When you work in these small local authorities, the work is very similar to what I did in my years as "lensmann". (I11, T2)

Other informants acknowledged that one could easily continue business as usual, but challenged themselves and their colleagues to critically reflect on the requirements of the new position:

I think it's important that the police contacts really want this position and want to work according to the intentions. And perhaps we need to let go of things we've been doing before but don't need to continue doing. (I1, T1)

Our data showed that the informants interpreted the new role to fit their individual motivations and interests. An illustrative example is a description of how an informant had actively chosen which of the three roles to highlight most in the work; while recognizing the administrative role, this informant preferred a more professional role involving youth outreach work rather than with the local top management:

I spend a great deal of my time giving talks, parents' meetings at schools and so on. I haven't had any difficulties with this, but I've adjusted my role to be more operative than intended. (I3, T2)

Discussion

In our analysis, we identified three "ideal types" representing different understandings and practices of the new police contact position that emerged through sensemaking processes. The findings reported above suggest that different interpretations of their new role and practice in the new position emerged and persisted over time as the police contacts made sense of diverse and sometimes contradictory expectations. Local resource allocation and local needs served as important sensemaking cues and allowed for individual agency in enacting the new job. Our data therefore demonstrate that the sensemaking processes and experimentation to establish the new position involved local actors internally in the police and externally in local authorities, and reinforced local interpretations.

Police reforms are complex and unpredictable (Dibella, 2007; Fyfe, 2019; Filstad, 2022) and challenge the sensemaking literature, which focuses on solving the same problem (Weick et al., 2005). Therefore, while existing studies on distributed sensemaking are grounded in contexts where a shared understanding is necessary to solve the problem at hand, mostly as how individuals make sense of change initiatives (Balogun and Johnson, 2004; Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010), our study shows that distributed sensemaking also takes place when the problem or challenge is more open-ended in the sense that there is more than one solution. We argue that our findings make three contributions that extend our understanding of distributed sensemaking during reform implementation: The findings (1) support the notion of sensemaking as distributed but extend previous research by suggesting that “ideal types” help us understand the content of different understandings, (2) enhance our understanding by showing that distributed sensemaking takes place as individuals in organizations make sense of more open-ended problems than finding a solution to a specific problem. This challenges our understanding of the term distributed, because (3) unless challenged, distributed sensemaking in isolated pockets of the organization remains local, and we suggest that the term local distributed sensemaking captures this phenomenon. We discuss these three contributions in the following.

In line with existing research, our study shows that organizational change processes trigger sensemaking in different parts of an organization, resulting in different interpretations of the change (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2012; Dane, 2013; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014). The ambiguities regarding the content of the police contact position in reform documents and discussions triggered sensemaking among police officers and police managers in the various police districts. The three ideal types of interpretations about the position that we identified (administrative, professional, and strategic) represent our understanding of the results of sensemaking processes in different parts of the organization. Each ideal type exemplifies results of efforts to make sense of which duties are or should be tied to the position and, consequently, what knowledge would be most suitable in the position, and the suggested rank of a police contact. When faced with ambiguity, our informants capitalized on their existing knowledge and experience in their efforts to make sense of their new position. This parallels the discussion of balancing exploitation and exploration of knowledge (March, 1991), where our informants mostly relied on exploitation at the time of our study. Therefore, where previous studies report that sensemaking and sensegiving efforts tend to result in shared interpretations over time

(Voronov, 2008; Brown *et al.*, 2015; Filstad, 2014), we found that the three ideal types reflecting ideas of tasks, responsibilities and knowledge were reinforced over time.

There is an important contextual difference between our study and previous studies of distributed sensemaking. Previous studies have focused on problems or crises needing urgent attention, with expectations of finding one solution (Weber and Glynn, 2006). For example, Weick (2006) describes how several actors and organizations united forces and contributed their specialized knowledge to diagnose the cause of sudden bird deaths. The new police contact positions, however, were part of a political reform with considerable ambiguity as to how the position should be operationalized. In addition, explicit statements that the position should primarily strengthen crime prevention increased the ambiguity. Prevention of crime was a main goal of the police reform, a task that demands interprofessional and interorganizational cooperation, while also being extremely complex and characterized by fierce debates among professional groups as to how it should be approached (Filstad, 2022). In this way, exploring distributed sensemaking in a different context from previously studies sheds new light on our understanding of sensemaking processes when there is no clear solution to be reached. It underscores sensemaking as ongoing and dynamic, but also aids our understanding of the open-endedness of sensemaking. Future research should explore in further depth whether and how challenges in informal coordination between individuals with different knowledge differ between specific problems with expected solutions and tasks that are more open-ended. The theoretical implications of this are important because they challenge us to think differently about the meaning of “distributed”.

