MANAGERIAL SENSEMAKING AND SENSEGIVING:
UNDERSTANDING MIDDLE MANAGERS’ PERSPECTIVES
AT A GOVERNMENT INSTITUTE

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Abstract

The roles of middle managers in modern organizations go beyond the management of routine operations and administrative work. Middle-level managers play critical roles in facilitating organizational changes (Rouleau, 2005), mediating knowledge gaps in organizations (Burgess & Currie, 2013), and promoting strategic renewal in organizations (Wooldridge, Schmid & Floyd, 2008). As local leaders, they make sense of their experiences and give signals to the employees to construct shared meaning in the given context (Kezar 2013). Despite their vital roles and significant contributions, little is known about the perceptions and lived experiences of middle managers in government organizations (Chen, Berman & Wang, 2017). Through the lens of sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995), this study explored how Deans and Directors at a highly-structured government institute understand their positions and lived experiences as middle managers between senior level leaders and faculty members. Through the framework of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the research data revealed that middle managers orient themselves as (a) mediators of expectations, (b) influencers of people, (c) balancing wheels of organizations, and (d) generators of collective efficacy. The voices of the participants shed light on how they understand their positions and construct self-concepts in hierarchical organizational contexts. The findings from this study offered fresh insight into managerial discourse for government organizations, highlighting middle managers’ realities from relational perspectives.

Keywords: middle managers, government organizations, sensemaking, sensegiving, lived experiences, IPA
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In the current global economy, the roles of middle managers have become increasingly important in facilitating organizational learning (Döös, Johansson & Wilhelmson, 2015). Middle managers are local administrators, leaders, mentors, and change influencers who translate the vision of senior managers into local contexts. Their contributions go beyond administrative and technical matters because they actively participate in real-time organizational activities as local experts. While middle managers hold important positions in a variety of modern organizations, how they construct meaning from their lived experiences and enact them is relatively understudied (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Brady, 2013; Floyd & Wooldridge, 1997; Huy, 2001; Mantere, 2008; Rouleau, 2005; Toms, Kovacs & Immordino, 2011). Little is known about how middle managers make sense of their experiences and connect their thoughts into actions in a highly-structured government context.

Middle managers play critical roles in facilitating organizational changes (Huy, 2002; Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Rouleau, 2005; Toms et al., 2011), creating knowledge (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995), mediating knowledge gaps in organizations (Burgess & Currie, 2013), and facilitating strategic renewal in organizations (Floyd & Wooldridge, 2000; Wooldridge, Schmid & Floyd, 2008). Being charged with designated units, middle managers experience on-going sensemaking and sensegiving in an organization. That is, they make sense of their experiences and give signals to the employees to construct shared meanings in the given context (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Kezar 2013). What makes middle management unique is their “function as mediators between the organization's strategy and day-to-day activities” (Wooldridge et al., 2008, p. 1192). This study investigated how Deans and Directors at a highly-structured, government educational institute make sense of their positions as middle
managers between senior level leaders and faculty members.

**Statement of the Problem**

Literature provides varying definitions of middle managers. They are commonly defined as “any managers two levels below the CEO and one level above line workers and professionals” (Huy, 2001, p. 73). They can be “the leaders of a team or task force” (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995, p.127), or “mediators between the top management and the rest of the community” (Mantere, 2008, p. 295). Middle managers are also considered as any managers who mediate between the vision of the top and employees (Floyd & Wooldridge, 2000). Given the wide range of definitions, the researcher of this study defines middle managers as managers who serve between the first-line supervisors and the senior management. The participants of this study were middle managers who were positioned between first-line supervisors and the top management at a government institute. At the site of this research, they typically serve as Deans of schools or Directors of specific divisions who are responsible for the overall management of their designated units.

The purpose of this study was to examine how Deans and Directors at a government institute make sense of their positions as middle managers between senior level leaders and faculty members. Current government organizations are expected to produce the same or better outcomes with less resources while responding effectively to on-going and unexpected shifts in policies and goals. Scholars agree that public organizations across the globe are under increasing pressure to do more with less (Esteve, Schuster, Albareda & Losada, 2017). In such an environment, the performance of organizations is not contingent upon the strength and effectiveness of top management, but on the reflection of interplays among a variety of elements embedded in both micro and macro levels of organizational contexts. Literature confirms
middle managers’ contributions in a number of areas in today’s organizations. For example, Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) stated that new knowledge is created by middle managers who lead a team or task force “through a spiral conversion process involving both the top and the frontline employees” (p. 127). Floyd and Wooldridge (2000) found strong statistical relationships between middle-level performance and the overall organizational performance. They stated that middle managers can enhance “the organizational capability to innovate and renew its capabilities” (p. xxi). Middle managers also serve as mediators between senior management and operational levels (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1997; Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Wooldridge et al., 2008). Furthermore, they are structurally closer to the work force and more attuned to the needs of local employees. Senior leaders need middle managers who are capable of not only enforcing the directives from the top, but also ensuring the health of the organization, supporting the emotional and professional needs of local employees (Huy, 2001).

Despite their vital roles and significant contributions in modern organizations, middle managers frequently face a variety of challenges. Senior managers sometimes view seasoned middle managers as obstacles to innovations or organizational changes (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Hope, 2010). Middle managers in higher education regularly encounter tensions and ambiguities as they are expected to represent the voice of faculty and ensure the well-being of faculty members as supervisors, coaches, or local leaders while fulfilling various responsibilities as academic leaders (Armstrong & Woloshyn, 2017). Literature also points out that the roles of middle managers are significantly understudied in specific contexts such as an academic environment (Floyd, 2016) or public sector (Chen et al., 2017). Chen et al. (2017) argued that the current management literature lacks systematic studies of middle managers’ roles and contributions in public sectors, let alone their perceptions and interpretations of their lived
experiences in government organizations. It is also important to note that the challenges in various government organizations are specific to their local contexts. Investigating how members orient themselves in such environments requires a sensible and ideographic approach rather than a nomothetic one. At the time of this study, little was known about how middle managers understand their positions in the organizational hierarchy at a government training institute with significant military influence.

**Significance of the Research**

The findings from this study presented a deeper understanding of how middle managers orient themselves and assign meaning to their experiences in the rigid organizational hierarchy at a highly-structured, government training institute for military personnel. Hatch and Cunliffe (2013) presented seven commonly used dimensions that depict organizational structure: administrative component (i.e., percentage of administrators), differentiation (i.e., levels of vertical hierarchy and horizontal divisions), integration (i.e., coordination of activities), centralization (i.e., authority), standardization, formalization (i.e., rules and procedures), and specialization (p. 95). Government organizations are known for bureaucracy and high levels of formalization (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2013). The site of this study was a military institute with a high level of organizational structure in all areas listed above.

The study also offered *thick description* (Geertz, 1973) of middle managers’ perceptions of their positions at a hierarchical government organization. Organizational hierarchy refers to how authority is distributed in an organization (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2013). A hierarchical organization typically has clearly defined structures and established procedures for organizational operations which affect people at all levels. Middle managers translate senior leaders’ vision into more manageable and understandable discourse for the local members while
paying attention to micro-level nuances of social interactions among people (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Hierarchical organizations, however, often underestimate or ignore the roles of micro level social interactions among local agents. The findings from this study offered valuable insight into managerial discourse at a hierarchical government institute focusing on the following areas.

First, this study provided unique information about middle managers’ perspectives at a government institute. Chen et al. (2017) explained that the strategic apex in government organizations is often far away from the frontline because they usually have longer command chains than private organizations. In such an environment, middle managers serve as the “balancing wheel” (Chen et al., 2017, p. 703) and make sure that the critical information from the frontline is channeled up to the policy-making level. The site of this research was a hierarchical government institute which provides intensive foreign language and culture training to US military personnel in order to support national security requirements. As civilian middle managers, Deans and Directors are responsible for fulfilling a wide range of complex demands from different directions in a highly-structured organizational context. They need to understand the macro-level external requirements from stakeholders as well as the needs of local faculty members and military students. In other words, Deans and Directors hold important boundary-spanning positions as middle managers, translating the vision and directives of top military leadership to the local civilian faculty. In such an environment, exploring how middle managers make sense of their positions would help the institute gain a better understanding of the middle-level perspectives which connect varying priorities from different levels. The voices of middle managers would enable senior leaders at the institute to make more informed organizational decisions.
Second, this study investigated how government middle managers with varying responsibilities balance their roles in a hierarchical context. Deans and Directors at the research site are responsible for promoting academic initiatives of their designated units while fulfilling a variety of other responsibilities within a hierarchical context. This study aimed to provide fresh perspectives regarding how middle managers at a hierarchical government institute describe their positions in supporting academic innovations and other bottom-up initiatives in a hierarchical environment.

Finally, this study presented micro-level ideographic data focusing on the nuanced perceptions of Deans and Directors at the research site. As explained in the previous section, the current literature lacks middle managers’ perspectives in government organizations. The findings from this study fill the gap in managerial literature and shed light on middle managers’ on-going experiences and interpretations of their realities at a highly-structured government organization with military influence.

**Positionality Statement**

It is my belief that middle management involves a wide range of critical activities which promote organizational learning through collective and emergent processes. Organizational learning is a social process which entails effective investment in all aspects of human resources. Argote (2011) stated that organizational learning occurs as organizational members acquire experience collectively (p. 441). In other words, organizational learning cannot be prescribed because it emerges through a variety of social interactions among people through complex interplay of micro and macro level viewpoints. In the following sections, I will attempt to clarify what influenced my positionalities as a researcher and discuss potential biases which might affect this study.
As an Administrator

My interest in middle management was triggered by my own experiences as a local manager. For the last twenty years, I have been working in various positions at different levels of institutional hierarchy at the site of this research. Through my experiences, I became aware of the challenges that many middle managers face serving as the bridge between top leaders and local agents. It is a common belief that managers and leaders have responsibilities to guide, navigate, and sometimes direct the experiences of organizational members. Being an administrator myself, I fully recognize that my managerial experiences may influence my judgement as a researcher and steer my views about the priorities of certain organizational activities. Having worked in different divisions, I have my own views about middle managers’ perspectives in a hierarchical context. I am quite mindful regarding any unintended biases I may bring into this research.

According to Briscoe (2005), the issues related to pre-disposed bias are mutual between a scholar and the participants of his or her research. Researchers need to be fully aware of the potential biases even when they feel completely neutral. In the same vein, my previous experiences in multiple sub-divisions may influence the way others perceive me as a researcher. I believe that ensuring diversity among the research participants is one way to maintain objectivity and impartiality in my study. In addition, I hope to become more knowledgeable and sensitive to different viewpoints by raising my awareness through further readings and vigilant observations, which will help me maintain my self-awareness.

As a Member of Communities

I belong to multiple communities personally and professionally at the institute in which I work, which influence my positionality as a scholar practitioner. I have served as a subject
matter expert in different capacities. My experiences include working as a teacher of Japanese language and culture, a faculty development specialist, a project manager, and an administrator, fulfilling varying functions in each position. As I changed my positions throughout my career, I noticed that different networks, both formal and informal, naturally emerged around me. Both networks provided indispensable knowledge and connections with people, which helped me grow as an expert. I took advantage of the personal and professional level of interactions with people from different communities throughout my career. Lahtinen (2013) stated that knowledge sharing requires social interaction and networking. Literature also supports that both formal and informal interactions are critical for supporting positive outcomes of human networking (Brennecke & Rank, 2016; Cao & Xiang, 2012; Rusly, Corner & Sun, 2011).

Based on social constructivists’ views, learning entails “cultivation of knowledge which is socially developed” (Franklin, 2014, p. 76). Literature indicates that a community of practice can provide continuous support to facilitate transformative development of knowledge agents by promoting sustainable innovations. I believe that building a community involves each member’s commitment to participate in the dynamic network, supporting the emerging process of organizational transformation beyond his or her own sub-unit. Middle managers’ activities, therefore, should be situated in their living contexts where they can develop their communities of practice as local managers. The above perceptions are influenced by my own experiences and observations at the institute. It is possible that being part of some networks influenced my perceptions of local contexts. Likewise, certain members of different communities may interpret my intent differently. A thorough examination of different contexts and constant monitoring of the research process will help me minimize the possibility of skewed classification of social contexts and managerial practices.
As a Multi-cultural Scholar Practitioner

My cultural background and identity are interwoven with my academic experience and together they serve as the foundation of my positionality. I grew up and spent the first half of my life in Japan. I have a BA in education from a Japanese university and an MA in foreign language teaching from an American graduate school. Although I feel quite acculturated in the United States, I am certain that my experience in Japan continues to reshape my beliefs and identity on a regular basis. Compared to those who grew up in the United States, I may be more tolerant toward a traditional approach of organizational management because of my background. Similarly, I may value a formal structure over informal ones because I was brought up in a relatively high-context culture (Hall, 1976) where formal rituals and implicit style of communication are valued in professional contexts. While I am fully aware of my potential biases, I believe that having multi-cultural experiences enables me to appreciate pluralities and diversity among people and be adaptive in different contexts. Consequently, I pay close attention to my own thought processes and continue to improve my skills as a researcher.

Human development emerges in the community where members work to construct their collective reality. Freire (2000) described that dialogue requires intense human faith and humility (p. 91). He stated, “without dialogue, there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education” (p. 91). It is my assumption that this principle also applies to the concept of managerial practices which require more than transferring written guidelines, policies, or training. This study originates from my interest and passion which arose from my own beliefs and realities. As a scholar practitioner, I will strive to represent other people’s voices and realities truthfully while being aware of my own beliefs and biases. I fully agree that “voices of others ought to be heard in scholarly discourse concerning both ingroup and
It is my sincere hope that I will be able to capture the voices of middle managers in my research through on-going self-inquiry, open-mind, and continuous reflection of multiple realities.

Research Problem and Research Question

The purpose of this study was to examine how Deans and Directors at a hierarchical, government educational organization perceive their lived experiences as middle managers. The core of this study was grounded in the interpretive work of middle managers to shape their realities. The researcher of this study investigated how middle managers view their experiences at a government educational institute using the framework of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).

The goal of IPA is to explore how people orient towards the world through their lived experiences. Therefore, scholars suggest that IPA research questions should focus on “people’s understandings, experiences, and sense-making activities” within specific contexts (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2009, p. 47). Smith, et al. (2009) also recommended that the primary research questions should be very open and exploratory rather than explanatory. They cautioned to avoid imposing too many theoretical constructs on the phenomena. Therefore, to reflect phenomenological and interpretative principles of IPA, the researcher of this study used the primary question as the starting point of this research.

The central question of this study was:

- How do Deans and Directors at a highly-structured, educational, government institute make sense of their positions as middle managers between senior leaders and faculty members?
Theoretical Framework

This section provides an overview of sensemaking theory including its definition, properties, limitations, and application to this study.

Sensemaking Theory

Sensemaking is an on-going social process which allows people in an organization to collectively identify a direction in which to move forward (Weick, 1995). It involves “the ongoing retrospective development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005, p. 409). Sensemaking supports both self-expression and social construction of shared meanings (Klag & Langley, 2013; Maitlis, 2005; Weick, 1995; Weick, 2009). Through sensemaking, organizational members continue to develop their shared meanings of a variety of experiences such as crises and economic downfalls which bring tremendous emotional shifts as well as changes in the environment. Although the original work of Weick (1995) emphasized the cognitive aspect of sensemaking, recent studies support that sensemaking involves both cognitive and affective processes (Cunliffe & Coupland, 2011; Sharma & Good, 2013).

Weick (1995) provided seven properties that illustrate the characteristics of sensemaking as follows.

- **Identity construction:** Sensemaking is grounded in each sensemaker’s identity construction to confirm one’s self.
- **Retrospective:** Sensemaking is derived from one’s lived experience.
- **Enactment:** Sensemaking focuses on activity of “making” or “producing”.
- **Social:** Sensemaking is a social activity among people.
- **On-going:** Sensemaking never stops or starts.
Focus on extracted cues: Sensemaking requires noticing extracted cues from which people develop a larger sense of what is happening.

Plausibility rather than accuracy: Sensemaking calls for timely plausible reasoning, and therefore, pursuit of accuracy is secondary.

More detailed explanations of each property will follow in the next chapter. Many of his propositions prompted active discussions and disagreements among scholars, which made the framework of sensemaking well-developed in organizational studies. Despite the fluid nature of sensemaking theory, his seminal book, Sensemaking in Organization (Weick, 1995) has been cited more than 20,000 times at the time of this study, which indicates its significance in the field of organizational studies. Weick (1995) contrasted the nature of sensemaking with that of decision making. He states that while decision making requires a fixed solution, sensemaking provides a direction for an organization to move to the next stage. Sensemaking is about “the interplay of action and interpretation rather than the influence of evaluation on choice” (Weick et al., 2005). Sensemaking, therefore, enables people to be more responsive and open to revisions as needed. Successful organizations encourage people to engage in constructing shared experiences and finding an optimal direction through sensemaking.

The notion of sensemaking falls under the ecological view of organizational theory (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2013) which focuses on symbolic perspectives. Literature supports that organizational sensemaking is a social process in which members interpret their environment through social interactions with others (Weick & Roberts, 1993; Weick, 1995; Maitlis, 2005; Weick et al., 2005). There seems to be a mixture of forces pulling the sensemaking theory into different directions creating localized diversions. While some researchers focused on the cognitive aspects of sensemaking (Thomas, Sussman & Henderson, 1993), others investigated
how people work collectively in specific social contexts (Weick & Roberts, 1993) or the influence of leadership and management in an organization (Maitlis, 2005). Additionally, more recent studies point out the importance of the affective aspects of sensemaking, such as mood (Holt & Cornelissen, 2014) and members’ emotions and identities (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010; Cunliffe & Coupland, 2011; Weick et al., 2005). For example, Cunliffe and Coupland (2011) proposed the notion of embodied narrative sensemaking, focusing on how people make their lives sensible through embodied interpretations of everyday lives. They define embodiment as an integral part of sensemaking which includes “bodily sensations, felt experiences, emotions, and sensory knowing” (p. 64). Weick (2011) also tied organizing to the notion of story-telling, emphasizing the emergent nature of sensemaking. Weick et al. (2005) provided a useful overview of the sensemaking theory as well as the recent shifts to more process-oriented approaches, and renewed interests in areas such as identity, power, and emotions. These studies are contextually situated, allowing multiple realities and truths, which is the core of sensemaking theory. In other words, sensemaking would not support the scientific managerial approach (Weick et al., 2005) which expects that “the accuracy of managers’ perceptions determines the effectiveness of outcomes” (p. 415). Such a prescriptive view originates from the belief that the managerial challenges in organizations can be resolved by scientific problem solving and rational decision making. The value of sensemaking in modern organizations resides in its flexibility and adaptability to help people shape and reshape their emerging stories in complex and changing organizational contexts.

Sensemaking is sometimes criticized because of its fluid nature, which is both its strength and its weakness. There are various views of sensemaking, ranging from a cognitive orientation (Weick, 1979) to a broader understanding of sensemaking including phenomenological
perspectives (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Colville, Brown & Pye, 2012) and emotional orientations (Degn, 2015). Another criticism of sensemaking theory is its lack of macro-level perspectives (Magala, 1997). The framework of sensemaking and sensegiving is suitable for investigating micro-level practices (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991) in specific organizational contexts. In modern organizations, most sub-divisions or project teams involve a certain power hierarchy where a trusted agent (e.g. a leader, manager, or a technical expert) initiates the direction of the group through sensegiving. The current literature lacks an emphasis on agent-based sensemaking to understand intricate human dynamics in complex organizational contexts (Magala, 1997; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015). The sensemaking theory has potential to be expanded to the organizational level which requires a macro view of human dynamics, organizational culture, and institutional constraints.

Rationale for Using Sensemaking

The researcher of this study used Weick’s sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995) as the theoretical framework of this study for the following reasons. First, sensemaking supports the exploration of intricate human perspectives as emergent phenomena, supporting multiple realities and lived experiences. It is a process where participants assign meaning to emerging phenomena and collectively identify a direction in which to move forward (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking is not about discovering the absolute truth but about creating a plausible direction by organizing experience (Hatch & Cunliffe (2013). Investigating middle managers’ lived experiences requires a nuanced first-person account which involves on-going interpretative work. The framework of sensemaking enables people to be more responsive and open to revisions as needed, while they assign meaning to their experiences.
Second, the fluid nature of sensemaking offers the potential for exploring both cognitive and emotional aspects of meaning constructions of organizational members (Cunliffe & Coupland, 2011). Middle managers construct meaning of their experiences by navigating tremendous emotional shifts as well as changes in the environment (Kezar, 2013). Their interpretative work requires continuous scanning and interpretation of the context, which includes not only the organizational needs but also the cognitive and affective needs of the members. Sensemaking theory allows managers to be more sensitive to their experiences by “illustrating the relationship between embodied identities and making life” (Cunliffe & Coupland, 2011, p. 83).

Third, sensemaking theory offers connections between the first-person accounts to the macro level of organizational contexts. Weick et al. (2005) confirmed that sensemaking can provide “micro mechanisms that link macro states across time through explication of cognitive structures” (p. 417). Literature supports that construction of meaning is not only subjective but also constrained by the organizational contexts (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Sensemaking and processes of middle managers have significant influence on their managerial activities (Hope, 2010) because leaders and managers send signals to organizational members by putting structures and processes in place, allowing organizational members to create shared senses of meaning not only through top-down changes but also through bottom-up changes (Kezar, 2013). While there are different understandings of sensemaking, it provides both micro and macro perspectives of the organization, linking members’ lived experiences to organizational contexts.

This study investigated the lived experiences of middle managers at a government language training institute in terms of their meaning-making processes. The researcher chose
sensemaking theory because it provides an ideal framework to explore middle managers’ experiences while supporting their self-expressions, interpretative work, and social construction of shared meaning (Klag & Langley, 2013; Maitlis, 2005; Weick, 1995; Weick, 2009). The flexibility of sensemaking complements the humanistic and fluid nature of middle managers’ meaning-construction work regarding their positions between top leaders and faculty members in the given contexts. Sensemaking theory, therefore, was an optimal theoretical framework for understanding middle managers’ nuanced lived experiences.

Through an IPA study, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with six middle managers at a highly-structured government educational institute with military influence. Smith et al. (2009) articulated that the phenomenological standpoint of IPA requires in-depth analysis of participants’ lived-experiences as they are. The framework of IPA was ideal to conduct this study because its methodological stance is well aligned with the framework of sensemaking which involves ongoing processes of managers making sense of their lived experiences. More discussions on methodological approach will be provided in Chapter Three.

**Chapter Summary**

The researcher of this study investigated how Deans and Directors make sense of their positions as middle managers at a government educational institute with military influence. As mentioned earlier, current managerial literature lacks understanding of roles and perceptions of middle managers in government contexts. The site of this research was a hierarchical government institute which provides education to military personnel. Deans and Directors are positioned between top military leadership and local civilian employees, acting as mediators
between them. They have to make sense of their roles in the organizational contexts and give signals to local employees.

