



## My colleagues (do not) think the same: Middle managers' shared and separate realities in strategy implementation

Benedikt Alexander Schuler<sup>a,\*</sup>, Kevin Orr<sup>b</sup>, Jeffrey Hughes<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of St.Gallen Institute of Management & Strategy, Dufourstrasse 40a, 9000 St.Gallen, Switzerland

<sup>b</sup> University of St.Andrews School of Management, The Gateway, N Haugh, St Andrews KY16 9RJ, United Kingdom

<sup>c</sup> Durham University Business School, Mill Hill Lane, Durham DH1 3LB, United Kingdom

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### ABSTRACT

How does middle managers' sensemaking of other middle managers' attitudes to a new strategy affect strategy implementation? We explore this question using a qualitative-abductive approach. Our investigation of the implementation of a top-down strategy in the plant of a multinational German engineering company revealed that middle managers experiencing ambiguity make sense of other middle managers' attitudes to the strategy in social interactions. Based on their understanding of their colleagues' attitudes, middle managers construct shared and separate realities about the strategy to be implemented. While shared realities are subjectively experienced commonalities, separate realities are subjectively experienced differences from others' attitudes to the strategy. In our case, middle managers' shared realities were associated with inaction on strategy implementation, whereas middle managers' separate realities were related to initial actions to implement the strategy. Our findings suggest that middle managers' sensemaking of other middle managers' attitudes to a new strategy can shape their strategy implementation behavior.

Strategy implementation is crucial for successful strategic management as it enables the realization of superior firm performance or the learning of better strategies (Lee & Puranam, 2016; Santos-Vijande et al., 2012). Conceptualizing strategy implementation as a dynamic process that involves both top and middle managers (Friesl et al., 2021; Noble, 1999; Weiser et al., 2020), research has demonstrated that middle managers are key agents of strategy implementation (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992a; Wooldridge et al., 2008) who can be protagonists or antagonists of strategy implementation (Balogun, 2003; Floyd & Wooldridge, 1997; Guth & Macmillan, 1986). From a behavioral perspective (Powell et al., 2011), previous research has examined middle managers' cognition (Balogun, 2003), embodied cognition (Gylfe et al., 2016), legitimacy judgments (Huy et al., 2014), emotion management (Huy, 2002), group-focus emotions (Huy, 2011), and sensemaking of strategies (Balogun & Johnson, 2004, 2005) in strategy implementation.

However, we know little about middle managers' sensemaking of other middle managers' attitudes in strategy implementation. Sensemaking is a cognitive process whereby humans seek to understand the world (Weick, 1995b). Driven by the need to understand others (Higgins & Pittman, 2008), humans make sense of their fellow human beings' perspectives on the world through reflexive processes in social

interactions (Fiske & Taylor, 2013), which then informs their actions (Fiske, 1993). For example, middle managers routinely engage in lateral social interactions when they are confronted with a new strategy (Balogun & Johnson, 2004, 2005), which could allow them to infer what their colleagues think and feel about the new strategy. Based on their understanding of whether their colleagues view the new strategy positively or negatively, middle managers may adjust their own judgments about the new strategy and consequently, support or resist the implementation of the new strategy (cf. Huy et al., 2014). In other words, middle managers' implementation behavior could be influenced by their understanding of their peers. In this light, exploring middle managers' sensemaking of other middle managers' attitudes in strategy implementation is important and worthwhile because it can enable us to better understand middle managers' strategy implementation behavior.

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to answer the question: how does middle managers' sensemaking of other middle managers' attitudes to a new strategy affect strategy implementation? We study this question in the context of the top-down implementation of a new strategy in the plant of a multinational German engineering company using a qualitative abductive approach informed by grounded theory. The middle managers in this plant are confronted with the archetypal

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [benedikt.schuler@unisg.ch](mailto:benedikt.schuler@unisg.ch) (B.A. Schuler), [kmo2@st-andrews.ac.uk](mailto:kmo2@st-andrews.ac.uk) (K. Orr), [jeffrey.hughes@durham.ac.uk](mailto:jeffrey.hughes@durham.ac.uk) (J. Hughes).

problem of strategy implementation: the top management communicated a new strategy top-down and expected the middle management to implement this new strategy. We find that when middle managers experience ambiguity related to the communicated strategy and its implementation, they make sense of other middle managers' attitudes to the strategy in social interactions and form shared and separate realities. While shared realities are subjectively experienced commonalities with others' attitudes to the strategy (Echterhoff et al., 2009; Hardin & Higgins, 1996), separate realities are subjectively experienced differences from others' attitudes to the strategy. Although our data analysis suggests that all middle managers had similar negative attitudes to the strategy, some middle managers thought that their colleagues "think the same" about the strategy, whereas other middle managers thought that their colleagues "think differently" about the strategy. It is this subjective experience of sharedness and separateness, irrespective of whether middle managers' statements actually suggest commonalities or differences, that is the defining characteristic of shared and separate realities. Furthermore, we find that middle managers' shared realities were associated with inaction on strategy implementation, whereas middle managers' separate realities were related to initial actions to implement the strategy. In other words, our findings suggest that middle managers' sensemaking of other middle managers' attitudes to a new strategy can shape their implementation behavior and thereby affect whether the strategy is successfully implemented.

We contribute to research on strategy implementation from a middle manager perspective by proposing a theoretical model of middle managers' sensemaking of other middle managers' attitudes in strategy implementation. This model suggests that middle managers do not only engage in sensemaking to understand new, ambiguous strategies (Balogun & Johnson, 2004, 2005; Balogun, 2003; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011; Rouleau, 2005) but also to understand other middle managers' attitudes to new, ambiguous strategies. That is, the focal point of middle managers' sensemaking can be the new strategies themselves, but also their peers' attitudes to new strategies. The model introduces the concepts of shared and separate reality to the literature on strategy implementation. Thereby, it extends prior research that has examined how cognition and emotions affect middle managers' implementation behavior (Balogun & Johnson, 2004, 2005; Balogun, 2003; Huy et al., 2014; Huy, 2002, 2011) and ensuing organizational change (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999; Choi, 2011; Oreg & Berson, 2019; Oreg et al., 2011). Taken together, middle managers' sensemaking of others and the resulting shared and separate realities may affect whether they take action to implement the strategy.

In this paper, we first review the literature on strategy implementation and cognition from a middle manager perspective to provide the conceptual background for exploring middle managers' sensemaking of other middle managers' attitudes in strategy implementation. Second, we describe how we collected and analyzed the qualitative data. Third, we delineate our findings and theoretical model. We end with a discussion of the theoretical and practical implications of our study and articulate potential avenues for future research.

## 1. Theoretical background

Strategic management can be viewed as a process comprising strategy formulation and implementation (de Oliveira et al., 2019; Mintzberg & Waters, 1985). However, the implemented strategies usually do not correspond exactly to the formulated strategies even though they may result in the originally intended outcomes for the organization (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985). As strategy implementation can be defined as "the task of putting strategy into action" (Hill et al., 2014, p. 4), we understand strategy implementation as a set of actions taken by organizational actors that result in the organizational outcomes originally intended by the strategy. Since the implementation of new strategies usually entails organizational change, we also review relevant literature on middle managers in organizational change.

### 1.1. The middle manager perspective on strategy implementation

Middle managers were initially regarded as change recipients who are passive subjects of top managers' alignment of the organizational structures with the new strategy (Govindarajan, 1988). However, later research demonstrated that middle managers actively organize strategy implementation (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992a, 1992b, 1997). Subsequent research showed that middle managers can be both protagonists and antagonists of strategy implementation.