Thus, the term distributed sensemaking does not really account for what we found in our study. In particular, the sense of interconnectivity in Weick’s notion of distributed sensemaking is missing in our data. Instead, we found that sensemaking was distributed throughout the organization, but remained local. There are three different dimensions of “local” in our data. The first refers to the local police, and their needs and organization. Depending on how crime prevention was organized, they tried to fit the police contact into the local organization. Local resource allocation was therefore a significant sensemaking trigger/cue. The second dimension of “local” refers to the relationship between the local police and the local authority. The police contact adjusted to local needs and differences in the crime situation. The third dimension of “local” refers to local knowledge. Our informants explained that they made sense of the police contact position based on their use of their knowledge and experience. This is illustrated in our findings by the possibility to capitalize on individual preferences. An

important question is whether it is a problem that sensemaking remains local. Addressing a similar question, the interprofessional collaboration literature argues that different professions' competencies and uniqueness provide opportunities for coordinated efforts and expertise (Gilling, 2005). However, it also expresses concern that the different expertise might be lost through a lack of professional autonomy in collaborative work (Gopee and Galloway, 2009; Pihl, 2011). Interprofessional collaborative work will involve role boundary issues, expertise and differences in status, scope of practice, accountability, and professional hierarchy rather than equal footing (Barrett, Sellman and Thomas, 2005; Gopee and Galloway, 2009; Brown *et al.*, 2010). Ensuring equal distribution of group influence, managing differences, sharing expertise, trust and respect, and supportive communication are critical (San Martín-Rodríguez *et al.*, 2005; Strype *et al.*, 2014; Whelan, 2017). Thus, even though local sensemaking may serve local needs well, it may also be problematic if knowledge and expertise from other stakeholders are isolated from the sensemakers.

Our findings concur with previous research suggesting that commitment, identity and expectations could explain local sensemaking processes in change implementation in larger organizations with unclear, ambiguous and agenda-driven reframing (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010; Knight and Tsoukas, 2019; Karp, 2021). Commitment is linked to our finding that the police contacts prioritized work to meet local needs. Their commitment was more to local needs than to national efforts at standardization across the police force. Identity is linked to our finding that the police contacts had the agency to interpret and shape the new position to fit their individual motivation rather than a standard description. Expectations are linked both to the various expectations from the local community and to the contrasting and sometimes competing expectations communicated through resource allocation in the local police station. What is lacking in our data, however, is “interconnectivity” (Weick *et al.*, 2005). Where we found traces of shared sensemaking efforts, this was at the local level, either between the police and the local authority or internal discussions in the local police organization. This reinforces the usefulness of our notion of “local distributed sensemaking”, which means that sensemaking was distributed but remained local. This locally based sensemaking resulted in reinforcement of initial interpretations by exploiting existing knowledge in different parts of the organization and not by challenging existing knowledge. However, some of our informants in the second round of interviews gave reports suggesting new police contact practices, which would serve as cues for “updating” or “doubting” (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010: p. 565) established practices. Our findings therefore help to explain why organizational sensemaking and learning remain local

and cause variation in practices regardless of the intentions of the reform to standardize practice across diverse and geographically dispersed organizational units.

Concluding remarks

Our findings contribute to the discussion of the meaning of “distributed” in the concept “distributed sensemaking” (Weick *et al.*, 2005; Weick, 2006). We find that sensemaking was distributed in the sense that it occurred in various parts of a large organization. However, in our data, the lack of interconnectivity between the various interpretations did not challenge the local interpretations. Thus, interpretations as ideal types remained local and were reinforced rather than challenged.

Our data collection at two different points in reform implementation helped us identify that the interpretation of a new position is based on existing knowledge but is also dynamic and continuous. Although we found that the three different interpretations of the police contact persisted throughout our study, we see that the content could change as individuals experienced new ways to cooperate internally and externally and as new understandings of working with crime prevention emerged. This may explain why reform work seems to be everlasting rather than having a clear end point.

The change context was the implementation of a political reform which changed the structure of police districts, closed several local police stations and centralized functions. This meant that a large group of local police leaders, the “lensmann”, were re-organized and lost their well-established status in the local community. Several of these were appointed as police contacts. We call for further research on the role of power in sensemaking processes in reform contexts, as well as research on sensemaking in contexts where actors have less to defend.