By focusing on middle managers’ perspectives, this study aimed to connect micro and macro levels of organizational discourse. Van Manen (1990) contrasted the approaches to natural science and human science and calls for pedagogic reflection. He claims that people’s lived experiences consist of intricate meanings associated with thoughts, emotions, values, and therefore, assumptions and cannot be rationalized by scientific approaches. The findings from this study may also promote a deep understanding of middle managers’ perspectives, which include both cognitive and affective aspects of meaning-making processes. The researcher explored middle managers’ interpretations of their realities as dynamic human phenomena.
Definition of Key Terminology

**Middle manager**: Managers who serve between first-line supervisors and senior management. In this study, middle managers refer to the managers who are one level above the first-line supervisors.

**Sensemaking**: On-going social process which allows the people in an organization to collectively identify a direction in which to move forward (Weick, 1995). Embodied efforts to figure out what to do and who we are (Weick, 2011; Cunliffe & Coupland, 2011).

**Sensegiving**: “The process of attempting to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others toward a preferred redefinition of organizational reality” (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991, p. 442); Processes to make others understood by communicating one’s thoughts to others and gaining support (Kezar, 2013).

**High-context culture**: Cultures that rely heavily on contexts to communicate meaning. A high-context culture provides information implicitly in a given context rather than through explicit words (Hall, 1976).

**Thick description**: A way of ethnographic description that involves “guessing at meanings, assessing the guesses, and drawing explanatory conclusions from the better guesses” (Geertz, 1973, p. 20). Thick description entails an in-depth understanding of not only the behaviors or actions but also of the context in which the actions take place. It involves extensive interpretation of the flow of social discourse (Geertz, 1973).

**Lived experiences**: “The life as we live it” (Van Manen, 2016, p. 39). The lifeworld of people as they experience it as first-hand accounts (Van Manen, 1990). The most basic form of lived experiences involves people’s immediate, pre-reflective consciousness of life (Dilthey, 1985).
**Embodiment**: Bodily sensations, felt experiences, emotions and sensory knowing (Cunliffe and Coupland, 2011).
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this literature review was to examine current literature relevant to the experiences of middle managers. To investigate how middle managers make sense of their positions, this chapter explores three interrelated themes: who middle managers are, how middle managers interpret their experiences through the lens of sensemaking theory, and the environment where middle managers construct their experiences, that is, the institutional contexts and their influence on middle managers’ perceptions. First, the review will focus on the literature on the discourse of middle management and conceptualization of managerial practices in organizations. Second, it will provide an overview of sensemaking theory and its applications in organizational studies focusing on Weick’s sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995) as the theoretical framework. Third, the topic will address key aspects of institutional influence which shape middle managers’ experiences in their institutions.

Discourse of Middle Management

The current trend of increasing complexity and decentralized operations in modern organizations elevates the roles and responsibilities of middle managers. This section provides an overview of literature related to middle management focusing on how managerial work has been viewed and studied in modern organizational contexts. It consists of four key areas: (a) an overview of leadership and management, (b) the roles and images of middle managers, (c) managerial identity, and (d) paradox and challenges in managerial discourse.

Leadership and Management

The recent trends in organizational studies have popularized the notion of leadership promoting innovations, visions, movement, and reciprocity among members. Despite the varying definitions of leadership in organizational studies, scholars generally agree that
leadership is a matter of influence (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003a, 2003b; Carroll & Levy, 2008; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016; Yukl, 1989). In other words, the function of leadership entails creating changes by influencing people (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003b) and fostering on-going movement (Kotter, 1990). The growing market of leadership tends to glorify the concept of leadership and puts it as a glamorous and indispensable component of an organization. Management, on the other hand, is often viewed as rather tedious administrative or operational requirements, and the emphasis in the management literature is still on “planning, strategy, overall orientation and symbol work with general values” (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016, p. 29). One of the common ideologies is that leaders influence commitment, whereas managers carry out administrative responsibility and practice authority (Yukl, 1989). Bush (2007) stated that the notion of leadership involves values and purpose while management relates to implementation or technical issues. Kotter (1990) offered a practical distinction between leadership and management processes as follows. Effective leadership entails (a) establishing direction, (b) aligning people, and (c) motivating and inspiring, while the process of effective management involves (a) planning and budgeting, (b) organizing and staffing, and (c) controlling and problem-solving. Kotter (1990) also explained that leadership produces movement while management produces consistency and order.

While there is no definite consensus that distinguishes leaders and managers, scholars recognize the importance of both roles in an organization (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003a, 2003b; Bush, 2007; Carroll & Levy, 2008; Kotter, 1990; Yukl, 1989; Yukl & Lepsinger, 2005). For educational institutes, in particular, leadership and management are both essential to support effective teaching and learning (Bush, 2007). The managerial job in an organization is “an important resource base for the individual seeking to exercise leadership” (Sveningsson &
Alvesson, 2016, p. 53). Scholars agree that one’s managerial skills are as important as leadership skills in modern organizations (Kotter, 1990; Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003a, 2003b; Bush, 2007; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016; Floyd & Wooldridge, 2000). Carroll and Levy (2008) explored the dynamics between management and leadership from identity perspectives and concluded that each is shaped by the other in subtle and overt ways. Mintzberg (2009) followed his seminal work of The Nature of Managerial Work, published in 1973, and maintained his position that the essence of management is reflected on managers’ daily thoughts and actions rather than on titles or positions (Mintzberg, 2009). Grint (2005) argued that management and leadership are constituted by social actors’ preferences and comfort with regard to power and uncertainty.

In reality, people with informal leadership skills often become managers and gain formal positions which allow them to exercise more formal influence on people. The framework of complexity leadership approach is consistent with the assumption that leadership is “multi-level, procedural, contextual, and interactive” (Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009, p. 631). Because middle managers play multiple roles in organizations, exploring their perceptions to different leadership and management approaches would shed light on how they position themselves in organizational realities. It is fair to say that many recent studies support bottom-up perspectives which foster adaptive practices and support continuous organizational changes (Kezar, 2013). In summary, leadership and management are interwoven in organizational realities and people’s everyday experiences.

Roles and Images of Middle Managers

Middle managers play critical roles in organizations in helping people understand the purpose of guidelines or rules by making the organizational activities more meaningful while
translating the needs of local members to senior leaders (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Floyd & Wooldridge, 2000; Huy, 2001, 2002; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Rouleau, 2005). There is a large volume of literature that offers practical managerial tips and a list of strategies, but the actual work of middle managers is quite complicated and diverse (Bush, 2007; Carroll & Levy, 2008; Grint, 2005; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016; Burgess & Currie, 2013).

Additionally, to play such diverse roles as mentioned above, managers need a wide range of skillsets to accomplish their tasks. In fact, many managers view leadership as one of the most critical aspects of managerial activities (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003b). Through extensive study with thirteen managers in practice, Sveningsson and Alvesson (2016) identified four foundational platforms or skillsets for managerial work. They are: (a) ability to act as a dialogue, (b) natural authority and clarity, (c) drive and ability to take actions, and (d) natural desire and ability for change. According to their study, many managers agree that “management is about dealing with the constant stream of everyday demands and expectations” (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016, p. 126), which includes not only administrative practices but also managing relations with people. This means that managerial work involves presenting self as moral examples and providing support for others as a coach.

Understanding managerial realities requires a deeper analysis of representations, values, and frames of reference of managers through their experiences. Recent literature on organizational management points out that managerial core practices go beyond administrative duties (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003a, 2003b; Bush, 2007; Carroll & Levy, 2008). Forward-looking management entails dealing with contradictory tensions or paradoxical views because conditions in the new environment always create opposition with the status quo (Morgan, 2006). Morgan (2006) presented that the fundamental role of managers is “to shape and create contexts
in which appropriate forms of self-organization can occur” (p. 257). He stated that managers become skilled in identifying “the parameters that can define an appropriate context, while allowing the details to unfold within this frame” (p. 257). Managers need to be listening to people, paying attention to daily activities, and understanding different perspectives (Mintzberg, 2009). Middle managers face additional complications in being between senior leaders and employees. Literature suggests that the following areas are some of the key functions of middle managers in an organization.

**Mediating between senior leadership and employees.** Middle managers play vital roles in translating the visions of top leaders into local context and supporting the goals of senior leadership. They must pay attention to the people and activities above their level (i.e., senior executives) and below (i.e., employees), which adds complexities and potential contradictions to their managerial life. Middle managers can contextualize the abstract visions into more concrete plans that can be understood by local members and experts who work in the front line of an organization. Furthermore, middle managers can synthesize information for top managers on internal and external events. (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1997). Huy (2001) articulated the crucial support of middle managers for senior leaders by stating “the senior executives who learn to recognize respect and deal fairly with the most influential middle managers in an organization will gain trusted allies” (p. 79).

Middle managers are more attuned to the needs of local employees than senior executives because they are structurally closer to local employees. There are studies which support the importance of managerial knowing. Middle managers also make significant efforts to meet the psychological needs of organizational members. For example, Sveningsson and Alvesson (2016) identified critical roles of middle managers in defending and protecting their co-workers’
demands for independence. Middle managers also provide emotional support to local members
during organizational changes (Huy, 2002). Based on a three-year inductive field study in a
large firm, Huy (2002) found that middle managers displayed emotional support for local
members during a radical organizational change. In higher education contexts, middle managers
must be familiar with the needs and expertise of each faculty member and the needs of students
in the department while supporting institutional visions and goals (Berdrow, 2010). These
findings illustrate that middle managers’ contributions include providing intricate emotional and
psychological support of local members as well as monitoring administrative duties that affect
employees and other stakeholders in the organization.

**Serving as change agents.** Scholars point out the strategic importance of middle
managers’ involvement in change processes and implementation (Balogun, 2006; Balogun &
Johnson, 1998; Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Holmemo & Ingvaldsen, 2016; Huy, 2002; Kras,
Rudes & Taxman, 2017; Toms, et al., 2011). Burgelman (1991) was one of the original scholars
who focused on emergent strategic behaviors in organizational life rather than viewing strategies
as directives from top management. Floyd and Wooldridge (2000) advanced Burgelman’s
concept and articulated how middle managers contribute to strategic renewal of organizations.
From their viewpoint, strategies are not planned as top-down directives. Instead, middle
managers, with their network centrality, have great potential to develop a sense of strategic
context (Floyd & Wooldridge, 2000).

Literature confirms that middle managers are important change agents (Toms, et al.,
2011) and strategic assets for change (Kras et al., 2017). They serve as “recipients of change as
much as its implementers” (Balogun & Johnson, 2004, p. 523). Middle managers operationalize
change initiatives, thereby aligning their units to executive mandates (Balogun & Johnson, 2004)
and act as intermediaries between top management and front-line employees (Huy, 2002; Kras et al, 2017). Balogun & Johnson (2004) investigated middle managers’ sensemaking process through a radical organizational change directed from senior leadership. Their longitudinal study showed that middle managers are actively engaged in determining the outcomes of organizational change through social interactions instead of being passive recipients of change. Middle managers interpret their new environments and guide those organizational members they are tasked with by providing guidance and direction (Toms, et al., 2011). In public organizations, they “translate policy provided by upper management and assist line staff with navigating competing expectations regarding job responsibilities” (Kras et al., 2017, p. 173).

Public middle level managers often ensure stability of local units when their senior executives introduce new organizational structures (McKinley and Scherer, 2000). Additionally, through the analysis of 98 interviews, scholars found that middle managers facilitate the implementation of innovative practices and improvement of organizational culture (Engle, Lopez, Gormley, Chan, Charns & Lukas, 2017).

Middle managers’ work in ensuring communication during organizational change is another important area of their involvement. Middle managers play key roles in decision-making and consensus-building to promote organizational transformation (Ahearne, Lam, & Kraus, 2014; Conway & Monks, 2011). Balogun (2006) noted that communication has more to do with generating new knowledge and shared meanings required for strategic transformation than the transmission of information. Rouleau (2005) investigated middle managers’ on-going micro-level practices in selling strategic changes. Holmemo and Ingvaldsen (2016) recommended earlier and intensive involvement of middle managers for lean transformation which calls for reduction of costs through process improvement, waste elimination and systematic continuous
improvement. They identified middle managers as initiators and champions of continuous improvement. These findings indicate middle managers’ vital roles in supporting organizational changes and implementation of innovative practices.

**Supporting organizational learning and knowledge development.** Middle managers make significant contributions to real-time knowledge creation (Nonaka, 1994; Rouleau, 2005; Schwandt, 2005; Meier, 2006; Chen et al., 2017), knowledge acquisition (Richards & Duxbury, 2014), and knowledge sharing (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Burgess & Currie, 2013). They serve as knowledge engineers as they synthesize tacit knowledge of employees and senior managers (Nonaka, 1991; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995) and support organizational capability evolution (Tippmann, Scott, & Mangematin, 2014). Burgess & Currie (2013) found that middle level management plays a strategic role in “mediating and resolving the knowledge gap between the top and bottom layers of organizations” (p. S133). Emphasizing the continuous nature of knowledge sharing and organizational change, Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) proposed a framework known as middle-up-down management. The “middle-up-down model” supports an on-going interactive process where “knowledge is created by middle managers, who are often leaders of a team or task force, through a spiral conversion process involving both the top and the front-line employees” (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995, p. 127). Similarly, Burgess & Currie (2013) presented that hybrid middle level managers who cross different professional and managerial communities influence both upwards and downwards knowledge flow as knowledge brokers. The hybrid middle managers help organizations understand the functionality of the knowledge and how to match the knowledge to potential opportunities (Burgess & Currie, 2013). In public sector organizations, middle managers provide “contextual information that permits group
Middle managers orient chaos toward purposeful knowledge creation. As Nonaka (1991) stated repeatedly, the real value of a learning organization is its ability to transfer tacit knowledge among members. Tacit knowledge is an intangible asset which influences people’s values and perceptions. Middle managers play critical roles in organizational learning because they actively contribute to the process of knowledge creation by making tacit knowledge explicit (Nonaka, 1991; Nonaka, 1994; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). More recent studies also confirmed that middle managers provide contextual information that permits group members to better understand the relevance of external knowledge (Richards & Duxbury, 2015). They foster self-organizing teams that create dialogues among organizational members and transfer of tacit knowledge.

Middle managers also support informal learning which occurs as a by-product of regular working processes and knowledge management (Döös et al., 2015). They connect with more people across the organization and support knowledge sharing across organizational boundaries (Ainsworth, Grant & Iedema 2009). Carlstrom (2012) stated that the importance of middle managers in knowledge sharing is growing within the context of public management.

Knowledge sharing requires constant dialogues among people. Nonaka (2005) introduced an interesting concept of “\textit{ba}”, a Japanese word which literally means a space or a context. According to Nonaka (2005), “\textit{ba}” is a “shared context in motion, in which knowledge is shared, created, and utilized” (p. 380). He argued that “\textit{ba}” can be a driving force for the knowledge transfer process in an organization because an organization can be defined as “an organic configuration of multi-layered \textit{ba}” (p. 381) where context-specific meanings emerge through
interactions among participants. To summarize, middle managers translate the knowledge vision of senior leaders into concrete plans, facilitate the process of continuous conversion of tacit knowledge and explicit knowledge, and build “ba”, a shared context for knowledge sharing.

Navigating day-to-day operations. Organizations need middle managers who “pay attention to everyday operational circumstances which lie beyond questions of strategies and visions” (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016, p. 53). Middle managers are close to the day-to-day operations and the people who work in the frontline of the organization (Huy, 2001). They know how to get things done because many of them have previous experiences in local operations or technical fields. Through their “webs or networks”, middle managers can “spread the word and get people on board because they usually have the best social networks in the company (Huy, 2001, p. 76).

Middle managers foster formal and informal social interactions which may become organizational routines. Organizational routines are defined as “repeated patterns of behavior that are bound by rules and customs and that do not change very much from one iteration to another” (Feldman, 2000, p. 611). Feldman (2000) presented that internal dynamics within routines promote continuous organizational change, placing agency as the key aspect of the change process. Her longitudinal study of a housing organization offered valuable information that change occurs as a result of participants’ reflections on and reactions to various outcomes of routines. Feldman and Rafaeli (2002) emphasized both process and outcome of routines. They stated that one of the critical functions of organizational routines is to form social connections and alliances. Recent literature suggests multi-level perspectives on organizational routines (Salvato & Rerup, 2011). These findings support evolutionary and multi-level perspectives of organizational routines embedded in organizational daily life. As middle managers are deeply
involved in managerial practices, their perspectives on organizational routines, beyond standard operating procedures, would reveal how they position themselves in intricate organizational dynamics.

**Managerial Identity**

**Framework of managerial identity.** Many studies support that managers’ identity framework and self-views are critical to refine managerial life (Alvesson, 2010; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016; Watson, 2008; Warhurst & Black, 2017). Identity studies in the last few decades have increasingly emphasized the relational aspects of identity work rather than viewing identities as fixed entities (Watson, 2008; Contu & Willmott, 2003). The framework of managerial identity involves “the multiplicity of social-identities” and managers’ relationship with “both their ‘inward facing’ and their ‘outward facing’ identity work” (Watson, 2008, p. 121). From this point of view, organizational members including middle managers construct their identities through dynamic interactions and social relationships.

Managerial identification is associated with how managers and non-managers classify themselves in an organization and define their social environment collectively. According to social identity theory (SIT), one’s self-concept consists of a personal identity (i.e., characteristics of self) and social identity (i.e., group classifications such as organizational roles or affiliations) (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993). SIT provides an interesting perspective connecting symbolic leadership and identity. Managers can use symbols such as traditions, metaphors, rituals, and sagas, to make the organizational membership salient (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Social identity theorists believe that people identify themselves with groups “partly to enhance self-esteem” (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993). Alvesson (2010) proposed seven images to understand manager’s self-identities as: self-doubter, struggler, surfer, storyteller, strategist, stencil, and
soldier. Research shows that the extent to which people identify their roles such as middle managers impacts their internalization of role obligations (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

**Identity of middle managers.** Professional identity is defined as “both a product and an agent of the systems and structures within which the individual’s working life is located” (Briggs, 2007, p. 473), which points to the significant impact of organizational contexts on managers’ identity construction. It is also important to note that managerial identity literature includes dimensions of images that can conceptualize how people define a phenomenon. Armstrong and Woloshyn (2017) highlighted the complexity and multiple tensions associated with the identity work of academic middle managers at universities. They face tensions in forming their professional identities, balancing their managerial work and academic career as scholars (Armstrong & Woloshyn, 2017).

Strategic changes and restructuring are part of the norm in modern organizations, which sometimes questions the legitimacy of middle management. In such an environment, middle managers continuously adjust their identities and justify their existence in organizational discourses (Thomas & Linstead, 2002). Warhurst and Black (2017) investigated the notion of wisdom among seasoned middle managers and found that experienced middle managers accept their own limitations and make sense of their limitations through constant reflexive identity-work. They concluded that middle managers construct their identities “through their own reflexive positioning in relation to available discursive resources” (p. 426). Scholars also pointed out that middle managers often face challenges shaping their identities because of “the opaque nature of managerial work as well as the blurred boundaries around the middle” (Thomas & Linstead, 2002, p. 88). Despite these challenges, middle managers continue to engage in multiple discourses such as professionalism and expertise, gender, performance and
commitment, and public sector ethics (Thomas & Linstead, 2002). The relevance of identity work of middle managers is significant to managerial experiences because middle managers who operate between senior leaders and employees continue to face potential role conflicts due to fluid organizational contexts and competing priorities. How middle managers construct and maintain a positive sense-of-self must be investigated through a relational perspective because their identity work involves socially and contextually grounded actions.

**Paradox and Challenges in Managerial Discourse**

People often aim to become managers because the ideal concept of managerial life looks attractive and influential. In reality, literature confirms that middle managers encounter significant challenges and paradoxical organizational contexts through their daily managerial experiences (Armstrong & Woloshyn, 2017; Berdrow, 2010; Barley & Kunda 1992; Schwandt, 2005; Rouleau, 2005; Vail, 1996). Middle managers often face contradictions between the need to achieve highly reflexive managerial tasks while demonstrating deep reflective practices as mindful professionals in support of organizational learning. They deal not only with their subordinates and senior leaders but also with regulations, guidelines, and other organizational expectations in ambiguous and imperfect environments. In academic institutes, middle managers have to deal with boundary-spanning responsibilities and routines that are “fragmented and unpredictable” between the faculty and senior management (Armstrong & Woloshyn, 2017, p. 102). They encounter challenges inherent in fulfilling a number of administrative functions, negotiating the constraints of organizational resources and personal capabilities (Berdrow, 2010). Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003a) described managers’ sensemaking processes as “seemingly contradictory moral positions” which is “strongly governed by leadership discourse as well as experienced corporate demands implying more administrative orientations” (p. 983). On the one
hand, organizations and senior leaders expect middle managers to become reflective practitioners who support the professional growth of employees. On the other hand, middle managers, especially those who work in a hierarchical organization with rigid command and control, are expected to follow guidelines and ensure members’ accountability to all regulations.

Cunliffe (2008) reminded us that managing is a relational and dialogic process as we are always a self-in-relation-to-others, and we do not live and act in isolation. Therefore, it is important for managers to consider how they relate with others; what assumptions they hold about people; to understand how others may view the world; and to create opportunities for open dialogue (p. 131). Morgan (2006) stated that successful management requires skill in dealing with contradictory tensions because potential new futures always create opposition to the status quo. This means that middle managers must have skills to recognize contradictions in managerial discourse and navigate the complex process embedded in local contexts.

Conclusion

This section provided an overview of the discourse of middle management including managers’ roles, contributions, and the insight into their identity construction. Middle managers’ contributions go beyond day-to-day operations as they play multiple roles such as leaders, managers, coaches, moral supporters, local experts and change agents. Because of their unique position, they contribute to shaping organizational identity and members’ well-being through a number of practices such as routines, rituals, and traditions. As evidenced in identity studies, middle managers face challenges dealing with balancing internal (i.e., self) expectations and external expectations. Their perception of themselves and their experiences would impact how they assign meaning to their reality through sensemaking processes. At the same time, middle
managers must be reflexive and reflective to support complex organizational demands in the middle of hierarchy.

The notion of organizational change has become constant in modern organizational contexts. In such a fluid environment, middle managers charged with interpreting, communicating, and implementing change often struggle for grasping intricate nuances (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008). They need to make sense and communicate their understandings by “providing their subordinates with a workable certainty” in the middle of changes (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008, p. 221). This means that “middle managers are always in the process of sensemaking” (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008, p. 230). The next section explores the construct of sensemaking theory and its relevance to managerial practices.

Sensemaking Theory

Sensemaking is a process of “ongoing retrospective development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing” (Weick, 2005, p. 397). It is a way of understanding contexts and finding directions with high complexity or uncertainty. Sensemaking literature includes many studies of crisis situations (Weick, 1988; Weick & Roberts, 1993; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007; Mailtis & Sonenschein, 2010) because crises or episodic sensemaking situations are typically caused by sudden organizational shifts which force people to make sense of the environment and find a new direction. Besides episodic situations, sensemaking is embedded in organizational life because challenges in modern organizations involve not only dealing with crises or sudden operational shifts but also with handling emerging changes and nuances of human dynamics (Rouleau, 2005; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015; Schwandt, 2005). Sensemaking, therefore, has significant implications for day-to-day managerial discourse in which middle managers navigate complex organizational contexts.
handling varying assumptions, values, and requirements of people at different levels. Middle managers’ perceptions of being in the middle of organizational layers influence their actions and consequently impact organizational outcomes. This section will review the literature on sensemaking theory focusing on three areas: the framework of sensemaking theory, applications to organizational practices, and implications of sensemaking in organizational studies.