Middle managers can be protagonists of strategy implementation by implementing the deliberate strategies in their departments as intended (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992a, 1992b), actively engaging with the strategy and its implementation (Raes et al., 2011), selling the new strategy to frontline employees (Rouleau, 2005; Sonenshein, 2010), interpreting new strategies and strategic change (Balogun, 2003; Rouleau, 2005), using embodied cognition to support employees' behavioral and cognitive changes (Gylfe et al., 2016), acting according to the appropriate role configurations (Heyden et al., 2017), and engaging in emotion management that enables middle managers' units to better adapt to change (Huy, 2002). Furthermore, research has shown that fostering consensus among middle managers (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992b), involving middle managers in the formulation of the new strategies (Ketokivi & Castañer, 2004; Westley, 1990), and positive group-focus emotions of middle managers (Huy, 2011) can make middle managers protagonists of strategy implementation.

However, middle managers can also be antagonists of strategy implementation by resisting strategy implementation due to their self-interest (Giangreco & Peccei, 2005; Guth & Macmillan, 1986), personality and change context (Judge et al., 1999; Oreg, 2006), role conflict (Currie & Procter, 2005) cognition (Choi, 2011), negative group-focus emotions (Huy, 2011), and unfavorable legitimacy judgments of change agents that are rooted in emotional reactions (Huy et al., 2014). While middle managers' resistance is often dysfunctional (Guth & Macmillan, 1986; Nutt, 1998), it can also be functional for strategy implementation if the implementation of (parts of) the strategy would harm the organizational outcomes that the strategy intends to induce (Balogun et al., 2011; Ford et al., 2008). Despite these valuable insights, research from a middle manager perspective has paid little attention to middle managers' sensemaking of other middle managers' attitudes in strategy implementation.

### 1.2. Sensemaking

Sensemaking is a process whereby organizational agents socially construct a plausible account of ambiguous events by answering the question: What does this mean? (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1995b) The meaning created by organizational actors in social interactions represents an interpretation of reality that provides the basis for their actions in organizations (Maitlis, 2005; Weick et al., 2005). Thus, sensemaking is not only about discovering but also about inventing the meaning of ambiguous<sup>1</sup> events in the world (Brown et al., 2015; Colville et al., 2012; Weick, 1995b). That is, sensemaking does not only allow organizational agents to understand but also to shape ambiguous events that affect their organizational reality (Brown et al., 2015; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick et al., 2005).

As new strategies and their implementation challenge the prevailing meaning in organizations, managers engage in sensemaking to construct new meaning (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). The meaning of new

<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that for some sensemaking scholars in the field of organization studies it is important to distinguish 'ambiguity' from 'equivocality' to describe the idea that managers do not only discover but also shape meaning in the world (Brown et al., 2015). We prefer to stick with 'ambiguity' as it is a term well understood by strategy researchers and enables us to bridge the two scholarly conversations.

strategies and their implementation is socially constructed by the use of language (Cornelissen et al., 2011; Gioia et al., 1994; Jalonen et al., 2018; Whittle et al., 2023), conversations (Ford & Ford, 1995; Hendry & Seidl, 2003), discourses (Heracleous & Barrett, 2001; Vaara et al., 2016), and narratives (Balogun et al., 2015; Barry & Elmes, 1997; Brown et al., 2008; Currie & Brown, 2003). These linguistic practices create shared meaning (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010) or multiple coexisting meanings (Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2017) of new strategies.<sup>2</sup>

Middle managers engage in sensemaking to socially construct the meaning of new strategies and their implementation by conversing with and selling the new strategy to stakeholders during strategy implementation (Rouleau & Balogun, 2011; Rouleau, 2005; Splitter et al., 2021). They also routinely engage in lateral social interactions that shape middle managers' sensemaking and their implementation actions (Balogun & Johnson, 2004, 2005). This suggests that organizations are social spaces in which middle managers routinely engage in social interactions to make sense of new strategies, which contributes to the (un)intended outcomes of strategy implementation.

However, we still know little about middle managers' sensemaking of other middle managers' attitudes to a new strategy in strategy implementation even though research has demonstrated that people's understanding of others influences their behavior in a variety of ways (Fiske & Taylor, 2013; Fiske, 1993; Higgins & Bargh, 1987). In light of the evidence suggesting that organizations are social spaces in which middle managers routinely engage in social interactions to understand new strategies and their implementation (Balogun & Johnson, 2004, 2005), middle managers could also seek to understand other middle managers' attitudes to new strategies. In turn, not only middle managers' understanding of the strategy but also their understanding of others could influence middle managers' judgments about the new strategy and consequently, drive their actions regarding the implementation of new strategies (cf. Huy et al., 2014). Thus, middle managers' sensemaking of other middle managers' attitudes to a new strategy may affect strategy implementation. Therefore, the goal of this research is to explore middle managers' sensemaking of other middle managers' attitudes in strategy implementation by asking: *How does middle managers' sensemaking of other middle managers' attitudes to a new strategy affect strategy implementation?*

## 2. Method

To deepen our understanding of how middle managers' sensemaking of other middle managers' attitudes to a new strategy affects strategy implementation, we chose a qualitative-abductive approach (Sætre & Van de Ven, 2021; Van de Ven, 2007) informed by grounded theory (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Gioia & Pitre, 1990; Gioia et al., 2013; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). GenCo (the pseudonym for a multinational German engineering company) provided the ideal research setting for this purpose. GenCo has over 10,000 employees located across 100 sites around the globe and generates an annual revenue of several billion Euro. GenCo is active in a variety of businesses as they produce an assortment of machinery for a range of applications. In addition, GenCo offers services for the maintenance of this machinery. In the context of changing customer expectations, an industry gradually adopting digitization and artificial intelligence to reorganize its production, and a society promoting a more sustainable economy, GenCo formulated a new strategy that is premised upon meeting these requirements.

It is important to note that GenCo's new strategy was established top-down by the management board. GenCo's middle managers and employees were later informed about the new strategy during strategy roadshows. These strategy roadshows included a presentation of the

new strategy by one member of GenCo's management board. Furthermore, middle managers and employees had the opportunity to ask members of the management board questions about GenCo's new strategy. In addition, the strategy roadshows encompassed discussions in small, mixed groups, in which organizational members were asked to describe how they and their business units were affected by the new strategy and how they could implement the strategy in their business unit. The strategy roadshows each lasted one day and took place in all plants with more than 25 employees. All middle managers and almost 50 % of GenCo's total employees participated in one of these strategy roadshows. Subsequently, the management board expected the middle managers to implement the strategy in their departments. That is, GenCo is a case of an archetypal problem in strategy implementation: the strategy was exclusively formulated by the top management who subsequently tasked the middle management with implementing the strategy at the business unit level.

### 2.1. Data collection

Our data collection took place about one year after the strategy roadshows when GenCo's top management had begun to implement the strategy at the corporate level by acquiring firms and developing a new organizational structure. We selected the specific plant of GenCo to conduct our interviews based on the observation of the plant manager that the middle managers had not yet implemented the strategy at the plant. As the top management had formulated the strategy without middle manager involvement, this appeared to be an interesting context to study middle managers' sensemaking of other middle managers' attitudes in strategy implementation. This production plant has a long history of inventing and producing products that became less central to the new strategy. Company policies did not provide any monetary incentives for middle managers to implement the strategy. However, middle managers seemed to be motivated to implement a strategy they deemed appropriate due to an awareness of GenCo's need to adapt in light of the changing business environment as detailed in the findings section. The members of the production plant communicated openly with each other and with us. Overall, the plant consisted of approximately 3,800 employees.