Our study has some the practical implications for initiators of political reforms as well as for those tasked with implementing political reforms. First, the study reminds us that sensemaking will take place in several parts of the organization as individuals interpret ambiguities and uncertainties of the reform contents. This may, as it did in our study, result in different interpretations of what to do to implement reform elements. Second, our informants exploited existing knowledge rather than exploring new knowledge when making sense of their new position. While this helped them in the initial phases of the reform implementation, we would encourage organizations to build structures or processes that challenge local sensemaking during reform implementation. The goal of such structures or processes should not be to force shared interpretations. Rather, it would challenge the actors to argue for their

interpretations and be open for the questions and perspectives of others. This would ensure the exploitation of different available knowledge and might also encourage exploration.

References

- Agency for Public Management and eGovernment (Difi) (2017), *Evaluering av nærpolitireformen: underveisrapportering om kultur, holdninger og ledelse*, [Evaluation of the police service reform: status about culture, attitudes, and leadership], Difi Report 2017:9, ISSN 1890-6583.
- Ainsworth, S. and Hardy, C. (2012), "Subjects of inquiry: statistics, stories, and the production of knowledge", *Organization Studies*, Vol 33 No 12, pp. 1693–1714.
- Balogun, J. and Johnson, G. (2004), "Organizational restructuring and middle manager sensemaking", *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol 47 No 4, pp. 523–549.
- Balogun, J. and Johnson, G. (2005), "From intended strategies to unintended outcomes: the impact of change recipient sensemaking", *Organization Studies*, Vol 26 No 11, pp. 1573-1601.
- Barrett, G., Sellman, D., and Thomas, J. (Eds.) 2005, *Interprofessional Working in Health and Social Care*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, UK.
- Brown, A.D., Colville, I. and Pye, A. (2015), "Making sense of sensemaking in organization studies", *Organization Studies*, Vol 36 No 2, pp. 265-277.
- Brown, J., Lewis, L., Ellis, K., Stewart, M., Freeman, T.R., and Kaperski, M.J. (2010), "Conflict of interprofessional primary health care teams – can it be resolved", *Journal of Interprofessional Care*, Vol 25 No 1, pp. 4-10.
- Carlile, P.R. (2002), "A pragmatic view of knowledge and boundaries: boundary objects in new product development", *Organization Science*, Vol 13 No 4, pp. 442-455.
- Carlile, P.R. (2004), "Transferring, translating and transforming: an integrative framework for managing knowledge across boundaries", *Organization Science*, Vol 15 No 5, pp. 555-568.
- Catino, M. and Patriotta, G. (2013), "Learning from errors: cognition, emotions and safety culture in the Italian air force", *Organization Studies*, Vol 34 No 4, pp. 437–467.
- Corradi, G., Gherardi, S. and Verzelloni, L. (2010), "Through the practice lens: where is the bandwagon of practice-based studies heading?", *Management Learning*, Vol 41 No 3, pp. 265–283.

- Dane, E. (2013), “Things seen and unseen: investigating experience-based qualities of attention in a dynamic work setting”, *Organization Studies*, Vol 34 No 1, pp. 45–78.
- Dibella, A.J. (2007), “Critical perceptions of organisational change”, *Journal of Change Management*, Vol 7 No 3-4, pp. 231-242.
- Filstad, C. (2014), “The politics of sensemaking and sensegiving at work”, *Journal of Workplace Learning*, Vol 26 No 1, pp. 3-21.
- Filstad, C. (2022). *Police Leadership as Practice*, Taylor & Francis Group, London.
- Fyfe, N.R. (2019), “The challenge of change: exploring the dynamics of police reform in Scotland”, *International Journal of Police Science & Management*, Vol 2 No 4, pp. 196-205.
- Gilling, D. (2005), “Partnership and crime prevention”, Tilley, N. (Ed.), *Handbook of Crime Prevention and Community Safety*, Willan Publishing, Cullompton, pp. 734-756.
- Gioia, D.A. and Thomas, J.B. (1996), “Institutional identity, image, and issue interpretation: sensemaking during strategic change in academia”, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol 41 No 3, pp. 370–403.
- Giorgi, A. (1985), *Phenomenology and Psychological Research*, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh.
- Gopee, N., and Galloway, J. (2009), *Leadership and Management in Healthcare*, Sage, London.
- Guiette, A. and Vandenbempt, K. (2017), “Change managerialism and micro-processes of sensemaking during change implementation”, *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, Vol 33 No 2, pp. 65-81.
- Hammer, S., and Høpner, J. (2019), *Meningskabelse, organisering og ledelse - en introduktion til Weicks univers* [Sensemaking, organization and leadership – an introduction to Weick’s universe], 2nd edition, Samfundslitteratur, Copenhagen.
- Helms-Mills, J. (2003), *Making Sense of Organizational Change*, Routledge, London.
- Karp, T. (2021), “The coproduction of leadership – a processual perspective”, Thomassen, A.O. and Jensen, J.B. (Eds.), *Processual Perspectives on the Co-production Turn in Public Sector Organizations*, IGI Global, Hersey, PA, pp. 80-99.