**Framework of Sensemaking Theory**

Sensemaking is an on-going process by which individuals give meaning to experiences. Weick (1995) provides seven properties that have critical influence on sensemaking. They are: (a) grounded in identity construction, (b) retrospective, (c) enactive of sensible environments, (d) social, (e) on-going, (f) focused on and by extracted cues, and (g) driven by plausibility rather than accuracy. The following section will provide succinct explanation of each of these characteristics.

**Grounded in identity construction.** Sensemaking is closely related to identity construction because its processes are driven by the needs within individuals to construct a sense of identity. People learn about their identities by projecting them into the environment and observing the consequences (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking has a strong influence on the ways in which people interact with others by reshaping the identity of their own organization. Furthermore, organizational culture and identity construction are socially intertwined. Ravasi and Schultz (2006) explored how organizational culture influences the process of identity-threatening changes. They found that organizational culture serves as cues for sensemaking of leaders and provides a platform for their sensegiving actions. They also stated that organizational identity helps members make sense of their own actions through tacit cultural norms.
**Retrospective.** Weick (1995) argued that sensemaking is retrospective because people can make sense only after they have completed the actions. Retrospective perspective is important because it “signals the fact that the frameworks people create are built on past events and then used to understand later circumstances” (Floyd & Wooldridge, 2000, p. 74). Retroactive sensemaking focuses on people’s “meaningful lived experience” (Weick, 1995, p. 24). It is also important to note that meanings of lived experience change as current situations change (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Weick, 1995).

**Enactment.** Sensemaking “keeps action and cognition together” (Weick, 1995, p. 31). Enactment is the pivot of Weick’s framework, who used Follet’s philosophy (Follet, 1924) to explain the notion of enactment. Follet (1924) stated that people receive information or stimuli because of their own activities. She argues that instead of pursuing the results, we need to look for the act of relating. The organization is enacted through the interpreted meaning of individual interactions. The concept of enactment is rooted in the people who deal with their complex environments and continuously act in such contexts. This means that there are no fixed reference points because sensemaking is a fluid process where people shape experiences into meaningful patterns.

**Social process of meaning making.** Sensemaking is a social and collective process. Weick and Roberts (1993) examined the framework of collective mind using the context of flight operations. Their study demonstrates that the process of sensemaking goes beyond individual cognitive activities and involves dynamic interactions among members to determine the optimal actions in a specific context. Literature supports that people with shared understanding collectively construct meanings of their experiences through interactions. However, most studies provide the results focusing on people’s dynamic interactions within their own group. Inspired
by Weick (1998), Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010) expanded the concept of social process and stated that sensemaking in crises have individual, collective, and institutional influences. While both studies highlight the criticality of the collective nature of the sensemaking process, they did not consider the influence of hierarchy or power dynamics in organizations as part of social processes.

**Ongoing act of organizing.** Weick (1979, 1995) presented a unique perspective using verbs such as organizing and theorizing to emphasize the importance of continuous movements rather than fixed outcomes. To him, an organization is an active system which takes information from its environment, tries to make sense of the information, and uses what was learned in its future activities. According to Weick (1979), organizing is about reducing uncertainty through sensemaking. Organizing indicates the core of sensemaking which involves a process of structuring the unknown. Because sensemaking is an ongoing process, there are no *results* as the outcomes of sensemaking. There is only a moment in process, which indicates that the goal of sensemaking is not to find the accurate solution, but to identify a plausible direction in a specific context (Weick, 1995). The emerging view of sensemaking lies in a process-oriented perspective where people continuously construct the meaning of their experiences which inform and constrain their identities and actions (Weick et al., 2005).

**Extracted cues.** Another important aspect of sensemaking is the role of contextual cues in sensemaking. Organizational members extract cues during the sensemaking process because cues help them identify relevant information and find acceptable explanations (Weick, 1995). Gacasan, Wiggins, and Searle (2016) investigated how cues are utilized in the context of project management. They analyzed the boundaries of cues including feedback and tacit knowledge
sharing (Gacasan, et al., 2016), which provides evidence that sensemaking supports fluid human interactions in organizational contexts.

**Plausibility and improvisation.** Literature explores the collective nature of organization through improvisation of activities (Weick, 1998; Vera & Crossan, 2005). Weick et al. (2005) contrasted the nature of sensemaking with that of decision making, stating that while decision making requires a fixed solution, sensemaking provides a direction for an organization to move to the next stage. Sensemaking, therefore, enables people to be more responsive and open to revisions as needed. Successful organizations encourage people to collectively engage in constructing shared experiences and finding an optimal direction through sensemaking. Weick (1998) claimed that having rigid rules and control within organizations often inhibits members’ ability to support creativity and innovation. Using jazz performance as a metaphoric foundation, he presented his analysis regarding how improvisation contributes to organizational studies (Weick, 1998).

Referring to previous studies on improvisation such as Weick (1998), Vera and Crossan (2005) examined critical elements for improvisation such as expertise, teamwork quality, experimental culture, real-time information and communication, memory, and training. The notion of improvisation best captures the collective and spontaneous nature of sensemaking, which is consistent with the concept of organizing (Weick, 1995). The study of Vera and Crossan (2005) confirmed that improvisation is essential for the strategic renewal of organizations because it could either support or hinder change in a team environment. More information is needed for a multi-level study to define the processes of improvisation at different organizational levels.
Applications of Sensemaking

Sensemaking is a critical part of organizational practices for several reasons. First, in the modern society we live in, organizational changes are often unpredictable and inevitable. As members of a community in such a context, we must learn how to deal with these changes, which often bring emotional and psychological stress. Second, sensemaking is an agent-oriented process which puts people in the center of its framework. As any organizational changes involve participation of members, it is critical to study the phenomena through the lens which considers human factors. Third, organizational sensemaking is an ongoing process that emerges collectively through social interactions. In short, organizational learning is about making social and collective changes that make sense to the people involved.

Sensemaking and changes. The processes of sensemaking are important during times of organizational change (Gioia, 1986; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Weick, 1995). Scholars have found that organizational changes involve managerial sensemaking processes which are ongoing and locally situated (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). In general, managers strive to understand subtle changes in organizations, but changes may occur with or without managers’ directives. Through the study of unintended consequences of organizational change, Balogun and Johnson (1998) concluded that managing change is about the “management of meaning” (p. 75) rather than giving directions. Tsoukas and Chia (2002) suggested that managers need to see what is going on and help people construct shared meanings. Thomas et al. (2001) explored organizations’ strategic management capabilities, highlighting how organizational learning takes place in relation to fundamental sensemaking activities at both individual and organizational levels.

Sensemaking as collective institutional practices. Literature confirms that sensemaking is a collective activity which generates shared understanding. Many studies
reviewed in this report examined the sensemaking processes in smaller contexts, focusing on how individuals interact among themselves within a group in various situations (Weick & Roberts, 1993; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis, 2005; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006; Basu & Palazzo, 2008). Several studies explored sensemaking in larger contexts and examine the mechanism of sensemaking as institutional phenomena (Weber & Glynn, 2006; Maitlis, 2005). Through a longitudinal study of British orchestras, Maitlis (2005) presented that the degree of leaders’ and stakeholders’ involvement impacted the forms of sensemaking. Further research is needed to investigate the influence of leadership and power on sensemaking processes in a variety of contexts.

**Sensemaking and sensegiving.** Sensemaking and sensegiving are closely connected as part of managerial practices. Rouleau (2005) noted that sensemaking and sensegiving are two sides of the same coin. Kezar (2013) explained that sensemaking is about “creating understanding of the change while sensegiving is concerned with influencing the outcomes, communicating thoughts about change to others, and gaining support” (p. 763). Sensegiving is an important leadership activity which fosters organizational learning. Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) claimed that one of the critical management behaviors is sensegiving during strategic change processes. They defined sensegiving as a process of influencing others, which indicates that sensegiving involves human dynamics. Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) examined the process of long-term strategic changes through an ethnographic study at a large university. They concluded that senior leaders play the roles of architects, assimilators, and facilitators to foster effective organizational changes through sensemaking and sensegiving processes. Focusing on sensegiving activities of a senior executive, Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) presented a broader
perspective of leadership roles in organizational changes, confirming that the initiation of the change process requires a set of management actions in support of change process.

**Sensemaking and managerial discourse.** The findings of several studies on general managerial practices are applicable to the analysis of middle managers’ experiences. Schwandt (2005) called for critical reflection of managers on their assumptions and to investigate their knowledge frames in order to make sense of their own actions and those of the organizations. In other words, to meet today’s complex organizational demands, “managers need multiple and diverse sensemaking frameworks and the ability to create and recreate different type of sensemaking frames through reflective learning” (Schwandt, 2005, p. 185).

Rouleau (2005) examined managers’ micro-practices of on-going sensemaking and sensegiving at a clothing company. She found that strategic sensemaking and sensegiving processes are the results of a complex set of micro-practices embedded in tacit knowledge and social context. She also described the importance of managers’ tacit knowledge and their critical roles as interpreters who hold strong links with stakeholders. Her study highlighted how middle managers position themselves socially in their day-to-day interactions and influenced people around them by modifying their daily discourse to change orientation. Managers in modern organizations need flexible sensemaking frameworks for association of different assumptions and orientations to navigate complex organizational contexts.

**Challenges in managerial sensemaking.** The frameworks of sensemaking (i.e., immediacy of meaning making) and transformative learning (i.e., reflective and mindful practice) sometimes contradict each other although they co-exist in today’s organizations (Schwandt, 2005). As mentioned in the previous topic of middle management, managerial practices involve reflexivity to support unpredictable events. For managers to make
transformative changes in their own knowledge, skills, and attitude, however, they also need to reflect on their own practices and go through constant re-appraisals. This indicates the potential challenges that exist in managerial sensemaking, where managers deal with seemingly conflicting demands.

**Implications of Sensemaking**

Sensemaking theory has significant implications as a theoretical framework to investigate on-going managerial practices in organizations for the following reasons. First, sensemaking allows people to shape on-going experience collectively and identify the next step. It fosters active interactions among people which supports collective transformational processes rather than the one-way transmission of knowledge. Literature emphasizes the importance of human interactions and Community of Practice (CoP) across organizational boundaries (Weick, & Roberts, 1993; Lahtinen, 2013). Second, sensemaking and sensegiving provide a blueprint illustrating people’s fluid interactions such as the influence of leadership and management (Maitlis, 2005). In a project team, for example, the framework of sensemaking and sensegiving would capture the dynamic interactions among all members, including the manager and team members.

**Limitation of sensemaking.** The limitations of sensemaking research have been identified by several scholars. The traditional sensemaking framework falls short as it emphasizes the immediacy and reflexive practices connecting cognition to meaning (Schwandt, 2005). As mentioned earlier, many sensemaking studies focus on highly unpredictable situations such as crises and disasters. However, managerial sensemaking in learning organizations requires mindful practices which lead to continuous critical inquiry and deep learning.
(Schwandt, 2005). This indicates that the field of sensemaking requires further investigation connecting sensemaking to continuous organizational learning.

The fluidity in understanding sensemaking theory is another weakness due to its lack of standardized approach. Sensemaking plays a key role in cognitive re-orientations (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Gioia & Thomas, 1996). The work of Weick (1979) originally emphasized the cognitive aspect of sensemaking, suggesting that organizations are socially constructed as members make sense of their environment through cognitive maps or images. According to Sandberg and Tsoukas (2015), however, Weick’s position has shifted from primarily focusing on the cognitive aspect of sensemaking to more inclusive and sensible understanding of sensemaking. Weick (2005) explained that sensemaking is a process of theorizing and emphasizes the emerging aspects of its framework. Other sensemaking literature in recent years (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Colville, Brown & Pye, 2012; Weick 2012) also views sensemaking from a phenomenological perspective, indicating that sensemaking is not purely cognitive.

Another shortcoming of sensemaking theory is its lack of understanding of how people at different levels of organization construct their realities through sensemaking and sensegiving. Magala (1997) is one of the scholars who investigated how institutional constraints impact local agents’ sensemaking and sensegiving. For sensemaking theory to advance, it is necessary to include how different members are affected by various organizational elements such as institutionalized practices, organizational culture, senior leaders’ vision, and other environmental factors.

Finally, many sensemaking studies are centered around the organizational context rather than the sensemakers. Literature suggests that sensemaking theory downplays the emotional
aspects of organizational members. Sensemaking processes seek to serve three basic needs of every individual: the need for self-enhancement, self-efficacy, and self-consistency (Degn, 2015). Sensemaking research should include not only cognitive aspects of human nature but also affective and other areas of organizational learning which include socio-cultural aspects.

**Emerging trends.** While earlier research and frameworks of sensemaking focused on studies of the individual sensemaking process (Weick, 1988), more recent literature recognizes the importance of interrelationships among people and human dynamics associated with sensemaking and sensegiving (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis, 2005). An increasing number of studies apply the framework of sensemaking to investigate certain organizational phenomena. For example, Basu and Palazzo (2008) propose a process model of sensemaking for Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) which is a form of a company’s self-regulation to take responsibilities in support of the environment and social well-being. They pointed out that exploring CSR through the lens of sensemaking promotes more process-oriented approaches for CSR. Holt and Cornelissen (2014) found that emotional factors also influence sensemaking processes because sensemaking is related to the mood through which people experience activities. Other areas of applications include knowledge management (Thomas et al., 2001) and project management (Gacasan et al, 2016). These studies show that sensemaking is a flexible theory which can be adapted to a variety of organizational situations.

**Conclusion**

Sensemaking is a dynamic perspective based on people’s meaning-making practices. It is about describing how people make sense of a situation. Weick’s seven properties of sensemaking (Weick, 1995) offered a useful framework for investigating organizational learning practices. No two sensemaking or sensegiving processes are the same because the experiences
and perceptions of people vary significantly in different organizational contexts. The flexibility of sensemaking is the very reason why some researchers shy away from even calling it a theory. The future research for sensemaking studies should include additional factors such as power, authority, and people’s emotions.

Sensemaking allows organizational members to have multiple truths. Weick et al. (2005) asserted that sensemaking is a process of theorizing and emphasized the emerging aspects of its framework, looking at realities through the lens of humanistic science. Today’s managers, including middle managers, need “multiple and diverse sensemaking frameworks and the ability to create and recreate different types of sensemaking frames through reflective learning” (Schwandt, 2005, p. 185). Sensemaking literature supports that meaning-making activities of agents must be connected to organizational contexts where dynamic human interactions are created and sustained. The next section will examine how organizational realities are constructed and how they influence middle managers’ lived experiences.

**Institutional Influence on Middle Managers’ Experiences**

To understand how middle managers make sense of their experiences, it is necessary to examine the factors that influence the organizational contexts they live in. This section examines the literature which examines institutional influence on middle managers’ managerial experiences. It starts with the general overview of common institutional factors, focusing on organizational structures, power dynamics, organizational culture, organizational learning, and shared contexts and networks. The review then proceeds to the discussion on organizational influence in academic institutions, followed by the review of organizational influence in government institutions.
Overview of Institutional Influence

Scholars call for a renewed attention to organizations’ relationships with their environment, highlighting the importance of symbolic, cultural, and meaning-based environments which affect modern organizations (Suddaby, Elsbach, Greenwood, Meyer & Zilber, 2010). In particular, Suddaby et al. (2010) emphasized that organizations “are the product of common understandings and shared interpretations of acceptable norms of collective activity” (p. 1235). They also emphasized the criticality of the roles and identity construction of individual members which are often influenced by organizational pressure.

Realities are socially constructed, and therefore, what is real depends on what is accepted among people because meaning is always socially embedded (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Institutional theory highlights cultural influence on decision making and formal structure (Barley & Tolbert, 1997). Powel and DiMaggio (1991) claimed that there is a push toward homogeneity as a result of institutional pressures from the environment on managers. In short, institutional influence can be understood by exploring not only what people share but also how the shared environment is developed among people. The following section reviews some areas in organizational literature that are likely to impact the construction of members’ social realities.

Organizational structures. Understanding organizational realities entails dynamic and contextually-situated perspectives which promote shared understanding and joint efforts in specific contexts. Scholars have debated how actions reinforce or alter organizational structures and why. Typically, organizational structures are treated as “formal relations that constrain day-to-day action in social settings” (Barley, 1986, p. 79). Giddens (1979) advocated the notion of structural duality viewing organizational structure as process and outcome. From this
perspective, “structures shape people’s practices, but it is also people’s practices that constitute and reproduce structures” (Sewell, 1992, p. 4).

The notion of organizational structure goes beyond the static views of functional relationships among members. Barley (1986) validated Giddens’ (1979) structuration theory which posits structure as a process and an outcome. As evidenced in Barley’s study on technology implementation in hospitals, organizational structures can be viewed as a “flow of ongoing action and as a set of institutionalized traditions or forma that reflect and constrain that action” (Barley, 1986, p. 80). Recent literature also reveals that organizational structure impact knowledge sharing. Tippmann, et al. (2014) found that a flexible organizational structure triggers knowledge search and knowledge sharing. In contrast to the traditional view of organizational structure, literature indicates the vital roles of local members such as technicians who influenced the process and outcome of organizational structure.

**Power dynamics.** Referring to Mary Parket Follet’s analysis of the meaning of self-interest (Follet, 1940), Aram (1976) recognized the challenges associated with linking self or group interest with organizational interest because the “needs and interests at different vertical levels of an organization may conflict and thus be incapable of being simultaneously met” (p. 21). This implies that the tension between senior leaders’ needs and employees’ needs, makes the tasks of middle managers quite difficult. More recently, Thomas, Sargent and Hardy (2011) provided intriguing insight on power-resistance relations between senior and middle managers, exploring how meanings are negotiated between the two groups. According to their empirical study, “power-resistance relations are facilitative insofar as middle managers engage in communicative practices that might be construed as resistance to change in that they challenge senior managers’ meanings” (p. 33). The outcome of organizational change depends on “the
willingness of middle and senior managers to engage with each other, which gives rise to conceptual expansion, combination, and reframing” (Thomas et al., 2011, p. 33). They found that resistance from middle managers can facilitate change because from the process-oriented view, resistance gives opportunities for conceptual expansion, combination, and reframing.

Contu and Willmott (2003) offered a power-sensitive view of learning using the framework of situated learning theory which is an alternative perspective to cognitive theories. Refining Leve and Wenger’s (1991) framework of situated learning theory, Contu and Willmott (2003) highlighted the “power-invested situatedness of learning” (p. 284) and explained how learning practices are embedded in social contexts in relations to power. Learning is “located or situated within everyday practice” and is “conceived as an integral part of generative social practice in the lived-in world” (p. 284). Situated learning theory highlights “the embeddedness of learning practices in power relations rather than the cognitive concepts of individuals’ minds” (p. 283). Contu and Willmott (2003) emphasized that learning occurs as individuals participate in communities of practice, which involves understanding intricate power dynamics in institutional contexts because power dynamics may influence people’s access to communities of practice.

Organizational culture. Schein (2010) defines organizational culture as “a pattern of shared basic assumptions learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, which has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems” (p. 18). Organizational members need the “common language and shared categories of perception and thought” (Schein, 1984, p. 8) that foster shared contexts. Schein (2010) analyzed culture based on three different levels: artifacts (i.e., visible structures and processes),
espoused beliefs and values (i.e., ideas, goals, values, aspirations, ideologies), and basic underlying assumptions (i.e., tacit, unconscious take-for-granted beliefs and values).

Organizational culture is deeply related to leadership as the challenge of leaders is “to understand the deeper levels of a culture, to assess the functionality of the assumptions made at that level and to deal with the anxiety that is unleashed when those assumptions are challenged (Schein, 2010, p. 33). According to Schein (2010), leaders and managers can embed their beliefs, values, and assumptions in organizational practices using different means to influence organizational culture. Some mechanisms include measures of control, resource allocation, rewards, modeling and coaching, physical space, and organizational design. Organizational culture can be considered as a way for senior managers “to control workers through socialization processes that ensure that employees conform to espoused organizational values and behaviors” (Floyd, 2016, p. 170). With regards to power and authority, scholars explain that organizational culture determines “how power is exercised and experienced” (Kondra & Hurst, 2009, p. 42).

In recent literature, organizational culture is viewed as a dynamic, ever-changing social process which is continuously shaped and reshaped through micro and macro levels (Staber, 2013). Furthermore, organizational culture can serve as a source of cues of sensemaking actions by leaders and managers and the platform for sensegiving actions (Ravasi & Schultz, 2017). Through a longitudinal study of a Danish audiovisual company, Ravasi and Schultz (2017) presented a framework that connects organizational culture, identity and image. They examined how external change and internal processes of sensemaking and sensegiving influence organizational dynamics. Their findings suggest that organizational culture plays the central role in understanding the core of organizational identity and image, the answer to what the organization is really about (Ravasi & Schultz, 2017). Overall, elements such as organizational
culture, identity, and image give notable influence on managers’ understanding of their realities, but there is a reciprocal relationship between these elements and managers’ perceptions. While these elements affect organizational practices and managerial experiences, managers themselves are part of constructing the contexts in which people collectively construct these components.

**Approaches to organizational learning.** Organizational transformation involves changes in people’s attitudes, values, skills, and significant relationships in addition to changes in knowledge, information, or rationales for actions (Chin & Benne, 1989). A sustainable organizational change, therefore, entails careful attention to the people in the organization. Lawler and Worley (2006) proposed the view of “change as a positive element” and state that “the ability to change is an organization’s best sustainable source of competitive advantage” (p. 19). They challenge the common assumption of “stability equals effectiveness” (p. 20). As we live in “the age of discontinuity” (Burke, 2014, p. 13), changes are inevitable in the current complex organizational landscape. That is, changes become part of the normal conditions of organizational life rather than being episodic and exceptional (Thomas et al., 2011).

An increasing number of scholars who associate organizational change with process-oriented perspectives emphasize the notion of organizational *becoming* (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002; Thomas et al., 2011). Tsoukas and Dooley (2011) proposed that organizational studies employ more developmental perspectives of *becoming* instead of *being* and promote a notion of self-organization. In such a context, managerial practices necessitate close attention not only to the quantitative outcomes but also to the dynamic and emerging processes of organizational learning and reflective activities (Schwandt, 2005). The perspective of organizational *becoming* emphasizes the effects of language and “ongoing authoring act situated in everyday acts” (Thomas et al., 2011, p. 23). This expectation may bring tremendous challenges for middle
managers who work in heavily structured organizations which strive to support human transformation.