Multiple data collection methods were employed to improve the validity of our findings through data triangulation (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Eisenhardt, 1989). We conducted 21 interviews in total composed of 10 semi-structured and 11 informal interviews. Our main data source are the semi-structured, one-to-one interviews with 10 of 13 middle managers who head a department. Although middle managers can refer to managers whose position is higher than a team leader and lower than the management board, we focused on those middle managers who head a department because they have to interpret the strategy and translate it into practice. It is important to note that our informants included all eight middle managers who are members of the plant's leadership circle. Together with the plant manager, the leadership circle is responsible for the management of the plant and thus, also for the implementation of the new strategy in the plant. Furthermore, our informants included two middle managers who head other key departments in the production plant. As most of the middle managers' social interactions took place within the leadership circle and the plant, this purposive sample was ideal for exploring middle managers' sensemaking of other middle managers' attitudes in strategy implementation.

The semi-structured interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and were conducted in German to ensure high-quality responses. Six informants gave permission to be audio-recorded. These interviews were transcribed verbatim. For the other four informants, we took detailed

<sup>2</sup> We acknowledge that research has identified the significance of narratives (Brown et al., 2008, 2009; Brown & Humphreys, 2003), emotion (Maitlis et al., 2013), and embodiment (Cunliffe & Coupland, 2012) for sensemaking.

**Table 1**  
Coding chart illustrating our data analysis.

| Quotes   | Codes  | Themes  |
|--|--|---|
| I still think to myself, how is this connected and which of these is really the clue and the direction? The strategy is like a supermarket: we can put everything into the cart. [...] At the moment we are in the fog. (MM #5)  | meaning of strategy remains ambiguous, many interpretations of strategy are possible | Ambiguity about the strategy  |
| One weakness of the whole story is that for many, especially here on-site, it is not quite tangible what the role of the site is. Because the site consists of 50 % production, and I believe it is clear to us that we will not necessarily produce new products here. That ultimately means: What is our outlook? And this outlook is not clear. (MM #5)   | implementation remains ambiguous, outlook of production remains unclear              | Ambiguity about the implementation of the strategy  |
| We talk about the strategy. (MM #10)   | conversations about strategy   | MMs engage in social interactions related to the strategy   |
| We talk relatively openly about the issues that we find good, that we don't find so good. If I stay on the production side, production has a different interpersonal approach than other areas. In communication, I can say that because I also worked in development for many years. Production is very well known for direct words. (MM #7)  | open, direct conversations about thoughts related to strategy                        | MMs sense other middle managers' attitudes to the strategy  |
| I would say very similar. (MM #10)   | believes that colleagues think similarly   | MMs' subjective experience of sharedness  |
| One of our competitors spent over a billion on the acquisition of firms [...]. That is on an entirely different level. Once this competitor was as big as us, but he is now almost double the size of us and he declared this strategy and was prepared to spend a lot on it. And we bought some firms in the last years, which will help us for sure, but it is way below that what this competitor does. (MM #2) | doubts that investments into the new strategy are enough                             | MMs' negative attitudes to the strategy constituting their experienced realities about the strategy |
| Of course, today not all things are clear, but it is okay like that. But I think many do not see it that way. (MM #9)  | believes that colleagues think differently   | MMs' subjective experience of separateness  |

Note. MM = middle manager.

notes and reconstructed the interviews within 24 hours.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, we engaged in informal interviews (Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013) with the middle manager who served as our contact person (six interviews), the change manager of the executive department who was responsible for the strategy roadshows (two interviews), and the plant manager (three interviews) about GenCo's new strategy and its implementation. Moreover, we were granted access to secondary data in the form of materials describing GenCo's strategy and the roadshows in detail. In addition, we obtained 410 newspaper articles and six internal plant newsletters covering a variety of topics in GenCo's plant. These documents not only allowed us to gain a thoroughly grounded understanding of our research context, but also to triangulate the implementation behavior of the middle managers. Table\* A1 in the Appendix\* provides an overview of our data sources.

In line with our qualitative-abductive approach, we conducted semi-structured interviews because it enabled us to access, explore, and understand the informants' interpretations about other middle managers. After a warm-up question, we asked the informants open ended questions about their thoughts, gut-feelings, and beliefs about GenCo's new strategy. Then, we inquired about their views on their colleagues' thoughts, gut-feelings, and beliefs regarding the strategy. Furthermore, we asked the informants how they knew about their colleagues' thoughts, gut-feelings, and beliefs about the strategy. Lastly, we inquired about their actions regarding the implementation of GenCo's new strategy.<sup>4</sup> The emergent themes began to recur from the second interview onwards and no new major themes emerged in the last interview. This suggests that theoretical saturation was reached (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

## 2.2. Data analysis

To analyze the data, we employed a coding technique premised upon the coding principles of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). First, we read the interview transcripts several times and marked interesting passages to immerse ourselves in the data. Second, we coded the transcripts by summarizing what the informants said in their own words. Furthermore, we coded the transcripts descriptively by assigning our own labels to the initial codes. Third, we began to abstract concepts, themes, aggregate dimensions, and processes from our codes. While we largely ignored existing theories in the literature up to this point to enable naïve coding, through the process of constant comparison (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) we began in a fourth step to cycle between the nascent concepts, themes, and aggregate dimensions and the existing literature to prevent the "reinvention of the wheel". Table 1 shows a coding chart illustrating our data analysis.

We integrated the concepts emerging from our data analysis in an abductive theoretical model of middle managers' sensemaking of other middle managers' attitudes in strategy implementation. Although the accurate description of concepts is an important aspect of research (Hempel, 1965) and can represent an important step in the process of theorizing (Weick, 1995a), theoretical models go beyond description by providing an answer to questions like how, when, and why (Bacharach,

<sup>3</sup> Although four middle managers did not give their permission to be audio-recorded, this did not appear to be an issue of trust. On the contrary, all middle managers openly shared their interpretations of GenCo's strategy and its implementation with us. For example, they openly criticized GenCo's management board during the interviews. Thus, their refusal was likely rooted in their need for psychological safety.

<sup>4</sup> To exclude the possibility that they gave strategic answers to this question (i.e., suggesting that they had taken implementation actions even though they actually had not taken any implementation actions), we triangulated their statements through informal interviews with the plant manager, the middle manager who served as our contact person, and through newspaper and internal plant newspaper articles where appropriate.