- Knight, E. and Tsoukas, H. (2019), “When fiction trumps truth: what ‘post-truth’ and ‘alternative facts’ mean for management studies”, *Organization Studies*, Vol 40 No 2, pp. 183-197.
- Kuckartz, U. (1991), “Ideal types or empirical types: the case of Max Weber's empirical research”, *Bulletin de Méthodologie Sociologique*, Vol 32 No 1, pp. 44-53.
- Maitlis, S. (2005), “The social processes of organizational sensemaking”, *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol 48 No 1, pp. 21-49.
- Maitlis, S. and Christianson, M. (2014), “Sensemaking in organizations: taking stock and moving forward”, *Academy of Management Annals*, Vol 8 No 1, pp. 57–125.
- Maitlis, S. and Sonenshein, S. (2010), “Sensemaking in crisis and change: inspiration and insights from Weick (1988)”, *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol 47 No 3, pp. 551-580.
- Mangham, I.L., and Pye, A.J. (1991), *The Doing of Managing*, Blackwell, Oxford.
- March, J.G. (1991), “Exploration and exploitation in organizational learning”, *Organization Science*, Vol 2 No 1, pp. 71-87.
- Ministry of Justice and Public Security (2015). Endringer i politiloven mv. (trygghet i hverdagen – nærpoltireformen) [Amendments to the Police Act (everyday security - the community policing reform)] (Prop. 61 LS (2014-2015)). Accessed at <https://www.regjeringen.no>
- Pihl, J. (2011), “Literacy education and interprofessional collaboration”, *Professions and Professionalism*, Vol 1 No 1, pp. 52–66.
- Sandberg, J. and Tsoukas, H. (2015), “Making sense of the sensemaking perspective: its constituents, limitations, and opportunities for further development”, *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, Vol 36 No S1, pp. S6-S32.
- San Martín-Rodríguez, L, Beaulieu, M.D., D’Amour, D., and Ferrada-Videla, M. (2005), “The determinants of successful collaboration: a review of theoretical and empirical studies”, *Journal of Interprofessional Care*, Vol 19 No S1, pp. 132-147.
- Strype, J., Gundhus, O.I., Egge, M., and Ødegård, A. (2014), “Perceptions of interprofessional collaboration”, *Professions & Professionalism*, Vol 4 No 3, pp. 1-17.

Tsoukas, H. and Vladimirou, E. (2001), “What is organizational knowledge?”, *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol 38 No 7, pp. 973-993.

Voronov, M. (2008), “Towards a practice perspective on strategic organizational learning”, *The Learning Organization*, Vol 15 No 2, pp. 195–221.

Weber, K. and Glynn, M.A. (2006), “Making sense with institutions: context, thought and action in Karl Weick’s theory”, *Organization Studies*, Vol 27 No 11, pp. 1639-1660.

Weick, K. E. (1995), *Sensemaking in Organizations*, SAGE Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA.

Weick, K. E. (2006), “Managing the unexpected: complexity as distributed sensemaking”, McDaniel, R. R. Jr. and Driebe, D. J. (Eds.), *Uncertainty and Surprise in Complex Systems. Questions and Working with the Unexpected*, Springer, Berlin/Heidelberg, pp. 51-65.

Weick, K.E., Sutcliffe, K.M., and Obstfeld, D. (2005), “Organizing and the process of sensemaking”, *Organization Science*, Vol 16 No 4, pp. 409–421.

Whelan, C. (2017), “Security networks and occupational culture: understanding culture within and between organisations”, *Policing and Society*, Vol 27 No 2, pp. 113-135.