Literature confirms that organizational change is a multi-authored process because the authors construct shared meanings of their daily experiences (Thomas et al., 2011). In other words, organizational change results from ongoing dynamic exchanges among different actors (Weick et al., 2005; Thomas et al., 2011; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). Continuous exchanges among organizational members are critical components to support organizational change as they negotiate meaning and collectively construct their realities (Thomas et al., 2011). In such an environment, middle managers must make sense of their experiences by assessing the gap between the intent of top leadership and the expectations of frontline employees while continuously monitoring the process of organizational transformation as a whole.

**Shared contexts and networks.** People’s perceptions of reality are socially constructed, maintained, and changed among the members of a specific community (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2013). Hatch & Cunliffe (2013) stated that a community of practice (CoP) offers insight into how learning occurs among people who are informally connected by common interests. CoP is a body of people who collectively develop knowledge, experience, and practices. The concept of CoP is similar to what Nonaka (2005) proposed as “ba”, a shared context for knowledge sharing as explained in the previous section regarding middle managers’ support for organizational knowledge development.

Multiple researchers explored different types of organizational networks. Cross, Ernst, and Pasmore (2013) presented a boundary-spanning network model to support organizational change. They claimed that many problems with organizational change stem from an inability to work across boundaries and presented five boundary types: *vertical* (e.g. rank and authority),
horizontal (e.g. expertise and function), stakeholder (e.g. partners and communities),
demographic (e.g. gender, age, nationality), and geographic (e.g. location and markets). Cross et al. (2013) also mentioned different network roles which play critical parts in facilitating effective changes: connector, expert, broker, energizer, and resister. These roles are not formally assigned with certain titles in the organizational chart. Rather, only those “who work directly with these people understand the impact they can have on the pace and success of change” (Cross et al., 2013, p. 83). They further suggested keeping communication channels open so that formal and informal leaders stay engaged. Managers can support the mechanisms for a boundary-spanning network approach by creating just enough structure to help network leaders maintain focus and momentum, but not so much that they interfere with the dynamics of informal networks (Cross, et al., 2013).

Organizational networks can be emergent and self-organized. Complexity theory explains how emergence and self-organization occurs from various perspectives (Lichtenstein & McKelvey, 2011) and views self-organization as a natural and non-linear process (Houchin & MacLean, 2005; Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009). One of the key concepts in understanding complexity theory is the framework of complex adaptive system (CAS) which is defined as “neural-like networks of interacting, interdependent agents who are bonded in a collective dynamic by common need” (Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009, p. 631). The notion of CAS assumes that collections of individual parts in an organization will not convey the concept of whole. The emergent properties of CAS support dynamic human interactions and adaptive nature of interdependence among agents. This concept is roughly aligned with the notion of “loosely coupled systems” (Weick, 1976) which represent events that are responsive but preserves their own identities and separateness. Loose coupling allows organizations to stay adaptive and
flexible. It also lowers the risk of organizations having to respond to every small change, provides a balanced sensing mechanism, and fosters localized adaptation, supporting self-determination and identities of local members and units (Weick, 1976).

**Organizational Influence in Academic Institutions**

The changing values and current competitive environment have altered the context of higher education institutes from “collegial ideas to ones dominated by business-like, market-driven principles” (Floyd, 2016, p. 169). As higher education institutions are considered as sites for a nation’s economic success (Shields, 2013), universities continue to react to the “demands of increasingly performative systems of accountability” (Floyd, 2016, p. 167) reflected in internal and external quality assurance procedures. College principals may act as managing directors, suggesting that the success of the organization is based on outputs rather than process (Thompson & Wolstencroft, 2018). Scholars agree that the “corporatization of education and the subsequent adoption of managerialism” (Thompson & Wolstencroft, 2018, p. 215) has led to fundamental changes creating a “new educational landscape” (p. 214).

**Institutional influence in higher education.** The scope of current higher education institutes is influenced by multiple factors such as governmental pressure (Floyd, 2016); changes in power relations among the state government, universities, and academic staff (Kolsaker, 2008); multi-faceted purposes of higher education (Carr, 2009); and international outlooks (Floyd, 2016) to effectively compete in globalizing markets (Parsons & Filder, 2005).

Modern higher education institutions employ ideologies that are often grounded in a pragmatic business-model, shifting the focus of institutional leadership and management from academic principles to a market-driven framework (de Boer & Goedegebuure, 2009). Floyd (2016) presented the findings that resonated with the notion of *Greedy Organization*, a term used
by Lewis Coser (1974) to illustrate institutions that demand undivided time and loyalty of individuals. *Greedy institutions* are far from obsolete in today’s competitive society and continue to exercise power over individuals (De Campo, 2013). Floyd (2016) cautions that changes in higher education contexts “should not be seen as controlling mechanisms in ‘greedy’ organizations, with the key purpose being to increase productivity at the expense of professional academic values and staff motivation” (p. 179).

**Academic leadership and management practices in higher education.** The continuous trend of outcome-based business-oriented operation in higher education has created a notable impact on how managers and leaders enact their roles and responsibilities in academic contexts. Literature supports that academic middle managers’ role remains vague, causing a confused sense of professional identity (Thompson & Wolstencroft, 2018; Murphy and Curtis, 2013). Scholars argue that managers themselves are often not clear about their roles, which may influence their sense of identity or purpose (Thompson & Wolstencroft, 2013).

Middle managers in higher education are responsible for boundary-spanning and brokering functions which are complicated by institutional demands (Armstrong & Woloshyn, 2017). Armstrong & Woloshyn (2017) identified three interrelated challenges of university department chairs as academic middle managers: managing position, managing people, and managing self. These challenges impact their professional identities that are closely linked to their organizational realities. As academic middle managers, department chairs struggle to balance their academic and managerial duties (Floyd, 2016; Smith, 2005). They are accountable to senior administrators while representing the interests of the department and voices of faculty members (Gonaim, 2016; Carrol & Wolverton, 2004; Gmelch, 2004). Academic middle managers often feel “stuck in the middle” (Bryman & Lilley, 2009, p. 340) between the
organizational goals and the expectations of the staff they lead, despite their desire to develop deep subject-specific knowledge and professional autonomy (Beck & Yound, 2005; Floyd, 2012). Other scholars find that academic managers may focus on the management rather than on the leadership part of their job (Thompson & Wolstencroft, 2018). Even if managers wish to strive for academic improvements, they may feel “chained by operational activities designed to meet the needs of external bodies” (Thompson & Wolstencroft, 2018, p. 226).

In the context of higher education, academic deans also encounter a high level of social and administrative complexity. They serve as “brokers of relationships because they help set a tone and facilitate various forms of interaction that occur in colleges” (Krahenbuhl, 2004, p. 4). Scholars also confirmed that the work of academic deans at universities requires “a refined set of interpersonal sensitivities” (Harris, 2017, p. 389) beyond leadership and managerial ability as they have to “keep peace among various groups with competing priorities (Wall, 2015, p. x). It is fair to say, based on the literature, that both deans and department chairs at universities hold intermediary roles as academic managers in higher education institutes.

**Challenges in academic institutes.** Academic managers require different values and knowledge when they move into the role (Bolton, 2000; Knight & Trowler, 2001). Scholars expressed concerns that universities may not be able to respond to changing pressures successfully (Kezar, Bertram Gallant & Lester, 2011). There is not enough research on leadership effectiveness in university contexts (Bryman, 2009), which creates multiple gaps in higher education. Despite the complexity and demanding tasks, the field of higher education tends to undervalue middle management positions and many academic professionals come to the position unprepared (Al-omari, 2005; Gonaim, 2016; Floyd, 2016; Gmelch, 2004). From the perspective of leadership development, Al-omari (2005) discussed the lack of formal training,
instruction, or orientation for new academic deans and department chairs. Despite the fact that deans and department chairs are expected to play dynamic roles as change agents, academic professionals, and effective mentors for faculty members, they are “placed in charge of academic units without actual knowledge of people management skills or how to accomplish group goals” (Al-omari, 2005, p. 1). Through the framework of organizational culture, Floyd (2016) found that higher education institutes lack development and support for academic middle managers. He argued that universities should move from “a culture of institutional neglect to one of support and development for our middle leaders” (p. 180).

A lack of support and sufficient training also affects the identity construction of academic middle managers. Using the terms presented by Winter (2009), Floyd (2016) highlighted the identity challenges of academic managers as they are academic managers as well as managed academics. To effectively handle increasing pressure and multi-tasks, higher education middle managers need not only generic training but also customized and tailored programs to fit the individual needs and varying cultures of local contexts (Floyd, 2016). The roles and responsibilities of academic middle managers are complex and must be examined within the institutional context because the stakeholders are affecting and also affected by the managers’ experiences (Berdrow, 2010).

Organizational Influence in Government Institutions

In the current global landscape, public organizations are under increasing pressure to do more with less (Esteve, et al., 2017). Administrative reforms in public sectors have reduced public servants’ job security, forcing government organizations to be more competitive and responsive. Specifically, one of the key trends across the world of New Public Management (NPM) reforms is pushing public organizations to mimic practices of private sectors as
evidenced by studies from Australia (Lindorff, Warrall & Cooper, 2011), the United Kingdom (O’Reilly & Reid, 2011), and the United States (Yang & Kassekert, 2009). These studies indicate that “delivering improved services through a motivated workforce” has become increasingly important for government organizations (Esteve, et al., 2017, p. 544).

**Middle managers in public sectors.** Public organizations, especially federal government organizations, are larger in size and have longer command chains with hierarchical systems (Light, 1999; Chen et al., 2017). Middle managers in such organizations help ensure the needed information is communicated between the operation and the stakeholders. They play a critical role in providing professional information and judgement for the decision makers by serving as “the balance wheel, being participative and even proactive in a policy-making process” (Chen et al., 2017, p. 703). In addition to serving as liaisons for information exchange, middle managers in public sectors contribute to reinforcing organizational ethics (Bowman and Knox, 2008). Another important factor in government organizations is the influence of stakeholders, which involves strategic political considerations (Chen et al., 2017). Literature confirms that the competence of middle and lower level employees is a predictor of workplace performance (Light, 2008).

Scholars recognize that research on middle managers in government organizations has been sparse (Chen et al., 2017; Pick & Teo, 2017). As Currie (2000) stated, there is a lack of managerial literature in specific contexts, particularly in the public sector. The majority of previous studies in public administration focused on middle managers’ roles in policy implementation (Chen et al., 2017). Within a limited scope of literature, scholars acknowledge the vital roles of middle managers in public organizations. Middle managers in public sectors are responsible for implementing reforms in accordance with requirements of executives,
government and community groups while ensuring the well-being of staff members (Pick & Teo, 2017).

Recent studies explored not only the competencies of middle managers but also their knowledge and psychological state such as attitude, satisfaction, and motivation. For example, public workers’ professional knowledge and cutting-edge expertise are essential to support new programs and policies effectively (Meier, 2006; Chen et al., 2017). Studies confirm that staff participation and managers’ access to change information impact middle managers psychological well-being and attitude during organizational change (West, Dawson, Admasachew & Topakas, 2011; Bordia, Hobman, Jones, Gallois & Callan, 2004; Pick & Teo, 2017). Chen et al. (2017) investigated middle managers’ upward roles and found that middle managers engage more often in synthesizing information than in championing alternatives. Their study also revealed that the most important predictors of middle managers’ actions are linked to job security, connections with stakeholders, and autonomous motivation. Public institutions can lower middle managers’ stress and raise job satisfaction during change by communicating necessary information.

**Norms and expectations in military organizations.** The site of this study is a military educational institute led by senior military leaders with a large body of civilian staff including senior and middle managers. The institute has a strong influence of military structure and operational processes. The middle managers who serve as Deans and Directors are expected to follow the chain of command and standard operating procedures (SOPs) in conducting varying administrative matters. In the military, an SOP provides a clear operations framework (Liao, 2008). The process of following SOPs reflects the principle that “a systematic approach promotes thoroughness, clarity, logic and an effective application of military problem solving” (Liao, 2008, p. 646). Mutch (2006) cautioned against the simplistic use of military metaphor as a
mechanical and hierarchical organization because empowerment can be combined with hierarchy due to the complexity of modern military practices. He claimed that modern infantry units, for example, operate under a high degree of “responsible autonomy being granted to the rank and file” (p. 762) because of the “strong focus on decentralized decision making supported by strong regimental culture” (p. 763).

Literature confirms that members’ perceptions of different organizational norms influence various aspects of organizational life and their attitudes toward each other. Pramanik (2015) examined perception-related challenges in civil–military coordination for post-disaster operations and provided intriguing insight regarding the differences between civilian and military organizations. The study found that “differences in hierarchies, leadership and the general structure of organizations resulted in challenges to overall communication between both sides and challenges in terms of operational routines” (p. 999). According to Pramanik (2015), organizational identity was the central theme, and differences in people’s perceptions influenced openness and trust toward the different groups. To summarize, modern military organizations have multiple characteristics despite the fact that members are often expected to observe clearly-defined operational processes.

Conclusion

This section reviewed literature on institutional influences on middle managers’ experiences. Being a successful middle manager requires a variety of skills to navigate organizational tensions and paradoxes. How middle managers perceive themselves in this complex and contradictory environment affects their meaning-making processes and their actions as individuals. Literature highlights several emerging changes in both academic and public institutions. That is, middle managers in general are under increasing pressure to produce
positive outcomes while juggling a variety of factors such as local members’ well-being, support for senior leadership, compliance with external regulations, and finally, taking care of self as managers and leaders.

Institutional norms and expectations shape how organizational members behave and interact among themselves. Regardless of the level of organizational hierarchy, it is important to consider what is expected of the people in an organization. Managers’ orientation to self, others, and to the macro level of institutional expectations significantly influences their managerial experiences. How middle managers construct meanings of their experiences working between senior leaders and employees in such a complex environment is still unclear and should be further investigated.

**Chapter Summary**

Organizations are sites for continuous flux with dynamic human actions and interactions. Understanding people’s experiences in organizations requires investigations of ongoing phenomena through process-oriented approaches from both micro-level as well as macro-level perspectives. The purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of how Deans and Directors at a highly-structured government institute make sense of their positions as middle managers between senior leaders and faculty.

This literature review provided a synopsis of three critical areas to help understand middle managers’ experiences: discourse of middle management, sensemaking theory, and institutional influences on middle managers. The literature on middle management illustrates the significance of the roles and challenges that middle managers face in organizations. Literature confirms middle managers’ significant contributions to a wide range of organizational discourse such as supporting day-to-day operations and fostering knowledge sharing. Sensemaking theory
provides a sensible process in deciphering middle managers’ voices. The seven properties of sensemaking (Weick, 1995) offers a useful framework for analyzing sensemaking phenomena. Finally, theories and literature on institutional influences offer macro perspectives regarding a number of key concepts such as organizational norms, expectations, power dynamics, culture, and approaches to organizational learning that outline middle managers’ perceptions and experiences. The next section will discuss the methodology of this study to investigate how middle managers assign meaning to their experiences.
CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN

The purpose of this study was to investigate how Deans and Directors at a highly-structured, educational, government institute make sense of their positions as middle managers between senior leadership and faculty members. The researcher used the framework of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to conduct the study. The section below provides a brief introduction of research design followed by an overview of IPA. The researcher then presents the procedure of the research, which includes the site access, recruitment of the participants, and handling of research data. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion on trustworthiness and ethical considerations of this study.

Methodology Introduction

The goal of this study was to investigate how Deans and Directors make sense of their positions as middle managers at a government institute for military personnel. As discussed in Chapters One and Two, middle managers play important roles as local managers, leaders, mentors, and change influencers who translate the vision of senior managers into local contexts. In addition to juggling multiple functions in their everyday lives, middle managers deal with sensitive and nuanced tasks in complex institutional contexts. They also encounter contradictions between the need to achieve highly reflexive managerial tasks while demonstrating deep reflective practices as mindful professionals who are attuned to the local context.

The researcher used qualitative research for this study to investigate how Deans and Directors assign meaning to their experiences as middle managers. A qualitative study includes a broad range of procedures designed to describe and interpret the experiences of people (Ponterotto, 2005). While the classical approach to positivism focuses on objective verification
of scientific hypotheses through experimentation and quantitative analysis, qualitative methods call for in-depth descriptions, interpretations, and analyses of unique experiences of research participants in specific contexts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The goal of qualitative studies is “not to confirm or disconfirm earlier findings, but rather to contribute to a process of continuous revision and enrichment of understanding of the experience of form of action under study” (Lincoln, 1995, p. 278). Creswell (2013) offered eight characteristics of qualitative research: natural setting, researcher as key instrument, multiple methods, complex reasoning through inductive and deductive logic, focus on participants’ meanings, emergent design, reflexivity and holistic accounts. These characteristics are consistent with the premise of qualitative research which focuses on unique views of participants in natural contexts.

To investigate the experiences of Deans and Directors as middle managers, the researcher employed qualitative research methodologies for the following reasons. First, understanding middle managers’ lived experiences involves the premise that there are multiple realities and truths in the world. From the phenomenological point of view, Van Manen (1990) reminded us that the core of human science is not about finding the absolute truth. Instead, the focus should be placed to accept and explore the “theory of the unique” (p. 7) in order to “gain a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences” (p. 9). As Van Manen (1990) explicated, to do research on people’s experience means “to question the way we experience the world, to want to know the world in which we live as human beings” (p. 5). Other scholars also described the fluidity of the ways individuals construct their personal realities. Ponterotto (2005) stated that the reality is constructed in the mind of individuals. Ricoeur (1992) also explained that knowing who we are and how we relate to people requires practical wisdom which is defined as implicit knowledge from within. A qualitative approach
supports the purpose of this study because investigating middle managers’ experiences requires understanding of how they make sense of their experiences and construct their own realities.

Second, this study involved constructionist-interpretivist perspectives, which assume that knowledge and experiences are constructed through social interactions among people. The orientation to constructivism-interpretivism assumes that there are multiple realities where individuals exist in relation to others. Exploring a range of underlying assumptions for social-constructivism, Cunliffe (2008) explained the criticality of intersubjective and dialogical nature of human experiences. Literature on managerial studies also confirms the intricate position of middle managers who constantly face challenges in mediating the vision of senior leadership and the voices of employees (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Floyd & Wooldridge, 1997; Hope, 2010; Huy 2001; Lüscher & Lewis, 2008; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Middle managers make sense of their experiences and give signals to the employees to construct shared meanings in the given context (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Therefore, to study how middle managers perceive their experiences of being in the middle, it was necessary to explore how they describe their experiences through dynamic social interactions with a variety of people at different levels in an organization.

Third, middle managers’ perceptions and lived experiences are contextually situated. Scholars confirm that approaches to human science entail an understanding of social interactions in specific contexts. In other words, the notion of truth is fluid because it is “the subject of community negotiations regarding what will be accepted as truth” (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011, p. 177). Qualitative researchers use a set of data collected in a natural setting in which people construct their meanings of experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Interestingly, in the early 1920s, Mary Parker Follett first presented the law of the situation asserting that a situation
is always evolving, and therefore, understanding managerial experiences requires accepting the evolving contexts which influence people’s perceptions (Follett, 1940/2013). As Follett (1940/2013) described, people’s lived experiences cannot be codified as static and nomothetic phenomena. Understanding middle managers’ experiences, therefore, requires ideographic attention to capture the unique experiences of individuals who live in specific contexts. In summary, a qualitative approach was appropriate for this study because it allows flexibility in understanding complex social phenomena through people’s experiences in fluid contexts. The next section describes the framework of this study in detail.

**Research Design**

This study used the framework of IPA to uncover the meaning construction of middle managers’ experiences using sensemaking theory. IPA is a systematic approach which is committed to understanding the first-person perspective from the third-person position (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009; Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2006). The core value of IPA is the meaning making of individuals through intersubjective inquiry and analysis. In other words, IPA offers rich and contextualized insider perspectives (Larkin et al., 2006). The process of IPA involves in-depth examinations of how participants make meanings through their lived experiences and how the researcher makes meanings by interpreting the participants’ meaning construction. This perspective is called double hermeneutic because IPA researchers aim to “make sense of the participants trying to make sense of what is happening to them” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 3). The section below provides the key premises of IPA.

**Research Approach**

The purpose of this study was to gain understanding of the perspectives and lived experiences of middle managers regarding their positions between faculty and senior
management at a hierarchical government organization. The researcher used IPA to explore how middle managers orient themselves and assign meaning to their experiences of being in-between at a hierarchical government institute. IPA is a relatively new approach started in 1996 by the psychology professor Jonathan Smith, in England. The initial interests were brought by health professionals and psychologists to better understand the experiential perspectives of patients. Currently, IPA is widely used by other professionals, including those in the fields of human and social science. According to Smith et al. (2009), a good IPA study balances phenomenological description with insightful interpretation. They explained that one might use IPA if he or she had a research question which aims to understand what a given experience is like (i.e., phenomenology) and how each participant makes sense of it (i.e., interpretation).

IPA is a meaning-focused qualitative approach which is informed by three elements of philosophical thinking: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography (Smith et al., 2009; Smith, 2017). First, IPA is influenced by the concepts of both descriptive and interpretive phenomenology as it is concerned with the participants’ experiences in a given phenomenon. Van Manen (1990) stated that phenomenology is the study of lived experiences which aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences. IPA is phenomenological as it concerns itself with exploring participants’ lived experiences as they are. Second, IPA’s interpretive standpoint is aligned with the interpretive paradigm, which seeks explanations within the frame of individual consciousness and subjectivity (Burrel and Morgan, 1979). IPA requires the perspective of double hermeneutics because the researcher attempts to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of a particular phenomenon (Smith & Osborn, 2003; Smith et al. 2009; Smith, 2017). The third component, known as ideography, refers to IPA’s focus on detailed and nuanced experiences in a given context. IPA is ideographic
because it offers in-depth and situated analysis of particular experiences of participants in their realities (Smith et al., 2009; Larkin et al., 2011).

One of the key differences between IPA and traditional phenomenology is the fact that IPA acknowledges the researcher’s biases and assumptions instead of removing or “bracketing” them. This is a notable contrast from Husserl’s descriptive phenomenology which suggests removing researcher’s assumptions and presumptions. IPA is also closely tied to the social context where participants construct their lived experiences. Smith et al. (2009) emphasized the importance of the language and culture of participants, referring to Heidegger, who described how our understandings of experiences are constructed through enculturation and intersubjectivity. Larkin et al. (2006) summarized the key concepts of IPA as follows: 1) IPA maps out participants’ concerns and cares, 2) IPA’s interpretive component contextualizes these claims within their cultural and physical environments, and then attempts to make sense of the mutually constitutive relationship between ‘person’ and ‘world’, and 3) The overall outcome for the researcher should be informed by the participant’s own relatedness to, and engagement with, that phenomenon. In short, the framework of IPA is embedded in the contexts in which participants live and make sense of their experiences.