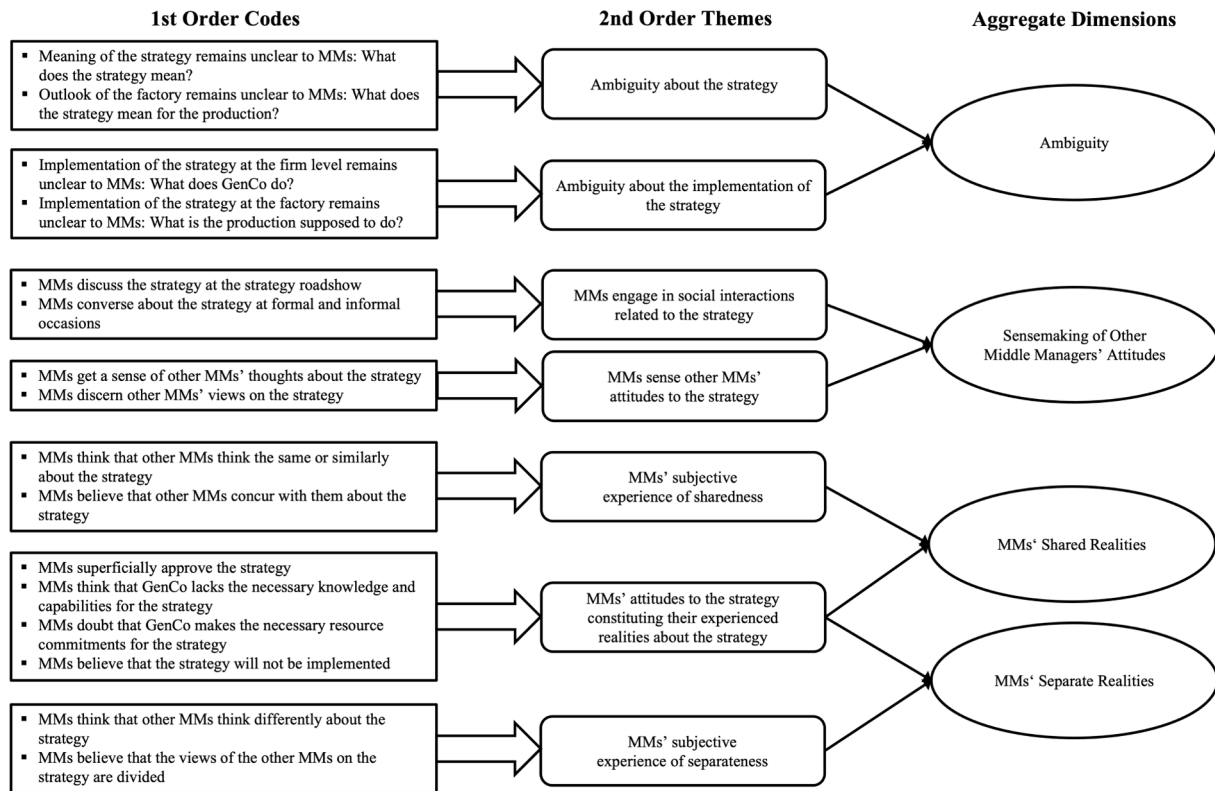


Fig. 1. Data Structure.

1989). Although various forms of theory exist (DiMaggio, 1995), answers to “why” questions can be considered the strongest form of theory (Stinchcombe, 1987; Sutton & Staw, 1995), because they can explain the emergence of phenomena and the happening of events (Bacharach, 1989). The why of theories encompasses the notion of causality, which organizes concepts into an ordered and coherent form. Yet, causality remains abstract and transcends concrete data. Thus, theorizing is also a creative process that goes beyond the data when theorists delineate concepts and propose relationships between them (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). For this reason, the model we propose assumes causality to meaningfully integrate the concepts emerging from our data analysis. Furthermore, theory is often generated abductively by explaining anomalies from hunches, which represent potential explanations for phenomena that are to be evaluated regarding their plausibility in light of the available evidence (Sætre & Van de Ven, 2021; Van de Ven, 2007). Therefore, abduction is used to provide the most plausible answer to the question how middle managers’ sensemaking of other middle managers’ attitudes to a new strategy affects strategy implementation.

During data analysis, we noticed that some middle managers repeatedly reported that their colleagues “think the same” about GenCo’s new strategy. Based on the existing literature on sensemaking, we reasoned that some middle managers potentially construct shared realities about GenCo’s new strategy. Henceforth, we used the concept of shared reality (Echterhoff et al., 2009; Hardin & Higgins, 1996) to interpret our findings.

### 3. Findings

Our findings show that middle managers made sense of other middle managers’ attitudes to the strategy in social interactions when they faced ambiguity about the strategy and its implementation. Although all middle managers shared the same negative attitude to GenCo’s new strategy, they constructed either shared or separate realities about GenCo’s new strategy depending on whether they subjectively

experienced their attitudes to be shared with or separate from other middle managers. In our case, middle managers’ shared realities were associated with middle managers’ inaction on strategy implementation, whereas middle managers’ separate realities were related to initial actions to implement the strategy. The data structure of our findings is summarized in Fig. 1.

#### 3.1. Prologue: the fog of ambiguity

GenCo has been a successful company with an experienced top management who considered the implementation of its new strategy to be very important. Therefore, they followed a textbook approach to implementing their top-down formulated strategy by investing considerable time and financial resources into conducting strategy roadshows that were designed to enable managers and employees to understand and consequently implement the new strategy. Although the top managers were able to spark questions and group discussions during the strategy roadshows among middle managers who sought to understand the new strategy, the meaning of GenCo’s new strategy remained ambiguous to them:

That digitalization is not yet really translated for us. [...] What does digitalization mean for us? What does digitalization mean for the company? What does digitalization mean for the product? Those are three different questions. And none of them has been answered. [...] If digitalization was not part of the strategy, we would do it anyway, because it is simply state-of-the-art technology. [...] Therefore, I do not entirely understand what they sell us in the strategy. What is the trick behind it? What is the strategy? (MM #5).

The question remained unanswered: What does the strategy actually mean? (MM #3).

When the middle managers attempted to understand the meaning of GenCo’s new strategy, they saw it in the light of GenCo’s past strategy that had focused on the products they had been producing for over 100

years. The fact that the old products were supposed to become less central and partly replaced by new products made middle managers wonder how GenCo's past strategy relates to the new strategy, which made it even more difficult for the middle managers to understand the meaning of GenCo's new strategy.

It is difficult to understand exactly what products are offered. If new products are the goal of the strategy, what about the old products? What role does the service play? What does the strategy mean concretely? (MM #6).

In light of the anticipated shift from the old to the new products, the middle managers also wondered about the meaning of the strategy for the production at their plant:

What does that mean for the production here? Are we supposed to produce less and less? (MM #1)

What does the strategy mean for the production on-site? (MM #4)  
A production strategy is missing. [...] There is now a corporate strategy that operates at a very high level and what I don't see is that it is broken down into a production strategy, because I think that the production is having a hard time at the moment seeing what comes out of this strategy. (MM #7).

As middle managers could not understand what the strategy means both in relation to what GenCo had been doing in the past and what they had been doing in the production plant, GenCo's new strategy was described as a "cloud" (MM #10), which symbolizes how intangible and ambiguous the strategy was for the middle managers.

Since the meaning of GenCo's new strategy remained ambiguous, the middle managers also wondered how the strategy would be implemented. Even though they understood the vision of GenCo's strategy (i. e., where GenCo wants to be in the future), they questioned how GenCo would get there. The middle managers could not discern the concrete steps GenCo would take to realize the vision painted in the new strategy:

What do we do now? What are the steps to reach the goal? [...] How will the strategy be implemented? (MM #1)

It is not clear how the strategy is implemented. The vision of the strategy is clear, but the steps to reach the goal are not. (MM #4)

I say: you can target if you know what to target. And there is no clear target defined in this strategy. It's more of a vision. Such a green island where we want to go, with all the possibilities, only on all these weddings I am sure we cannot dance. (MM #8)

Middle managers also wondered how the strategy could be implemented in their plant:

But of course, you also notice that there is uncertainty. What will happen next? Where are we going? What do we have to do? (MM #7)

The cogwheels linking the strategy with goals and actions in the production are missing. (MM #6)

In the short-term many elements were explained, that is no problem at all [...]. But maybe these two following steps are missing. One gets the feeling that one has just started and now has to act fast. But in what direction? (MM #5).

Although workshops at the strategy roadshows were designed to facilitate middle managers' understanding of the strategy and its implementation, the ambiguity about the implementation of the strategy remained:

In these workshops one was supposed to infer for oneself: 'What can I do to implement the strategy?', which was the most difficult exercise. That was the least tangible part of the whole workshop, because there is nothing but this big cloud. (MM #10)

Therefore, middle managers wondered "What can we do?" (MM #10) and concluded that "we are in a fog" (MM #5). Confronted with such pervasive ambiguity related to the strategy and its implementation, middle managers began to engage with other middle managers in

relation to GenCo's new strategy.