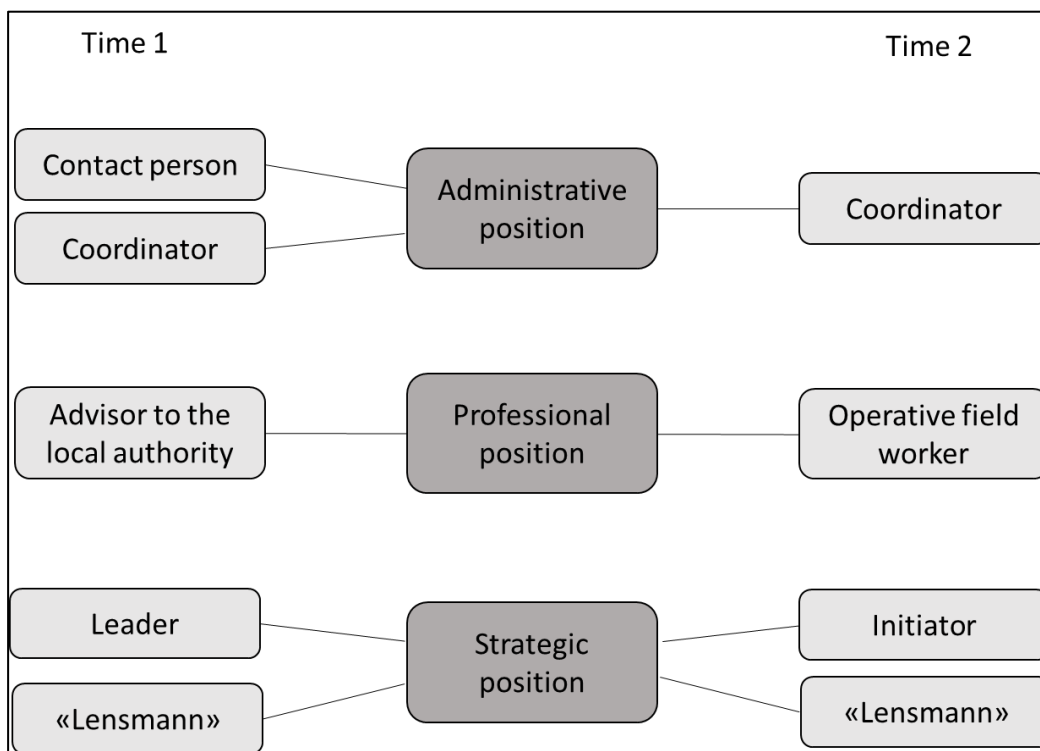


Figure 1: Categories leading to identification of three interpretations of the police contact position

Table I: Three interpretations of the police contact position: illustrative quotes

	T1	T2
Administrative position	<p>Contact person The police contact is responsible for the contact with the local authority. The local authority is supposed to know who their police contact is (I4, T1) We started by writing a letter to the local authority, then we met in all the police councils in the local authorities and had a dialogue where we shared expectations... They wanted one point of contact in the police for advice and guidance. (I9, T1)</p> <p>Coordinator The police contact is also a coordinator internally in the police. You need to know what others in the police are working on to know what we can offer in external cooperation. (I1, T1)</p>	<p>Coordinator I'm a police contact and I have different roles, that's why I have separated them. My colleagues give talks to youth and their parents about netiquette, alcohol, drugs and all that. I take care of the action plans that we develop with the local authorities. (I6, T2) It's a position where you attend several meetings at different levels with the local authorities... When they need to contact the police, we find that they get in touch with the police contact. It's important to develop the police contacts to fit into an administrative role, because they are the ones that are supposed to inspire our unit to do prevention work. (I13, T2)</p>
Professional position	<p>Advisor/source of information It's not a leadership position, no. But it's a position that demands that you have experience and that you feel secure. (I13, T1) I talk a lot about [crime] trends, that is I try to give them information from our intelligence. (I10, T1)</p>	<p>Operative field worker I think the police contact was intended to be more administrative. There are a lot of meetings and groups to attend. I've tried to turn it into something more operative because I think it's interesting to be in the field. (I3, T2).</p>
Strategic position	<p>Power to commit the police The police contact should be a person with authority and one who is able to implement decisions... It's all about resources and you have to be able to make a decision in a meeting with the local authority, for example, ok, we'll allocate two officers to that issue. (I6, T1) It is important that the police contact can commit the police in meetings with the local authority. He or she must be able to respond and say that what you are telling me now is so important that the police must act. (I8, T1)</p> <p>«Lensmann» If I were to summarize in a few words, to me the police contact really is a "lensmann" without a title who is supposed to be closer to the community and work even more on crime prevention. (I11, T1)</p>	<p>Initiator They don't just sit and wait like people who did preventative work traditionally used to do... They contact the senior decision makers in local government directly instead of going directly to the first-line managers as they did before. They know that the decision power is higher up in the hierarchy. (I5, T2) I try to market our services and to be close to our partners. (I10, T2)</p> <p>«Lensmann» I feel that we're continuing parts of the role we had before the police contact was invented. We continue the old role of "lensmann" that we used to have. We've always emphasized close contact with schools and local authorities (I4, T2)</p>