Construction of meanings of one’s lived experiences is not only subjective but also constrained by the organizational contexts (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Investigating middle managers’ meaning-construction activities, therefore, requires a nuanced first-person account which is contextually situated. The researcher found IPA to be the most suitable approach for this study because IPA aims to understand “how people make sense of events, relations, and processes in the context of their particular life worlds” (Larkin, Eatough, & Osborn, 2011, p. 330). Smith et al. (2009) stated that the phenomenological standpoint of IPA requires “taking a
quality which involves everyday life, honing it, stretching it, and employing it with a particular
degree of determination and rigor” (p. 189). The goal of IPA is to explore how participants
make sense of their own realities, which is aligned with the principles of sensemaking theory.
While there are different understandings of sensemaking, the process of sensemaking involves
members’ lived experiences which are tied to organizational contexts (Weick, 1995). IPA’s
methodological stance is well aligned with the framework of this study, which aims to
understand middle managers’ lived experiences. The next section will provide the steps of this
study in investigating middle managers’ perspectives of their lived experiences.

**Procedures**

**Site Access**

The research site was a US government military training institute where the researcher
works as a staff member. To obtain site access, the researcher followed the guidelines provided
by the institute’s Human Research Protection Program office, ensuring compliance with the
following requirements to conduct research using human subjects:

1) Scientific and ethics review by local Scientific and Ethics Review Board (L-SRB)
2) Scientific and ethics review by Institutional SRB (I-SRB)
3) Administration’s support for research
4) Commandant’s support for research
5) IRB review and approval by the affiliated university (Northeastern University)
6) Army Research Protections Administrative Review

**Participants and Recruitment**

Middle managers are commonly defined as “any managers two levels below the CEO and
one level above line workers and professionals” (Huy, 2001, p. 73). Depending on the
organizations’ structures, however, there could be more than two layers between the CEO and the middle managers. The site of this study was a hierarchical military educational institute with multiple structural layers and different types of middle managers. The participants of this study were Deans and Directors who serve as middle managers at a government training institute. The institute has a variety of middle managers, but the researcher chose Deans and Directors because their experiences were the most relevant to the scope of this study. The Deans and Directors at the research site are typically tasked to lead academic innovations, ensuring sound educational practices in local settings while supporting the vision of mission goals that are determined by the military leadership. Through semi-structured interviews with Deans and Directors, the researcher investigated how they make sense of their positions as middle managers at a highly-structured government institute.

The researcher interviewed six Deans and Directors as research volunteers. Participation in this study was voluntary, and the participants were recruited from three academic directorates at the research site, through invitation by email. The value of IPA’s small sample size is well recognized and documented (Smith et al., 2009; Wagstaff, Jeong, Nolan, Wilson, Tweedlie, Phillips, Senu, & Holland, 2014). Wagstaff et al. (2014) presented that multiple researchers who used IPA in different fields benefitted from the smaller sample sizes and IPA’s emphasis on individual experiences, which provided rich data for their studies. Smith et al. (2009) also suggested recruiting a small number of homogeneous participants, which is typically between three to six people in conducting an IPA study. For doctorate research, they recommended using four to ten interviews. The researcher of this study conducted semi-structured interviews with six participants. All participants were positioned two levels below the highest civilian leader and shared managerial responsibilities as middle-level managers at the institute. The participants
consisted of both males and females who had more than 18 months of experience in their present positions at the time of this study. All members had graduate level academic degrees with extensive institutional knowledge from previous positions at the research site. Considering the demanding work schedules of Deans and Directors at the research site, the researcher conducted one semi-structured interview with each participant, which lasted 60 to 75 minutes, followed by their review of transcripts, which allowed the researcher to obtain in-depth data from each manager.

Data Collection

The researcher first piloted the interview questions with a middle manager who was not included in the study. After the pilot interview, adjustments were made in the interview questions based on the feedback received from the pilot interviewee. Then, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with six middle managers who were serving as Deans and Directors at the research site. The aim of the interviews was to gain insight from the participants’ stories. Seidman (2006) offered insightful reminders for interviewers in conducting effective interviews by listening more and talking less, which helps the interviewers pay attention to the inner voices of participants. Throughout the semi-structured interviews, the researcher remained flexible, yet mindful to allow the participants to express their thoughts and experiences in their own ways.

Following the interview protocol, the researcher asked for permission from each participant to audio record the interview using the IRB approved written consent form. All recorded interviews were transcribed by a professional transcription service from which the researcher obtained a written non-disclosure agreement. Upon completion of the transcription, the researcher verified the accuracy of content and ensured the use of pseudonyms to protect
confidentiality. All personally identifiable information (PII) such as the names of people, projects, or language programs were removed and replaced with pseudonyms. The transcripts were reviewed by all participants to ensure accuracy and completeness. It is also recommended that IPA researchers include a “semantic record of the interview” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 74). Therefore, the researcher included verbal and non-verbal utterances and additional social cues such as pauses and hesitations into the transcripts.

The researcher also developed a contact summary form for each interview, as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994), by entering impressions and reflections of each interview immediately after the interview and before the transcription is completed. Miles and Huberman (1994) explained that a contact summary helps researchers capture salient points combining immediacy with reflectivity. Juxtaposition of multiple data points helped the researcher interweave data collection and analysis using both inductive and deductive reasoning throughout the study. By using the contract summary forms, the researcher was able to stay focused and reflective throughout the process of coding and data analysis.

In addition to contact summary, the researcher used analytic memos throughout the study to document her self-reflections and thinking processes on regular bases, as recommended in literature (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014; Saldaña, 2016). Memoing is a valid method to document researchers’ reflections on the development of coding processes, coding choices, emergent themes and other concepts that lead toward research findings (Saldaña, 2016). Scholars explain that analytic memoing and coding are concurrent qualitative analytic activities that facilitate a reciprocal relationship between the development of coding and the evolution of understanding a phenomenon (Saldaña, 2016; Weston, Gandell, Beauchamp, McAlpine, Wiseman & Beauchamp, 2001). Both contact summary forms and analytic memos served as
tools for heuristic inquiry in which the researcher aimed to uncover information through informed self-reflection.

Data Analysis

The process of IPA generally offers 'bottom-up’ perspectives rather than testing theories or hypotheses. As Denzin & Lincoln (2003) explicated, research participants seldom provide full explanations of their actions, and therefore, qualitative data analysis involves in-depth interpretation of the stories about what the participants did and why. IPA researchers usually analyze interview transcripts through a systematic qualitative analysis, which involves investigating first-person perspective from the third-person position. As recommended by Smith et al. (2009), the researcher aimed to accomplish two goals: to give a sense of what the data are like and to offer an interpretation of data by explaining what they mean. In other words, the data analysis of this study included moving back and forth from the particular to the shared concept and from descriptive to interpretive analysis. This process required both convergence and divergence of data in details (Smith et al., 2009), which the researcher found conceptually profound and demanding.

For this study, the researcher followed the six steps of IPA (Smith et al., 2009) as general guidelines, as explained below. The first step of the analysis involved immersing self in the interview data by the reading and re-reading of written transcripts and by placing the participant in the center of the analysis. The second step was initial noting where the researcher moved from descriptive notes to interpretive notes by identifying “similarities and differences, echoes, amplifications, and contradictions in what the person is saying” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 84). The third step required developing emergent themes. This phase involved ideographic focus while organizing the original interviews into parts, by identifying what is important through the process
of “hermeneutic circle” (p. 92). During the fourth step, the researcher searched for connections across emergent themes. Smith et al. (2009) presented a variety of strategies in looking for connections among themes, such as grouping similarities, polarization (i.e., examining themes by focusing on differences), taking accounts of the frequency, and identifying contextual elements or functions. The fifth step involved moving to the next transcript and repeating the process of step one through four. The sixth step was looking for patterns across cases, in which the researcher needed to identify the connections across different interviews. Smith et al. (2009) explained that the researcher must fulfill the dual quality of IPA through data analysis by focusing on each participant’s “unique idiosyncratic instances” while paying attention to the “shared higher order qualities” (p. 101). Following these steps, the researcher was able to maintain openness of the IPA framework while ensuring in-depth interpretation of data moving between the particulars and the whole.

Data coding involved identifying patterns of regularities, anomalies, and deviations. During the coding process, the researcher analyzed the meaning of the participants’ statements and generated themes from the data using NVivo 12, a qualitative data-analysis software for coding of data. Saldaña (2016) explained that coding is a subjective and heuristic aspect of analysis because “coding is an exploratory problem-solving technique without specific formulas or algorithms to follow” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 9). The coding phase consisted of the first-cycle coding and the second-cycle coding as explained below. It is also important to note that the researcher employed inductive approach, which generates hypotheses by identifying common threads or abnormalities through exploration of data (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

During the first-cycle coding of this study, the researcher used In Vivo coding, capturing the exact words and phrases from participants’ own language. In Vivo coding, also known as
literal coding, is appropriate for studies that “prioritize and honor the participant's voice” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 106), which is the core of interpretive analysis. Scholars confirm that by using In Vivo coding, researchers are more likely to capture the meanings inherent in people’s experiences (Saldaña, 2016; Stringer, 2014).

The second-cycle coding involved two parts: 1) interpretation of the words and phrases identified during the first-cycle coding into themes and 2) grouping these themes into categories. During the initial stage of second coding, the researcher also exported the files to Microsoft Word and made tables for in-depth analysis across six interviews. At this point, additional exploratory notes were entered next to each interviewee’s statements. During the coding process, the researcher continued writing analytic memos and reviewing contact summary forms, which allowed the researcher to zoom in and out of data conducting descriptive and interpretive analysis. The researcher identified four emergent themes and nine sub-themes by juxtaposing multiple data points such as contact summary forms and interview transcripts to refine the interpretations and analysis of data.

**Data Storage**

To maintain integrity of the data, all data, including audio recordings, analytic memos, and other field notes, were stored in a password-protected personal computer located at the researcher’s residence. Each interview was assigned with a pseudonym and interview date. The password and encoding keys will be securely stored in a locked cabinet. The recordings of the interviews will be kept until the completion of the research and the transcripts will be kept for two years.
Presentation of Findings

Presentation of findings in qualitative inquiry is a dynamic process which involves paying attention to the peculiarities of the study. Chenail (1995) emphasized the importance of juxtaposition to re-present the stories of participants through description, explanation, and analysis. In the next chapter, the researcher presents the detailed analysis of interview data in narrative forms based on the emergent themes. In the subsequent chapters, the researcher will engage in discussion where she develops dialogues between the findings and the existing literature. The process of dialoging enables the researcher to cross-reference the findings and introduce new emerging themes which could contribute to the field of managerial sensemaking.

As suggested in Smith et al. (2009), the researcher also offers her overall assessment of the study, including the criteria, the research process, and unexpected findings. Smith et al. (2009) emphasized that IPA is “a creative process” and “the criteria for validity will need to be flexibly applied” (p. 184). The assessment of the study, along with rigorous and emergent data analysis situated in the context, helped the researcher build the appropriate level of trustworthiness for this study. Creswell (2013) stated that the final report of qualitative research should include “the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, a complex description and interpretation of the problem, and its contribution to the literature or a call for change” (p. 44). The data from this study provides a unique set of organizational insight towards understanding managerial sensemaking processes at a government institute.

Ethical Considerations

The researcher followed the guidelines provided by the institutional review board (IRB) of Northeastern University. The researcher also ensured that the institutional requirements were met at the research site, a government training institute for the military. The participation of the
study was voluntary, and the researcher obtained signed consent forms from all participants prior
to the interviews. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were used in each transcription and in
his or her program, and all potentially identifying markers, such as the names of programs, were
removed from written documents.

The researcher used an on-going practice of entering analytic memos, which provided a
space for self-reflection and reflexivity to refine the ethical practices as a qualitative researcher.
Memoing is the act of recording reflective notes of researchers. These memos support “the
credibility and trustworthiness of qualitative research and provide a record of the meanings
derived from the data” (Groenewald, 2008, p. 1). Scholars also discussed the criticality of
putting the ethical notion of reflexivity into everyday practice (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004;
Kuntz, 2010). For example, Kuntz (2010) highlighted his struggles in dealing with the tension
between representing participants’ voices and maintaining their anonymity. The framework of
procedural ethics in qualitative studies is often articulated and mandated through the process of
IRB, but Kuntz (2010) found that procedural ethics is insufficient, as it allows little self-reflexive
examination of researchers. He proposed a system of constructing analytic memos for reflection
and for articulating ethical decisions of researchers throughout the study. Kuntz (2010) also
stated that analytic memos provide the researcher of qualitative study with the ability to reflect-
in-action, which he called “ethics-in-practice” (p. 430). The researcher of this study actively
used analytic memos which provided a space for self-reflection-in-action throughout the study.

Trustworthiness

Building trustworthiness in qualitative research involves a process and a certain mindset.
Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified four key elements of trustworthiness for qualitative study:
credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Creswell (2013) described the
emerging development of the traditional notion of triangulation of data to a more dynamic process of crystallization of data to ensure trustworthiness through rigor and openness at the same time. From the postmodern perspective, ensuring trustworthiness is “a process of inquiry with the imagery of crystal and discovery” (Creswell, 2013, p. 249). As Constas (1992) reminded us about the defensibility of qualitative orientation, “the meaningfulness of a given study does not reside in the data” (p. 254). The key is to embed systematic rigor throughout the process while maintaining flexibility and creativity as a researcher.

One of the challenges that IPA researchers often encounter is ensuring the credibility of the study (Creswell, 2013; Smith et al., 2009). The researcher of this study built trustworthiness of the study by ensuring rigor in several ways. First, the researcher maintained analytic memos throughout the process. As supported by literature, systematic memoing will add credibility and trustworthiness of research (Groenewald, 2008), facilitate ethical and reflective practices (Kuntz, 2010), and assist the researcher in maintaining openness to emerging themes and self-reflection (Saldaña, 2016).

Second, to increase rigor of the study and facilitate the involvement of participants, the researcher asked each interviewee to review his or her interview transcript to ensure its accuracy and completeness, as encouraged by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Member-checking is a recommended strategy which allows participants to judge the accuracy and credibility of the account (Creswell, 2013). Validation within an interpretive approach involves dialogues with the participants (Angen, 2000). Communication with participants during the research will also improve and make the interview data more meaningful because any research texts are always “partial and incomplete” (Lincoln, 1995).
The third strategy was providing thick descriptions of the participants and contexts of the study (Creswell, 2013). By providing detailed descriptions of a case or a theme, the researcher will be able to offer abundant and interconnected details by paying particular attention to the participants’ stories. Thick description of research participants and context will assist readers of the study to make decisions regarding transferability of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1988).

Fourth, the researcher payed close attention to clarifying and articulating researcher biases throughout the study. As the researcher is a staff member of the research site, clarifying researcher biases and positionality will be an essential part of this study. Any interpretive approach is a “chain of interpretations that must be documented for others to judge the trustworthiness of the meanings arrived at in the end” (Creswell, 2013, p. 248). Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) found that one of the characteristics of a good qualitative research study is that the researcher makes his or her position explicit. Communicating the researcher’s position and comments on experiences will enable the readers to understand the assumptions of the researcher which may impact the inquiry (Merriam, 1988). Through analytic memos, field notes, and in-depth analysis of interview data, the researcher strived to clarify her own biases, reflections, and orientations to the study.

**Limitations of the Study**

The findings from this study offer complex and intricate perspectives of middle managers on their lived experiences of being in the middle. While the researcher aimed to maximize the rigor of this study as discussed above, there are several limitations associated with it. It is important to note that many of these limitations could be considered as strengths or unique attributes of this study.
First, the study may lack the classical notion of generalizability. The researcher investigated how Deans and Directors at a government institute understand and construct meaning of their lived experiences as middle managers, which support the emic viewpoints of the participants. Emic refers to constructs and behaviors unique to specific contexts which are not generalizable (Ponterotto, 2005). Because IPA is ideographic and focuses on individuals as unique and peculiar entities in specific contexts, scholars recommend a small sample size (Smith et al., 2009). Therefore, the generalizability of the study may be limited. That said, this is also the strength of IPA research, which offers rich and thick description of the participants focusing on their voices and intersubjective accounts that influence their realities. As recognized by multiple scholars, IPA provides “a theoretical rather than empirical generalizability” (Wagstaff et al., 2014, p. 3) and allows readers to make connections between the findings and their personal and professional experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

Second, the data analysis and presentation of this study was influenced by the researcher’s positionality because qualitative researchers “position themselves in their writings” (Creswell, 2013, p. 216). The subjectivity of the researcher is reflected in the concept of researcher-as-instrument (Creswell, 2013) which Lincoln and Guba (1985) referred to as human-as-instrument. In naturalistic inquiry, the involvement of the researcher adds significant value to the study providing a wide range of knowledge and experience (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For example, literature confirms that “the human instrument is the sole instrument that can build on tacit knowledge” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 198). If we consider human science inclusively as process and product, accepting the researcher-as-instrument and articulating the researcher’s positionality, subjectivity, and biases would possibly offer valuable tacit knowledge which can be shared with others.
Finally, the assessment of validity and quality of the study was another challenging area. Creswell (2013) pointed out that a qualitative study often lacks a set of clear evaluation criteria and IPA is not an exception. To assess the quality of IPA, Smith et al. (2009) explicated how IPA can meet the rigor referring to the four principles of qualitative research offered by Yardley (2000). They are: 1) Sensitivity to context, 2) Commitment and rigor, 3) Transparency and coherence, and 4) Impact and importance. IPA is a creative and contextually-situated practice, and therefore, the evaluation of IPA must allow flexibility while ensuring the rigor of the study throughout the process. In many ways, assessment of the quality of IPA study is embedded in the practice. For example, Yardley (2000) presented the importance of in-depth interviewing to ensure both commitment and rigor in which the researcher makes on-the-spot decisions on probing and important cues from the participants. Also, the write-ups of IPA must demonstrate the nature and principles of IPA as an interpretive activity. In other words, the readers should be oriented clearly how the researcher is “trying to make sense of the participant’s experience” (Smith et al., 2009).

Chapter Summary

Through the process of IPA, the researcher investigated the lived experiences of Deans and Directors who serve between senior management and employees at a hierarchical government organization. This chapter provided the overview of the research design of this study, focusing on the nature of qualitative approach, the framework of IPA, the research procedures, and ethical considerations. It also discussed how the researcher ensured rigor and trustworthiness while compensating for the limitations of the study. IPA is concerned with how participants make sense of or see meaning in their own experiences in their own world (Smith et al., 2009). It is a dynamic approach that offers the capacity for “making links between the
understanding of research participants and the theoretical frameworks” of mainstream theories (Smith et al., 2009, p. 186). IPA’s approach allowed the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of people’s everyday experiences (Vann Manen, 1990). The notion of researcher-as-instrument (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) supported the framework of IPA because the researcher actively engaged in the process, interpreting the peculiar experiences of participants and constructing emerging themes. Finally, it is important to mention that the core of this study remained the voices of the participants, which was also aligned with the principles of IPA. Focusing on the process and the outcomes of this qualitative study, the researcher remained committed and vigilant, looking for ideographic intricacies from the participants while integrating immediacy and reflective practices into the study.
CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

This chapter presents the findings and initial analysis of semi-structured interviews with six middle managers who were positioned in the middle of the organizational hierarchy at a highly-structured government organization. As mentioned in Chapter Two, little literature was available about the perceptions and lived experiences of middle managers in the context of government organizations at the time of this research. This study aimed to fill the gap in understanding how middle managers at a government educational institute orient themselves and assign meaning to their experiences. The central research question was: How do Deans and Directors at a highly-structured, educational, government institute make sense of their positions as middle managers between senior leaders and faculty members? Following the principle of IPA, the researcher purposely kept the research question general, as recommended by Smith et al. (2009), because the goal of an IPA study is to explore how the participants perceive themselves through their lived experiences. In other words, the primary question was kept open necessarily in order to examine the participants’ perspectives in depth without any pre-conceived theories.

In this research, middle managers are defined as those who are one level above the first-line supervisors. All participants of this study were Deans or Directors at the research site who report to the level of Associate Provost. The researcher explored how Deans and Directors as middle managers orient themselves and understand their lived experiences through the lens of sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995). The interview questions were generated based on the seven properties of sensemaking (Weick, 1995). They are: (a) identity construction, (b) retrospective, (c) enactment, (d) social, (e) on-going, (f) focus on extracted cues, and (g) plausibility rather than accuracy. To maintain the anonymity of interview participants, a pseudonym was used during
the interview to protect each participant’s identity. The chapter starts with a description of the combined profile of the participants, followed by four emergent themes and sub-themes.

**Combined Profile of Participants**

After the IRB granted permission for this study, the researcher recruited potential participants through e-mails. Six middle managers, consisting of three males and three females, were identified as interview participants. They shared a common profile as explained below. All participants had served over twelve years at the research site in various positions including over 18 months in their current middle management positions. Because of their extensive experience at the research site, they were well-informed about the mission of the institute and the needs of students who come to study foreign languages in various programs. Their previous experiences included positions at a different level at the research site, such as first-line supervisors and faculty members. All participants had master’s degrees or above with a wide range of knowledge and working experience from various fields related to the mission of the institute, which provides foreign language training. Their expertise included second language acquisition, faculty development, curriculum development, organizational leadership, and program management.

Another similarity was that they were the top leaders of designated local units or schools and were reporting to the rank of Associate Provost. This means that the participants were two levels below the Provost, the highest-ranking civilian academic leader at the institute. Being in the middle of organizational hierarchy, they were supervising the first-line supervisors in their assigned units. Because this study involved a relatively small population at the research site, the researcher used numbers to maintain participants’ anonymity in the sections below.
Table 1: Summary of participants’ profiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Manager</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manager 1</td>
<td>• Has worked over 12 years in multiple managerial positions at the institute;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The length in each position ranges from 18 months to nine years;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Emphasized the importance of military support and involvement to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>accomplish missions;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Discussed the challenge in balancing the mission and people’s needs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manager 2</td>
<td>• Has 15 years of service at the institute;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Served in multiple divisions as middle manager;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Commented on the importance of informal talks with the members of his organization;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Believes that high ethical standards are critical for managers to gain trust</td>
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<td>from people.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Manager 3</td>
<td>• Has 14 years of service at the institute;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Held multiple managerial positions in different divisions;</td>
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<td>• Has over five years in the current position;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Works closely with members of the core team in the current division.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Manager 4</td>
<td>• Has about 25 years of service at the institute working in different levels in</td>
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<td>various divisions;</td>
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<td>• Has 15 years with various positions at different levels in the current division;</td>
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<td>• Has experience with different levels of managerial positions;</td>
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<td>• Experienced several organizational changes.</td>
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<td>Manager 5</td>
<td>• Has approximately 15 years of service at the institute;</td>
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<td>• Has multiple levels of managerial experience in different divisions;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Applied for the current position about three years ago;</td>
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<td>• Emphasized the importance of academic leadership in the current division.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Manager 6</td>
<td>• Has over 13 years of service at the institute;</td>
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<td>• Has extensive experience in the field of foreign language education;</td>
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<td>• Served in multiple managerial positions in different divisions;</td>
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<td>• Has approximately 4 years in the current position.</td>
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Key Themes and Composite Descriptions

Six interview participants were identified as middle managers who were positioned two levels below the top civilian leader. During the interviews, which lasted approximately 60 to 75 minutes, the participants shared their personal stories, experiences, and their own views of being between senior leaders and faculty members. Although they work as local leaders in different divisions at the research site, four common themes emerged to illustrate how the participants as middle managers make sense of their positions at a highly structured organization. These themes are: (a) mediators of expectations, (b) influencers of people, (c) balancing wheels of organizations, and (d) generators of collective efficacy. There are also nine sub-themes identified based on the interview analysis. These themes and sub-themes are not mutually exclusive because many elements that influence the lived experience of middle managers are interwoven to shape their realities in the local community.