### 3.2. Sensemaking of other middle managers' attitudes: Middle managers locating each other in the fog

Facing ambiguity related to GenCo's new strategy and its implementation, middle managers reached out to other middle managers to discuss the strategy in social interactions. When they conversed and discussed the meaning of the strategy in formal and informal contexts, they inferred other middle managers' thoughts about the strategy in an attempt to get a sense of their colleagues' stance to the strategy and its implementation. In response to the interview question exploring how they know about the thoughts of their fellow middle managers, they answered:

There are a lot of conversations with colleagues [...]. There are a lot of regular meetings and leadership circles where these questions always come up. I do not want to say that we all stood together at the coffee machine, but on the way to the canteen and back more or less. The interpersonal aspects of course. [...] I think such meetings and circles are quite good for getting a sense of what other people think. (MM #2)

From the exchange with colleagues about the strategy not only in formal but also in informal contexts like having a beer. (MM #1)

At any meetings and so forth. There are so many countless opportunities where [the strategy] automatically becomes a conversation topic, be it these strategy launch meetings or the roadshows. (MM #7)

I have taken part in this workshop. It was a workshop with the management board lasting a whole day. Of course, we talked about that during breaks at this occasion. [...] One gets into conversation with the others in the end. (MM #10).

Even though the strategy roadshows did not facilitate middle managers' understanding of the new strategy, they spurred conversations and discussions about the strategy among them. This also enabled them to deduce other middle managers' thoughts and views about the strategy:

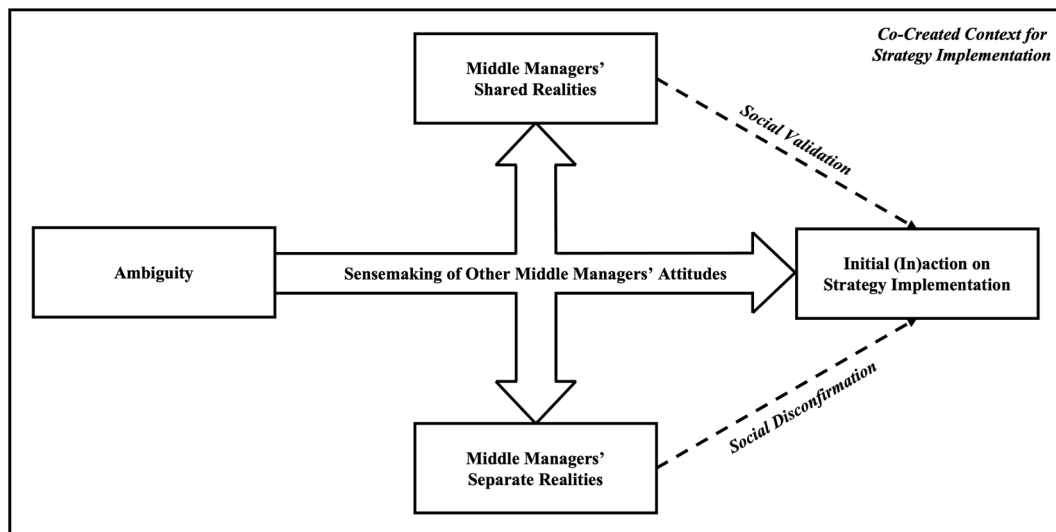
Of course, the strategy roadshows helped to get into conversations with the people: How do you see it? How does it affect you in your department? That's where my gut-feeling comes from how other people think about the strategy. (MM #2)

Joint visits and joint moments of reflection after a roadshow as part of qualification measures, where the topic of strategy was also discussed. And that's when we came into contact with others and exchanged ideas. (MM #5)

Furthermore, middle managers discerned other middle managers' stance on the strategy and its implementation not only directly from conversations and discussions pertaining to the strategy and its implementation but also indirectly from statements and comments made by other middle managers in social contexts:

That was not discussed in a formalized context, but that are often simply passing comments when something is presented. The statements of individuals, the questions of individuals. One can always discern from that who views the strategy more positively or less positively. (MM #9)

By conversing and discussing the strategy with their colleagues, middle managers reached out to their colleagues in relation to the strategy. When they engaged in social interactions with each other about GenCo's new ambiguous strategy, middle managers sought to understand their colleagues' stance on the strategy. In other words, middle managers made sense of other middle managers' attitudes to the strategy.



**Fig. 2.** A Model of Middle Managers' Sensemaking of Other Middle Managers' Attitudes in Strategy Implementation. *Note.* Dashed arrows represent the abductively theorized mechanisms of social validation and social disconfirmation of middle managers' attitudes to the new strategy, explaining how middle managers' shared and separate realities can influence their initial (in)action on strategy implementation.

**Table A1**

Data sources.

| Data Category                       | Description  | Use in Analysis   |
|-------------------------------------|--|---|
| Semi-Structured Interviews (N = 10) | Interviews with members of the leadership circle (n = 8)<br>Interviews with heads of key departments (n = 2)   | Main data source used for analysis and grounded theory building as these data provided insights into middle managers' sensemaking of other middle managers' attitudes to a new strategy |
| Informal Interviews (N = 11)        | Plant manager (n = 3)<br>Middle manager (contact person, n = 6)<br>Change manager (n = 2)  | Familiarization with the research context<br>Triangulation of the implementation actions by the middle managers   |
| Documents (N = 420)                 | GenCo's strategy document (n = 1)<br>Strategy roadshow presentation (n = 1)<br>Schedule of strategy roadshow (n = 1)<br>GenCo's Website (n = 1)<br>Newspaper articles (n = 410)<br>Plant's internal newsletter (n = 6) | Familiarization with the research context<br>Triangulation of the implementation actions by the top and middle managers   |

*Note.* Even though our data analysis mainly relied on the semi-structured interviews with the middle managers as we were investigating middle managers' sensemaking of other middle managers' attitudes in strategy implementation, the informal interviews and documents allowed us to familiarize ourselves with the research context and to triangulate the implementation actions by middle managers.

**3.3. Middle managers' shared and separate realities: my colleagues (do not) think the same**

Based on their sense of other middle managers' attitudes to the strategy, middle managers constructed shared and separate realities about GenCo's new strategy. Middle managers' shared and separate realities about GenCo's new strategy were characterized by four themes. For one, middle managers superficially approved GenCo's new strategy. Although the middle managers believed that GenCo's new strategy generally took the right approach as they deemed the themes of the strategy to be important, they often qualified their general approval in the same breath:

I have a good gut-feeling about the strategy, but it is associated with a question mark about how everything will continue. (MM #1)

The themes of the strategy are, of course, the big themes in society. Therefore, one cannot escape these themes and from this perspective it makes sense to start these points now. But one can say that one could have started it earlier. (MM #5)

Having expressed their superficial approval, the middle managers immediately began to talk in depth about their negative attitudes regarding GenCo's new strategy.

Being aware of GenCo's engineering and production capabilities rooted in the long history of the plant related to the products that became less central in the new strategy, middle managers thought that GenCo lacks the necessary knowledge and capabilities for the strategy to be successful:

And there I believe many employees and colleagues see the danger that we potentially put a lot on our plate without having the internal know-how or capacity to actually realize the product portfolio envisioned in strategy. (MM #2)

There is a discrepancy between the firm's capabilities and the requirements of the strategy. (MM #1)

The necessary knowledge, capabilities, and experience for the strategy are lacking. (MM #3)

We have no idea about [new product #1]. We have no idea how to control [the new product #1]. With our acquisition, we have found a company that can do that. But we have no idea how [the new product #2] works, we have no idea about [the new product #3], we have no idea about [the new product #4]. But we want to supply them. And to join forces with partners. And that is something where many, many question marks remain open. We want to install [the new product #1] here at the site and we are now realizing how little we know about what is needed. (MM #8)

This mismatch between the current and required knowledge and capabilities for producing the products envisioned in the strategy made the middle managers wonder:

How do we want to build up, produce and secure this breadth of know-how? (MM #8)

And as the new products seemed to be at the center of the new strategy, middle managers thought the lack of know-how to be the "central question mark" (MM #8) of the strategy.

In light of their analysis that GenCo lacks the necessary knowledge and capabilities for the strategy to be successful, the middle managers

thought that GenCo needs to invest heavily into the knowledge and capabilities required for the strategy. However, the middle managers doubted that GenCo made the necessary resource commitments to build up the required knowledge and capabilities:

You often hear that the resources are not available for the implementation of a strategic initiative. There are committees, but I am not sure whether they are really endowed with resources. For example, we say that we need new knowledge, we need new perspectives, but it needs to be economic as well, of course. There is a headcount freeze. We are not allowed to hire staff. This poses the question to me: If we need these new people, these new ways of thinking, talents, this does not fit to the headcount freeze. In conclusion, this can mean that we continue like before and miss the boat. (MM #2)

I am not always sure whether one goes the same way continuously. And by continuously, I mean mainly that one commits the necessary resources to the strategy. Because we always have many wishes in the firm, but if it comes to the resources, one likes to back out once in a while. And that would be a pity because it is a lot necessary for this transformation. (MM #9)

That is, the middle managers did not only see a discrepancy between GenCo's current and required capabilities for its new strategy but also deemed the resource commitments to implement the strategy to be insufficient.

In light of their conviction that GenCo neither possesses the knowledge and capabilities required for the new strategy nor is making the necessary investments to build up the required knowledge and capabilities, some middle managers came to believe that the strategy would not be implemented:

The strategy will not be implemented to that extent. (MM #1)

In the past strategies were rather a bit lip service [...]. I am still doubting whether we actually live them and bring them to life. (MM #2)

It is the question whether the management pushes it through with the same attention as if one management board member came, declared and communicated the strategy. Whether the management board emphatically clarifies what the production does, what the quality department does, what the logistics does, I am not sure whether this is a focus at the moment. (MM #2)

Similarly, other middle managers thought that the strategy will not be realized in the short term:

The strategic changes at GenCo do not yet affect the production massively at the moment, because the strategy results in changes in other areas. [...] The things will come in the future. (MM #9)

In the short term, we won't notice much of this. In the medium term, I think it will have a massive impact on production. At that moment: What else do we do? How do we position ourselves as a company with regard to the current product? Because at the moment there is only current product production here. Is that enough for us? And will it be useful in the future? And I think that in the long term we will see massive changes in development. Where the development focus will be. (MM #7)

These beliefs were further substantiated by the actions of GenCo's management board. To implement the strategy, GenCo's top management had hired marketing consultants to rebrand the firm according to its new strategic focus. However, these actions only raised questions for middle managers that confirmed their beliefs that the strategy will not be implemented as they observed discrepancies between the management board's communication to the outside world and to the employees inside GenCo:

And that's why it's a bit of a question what is actually communicated to the outside world that is constructed, because of course I need a

slogan now, and what of the strategy is actually serious. So, there is an outward communication and an inward communication. And that's a bit of a weakness in the whole story because it becomes apparent that it's not quite consistent. (MM #5)

Some middle managers even wondered whether the strategy was only a marketing stunt and therefore, was not meant seriously at all:

Is the strategy only a marketing stunt by the CEO? (MM #10)  
Maybe the strategy was only a marketing stunt. (MM #6)

Given middle managers' concerns regarding the strategy and their doubts that the new strategy would actually be implemented, middle managers believed that they had to react instead of act:

Our task is the production of hardware solutions. We build things on behalf of others. But the product does not change. For this to happen one needs new products and instructions to produce other products. The strategy needs to be implemented elsewhere. We have to react instead of act. (MM #1)

If there are new parts to build, the production can produce new parts. (MM #6)

That is, the middle managers were convinced that the strategy would not be implemented, at least in the short term.

Although all middle managers shared the same negative attitude to GenCo's new strategy, middle managers differed in their subjective experience of sharedness and separateness in relation to other middle managers' attitudes that they developed based on their sense of other middle managers' attitudes to the strategy. Some middle managers experienced their attitudes to GenCo's strategy to be largely identical with other middle managers. In response to questions on their colleagues' thoughts, gut-feelings, and beliefs about GenCo's new strategy middle managers repeatedly stated that they perceive commonalities with them:

My colleagues think the same. (MM #1)

I think similar. At least I would reckon that the people in the production have similar questions. (MM #2)

My colleagues think similarly. (MM #3)

I think that the views fairly coincide. (MM #5)

My colleagues think the same. (MM #6)

I think that we concur. (MM #10)

That is, these middle managers subjectively experienced their attitudes to be shared with other middle managers.

In contrast, other middle managers experienced their attitudes to GenCo's strategy to be largely different from other middle managers or recognized heterogeneity among their colleagues' attitudes. In response to questions on their colleagues' thoughts, gut-feeling, and beliefs about GenCo's new strategy middle managers repeatedly stated that they perceive differences with them:

Differently: Some approve the strategy and the results; others view it critically. (MM #4)

I believe it is divided. (MM #7)

I think most think that the strategy is very, very good. (MM #8 after stating that their gut-feeling is a question mark)

Gut feelings are as different as people are. There is certainly a group that says: great, onwards, upwards, I know some people personally who think like that. There is certainly a large section who think: well, let's wait and see what can be realized, and there are a few pessimists. So, the usual division I would say. (MM #9)

That is, these middle managers subjectively experienced their attitudes to be separate from other middle managers. Although all middle managers shared a critical stance towards GenCo's new strategy, they constructed shared and separate realities about the strategy based on their sense of other middle managers' attitudes towards the strategy.



### 3.4. Epilogue: middle managers' initial (in)action on strategy implementation

Although all middle managers had similar negative attitudes to GenCo's new strategy, some middle managers took initial actions to implement the strategy, whereas other middle managers remained inactive. Middle managers who experienced their negative attitudes towards GenCo's new strategy to be shared were initially inactive regarding its implementation:

- I did not implement the strategy. (MM #1)
- Er... that is a good question... (MM #2 in response to the question how they implemented the strategy)
- I did not implement the strategy at all. (MM #3, MM #10)

In contrast, middle managers who experienced their negative attitudes towards the strategy to be separate were initially active regarding its implementation:

- I supported the implementation of the new strategy by supporting the installation of test products and applications. (MM #4)
- We are in the course of implementing regulations that are in line with the strategy, [...] and this is a project that is currently underway. (MM #7)
- We prepared for the production of more products which are part of the new strategy. (MM #8)

Middle managers' initial implementation actions were partly covered by newspaper articles. While trade press newspapers like the *Handelsblatt*<sup>5</sup> and the *Financial Times* covered GenCo's shift from the old to the new strategy and initial measures to implement the strategy at the corporate level, local newspaper outlets, industry journals, and the plant's internal newsletter reported specific actions taken in the plant that allowed us to triangulate statements and verify implementation actions by the middle managers. For example, these outlets covered the installation of test products and applications as well as the procurement of machinery required for the production of more products which are part of the new strategy. Thereby, these trade press articles supported the statements made by middle managers regarding their implementation behavior.