One underlying notion which connects these four themes seems to be middle managers’ balancing acts in incredibly complex social contexts that are shaped by the lock-step organizational hierarchy and fluid human dynamics. Experienced middle managers in a hierarchical organization seem to clearly recognize the complexity of their environment as well as the limitation of their positions. They undergo a continuous process of forming and reforming their self-concepts between the senior leadership level and the faculty members. The interview data revealed that these middle managers understand their positions from various perspectives as managers, leaders, team members, and followers. The following chart summarizes the themes and sub-themes that emerged from this study, followed by a detailed discussion of each theme.
**Figure 1.** Representation of primary themes and sub-themes

**Theme 1: Middle Managers as Mediators of Expectations**

As middle managers are positioned structurally between senior leaders and faculty, they often mediate the organizational vertical channel. One of the prominent themes that emerged from six interviews was that middle managers continuously fill the gaps between senior leadership and faculty members. The participants pointed out that the most challenging part of their job is to bridge different expectations coming from above and below in the organization. Theme 1 consists of three sub-themes: 1a) filling the gaps by tailoring information, 1b) filtering the information and people’s emotions upward and downward, and 1c) facilitating communication flow.

**1a. Filling the gaps by tailoring information.** Structurally and functionally, middle managers are responsible for communicating expectations of senior leadership and the faculty. All participants acknowledged that there are gaps between these two layers. In fact, the word “gap” was mentioned a total of twenty-three times among six participants. The mission of the
government organizations, especially those supporting military efforts, is often driven by many external factors that are beyond control at the institutional level. Consequently, the expectations of senior leaders are tied to the institute’s political and strategic environment, which may not represent the current state of local units. Manager 1 stated that the faculty does not always see “the political side that needs to be finessed,” which often causes a great deal of frustration for the faculty. The data showed that being in the middle, the interview participants often find themselves having to bridge the gaps by translating messages between the two layers. Manager 2 used a metaphor to describe middle managers’ position:

Some people say it's a sandwich, because we are in the middle. I would say it's a cement. It's a cement between two layers of bricks. As I said, sometimes two layers of expectations, two layers of people you have to deal with . . . . The middle management is about how to seal these two pieces together so we all work together. A good manager should be a good cement to put these two blocks together.

Manager 2 also explained that these gaps exist because senior leaders try to focus on future institutional goals which are often far from the reality that faculty members currently live in:

The senior leadership is more or less focused on the results, the mission, the tangible products or results you produce. They expect me to work with teachers and to get them to the level where we can achieve the results . . . . The people I supervise probably are more focused on where we actually are.

The participants commented that messages should be communicated carefully in both downward and upward directions to minimize the gaps in order to avoid potential misunderstandings. For example, when a directive comes from the higher level, middle managers assess the context and send a tailored message to the people below. Manager 3 described the process:
If the senior leaders have directions, projects, or some initiatives, my role is to work it out with our staff to best make it work for my team. When certain initiatives come, and if you just put the message the way it is, it can have a negative impact. So, you try to sort of massage it out and make it work. During that process, it's very important what language you use with your staff, too.

Tailoring the message requires interpretation and “re-packaging” (Manager 6) of the message. Manager 6 stated, “You've got to be a smart messenger, which would also mean that the messenger's interpretation becomes part of the message.” Manager 6 also explained the reason why middle managers need to interpret and repackage the message from the top:

Because we're not gonna get consistent messaging from the top, stop waiting for it. Do your very best. Get the students to do their very best. And I figured, okay, that's it. I'm gonna put my neck on the chopping block. Because we have to get messages that we can work with. And because I'm in the trenches, because I know the students, they [top leaders] don't, because I know the teachers, they don't.

Middle managers also tailor their upward messages carefully to keep senior leadership informed about the reality while encouraging faculty to move forward and reach the organizational goal. Manager 2 explained as follows:

As a middle manager, you should tell your leader, the senior leadership, what is really happening here. But, you also have to send your message in a way that it does not put yourself as someone who's defeated. On the other hand, we have to try to translate it in the language that our faculty would understand and to find it more acceptable to the faculty. We have to bridge the gap between the two.
The comments from participants suggest that middle managers see themselves navigating the organizational gaps dealing with the present and the future of their units. They strive to fill the gaps in expectations between senior leaders and faculty through continuous negotiation and diplomacy. They serve as organizational mediators and send carefully-tailored signals to both sides to facilitate understanding between these layers.

1b. Filtering information and people’s emotions upward and downward. The interview data indicate that middle managers feel that they need to pay attention to the “strategic and the political aspects of the information” (Manager 5) and navigate complex and changing situations. All participants confirmed their roles as information gatekeepers to navigate the environment smoothly. Manager 1 explained:

There are certain things staff members need to know in order to do their job. But there's also information that maybe the staff is better off not knowing. So, to say that the staff should know everything, I think, is a mistake.

The participants’ comments also support that middle managers should be “politically astute and savvy” (Manager 1) and “able to read people and situations” (Manager 4) to filter information. Regarding the political and strategic aspect of middle management, Manager 1 stated, “You cannot win every battle. As long as you win the war, you can lose a few battles along the way, and don't take anything personal.” Manager 3 used an expression, “hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil,” to explain the perceived expectations of middle managers as information gatekeepers. Manager 3 also commented that although middle managers hear a lot of things, one should “not react to every single thing you see and you hear.”

Another point mentioned by all participants was the importance of being able to support people’s emotional needs. Manager 4 sees the importance of “keeping the boat steady” during
organizational changes and support the emotional needs of faculty by communicating what had not changed. Manager 4 recalled the situation:

Try to remain calm and assure people that things will work out. We're going to get through this together. Our mission hasn't changed. We've got to stay focused on our work and continue to do the job.

The interview responses show that the participants as middle managers see the need to maneuver organizational politics and serve as a shield or a filter between the senior level and the faculty level. The participants expressed that they are expected to make sound judgements on what information should be delivered by assessing the situation and the needs of faculty members. In addition to filtering information between the two layers, middle managers also identify their role in stabilizing the local unit by monitoring the needs of the people and providing emotional support or guidance as leaders.

1c. Facilitating communication flow. According to the interview data, middle managers also facilitate organizational communication flow. Manager 4 stated, “There are different expectations from different levels. So, my role is more of a facilitator. That requires a certain skillset of being a good ambassador, a good diplomatic type of negotiator.” Manager 3 explained middle managers’ responsibilities in communication as follows:

So, you need to smooth it out. You need to extend the communication skills in a way that instead of quoting somebody, think about why the direction, why that initiative, or why that order has to come down. . . . Then, you try to work with people, communicate, and do your best that we see the essence of it, instead of emotionally involved with the complaining. . . . your boss, or a situation. But, really try to see what's the essence of the task that we need to do. That's actually the most exhausting part.
Middle managers’ knowledge on local personnel appears to enable them to communicate effectively downward and upward. Manager 3 stated:

I need to work with our [first-line] supervisors and other teachers so that it can work more smoothly. I think that's actually a very important role, knowing the personnel in the organization, and knowing everybody's role, so you can execute the plans as smoothly as possible.

The value of senior leaders’ view was also mentioned because “senior leadership has a different perspective than middle managers because they see the bigger picture” (Manager 1). Manager 5 described the process of connecting faculty with the senior level by inviting senior leaders to various occasions, such as observation or award recognition of faculty. Overall, the comments from interviews supported middle managers’ perspectives in viewing their roles as facilitators in organizational vertical communication.

The interviews from six managers confirm their perceptions of existing gaps in expectations between senior level leadership and faculty members. The data also support the perceived roles of middle managers in filling the gaps as communication facilitators, diplomatic negotiators, smart messengers, and emotional supporters between the two layers. While recognizing the need for understanding the political and strategic aspects of organizational management, middle managers demonstrate a high level of awareness of the need for communication skills and people skills. The next theme explores how they view their roles as influencers in the organization.

**Theme 2: Middle Managers as Influencers of People**

Being positioned in the middle of organizational hierarchy, middle managers work as influencers of the people above and below. Interview participants agreed that influencing people
involves more than titles or positions of authority. The following sub-themes uncovered how they orient themselves as influencers in an organization.

2a. Organizational knowledge and experience. The data suggest that middle managers have a high level of expectation of themselves as seasoned managers, educators, and local experts with extensive organizational knowledge. The six managers expressed that many things that they have learned as managers are from their hands-on experiences within the local units. Their comments also validate the importance of organizational experience in navigating complex situations. Manager 3 shared the insight:

I think a lot of wisdom comes with the experience. You learn from your experience and try not to make the same mistakes. This position is very dynamic. You will learn a lot about yourself, as much as other supervisory positions because you cannot learn these things from the book.

Structurally, middle managers are often in the position to connect the macro-level institutional requirements, which often come from external sources, to the micro-level local capability, which requires the knowledge of certain organizational requirements, processes, and functions. For example, Manager 1 and Manager 4 explicitly made remarks regarding the need to have an understanding beyond the local level, especially the role of the military component which is unique at this research site.

It's a military-civilian equation that we need to deal with. So, it's important to understand the role of both the military and the civilians. – Manager 1

There are expectations that go beyond just the everyday management of the program. Because we know we're meeting, in many ways, a greater army and DoD mission beyond
just our teaching. This is not a university and we have to keep telling ourselves that. – Manager 4

In a hierarchical organization, organizational knowledge also involves knowing one’s boundaries. Middle managers seem to be keenly aware of their positions and orient themselves accordingly. Manager 6 described:

The most productive times have been when I've been able to kind of tune out the noise and just work with the people here that I work with, in my immediate vicinity. And that has been very rewarding. I don't find myself to be particularly influential up the chain . . . . I need to be in lockstep with people above me, even if I disagree, I need to put my game face on and take ownership of a decision. That, at times, has been very very challenging, although I do my best to do that.

The interview data indicate that middle managers think they should have the knowledge about the people as well as the ability to assign the right people to the right positions in order to maximize local capability. Manager 2 stated:

I think someone who has the mindset and ability to use the best people he can find. The best of people is not necessarily someone who's the best teacher. The ability to use the right people is more important than the manager knows everything about the program.

All interview participants were seasoned managers and were extremely familiar with the organizational context at the research site, with between 12 to 25 years of service at the institute. Their comments revealed that navigating a hierarchical organization entails not only technical knowledge as academic leaders or local managers but also awareness of the external environments which affect the reality of the local community. The comments also illustrated that as middle managers, the participants value the ability to connect various requirements from
the stakeholders or the senior leaders to the local capability, which involves identifying the right
people for the right positions. Besides the knowledge of organizational requirements and the
skillsets of people in the local community, interview comments confirmed middle managers’
awareness of the limitations of their own influence. Middle managers navigate organizational
hierarchy by constantly re-defining their boundaries as local leaders.

2b. Downward and upward management. Being in-between the two layers of an
organization, middle managers have to manage both layers. The comments of interview
participants revealed that successful upward management or influencing senior-level leaders
requires building trust through positive downward management. Manager 2 stated the
challenges:

The middle management faces really some unique challenges. You have to manage down
and manage up. Of course, if you want to manage people above you, you cannot manage
them with power because you don't have much power compared to the power they have.
So, you have to manage with influence . . . . whether you can successfully manage up
depends very much on how successfully you can manage down.

The perception of managers also shows that successful downward management requires
technical knowledge, mentoring skills, and most importantly, winning the trust of faculty
members not as their supervisor, but as someone who is a credible, sincere, and trustworthy
leader.

Manager 2 continued:

You cannot just rely entirely on your position of power. If you just manage it because
you just have the power, you're not going to win the trust or the support of the people, the
sincere support from people. People can take orders from you, but they will not see you as their leader. They just see you as their boss.

Successful downward management involves working closely with first-line supervisors in the local units in understanding what is really happening at the level of faculty. Manager 6 explained the value of first-line supervisors:

- I have to, from time to time, give them direction. But they have to give me direction, too.
- They, again, they're in the trenches. Just like I'm indispensable to my chain, they're indispensable to me. So, I try not to treat them as underlings.

Middle managers are also able to see the information flow which affects power dynamics in organizations by shifting their perspectives when needed. Manager 5 described the position of middle management using an hourglass as a metaphor:

- The hourglass is flexibility. When the sand trickles all down within a given time, then middle managers should be able to flip it, like information flow. And it's also the position. You don't consider faculty always top-down . . . at the bottom or at the receiving end. A lot of times you flip it. Then, you put the upper management under.

The perception of interview participants shed light on the unique and challenging situations of middle managers in a hierarchical government organization. The participants’ comments show that managing from the middle requires not only technical knowledge and local experience but also the ability to win the trust of both layers in an organization. Middle managers at the research site are positioned several layers above regular faculty members. Despite their seemingly apparent power as local leaders, the participants expressed the limitations and challenges of their positions for successful upward or downward management. Their comments confirm the complexity of the middle-level position that deals with upward and downward
management in a hierarchical organization. The interview participants demonstrated a high level of awareness for the need to produce positive organizational outputs while supporting first-line supervisors and faculty members in a community that shares the same reality. The data indicate that middle managers strive to gain credibility and trust from both senior leaders and faculty members, which, from their perspectives, enables them to serve as influencers between the two layers.

**Theme 3: Middle Managers as Balancing Wheels of Organizations**

The findings from interviews suggest that middle managers perceive themselves as being part of the balancing mechanism of an organization. They pay close attention to the well-being of the local community and maintain the optimal balance needed in specific situations. Middle managers who were interviewed expressed their roles as local leaders and managers. In particular, when external requirements bring sudden changes into the community, the data indicate that middle managers are the ones who are expected to monitor the balance of tasks and relationships at the local level.

**3a. Balancing efficiency and effectiveness.** All interviewees mentioned their roles in leading their faculty. Their comments show that they wish to see more faculty-initiated innovations to promote positive changes, even though such initiatives may take longer because it involves consensus building. Manager 1 stated the following about faculty involvement in facilitating collective growth:

In order to move forward, in order to grow, you need to change the way you do business, or look at different approaches to doing business. Giving them the ability to interject new ways of doing business, too, is a great help. And they're the ones doing the work. They know better than any of us how best to improve the process.
The importance of ownership was mentioned by Manager 6 as “buy-in” of faculty members when the program started a new initiative. Manager 3 also described the notion of ownership:

So, you have to take time to explain what it is, and then have enough buy-in from the people, so they own it. I exhaust a lot of energy and time to develop the buy-in in the initial stage, but once the project is out, then they own it because it’s their project.

The challenge in a hierarchical and output-driven organization such as the research site is that middle managers are expected to be efficient managers while leading their assigned groups. Participants’ comments revealed their dilemma in balancing “doing things right” as managers and “doing the right things” as leaders (Drucker, 1974, p. 45). Manager 2 explained the challenge:

You manage the present and look in the future. For example, military puts lots of emphasis on organization efficiency. That means you have to do things fast. Democracy is not the most efficient political system, but democracy is probably more effective. Efficiency means you do the amount of work in the shortest time with the least effort with the least cost. Effectiveness means probably it takes longer, but I'm looking long-term. I'm not saying they should be necessarily mutually exclusive, but to marry these two pieces together is not easy…… As more of a leader than a manager, you have to lead the whole group forward and to look into the future and prepare the people for what will happen three years down the road, five years down the road, ten years down the road.

Middle managers in a hierarchical organization are aware of the institutional expectation of being efficient managers who produce the expected results quickly. The data suggest that these managers recognize the challenge in balancing efficient management and effective leadership. As local leaders, middle managers seem to find faculty engagement important in promoting long-
term outcomes and therefore, they are willing to allow faculty to take as many initiatives as possible even if the process may take more time.

3b. Balancing tasks and people. The second sub-theme involves balancing the tasks and relationships among people in the specific context, which is unique to each local unit. The site of this study is a highly outcome-driven government organization with military influence. In such an environment, middle managers often find themselves juggling between the tasks and relationships on regular bases. As mentioned in previous sections, managers have a high level of awareness of the expectations from the senior level. The participants acknowledged that senior leaders are looking for efficiency with quick results. Middle managers, therefore, try to serve as efficient managers who support organizational goals. All participants, however, indicated that managerial skills alone would not enable middle managers to accomplish tasks, because managers need people skills to effectively communicate with people and win their trust.

Manager 1 stated:

I just think you need to be aware of the needs of the people and also the needs of the mission. And be able to balance those two out. Sometimes, people come first. Sometimes, the mission comes first. But the bottom line is, mission always needs to happen.

Several elements were mentioned in relation to building relationships with people, such as paying attention to individual needs (Manager 1), listening to different voices (Manager 3, 4), willingness to work with all people (Manager 3), patience (Manager 3), and listening to people with appreciation (Manager 2). The participants pointed out that they value building relationships with people above and below them. They try to build connections with local
faculty, not necessarily as their supervisors but as caring individuals who work in the same community. Manager 2 stated:

> When I communicate with my faculty members, I don't talk to them only when I'm in crisis. I would talk to them when there is no issue. So, we can build up some friendly professional relationship. It's very much like you save the money in the bank. . . . You talk to people. I don't want people to think, when the boss comes to see me, it will be a bad thing.

The value of personal connection to building relationships came up multiple times.

> I think it's very important for me not to stay at my desk eight hours a day. I also have to talk to people . . . . It's not always good, but I think people appreciate that. – Manager 1

> I visit everybody's office and try to have a one-on-one, eye-to-eye conversation. During that time, there are a lot of sharing, personal story sharing . . . . My point is that the good stories or bad stories that my teachers are willing to share when I drop in their office, it's just a very humbling experience. – Manager 3

> I have that personal time that I'm able to sit down with them all and let them tell me how things are going, what their concerns are, how their classes are. – Manager 4

> I think when you talk to someone in person instead of email, you give them assurance, a confirmation that you care, you didn't drop this, you didn't take this light-heartedly. – Manager 5

> I really do believe that all work and no play will lead to burnout, and I really worry about it. – Manager 6

Besides building personal connections, the interview data also confirm that middle managers monitor organizational well-being through various means such as faculty inquiries, informal
input, and the nature of complaints. Manager 2 explained, “Actually, I would like to sample the complaints because the nature of the complaints would tell you if the program is doing well.”

The data suggest that middle level managers balance between the tasks and relationships. They strive to fulfill organizational requirements as managers while building collegial relationships within the community. Through face-to-face communication or other means such as input from faculty, middle managers assess the well-being of the local community to which they belong. When they see the need to make an adjustment in the local community, middle managers may initiate contextually appropriate events or opportunities, such as informal chatting (Manager 2), office visits (Manager 3) or an offsite event (Manager 6) in order to align the balance of the community.

Theme 4: Middle Managers as Generators of Collective Efficacy

The interview comments suggest that as leaders, middle managers sought to generate collective efficacy of the local units in achieving their organizational goals. In social cognitive theory, perceived collective efficacy is defined as “a group's shared belief in its conjoint capability to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given levels of attainment" (Bandura, 1997, p. 477). As discussed under Theme 1, the position of middle management involves dealing with organizational gaps between the senior leader level and the faculty level. The data indicate that middle managers consciously translate the vision of senior leadership or filter the information from the top before sending appropriate signals to the faculty. In reality, their efforts go beyond sending translated messages to the faculty. Based on the interviews, middle managers are aware that they play key roles in cheerleading the collective energy in the local community. The following section discusses two sub-themes that emerged in
relation to middle managers’ roles in generating collective efficacy: 4a) facilitating teamwork and 4b) leading by examples through high standards of ethics.

4a. Facilitating teamwork. Middle managers are in optimal positions to facilitate local teamwork. As local leaders, they can identify local talent and expertise, form teams, and provide support and guidance by energizing the teams while demonstrating an understanding of the shared sense of reality. The data illustrate how they share their own vision with the faculty by sending future-oriented messages and lead the group to move forward. Manager 2 commented:

I also have to play the role of a leader. As I said, we should look forward and say, "Right now, we're not there. See, this is the goal. We have to think about this. Right now, there are gaps.” Then, as a leader, I would tell the people I supervise, "We have to improve ourselves. We have to move forward. This is my vision."

When facilitating teamwork, the participants position themselves as leaders in the local community who have knowledge about the people, and about the tasks they need to accomplish. The findings suggest that middle managers pay close attention to both the processes and products of teamwork in their local community. They use their knowledge about the people in the community to form effective teams to start new initiatives or accomplish specific tasks collectively (Manager 5). The data also show that middle managers feel satisfied when they support teamwork by using various opportunities to build a collective sense of community. For example, they facilitate the ownership of teamwork by articulating various team accomplishments and celebrating their wins at the local level (Manager 3). The sense of ownership and unity in the local community seems to provide middle managers with perceived collective efficacy as the positive outcome of teamwork. Manager 6 described one of the recent events:
It was kind of an offsite . . . , and they were working, working, working. And I just kind of sat at the back of the room and felt my whole body just sort of relax because I was just watching them being so smart. And I thought, "This is lovely. They don't need me at all." That was very satisfying . . . . It was great for them. And everybody just really seemed to be on board, and I thought, “This stuff is as important in its way." They need to feel united in this general enterprise. And to me, that kind of stuff has been very telling.

The above scene reveals how Manager 6 interpreted the observation of an offsite event as evidence of a critical teambuilding process which facilitates the sense of ownership and shared belief that leads to collective efficacy.

4b. Leading by example through high standards of ethics. Another interesting finding is that all interviewees expressed a strong sense of self-concept and self-efficacy, which can be understood as part of the principles for leading by example. The comments from interviews indicate that middle managers have a high level of self-efficacy which is supported by solid ethical standards. While recognizing the need for political savviness, the interviewees expressed that they “have to remain genuine to yourself” (Manager 5) and try to be “authentic” (Manager 3) and “honest” (Manager 6). Manager 2 articulated that it is important to be “a good person, honest, and someone who’s not playing the game under the table”. These self-concepts are related to morals and high self-efficacy. The excerpts below also indicate the personal conviction and selfless loyalty of middle managers.

I would like to leave this organization a better place than when I came here. I mean, that's my ultimate goal. – Manager 1

You have to have the loyalty to the mission, to what you do. Only with a good heart, you can contribute. You cannot, if you always have hidden agenda. – Manager 5
I don't doubt for one minute the effort that goes into this . . . And those teachers, every single one of them has to know how much I respect what they do, and that I admire them. I think people work so hard and get so sweaty and tired that they forget about that, and they need somebody to remind them of how important they are. – Manager 6

The participants also explained what they expect of themselves as individuals. They used various words such as integrity, empathy, trust, loyalty, and morale to describe their personal value as middle managers. Manager 2 explained:

If people don't see you as a person with integrity, with high moral standards, with high professionalism, how can people trust you? How can you go and convince people if you yourself behave unprofessionally? People won't trust you if you're not a decent person. You can talk great theories about leadership, but if you don't impress people with your personality, with the decency that you have as a human being, then no matter how much you talk about people, they won't trust you. Lead by example. You are supposed to be a good person.