### 4. A model of middle managers' sensemaking of other middle managers' attitudes in strategy implementation

Based on our findings, we propose a theoretical model of middle managers' sensemaking of other middle managers' attitudes in strategy implementation (see Fig. 2). Our model shows how middle managers construct shared and separate realities in reaction to ambiguity related to a strategy and its implementation by making sense of other middle managers' attitudes to the new strategy. Furthermore, our model proposes that middle managers' sensemaking of others affects their implementation behavior by influencing their initial (in)action on strategy implementation, which depends on middle managers' experience of shared and separate realities.<sup>6</sup> Thereby, middle managers' sensemaking of other middle managers co-creates the context for strategy implementation, in which middle managers (do not) take action to implement the strategy.

Ambiguity constitutes the first element of our model. Our model assumes that ambiguity, which is characteristic for new strategies and their implementation (Abdallah & Langley, 2014; Eisenberg, 1984),

<sup>5</sup> The *Handelsblatt* is the German analogue to the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Financial Times*.

<sup>6</sup> We construe this proposition as being abductive in nature to provide the best possible explanation for our grounded observation that middle managers' shared and separate realities were associated with their (in)action on strategy implementation (Sætre & Van de Ven, 2021; Van de Ven, 2007).

likely activates middle managers' epistemic motives, which refers to the need to arrive at a valid understanding of the world (Echterhoff et al., 2009). When middle managers face ambiguity related to a new strategy and its implementation, they discuss and converse about the new strategy in lateral social interactions (Balogun & Johnson, 2005; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011). In these social interactions middle managers communicate their attitudes—their thoughts, gut-feelings, and beliefs—about the new strategy to other middle managers (Higgins & Pittman, 2008). This enables the middle managers to make sense of other middle managers' attitudes to the strategy.

Based on their sense of other middle managers' attitudes to an organization's new strategy, middle managers construct shared and separate realities about the new strategy (Echterhoff et al., 2009; Hardin & Higgins, 1996). Middle managers experience shared realities if they subjectively experience their attitudes to the new strategy to be largely identical with other middle managers' attitudes. In contrast, middle managers experience separate realities if they subjectively experience their attitudes to the new strategy to be different from other middle managers' attitudes. It is important to note that this subjective experience of sharedness and separateness is the defining characteristic of middle managers' shared and separate realities (Echterhoff et al., 2009; Hardin & Higgins, 1996). Thus, our model suggests that middle managers' shared and separate realities emerge from their sensemaking of other middle managers' attitudes.

Grounded in our finding that middle managers' shared and separate realities were associated with their initial implementation behavior, our model proposes that middle managers' sensemaking of others co-creates the context for strategy implementation, in which they (do not) take action to implement the strategy. Specifically, middle managers' shared and separate realities may affect their implementation behavior by influencing their initial (in)action on strategy implementation. Middle managers' sense of others could affect their implementation behavior because their subjective experience of sharedness or separateness may socially validate or disconfirm their attitudes to a new strategy (Echterhoff et al., 2009). Thereby, middle managers' shared realities may reinforce their attitudes, whereas their separate realities may weaken their attitudes to a new strategy. As middle managers' attitudes to the new strategy likely affect their intention to implement the new strategy and consequently, their implementation behavior (Ajzen, 1985, 1991), their shared and separate realities can influence their implementation behavior. Overall, our model suggests that middle managers' shared and separate realities emerge from their sensemaking of others in an attempt to achieve a valid understanding of the world in the face of ambiguity related to the strategy and its implementation. Middle managers' experienced realities may subsequently shape their implementation behavior and thus, may affect strategy implementation.

### 5. Discussion

We studied the implementation of a strategy in the plant of a multinational German engineering company using a qualitative-abductive approach informed by grounded theory to explore how middle managers' sensemaking of other middle managers' attitudes to a new strategy affects strategy implementation. Based on our findings, we proposed a model of middle managers' sensemaking of other middle managers' attitudes in strategy implementation. Our model suggests that when confronted with ambiguity in relation to a new strategy and its implementation, middle managers make sense of other middle managers' thoughts, gut-feelings, and beliefs about a new strategy. In light of their sense of other middle managers' attitudes to the new strategy, they construct shared and separate realities. These experienced realities can determine whether middle managers take initial steps to implement the strategy or not. Thereby, middle managers' sensemaking of other middle managers' attitudes co-creates the context for strategy implementation, and ultimately shapes whether the strategy is implemented or not. Our study contributes to research on strategy

implementation from a middle manager perspective by introducing the concepts of shared realities, separate realities, and sensemaking of others' attitudes to the literature. Overall, this study represents a first step towards a better understanding of how middle managers' sensemaking of other middle managers' attitudes to a new strategy affects strategy implementation. In the following sections, we discuss the theoretical and practical implications of our findings for strategy implementation.

### 5.1. Middle managers' sensemaking in strategy implementation

Our study demonstrates that middle managers make sense of other middle managers' attitudes to the strategy when they experience ambiguity about the strategy and its implementation. Previous research suggests that middle managers react to ambiguity about new strategies by attempting to make sense of the new strategies (Balogun & Johnson, 2004, 2005; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011; Rouleau, 2005). Thus, we extend research on sensemaking by demonstrating that sensemaking does not only allow middle managers to construct an understanding of new strategies (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Maitlis, 2005; Weick et al., 2005; Weick, 1995b) but also an understanding of other middle managers' attitudes to new strategies. This represents a social process whereby managers attempt to discern other middle managers' stance on the strategy in reaction to ambiguity about the strategy and its implementation. That is, the focal point of middle managers' sensemaking can be the content and themes of new strategies but also their peers' attitudes to these, especially in relation to ambiguities. More generally, our research corroborates the notion that organizations are social spaces (Balogun & Johnson, 2004, 2005), in which social processes within middle management are ubiquitous during strategy implementation.

Our findings also show that middle managers can construct shared and separate realities about a new strategy. The defining characteristic of shared and separate realities is the subjective experience of sharedness and separateness (Echterhoff et al., 2009; Hardin & Higgins, 1996). This subjectivity differentiates shared and separate realities from similar concepts like consensus, which refers to an objectively observable agreement among individuals (Dess, 1987; Kellermanns et al., 2011; Rapert et al., 2002); organizational schemata, which represent cognitive frames that are objectively shared among organizational members (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Bartunek, 1984); and cross-understanding, which means the accurate comprehension of other group members' mental models (Huber & Lewis, 2010).

As middle managers' shared and separate realities represent social cognitive constructs,<sup>7</sup> our research provides fresh insight into middle managers' reactions to new strategies and their implementation. Previous research has mainly focused on cognitive (Choi, 2011; Eib et al., 2021; Fried et al., 1996; Huy et al., 2014; Oreg, 2006; Šilenskytė et al., 2022), emotional (Huy, 2002, 2011; Oreg, 2006), and behavioral (Canterino et al., 2020; Cartwright & Cooper, 1993; Judge et al., 1999;

<sup>7</sup> Social cognition refers to the cognitive structures and processes that shape humans' understanding of others and themselves (Fiske, 1993; Higgins & Bargh, 1987). In other words, social cognitions are an individual's mental structures representing their situated understandings of others' thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about the world. It is important to note that social cognition (cf. Fiske, 1993; Fiske & Taylor, 2013; Higgins & Bargh, 1987) is different from social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986; Wood & Bandura, 1989). Social cognition represents an independent research stream within social psychological research, whereas social cognitive theory is a broadly applied theory in management that was inspired by social psychological research. While social cognition is about the cognitive structures and processes that shape humans' understanding of others and themselves, social cognitive theory is about how people are both products and producers of their environment through the triadic reciprocal causation by their behavior, cognitive as well as other personal factors, and the external environment.