The sub-theme of leading by example was exemplified through a variety of self-concepts mentioned in the interviews, such as professional, sincere, trustworthy, and authentic leaders. These self-concepts uncovered middle managers’ high standards of ethics and expectations of themselves.

Although these managers have supervisory authority in the local community, they choose to position themselves as supporters for the community. The data showed that they have strong self-concepts as role models in the local divisions. Instead of looking at the faculty from the top-down perspective, they view the local community from the horizontal perspective, trying to generate the shared belief among the local community as part of the team. Middle managers
may serve as cheerleaders to start new initiatives, but the interview comments indicate that they prefer eventually stepping back. They find the experience of leading the team from behind rewarding and meaningful for establishing ownership among faculty.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the findings from six semi-structured interviews with middle managers at the research site. The narrative accounts from the participants’ stories provided rich insights and unique perspectives into middle managers. The findings of the interviews revealed how the participants as middle managers understand their positions and orient themselves between top leaders and faculty members at a hierarchical government organization. Four emergent themes and nine sub-themes were identified through an in-depth analysis of the interview comments. First, middle managers view themselves as mediators of organizational expectations by filling the gaps between senior leaders and faculty. Second, they serve as influencers of the people in their vicinity through upward and downward management. Third, they are also part of the organizational balancing mechanism. Fourth, as local leaders, middle managers generate collective efficacy by facilitating teamwork and holding high ethical standards. The next chapter will discuss the interpretations of the findings in relation to the theoretical framework and the literature review, followed by the implications of these findings.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This chapter offers discussions based on the data drawn from semi-structured interviews and presents implications for the field of middle management. First, it provides an overview of the research followed by discussions of four key themes in relation to the theoretical framework and the literature review. Next, it presents the implications for practice and the recommendations for managerial practice in government organizations. Finally, the chapter discusses the limitations of the study and offers recommendations for future research and conclusions.

Overview of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate how Deans and Directors as middle managers at a highly-structured government training institute make sense of their positions between senior leaders and faculty members. The roles of middle managers in modern organizations have been elevated beyond management of routine operations and administrative work. They support various organizational activities as local leaders, knowledge experts, and mentors for employees. Despite their critical functions, their perceptions and lived experiences are understudied in the current organizational literature. Scholars confirmed that there is a lack of studies regarding the perceptions and lived experiences of managers in public sectors (Chen et al., 2017; Pick & Teo, 2017; Currie, 2000).

The researcher used the framework of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore how middle managers make sense of their positions through their lived experiences. IPA is an approach which emphasizes both phenomenological and hermeneutic insights with idiographic sensibility (Smith, et al., 2009). This study was guided by the central question: How do Deans and Directors at a highly-structured, educational, government institute make sense of
their positions as middle managers between senior leaders and faculty members? The researcher conducted face-to-face semi-structured interviews with six middle managers at the research site. The interviews were recorded and lasted approximately 60-75 minutes. Each interview was then transcribed and later reviewed by the interviewee to ensure accuracy and completeness. The researcher also created a contact summary form immediately after the interview, to keep detailed records of the initial observations and reflections of each interview.

Overall, the researcher followed the six steps of the general IPA process recommended by Smith et al. (2009). These steps were:

1. Reading and re-reading of transcripts,
2. Initial noting,
3. Developing emergent themes,
4. Searching for connections across emergent themes,
5. Moving to the next case, and
6. Looking for patterns across cases.

During the coding process, NVivo 12, a qualitative data-analysis software was used. The coding process consisted of two phases: The first phase was In Vivo coding where the researcher studied the transcripts of interviews line by line, identified key statements, and took initial exploratory notes of each interview. The second phase focused on interpreting the meanings of the statements, finding the patterns across the six interviews, and re-grouping the themes into emerging categories. To establish trustworthiness of the research, the researcher kept analytic memos throughout the study while juxtaposing various data points such as interview transcripts, contact summaries, and various notes from the coding process.
The study employed Weick’s sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995) as its theoretical framework. Sensemaking is a social process which allows the organizational members to collectively identify a direction in which to move forward through actions and interpretations (Weick, 1995). Because sensemaking is on-going, it allows people to be more responsive and open to changes. The flexibility of sensemaking supports the dynamic and fluid nature of modern organizational contexts where middle managers continuously align their positions between senior leaders and the members of local units. Sensemaking fosters active interactions among people, which supports collective transformational processes rather than a one-way transmission of knowledge. Through sensemaking, people shape on-going experiences collectively and identify the next steps. Weick (1995) provided seven properties of sense making: (a) grounded in identity construction, (b) retrospective, (c) enactive of sensible environments, (d) social, (e) on-going, (f) focused on and by extracted cues, and (g) driven by plausibility rather than accuracy. These properties were embedded in the interview questions.

**Discussions and Interpretations of Major Themes from This Study**

The purpose of this study was to uncover how middle managers at a highly-structured government organization make sense of their positions and orient themselves between senior leaders and faculty. The interviews with six middle managers provided rich insight into their perspectives and experiences of being between these two layers at the research site. The participants spoke in very practical and personal terms without any theoretical justifications. Their stories offered first-person narratives from their everyday experiences as middle managers. Through in-depth analysis and interpretations of interview data, the researcher identified four emerging themes about how the participants orient themselves between senior leadership and faculty members. They are: (a) middle managers as mediators of expectations, (b) middle
managers as influencers of people, (c) middle managers as balancing wheels of organizations, and (d) middle managers as generators of collective efficacy. The section below provides interpretations of these four themes starting with the summary of findings, then continues to a discussion in relation to the theoretical framework, and ends with the discussions of findings in relation to the literature.

**Figure 2.** Summary of key themes

**Theme 1: Middle Managers as Mediators of Expectations**

All six participants acknowledged the noticeable gaps in expectations between the level of senior leadership and that of faculty members. The data indicated that middle managers in hierarchical organizations see themselves bridging the gaps in expectations between the two layers by navigating complex organizational contexts. The data also revealed that there are at least three major processes that middle managers use to bridge the gaps. First, middle managers tailor messages upward and downward to make them more understandable and acceptable to the audience. This process often entails interpreting and re-packing the messages as smart messengers (Manager 6). Second, they also filter information depending on the strategic and political aspects of the information (Manager 1). The participants commented on the need to be “politically astute” (Manager 1) and be “able to read people and situations” (Manager 4). Third, they also facilitate the communication flow in the organization by being diplomatic negotiators.
who link the two layers. Middle managers hope to connect the local faculty to the senior leadership through a variety of means, such as inviting the senior leaders to local events (Manager 5) or informing senior leadership on local practices (Manager 6). However, they find it difficult to link the two layers directly, because senior managers and faculty members deal with different organizational realities. When bridging organizational gaps, middle managers use their well-versed knowledge and connections in the community to serve as mediators between senior leadership and faculty.

**Theme 1 in relation to theoretical framework.** The interview participants demonstrated a strong sense of identity and self-concept as middle-level managers in a hierarchical organization who serve as mediators between senior leadership and local units (i.e., *grounded in identity construction*). They function as “connectors” of different levels (Manager 2) and “smart messengers” (Manager 6) who carefully fill organizational gaps. Being in-between the top and bottom levels, middle managers are equipped with organizational knowledge as well as subtle symbolic meanings that are embedded in local contexts. Mediating the differences between two vertical layers requires articulating self-concept through intricate sensemaking practices based on their past experiences (i.e., *retrospective*).

Sensemaking involves identifying salient and nuanced points in specific contexts (Weick, 1995). While mediating the different levels of people in an organization, middle managers continuously think about how others would respond in a particular situation and shape their actions accordingly (i.e., *on-going, focused on and by extracted cues, enactive of sensible environments*). Middle managers in a hierarchical organization believe that they should be able to “read the people and the situations” (Manager 4) and stay “politically astute” (Manager 1).
This means that their enactment of tasks involves a process of personal checking and adjustment of their actions between senior leaders and the local units.

Furthermore, middle managers in a hierarchical organization are quite aware of the social influence in the given context. That is, in a government organization, there are many formal protocols and standard procedures to follow. The findings, however, confirmed that middle managers’ mediation work actually goes beyond overseeing the codified procedures and regulations. Middle managers in such a context use personal interactions and careful observations in various contexts to assess the well-being of local members and the organizational climate (i.e., social, focused on and by extracted cues). They monitor what should be communicated and how the information should be delivered to each layer. While serving as gatekeepers of information, they pay close attention to people’s stories and emotions which directly or indirectly illustrate the realities people face. Manager 2 stated that the nature of complaints and disagreements often reveals the real situation of the local community. Middle managers believe that they are expected to find cues from various intricate signals embedded in formal and informal communications and messages (i.e., focused on and by extracted cues). This finding indicates that middle managers in hierarchical organizations mediate the organizational gaps by reading subtle signals among people and humanize the contexts as their middle-level authority permits.

Middle managers’ mediation activities also require constant enactment of plausible actions (i.e., driven by plausibility). As mediators in a hierarchical government organization, middle managers determine the optimal next steps, based on what is expected from the top and what is plausible in the given contexts. They find “the wiggle room” (Manager 3) in challenging situations, gain trust from “most of the people” (Manager 2), do their best to capture different
voices (Manager 3), and accept that you do not expect “to win every battle” (Manager 1). The findings from this study showed that middle managers in a government organization are very realistic, practical, and aware of the limitations and challenges they face while facilitating the communication flow and bridging the gaps between different layers. Their perceptions as mediators are strongly tied to their middle-level identity in a hierarchical organization, which serves as the foundation of their sensemaking work.

**Theme 1 in relation to literature.** As middle managers, the voices of the participants revealed that it is inevitable to face contradictions or gaps between senior leadership and local employees. Literature supports that one of the major challenges middle managers encounter is the disconnect and paradoxical expectations among different groups (Armstrong & Woloshyn, 2017; Berdrow, 2010; Barley & Kunda 1992; Schwandt, 2005; Rouleau, 2005; Vail, 1996). The interviews confirmed that the expectations of senior leaders often focus on the future, even when the people in local units are dealing with different realities. Middle managers in hierarchical organizations deal with more challenges with differing values compared to those in less hierarchical organizations, because the structural distance between the top and bottom levels is greater than that of a flat organization (Light, 1999; Chen et al., 2017). The participants of this study stated that senior leaders usually focus on the futuristic vision (i.e., where the organization should be) while members of the local community deal with their own realities (i.e., where the organization actually is). As effective mediators and local leaders, middle managers try to “smooth it out” (Manager 3) to minimize the discrepancies and deliver positive messages to local members (Manager 2, 6). That is, middle managers’ mediating work entails translating the vision of senior leadership into the language that can be understood by local members as evidenced in literature (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1997; Huy, 2001; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2016).
While serving as organizational mediators, the work of middle managers involves a high level of complexity. For example, literature points out that the frameworks of sensemaking (i.e., immediacy of meaning making) and transformative learning (i.e., reflective and mindful practice) sometimes contradict each other although they co-exist in today’s organizations (Schwandt, 2005). This type of contradiction was also present in middle managers’ comments as challenges associated with balancing efficiency and effectiveness (Manager 2). Managerial practices involve reflexivity to support unpredictable events efficiently. On the other hand, managers reflect on their own practices and go through constant re-appraisals to make transformative changes in their own knowledge, skills, and attitudes. The importance of buy-in and ownership was mentioned by multiple participants (Manager 2, 3, 5, 6). However, they also acknowledged that building trust and ownership among local members takes time, which they may not have because middle managers in government organizations are often expected to manage resources efficiently and produce positive outcomes quickly. This study verified that middle managers in a hierarchical organization live in complex realities where they have to balance reflexive managerial practices and reflective leadership practices.

As mediators of an organization, middle managers play a key role in interpreting messages from different directions and sending tailored signals to different people (Hope, 2010). While serving as mediators and “smart messengers” (Manager 6), middle managers monitor both the content and the processes of communication and support the communication flow of the organization. The findings from this study provided insight regarding how middle managers bridge various organizational gaps by identifying practical and contextually appropriate next steps. As Lüscher & Lewis (2008) mentioned, middle managers translate the directives from the top into “a workable certainty” for the local members (p. 221). This means that middle managers
in a government organization are always “in the process of sensemaking” (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008, p. 230). Literature states that middle managers in public sectors provide contextually appropriate information which enables local members to better understand the external environment (Richards & Duxbury, 2014, Burgess & Currie, 2013). The findings confirmed that middle managers translate the needs of local members to senior leaders to make organizational activities more meaningful (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Floyd & Wooldridge, 2000; Huy, 2001, 2002; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Rouleau, 2005).

The interview results uncovered the roles of middle managers in minimizing the gap between the two layers as mediators. Manager 2 used the term “cement” as a metaphor to describe middle management that connects the top and bottom layers. In fact, middle managers’ mediation work involves continuous sensemaking as liaisons and connectors of organizations. Instead of blindly forwarding the messages upward or downward, middle managers as mediators carefully screen and tailor information to make it more palatable for each layer. Experienced middle managers serve as connectors and gatekeepers of organizational communication.

Theme 2: Middle Managers as Influencers of People

Being in the middle of a hierarchy as managers and leaders, the participants of this study displayed a high level of awareness regarding their influence and boundaries in the organization. They demonstrated profound understanding of the limitations of their authority as middle-level managers in a hierarchical government institute. At the same time, they identified themselves as local leaders and ethical mentors who understand the specific local contexts. Furthermore, the participants mentioned explicitly the importance of practical organizational knowledge and experience, such as knowing the right people for the right tasks in order to have a positive
influence on local-level changes. That is, middle managers value context-related knowledge and job-specific experiences.

Organizational knowledge and job-specific experience support middle managers in strategizing their approaches to maximize their influence on upward and downward management. The interview comments showed that middle managers use trust from both layers as a key source of influence. The participants approach the notion of trust differently depending on the audience. For upward management, middle managers are very aware of the limitation of their power within the organizational hierarchy. That said, middle managers who work in an outcome-focused organization with a rigid hierarchical system also understand that their success in upward influence depends on the outcomes in downward management. They stated that they need to prove their capability to gain trust from senior leadership by successfully managing local units and producing quantifiable positive outcomes. To win trust from the faculty, middle managers prefer using their influence as ethical leaders with high moral standards instead of using their authority as local supervisors.

Gaining trust concurrently from these two layers is a challenging task for middle managers. Senior leaders expect improvement at the program level, which is evidenced by observable outputs to achieve macro-level institutional goals. On the other hand, middle managers see the need for supporting more nuanced micro-level local initiatives, which may not immediately lead to a quantifiable success. Working between the senior leadership and the faculty in an organization, middle managers determine the needs and expectations of the people above and below. To gain trust from both levels, middle managers adopt different means and approaches that are appropriate for each level, and therefore, serve as influencers for both layers.
This also confirms that middle managers’ experiences are socially embedded in both macro-level and micro-level organizational phenomena.

**Theme 2 in relation to theoretical framework.** Middle managers hold a unique identity as influencers of people in a hierarchical organization (i.e., *grounded in identity construction*). Being positioned between two vertical layers, they are very conscientious about how others perceive them. They make sense of their positions through on-going reciprocal identity work based on how they are viewed by different members of the organization.

As influencers, middle managers value on-the-job practical skills accumulated through organizational knowledge and prior experiences (i.e., *retrospective*). Their retrospective understandings shape their current values and self-concepts to serve as influencers, which enable them to find cues in social contexts (i.e., *social, focused on and by extracted cues*). The participants, as seasoned middle managers, revealed that there are “many things that one cannot learn from a book” (Manager 3). Middle managers often look back and make references to their experiences in order to shape their present (Manager 2, 4, 5) as they “try not to make the same mistakes” (Manager 3). This means that middle managers’ past experiences and reflections enable them to make better sense of their present actions. Middle management is, therefore, a dynamic process in finding the most optimal next step based on one’s experiences (i.e., *driven by plausibility, retrospective*).

Influencing different levels of people in a hierarchical organization requires sensible and practical approaches which must be enacted through on-going sensemaking processes (i.e., *ongoing, enactive of sensible environment*). The importance of trust was mentioned as a critical factor to positively influence people. Middle managers are aware that building trust in a hierarchical context takes on-going efforts and varying approaches depending on the audience.
The participants find successful downward management essential to gain senior leaders’ trust. Middle managers also prefer practicing downward management as a member of the local community. Despite their authority as local administrators and supervisors, middle managers strive to establish genuine trust with faculty members through humanistic approaches using informal talks, face-to-face meetings, and active listening rather than practicing authority as “bosses” (Manager 2). As organizational influencers, middle managers use subtle cues embedded in these approaches to make sense of the organizational climate and the people around them (i.e., social, focused on and by extracted cues). As influencers of people, middle managers’ sensemaking work is closely linked to all seven areas of theoretical framework.

**Theme 2 in relation to literature.** This study supports that activities of middle managers are bound to power dynamics and human influence. Their notion of power and influence was mentioned in terms of how middle managers position themselves and how they communicate with others in the organization. As Manager 2 stated, middle managers find managing by influence more effective than managing by power. They focus on slightly different approaches to build trust with people at different levels in a hierarchical organization. To gain trust from top leaders, they pay close attention to successful downward management and operational efficiency as effective managers. For downward management, middle managers focus more on their capacity as ethical and supportive leaders by investing their efforts in building human connections. This finding provides a unique insight into a hierarchical organization where human dynamics and people’s affective needs must be satisfied in spite of apparent institutional pressure and organizational rigidity.

In a hierarchical government organization, the gap between macro-level expectations and micro-level activities is quite significant. Middle managers create a shared sense of meaning
through bottom-up changes (Kezar, 2013). They live in the heart of fluid reality where macro and micro perspectives collide. The findings from this study suggest that middle managers in hierarchical organizations make sense of their positions and everyday activities through dynamic social interactions (i.e., sensemaking). As organizational mediators, influencers, balancing wheels, and efficacy generators, middle managers send salient signals to other members (i.e., sensegiving). As local leaders, they actively support the development of organizational cultures by embedding their beliefs, values, and assumptions in various organizational activities such as allocating specific resources, forming project teams, showing deliberate reactions to incidents, and role modeling (Schein, 2010). The findings support that middle managers’ sensemaking and sensegiving processes are embedded in fluid organizational realities where they navigate the complex organizational environment. Their on-going sensemaking and sensegiving activities cultivate organizational culture and have significant influence on collective sensemaking.

To gain positive upward influence, middle managers believe that they need enough credibility evidenced by successful downward management. To manage downward, middle managers continue to focus on building collective efficacy in their local units. Instead of exercising their power as local administrators, middle managers connect themselves to the first-line supervisors and faculty members as caring and trustworthy leaders who understand their realities. Literature associates the relevance of sensemaking to the notion of collectiveness or shared meanings. For example, Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010) stated that sensemaking in crises has individual, collective, and institutional influences. Tsoukas and Chia (2002) suggested that managers need to see what is going on and help people construct shared meanings. Overall, middle managers as influencers of the organization make sense of their positions through continuous assessment of human dynamics.
Theme 3: Middle Managers as Galancing Wheels of Organizations

In general, many government and military organizations have multiple standard operational procedures embedded in complex vertical layers which often require technical knowledge, specific skills, and relevant experiences. For these reasons, it is difficult for top leaders in a hierarchical organization to monitor the details of local operations or the subtle messages which indicate the well-being of organizational members. Middle managers in a government organization find themselves working as balancing wheels “in a big enterprise” (Manager 6). As explained in Theme 1, they bridge the gaps by serving as mediators and tailoring messages to make them more palatable for the audience. At the same time, they value faculty buy-in to promote successful changes (Manager 2, 3, 6). They are also aware that getting faculty buy-in sometimes takes time and may not be the most efficient way from the perspectives of senior leadership (Manager 2, 3).

The interview data support that seasoned middle managers are aware of institutional requirements which usually call for a high level of efficiency to reach organizational goals. As mentioned by the interview participants, the expectations of senior leadership may not reflect the current status of local units. Drucker (1974) presented that efficiency is concerned with “doing things right” while effectiveness is “doing the right things” (Drucker, 1974, p. 45). The findings suggest that middle managers in government organizations experience a continuous dilemma searching for the optimal balance in the continuum of effectiveness and efficiency. The senior leadership in government organizations typically looks for organizational efficiency and timely positive outcomes in middle management. While demonstrating efficient managerial skills as expected by senior leaders, middle managers must effectively lead local units and win the trust of the people.
Being the balancing wheels of organizations, middle managers adjust the focus between organizational tasks and relationships with and among people, determining what is important at the time of need. This process necessitates applying extensive organizational knowledge and building solid relationships with the people around them. The importance of building relationships with local members was one of the key elements mentioned by all six interviewees. Middle managers value face-to-face interactions to monitor the well-being of the program through a variety of means such as the nature of complaints (Manager 2), office visits (Manager 3), listening to different voices (Manager 2, 3) and team-building events (Manager 6). Middle management is a social phenomenon which is deeply embedded in organizational contexts.

**Theme 3 in relation to theoretical framework.** Middle managers defuse differing values and expectations in complex organizational contexts. Their sensemaking is connected to their unique positions as organizational balancing wheels, the individuals who can make sense and neutralize varying expectations among people (i.e., *grounded in identity construction*). Extensive organizational knowledge and past experiences enable middle managers to make sense of their functions as balancing wheels in such a complex environment (i.e., *retrospective*).

Two of the most notable properties of sensemaking theory in relation to middle managers’ balancing acts are how they extract cues and how they enact their environments (i.e. *focused on and by extracted cues, enactive of sensible environments*). Middle managers serve as efficient managers who bring positive outcomes as well as effective leaders assigned to the local units. Middle managers’ enactment is the result of their balancing acts to make sense of the varying expectations from the people around them (i.e., *enactive of sensible environments*). They articulate short-term accomplishments in the programs as they guide the local community toward long-term goals by fine-tuning organizational tasks and relationships. In general, middle
managers find the optimal balance in various aspects of their managerial activities while monitoring the flow of plausible actions in the assigned programs (i.e., *enactive of sensible environments, driven by plausibility*). They support the development of symbolic meanings of local routines, artifacts, and events (i.e., *focused on and by extracted cues*).

Middle managers’ enactment processes influence the balance of organizational change and stability. They are involved in the knowledge sharing practices and innovations at the local level because they can identify the right people for the right tasks, align the process of teamwork, and send appropriate signals as local leaders throughout the process. The interview participants confirmed that they try to change challenging situations into learning opportunities and growth for local members while facilitating buy-in and ownership (Manager 5, 6) at the local level. Innovations and knowledge sharing often bring changes into an organization. Middle managers introduce the most optimal balance of change and stability to the local unit, based on their ongoing sensemaking processes of specific contexts.