Oreg, 2006) reactions to new strategies, their implementation, and related organizational change (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999; Choi, 2011; Oreg & Berson, 2019; Oreg et al., 2011; Weiser et al., 2020). Our findings extend this work by documenting middle managers' social cognitive reaction to a new strategy and its implementation. Thus, our study shifts the focus from the cognitive to the social cognitive dimension of change reactions.

Based on our observation that middle managers' shared and separate realities were associated with their initial implementation behavior, our theoretical model proposes abductively that middle managers' subjectively experienced realities can shape their initial implementation behavior by socially validating or disconfirming their attitudes to the new strategy. Previous research has shown that middle managers' self-interest (Giangreco & Peccei, 2005; Guth & Macmillan, 1986), role configurations (Heyden et al., 2017), personality and context (Oreg, 2006), legitimacy judgments of top managers as well as emotional reactions (Huy et al., 2014), and negative group-focus emotions (Huy, 2011) influence whether middle managers become protagonists or antagonists of strategy implementation. Our research extends this work by advancing shared and separate realities as potential explanatory variables for middle managers' support of and resistance to strategy implementation. More generally, our findings suggest that middle managers' subjectively experienced realities can shape their organizational realities.

### 5.2. Boundary conditions, limitations, and future research

Our study examined middle managers' sensemaking of other middle managers' attitudes to a new strategy in a context in which top managers formulated the strategy and subsequently tasked the middle management with implementing this strategy. Although this context enabled us to investigate middle managers' sensemaking of other middle managers' attitudes in an archetypal top-down strategy implementation setting, it also imposes a boundary condition on our theoretical model as it remains unclear how middle managers' sensemaking of others affects strategy implementation in contexts where middle managers exerted strategic agency by being involved in the formulation of new strategies or engaging in bottom-up strategic initiatives (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992a; Splitter et al., 2021). Given that sensemaking of others' attitudes to phenomena in the world is fundamental to behavior (cf. Fiske, 1993; Fiske & Taylor, 2013; Higgins & Bargh, 1987), middle managers' sensemaking of other middle managers' attitudes to a new strategy may amplify positive or induce negative consequences for strategy implementation in such contexts. Therefore, future research should examine how middle managers' sensemaking of other middle managers' attitudes to a new strategy affects strategy implementation when middle managers have exerted strategic agency.

More generally, while we focused on middle managers' sensemaking of other middle managers' attitudes in strategy implementation, sensemaking of others' attitudes to a new strategy is not restricted to middle managers. Therefore, future research should broaden the focus of our study and investigate other organizational agents' sensemaking of others' attitudes in strategy implementation. Specifically, it may prove valuable to explore whether top managers experience shared and separate realities with their colleagues and what consequences these shared and separate realities have for strategy implementation. Furthermore, it could also be fruitful to explore whether top or middle managers experience shared and separate realities across hierarchical levels and what consequences these shared and separate realities have for strategy implementation. In addition, future research should investigate the influence of middle managers' shared and separate realities on whether they become protagonists or antagonists of strategy implementation as suggested by our observations and proposed by our model.

Along with the usual caveats of cross-sectional studies, our study possesses two limitations. First, our model is based on 21 interviews consisting of 10 formal and 11 informal interviews. Although we

recognize that this is a limited sample, it needs to be judged in light of the purpose of our research and the sample of informants with whom we conducted these interviews. As the purpose of our research was to explore how middle managers' sensemaking of other middle managers' attitudes to a new strategy affects strategy implementation, obtaining 21 interviews can be viewed as an important first step in advancing our understanding of middle managers' sensemaking of other middle managers' attitudes in strategy implementation. Furthermore, the middle managers we interviewed are located directly below the top management and included all middle managers who were members of the leadership circle. As these middle managers have to interpret the new strategy and are responsible for implementing the strategy in their plant, this purposive sample was ideal for exploring middle managers' sensemaking of other middle managers' attitudes in strategy implementation. Nevertheless, future research should build on this by elaborating and testing our model using different and broader samples.

Second, our informants described their subjective experiences retrospectively, which imposes limitations on our data as accounts of events and experiences recalled from memory can be distorted. We took several measures to ensure the credibility and dependability of our findings (Lincoln, 1995). First, we checked for the consistency of the subjective experiences reported by the middle managers within their interviews. Second, we conducted member checks during the interviews and when we presented the results of our research to the leadership circle. These member checks suggested that middle managers' subjective experiences were internally congruent and consistent over time. Third, the documents allowed us to triangulate the plausibility of their statements regarding their initial implementation behavior. Overall, these measures corroborate the credibility and dependability of our data. That being said, it could prove generative for future research to follow middle managers' sensemaking of other middle managers' attitudes in strategy implementation over an extended period in real time.

### 5.3. Managerial implications

Given the findings of our study, top managers should pay attention to the social dynamics underlying middle managers' organizational realities. Although middle managers' sensemaking of other middle managers' attitudes and their resulting realities may be inherently difficult to manage, top managers may increase the chances of successful strategy implementation by engaging in repeated cycles of sensegiving (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007). Thereby, top managers could provide the background against which middle managers develop their own and make sense of other middle managers' attitudes to a new strategy, which ultimately creates their shared and separate realities. Furthermore, our findings suggest that middle managers should critically reflect upon how their sensemaking of others may shape their experienced realities, and ultimately affect their implementation behavior. By becoming aware of their shared and separate realities, middle managers may be able to better understand why they (do not) take actions to implement a new strategy. Furthermore, the deliberate creation and use of heuristics by bottom-up identification, lateral validation, top-down guidance, and adaptation may aid in fostering implementation actions (Kratochvil et al., 2022). Consequently, they may be able to better fulfil their role as change intermediaries who implement useful and prevent potentially harmful aspects of a new strategy (Balogun et al., 2011; Balogun, 2003; Ford et al., 2008).

In our study, strategy implementation behavior emerges from reflexive, relational processes through which managers take a reading of their peers' perspectives on ambiguous aspects of corporate strategies and plans. Attention to these sensemaking processes highlights the work of middle managers in authoring the meaning of strategies in practical everyday ways. As Weick (1995b: 13) reminds us, sensemaking is a process by which "people generate what they interpret". Strategies do not have a pre-existing, essentialist character, waiting to be discovered by middle managers. Instead, their practical meaning is formed through

acts of sensemaking, involving processes of co-interpretation and co-creation. This insight lets us understand the active and highly relational role of middle managers in shaping strategy implementation.

### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Benedikt Alexander Schuler:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Investigation, Validation, Methodology, Project administration. **Kevin Orr:** Supervision, Methodology, Data curation, Conceptualization, Validation, Writing - review & editing. **Jeffrey Hughes:** Supervision, Methodology, Validation, Writing - review & editing.

### Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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### Appendix A

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**Benedikt Alexander Schuler** is a research associate and Ph.D. candidate at the Institute of Management & Strategy at the University of St.Gallen (Switzerland). In his research, Benedikt examines strategic phenomena from a behavioral perspective using cognitive theories.

**Kevin Orr** is Professor of Leadership and Governance at the University of St Andrews (UK) and a Senior Fellow in the Institute of European Studies at the University of California Berkeley. His scholarship engages with theories at the intersections of organizational theory, public administration and political studies. Kevin's research addresses aspects of leading, managing and organizing, most often in political settings.

**Jeffrey Hughes** is Associate Professor of Strategy and Entrepreneurship at Durham University Business School. His research interests reside at the nexus of strategy and technology, which includes work exploring the impact of persuasion on the adoption of big data analytics, open forms of strategic information systems planning, and the role of strategy in addressing grand social challenges.