Finally, middle managers see significant importance in building trust with the people in the organization (i.e., *social*) and make continuous efforts in building relationships through a variety of means with the people around them. They are fully aware that winning trust is more than being someone’s boss (Manager 2) who exercises power and authority. Middle managers carefully assess the well-being of organizations through subtle signals, such as people’s minor complaints and concerns displayed in the interactions within the local community. Their sensemaking, therefore, involves constant adjustments and fine-tuning of local activities.

**Theme 3 in relation to literature.** As balancing wheels of organizations, middle managers actively participate in creating a desirable environment for the community. This study shed light on how middle managers in a hierarchical organization find the optimal balance when
dealing with differing values and expectations. They face unique challenges because they are expected to satisfy varying expectations in the existing hierarchy and ensure smooth operations of the local units. For example, they must follow standard procedures and guidelines to ensure members’ accountability to all regulations as well as provide emotional support to build human relations in the local community. Interview data indicated the complexity of middle managers’ balancing acts in a hierarchical organization, requiring fine-tuning their focus between efficiency and effectiveness or tasks and relationships.

Scholars stated that sensemaking and sensegiving are closely connected to managerial and leadership practices in modern organizations (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Rouleau, 2005; Kezar, 2013). Literature also suggests that sensemaking and sensegiving processes are locally situated (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). The findings from this study confirm that middle managers’ balancing acts are tied to their sensemaking and sensegiving processes which are specific to the realities they live in. As balancing wheels of organizations, middle managers find the optimal balance in different values by making sense of the organizational realities. They provide nuanced signals (i.e., sensegiving) to indicate what is important in a given situation. They also attempt to understand the meaning in a given context instead of simply giving directions. These findings confirm that managing organizational changes as middle managers is about the “management of meaning” (Balogun & Johnson, 1998, p. 75) because balancing varying priorities in an organization requires constant adjustments in thoughts and actions through genuine sensemaking practices.

The interview data suggest that middle managers in hierarchical government organizations have notable challenges in dealing with strong institutional pressure while building genuine trust with the people around them. The power-infused pressure embedded in a
hierarchical organization shapes perceived expectations of senior leaders. Middle managers recognize the pressure from the top, which emphasizes the importance of ensuring positive outputs. Furthermore, seasoned middle managers recognize that senior leaders are also under pressure from external expectations. The notion of institutional influence has been studied by multiple scholars in relation to collectiveness and shared organizational norms. Suddaby et al. (2010) stated that organizations “are the product of common understandings and shared interpretations of acceptable norms of collective activity” (p. 1235). The findings confirmed the criticality of relational perspectives (Cunliffe, 2008) in middle management. Middle managers’ relational perspectives are both embedded in and shaped by socially and contextually grounded actions. As balancing wheels, middle managers develop organizational relationships by generating a sense of unity from the middle. They are aware of the importance of regularly assessing both what is being accomplished (i.e., tasks) and how they are accomplished (i.e., relationships) through their balancing acts.

The findings from this study support the view that managerial practices are relational and dialogic. Despite the inevitable institutional pressure, middle managers play critical roles in infusing local realities through dynamic interactions with the people around them. They diagnose organizational well-being by using a variety of unwritten information, such as informal communications, organizational routines, inputs from faculty members which include their complaints and feedback, and the values and assumptions of local members. Middle managers’ work involves interpreting people’s realities that are embedded in various symbolic forms which continue to re-shape collective realities through dynamic interactions. More than half a century ago, Berger and Luckmann (1966) presented that knowledge and facts are socially constructed. They argued that social realities and identities are created through interactions with others. The
findings from this study support their main premise that social realities and identities are created and maintained in dialogs with others rather than in organizational structures.

**Theme 4: Middle Managers as Generators of Collective Efficacy**

The final theme involves how middle managers construct their social space and lived experiences by looking both inward (i.e., self-concepts) and outward (i.e., collectiveness). The interview data illuminated how middle managers generate collective energy within their local units. The participants explained that they find fulfillment when they see their faculty members taking ownership of innovations as a cohesive team (Manager 5, 6). The concept of collective efficacy is also related to Theme 3, which discussed middle managers’ balancing role in supporting local buy-in. Seasoned middle managers are willing to step back and lead the community from behind (Manager 3, 5, 6) or position themselves to be part of the team when needed (Manager 1, 2, 4, 6).

The data confirmed middle managers’ capacity in monitoring the implicit nuances embedded in organizational culture, especially in the deeper levels of culture which Schein (2010) called “espoused beliefs and values” and “basic underlying assumptions” (p. 24). More specifically, the findings validated that the power of culture comes from the fact that “the assumptions are shared and therefore mutually reinforced” (Schein, 2010, p. 31) because underlying assumptions shape people’s behaviors, perceptions, thoughts, and emotions. By working at the deeper levels of organizational culture, middle managers find sensible and practical ways to generate a sense of collectiveness.

When facilitating teamwork in local units, middle managers also find it important to be role models for faculty members and to lead by example. The participants’ statements about themselves, such as remaining genuine to oneself (Manager 5), being authentic (Manager 3),
holding high ethical standards (Manager 2), leaving the place as a better place (Manager 1) confirmed their strong commitment to serve as ethical leaders. These comments are reflections of how they want to see themselves and how they want others to see them as trusted leaders. Middle managers orient themselves in relation to self and others in dynamic organizational contexts.

**Theme 4 in relation to theoretical framework.** Middle managers in a hierarchical organization play critical roles in generating collective efficacy, which involves their intricate sensemaking work in the context of a government organization. The findings support that middle managers value collectiveness and a sense of unity in the local community. They believe that it is important for the people in the community to “feel united” in the big enterprise (Manager 6). As generators of collective efficacy, they position themselves as part of the community and co-create the shared space, instead of telling people what to do as their supervisors.

To generate collective efficacy as moral leaders, middle managers practice the principle of leading by example. Their sensemaking processes as moral leaders are situated in their identity construction in the organization (i.e., *grounded in identity construction*). They make sense of their positions as leaders and managers, which involves identifying their fluid roles in the changing and often confusing environments between senior leaders and faculty. As Weick (1995) presented, the notion of identity is closely tied to the environment which surrounds the people. He explained that people learn about their identities by projecting them into the environment and observing the consequences. Exploring one’s identity requires looking into “what the situation means to the self” as sensemakers and “how they feel most appropriate to deal with the particular contexts” (Weick, 1995, p. 24). The data support that middle managers’
orientation as to who they are and what they do is influenced by their everyday dynamic interactions with people around them (i.e., *on-going*).

Middle managers’ sensemaking involves multi-directional activities because of their positions. To generate collective efficacy, they believe that communication with local members in non-crisis time is very important to assess organizational well-being (i.e., *social, focused on and by extracted cues*). Middle managers pay attention not only to the vertical management but also the horizontal connections in the local community through their experiences (i.e., *social, retrospective*). For example, Manager 6 sees the immediate subordinates as peers because of what they do in the program. Other participants also mentioned the importance of building relationships based on human trust. Middle managers use informal interactions in non-crisis situations to get a sense of peoples’ perspectives before sending more formal signals (i.e., *enactive of sensible environments*). The findings suggest that middle managers use a variety of means that are embedded in social situations to make sense of the intricate human dynamics in the organization. They work sensibly to monitor organizational well-being in very organic ways which may not be present in any formal standards or documents.

Middle managers function as creators of realities in a very practical sense (i.e., *enactive of sensible environments*). For them, communication skills are very important to develop the plausible next steps collectively (i.e., *driven by plausibility*). When navigating in a complex environment or unexpected situation, middle managers must make adjustments in standard processes and determine the best solutions in the given context. Offering plausible solutions to different levels of people in the organization requires effective communication skills.

**Theme 4 in relation to literature.** Middle managers develop organizational relationships and cohesiveness from the middle. When supporting teamwork in the local
community, middle managers connect themselves to the community by positioning themselves as part of the group. They place themselves almost parallel to the faculty as supporters and cheerleaders and listen to their voices from within. Middle managers in a hierarchical organization embrace high ethical standards which serve as tools for generating collective efficacy. The findings confirmed that middle managers’ work involves presenting themselves as moral examples (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2016) through the principle of leading by example.

By generating collective efficacy, middle managers build a community of practice (CoP) which supports organizational learning. CoP is a body which collectively creates knowledge, experience, and practices (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2013). The concept of CoP is similar to what Nonaka (2005) proposed as “ba” which literally means a space in Japanese. Linguistically, “ba” implies that it is a shared or common space. Nonaka (2005) stated that “ba” is “a shared context in motion, in which knowledge is shared, created, and utilized” (p. 380) and context-specific meanings emerge through interactions among participants. Middle managers create a contextually appropriate organizational “ba” or CoP to co-develop shared values and generate collective efficacy among the people.

Middle managers at a hierarchical organization develop and negotiate their identities in complex organizational contexts. Literature presents that middle managers show a strong sense of inward-facing identity and outward-facing identity (Watson, 2008). In addition to these aspects, middle managers at the research site hold a sense of fluid identity as they negotiate what is expected of them and who they would like to be. This fluid identity is slightly different from the managerial identity in higher education which Armstrong and Woloshyn (2017) presented in their study. They explained that middle managers in higher education face tensions in forming their professional identities, balancing their managerial work and academic career as scholars.
(Armstrong & Woloshyn, 2017). Literature also supports that academic middle managers struggle in balancing their academic and managerial duties (Floyd, 2016; Smith, 2005).

Interestingly, middle managers at the research site displayed a sense of fluid identity which allows them to strategically position themselves depending on the situations and audience. Being in the middle of a hierarchy, they regularly face challenges in maneuvering organizational politics (Manager 5) as politically savvy managers (Manager 1) who can read people and situations (Manager 4). They also serve as the gatekeepers of information and “smart messengers” (Manager 6) who mediate organizational gaps. While serving as politically wise managers, all participants acknowledged the importance of maintaining the ethical self and a high level of moral standards. This creates significant complexity in managers’ identity construction in hierarchical organizations. Middle managers may face the dilemma in which being politically smart may affect their moral values negatively as individuals. The findings indicate that serving as middle managers in hierarchical organizations requires a more fluid identity that enables managers’ strategic work as balancing wheels in hierarchical organizations. Despite the complexity and challenges they face in their identity work and organizational politics, middle managers at the research site find ways to generate collective efficacy among people through on-going communication with the faculty and locally-situated activities.

**Implications for Practice**

This section synthesizes the findings discussed in the previous sections and presents the implications for organizational practices. The site of this research was a military training institute where civilian middle managers strive to meet mission requirements while supporting a wide range of emerging needs in local contexts. The findings from this study would contribute to the field of organizational studies in five major areas explained below.
### Figure 3. Implications of findings

#### Implication 1: Sensible Interpretation Work with Potential Identity Challenges

Middle managers in hierarchical organizations fill the gaps between the top and bottom layers in a variety of symbolic ways that are not explicitly documented in any official procedures. They create and operationalize work through sensible relational practices in an environment where organizational control and efficiency are highly valued by the senior leadership. The interview data suggest that middle managers spend a significant amount of time and energy carefully interpreting different messages, making sense of different voices, and sending contextually appropriate signals upward and downward. As local leaders, they neutralize the bureaucratic top-down control with more humanistic approaches by showing understanding and by connecting to people as part of the team. It is the middle managers’ sensible work which enables hierarchical organizations to generate a collective sense of meaning among people at different levels. Their sensible interpretation work, however, encompasses potential identity challenges because middle managers must negotiate their personal beliefs with

<table>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Implication 1</strong></td>
<td>Sensible interpretation work with potential identity challenges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Middle managers make sense of their positions through sensible interpretation and give contextually appropriate signals upward and downward</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Implication 2</strong></td>
<td>Experts of relational work as organizational ecologists</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Middle managers are active authors of collective realities that are socially created and contextually grounded</td>
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<td><strong>Implication 3</strong></td>
<td>Focused on vertical organizational discourse</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Middle managers’ lived experiences are created within a vertical framework in hierarchical organizations</td>
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<td><strong>Implication 4</strong></td>
<td>Balancing organizational polarity by shaping workable solutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Middle managers in hierarchical organizations identify and support practical processes and working structures appropriate for the local community</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Implication 5</strong></td>
<td>Promote organizational learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Middle managers can identify and put the right people for the right tasks by translating macro-level expectations into salient local initiatives</td>
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</table>
organizational bureaucracy, which may force them to take actions as smart administrators and strategists rather than passionate and humane leaders.

**Implication 2: Experts of Relational Work as Organizational Ecologists**

Experienced government middle managers are active and creative authors of organizational discourse through social relationships. One of the many challenges in managerial discourse on hierarchical organizations is the fact that middle managers encounter both macro-level institutional realities and micro-level local realities. A more accurate observation is that middle managers are expected to co-create and manage local realities in the context of macro-level realities. Despite a variety of constraints and challenges associated with hierarchical organizations, middle managers support teamwork and generate collective efficacy in local communities. From the relational perspective, organizational discourse is socially created and contextually grounded. Therefore, managers’ interpretations and sensegiving responses depend on how others shape the landscape as part of the collective body. Middle managers create moral commitments and relational landscapes where members of the local community co-develop values, assumptions and shared understandings through collective experiences. Middle managers are organizational ecologists who understand the interactions of various elements in the given context.

**Implication 3: Focused on Vertical Organizational Discourse.**

Another important implication from the findings is that middle managers in hierarchical organizations understand their positions mostly within their vertical organizational discourse. Despite their extensive organizational knowledge as seasoned managers, they continuously strive to make sense of their positions and managerial activities within a limited organizational framework which they believe is relevant to their own experiences. In other words, their lived
experiences are generated in separate communities that are not necessarily connected, as senior leadership would like to see, as collaborative efforts in a large government organization. This could potentially create challenges in ensuring certain organizational standards across different units or in accomplishing a cross-functional project where individuals from different units must coordinate and collaborate toward a common goal.

**Implication 4: Balancing Organizational Polarity by Shaping Workable Solutions**

Middle managers in a hierarchical organization serve as the balancing pole in the organizational polarity and make significant contributions in supporting organic working structures and processes. More specifically, they lower the boundaries of formal organizational structures by paying attention to the balancing of opposing values such as efficiency and effectiveness. The traditional notion of organizational structures comes from the functional boundaries. Middle managers in a hierarchical organization can generate working structures based on people’s needs and interests in the local community. They identify “a wiggle room” (Manager 3) and flexibility by supporting contextually-situated practices within the scope of their authority. As balancing wheels of an organization, they play critical roles in influencing the processes and outcomes of organizational working structure, which supports the notion of organizational structures as process and outcome (Gidden, 1979). This validates that people’s ongoing actions in specific contexts shape organizational structure (Barley, 1986). Besides the formal structures which are codified in hierarchical organizations, middle managers can define and generate the working structures which are suitable for the local community within the scope of their authority. Because these working structures are generated from bottom-up processes, they are more practical and better support local initiatives. These working structures and processes also foster a higher level of ownership in the local community.
Implication 5: Promote Organizational Learning

The findings from this study confirmed that middle managers in government organizations are critical assets in promoting organizational learning. The goal of organizations is to collectively facilitate positive outcomes. Because middle managers are attuned to local contexts as well as the institutional landscape, they effectively support positive organizational learning. Their work involves “real-time knowledge creation, transformational change, and moral behavior in ambiguous social environments” (Schwandt, 2005, p.185). As mentioned in the interviews, middle managers put the right people for the right tasks and provide guidance (Manager 2, 5), which promotes specific support in the local community. Their positions allow them to identify local talents, promote a sense of ownership among people, and generate collective efficacy. In sum, middle managers can translate macro-level expectations into micro-level activities that are salient in specific contexts by aligning local initiatives to maximize organizational learning.

Recommendations for Managerial Practice in Government Organizations

The goal of the study was to examine how middle managers in a government organization understand their roles between the senior leadership and local members. Prior to this study, there was a lack of understanding regarding the discourse of middle management in hierarchical organizations. The data from this study offered unique perspectives of middle managers in a highly-structured government organization. Based on the findings, the researcher offers the following recommendations for government organizations.
Figure 4. Recommendations for managerial practice in government organizations

**Recommendation 1: Invest in Middle Management**

Government organizations should make more investment in fulfilling the real needs of middle managers and middle management. The tasks of middle management in government organizations are extremely complex and demanding. There is a common misconception that managerial work in government organizations mainly involves ensuring rules and regulations. In reality, middle managers’ work requires not only knowledge of standard processes and regulations but also extensive people skills and political sensitivity. Compared to the field of leadership development, most government organizations lack the support needed for middle managers, who must make sense of their work in ambiguous contexts. The researcher recommends that government organizations establish more comprehensive support for the work of middle managers and reinforce the organizational capability of middle management. Some practical ideas include building managerial mentoring systems, career guidance and coaching for managers, and incentives for middle managers.

**Recommendation 2: Empower Middle Managers**

Government organizations should recognize and empower middle managers as key authors of organizational discourse. In hierarchical organizations with multiple levels in the
supervisory chains, the vision of senior leadership is quite distant for most employees on the ground. The organizational vision statement or top-down directives alone will neither foster intrinsic motivation of the people nor promote continuous organizational learning unless the meaning of the message is truly understood and owned by the people. Middle managers play key roles in translating directives from top leaders into language which is more realistic and understandable at the local level. Their knowledge and skills in navigating complex organizational situations require thoughtful sensemaking and sensegiving processes. In hierarchical government organizations, middle managers’ on-going work can balance the task-oriented organizational climate with more humanistic approaches, including their on-going work in non-crisis time. The hidden efforts of middle managers should be recognized and appreciated.

**Recommendation 3: Pay Attention to Their Voices**

Middle managers are familiar with the expectations of both top leaders and local employees. Government organizations should pay more attention to the voices of middle managers in order to validate the well-being of the organization. Many government organizations try to assess organizational well-being through surveys and sensing sessions. The data from such sources may not explicitly reveal the intricate nuances and assumptions embedded in the realities of local units. Middle managers can fill the gap of organizational contexts by interpreting the local realities. Their voices may unveil hidden assumptions and core values of the people in various units. At the same time, the researcher recommends that middle managers in government organizations also take responsibility to effectively communicate with senior leaders and educate them about the experiences and perceptions of organizational members. This will require prioritizing managerial challenges as local experts and presenting key messages as succinct dialogs or business cases for senior leaders.
Recommendation 4: Promote Shared Experience

Government organizations should support middle managers by creating opportunities for horizontal communications across various local units. This will enable middle managers to embrace the notion of a more wholistic community of practice with their peers. Middle management in government organizations could be a solitary work, especially for those who serve as heads of assigned units such as the Deans and Directors in this study. The data indicated that middle managers provide extensive support for the employees under them and communicate their supervisory chain. However, their work in the assigned unit is often sheltered within their vertical chain of command. Government organizations could provide a shared “ba” for middle managers to share their experiences with peers across different units and directorates.

Another reason to create more robust sharing practices is the fact that modern organizations must maximize the use of resources to promote organizational learning in creative ways. For example, instead of initiating a single project in each local unit, the organization may use a matrixed approach and form a cross-functional team across different local units. Middle managers’ roles in identifying the right members and articulating the processes would be critical for the success of such projects. Establishing a larger community and face-to-face contacts among various middle managers will promote a better horizontal connection in an organization.

Recommendation 5: Enable Middle Managers to Support Organizational Learning

Middle managers play important roles in organizational learning and knowledge sharing because they understand macro-level goals and micro-level realities. Government organizations should use the skills and experiences of middle managers to transfer knowledge and promote organizational learning. Seasoned middle managers are equipped with practical knowledge and experiences relevant to local contexts. In government organizations, however, middle managers’
time is often taken up by a massive amount of administrative work instead of practicing academic leadership. Government organizations could allow middle managers more time for supporting local knowledge sharing by reducing unnecessary meetings and streamlining some administrative work.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This study aimed to understand how middle managers in hierarchical government organizations make sense of their positions between senior leadership and faculty members. The findings uncovered middle managers’ versatile roles and associated challenges in a highly structured government institute. The scope of this study was limited to understanding the perceptions and lived experiences of a small number of middle managers at a single site. Although the interview data from this study provided fresh perspectives and rich insight into middle management, the findings from this study are not directly generalizable to different organizational contexts. The researcher used multiple data points such as contact summary forms and analytic memos to juxtapose the findings with the interview transcripts to ensure the robustness of data analysis following the six steps of IPA (Smith et al., 2009). Future research may use the findings from this study as a set of data and expand the scope of the research with a larger population or multiple organizations using different approaches. In relation to the findings of this study, the following five areas are valuable to advance our understanding in middle management literature.

First, how middle managers use their tacit knowledge for sensemaking and sensegiving has not been well-studied in general (Rouleau, 2005), let alone their use of tacit knowledge in public sectors. Tacit knowledge is “deeply related in action, procedures, routines, commitment, ideas, values and emotions” of organizational members (Nonaka, Toyama & Konno, 2000). The
findings from this study suggest that middle managers employ both institutional knowledge and tacit knowledge to effectively navigate and interpret complex organizational environments. Through their tacit knowledge, middle managers capture rich micro-level symbolic elements that are important to the local units, as well as generate genuine activities and routines which emotionally and professionally connect faculty members. To investigate middle managers’ perspective in government organizations, it is essential to further explore how they construct and use their tacit knowledge in dynamic interactions.

Second, since managerial discourse involves reciprocal perspectives, it is also critical to explore how other members in government organizations view middle managers’ positions and actions. In other words, to fully understand the managerial discourse, it is necessary to explore how senior leaders and local members perceive middle management and middle managers’ work. Future research could investigate how members at different levels understand the dynamics of managerial discourse in government organizations.

Third, further research could provide insight into the mediating roles of collective efficacy in hierarchical organizations. One of the key themes that emerged from this study was how middle managers generate collective efficacy. Collective efficacy plays a critical role in connecting people to their environment (Bandura 1986) as it promotes people’s belief in their capability to perform a task as a team (Bandura, 1997). Literature supports different influences of collective efficacy in organizations. For example, a strong sense of membership with a group based on shared identity works as a powerful resource against burnout (Avanzi, Schuh, Fraccaroli, and van Dick, 2015). It would be useful to explore how other members in local organizations perceive middle managers’ actions in generating collective efficacy.
Fourth, there is a lack of contextual breadth in managerial sensemaking literature because most studies target a business (Hope, 2010; Sharma & Good, 2013) or academic context (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Kezar, 2013). Although this study offers unique perspectives of middle managers in a government organization, the findings from this study may not represent all types of government organizations. It is also likely that this study has overlooked some critical elements that shape managers’ perspectives. Future studies may investigate how middle managers relate to others and make sense of their positions in different types of government organizations. Additional data from other government organizations would support a deeper understanding in other critical areas in organizational discourse such as organizational culture, managerial education and learning, sensemaking in formal and informal organizational structures, and employees’ sensemaking processes.

Fifth, in the current organizational landscape, more people rely on technological tools and applications as means of communication, causing major changes in the work environment in all organizations. In fact, an increasing number of organizations are using the framework of virtual teams in recent years and this trend is expected to continue (Dulebohna & Hoch, 2017). Dulebohna and Hoch (2017) explained that leading or managing a virtual team requires appropriate skills and behaviors which compensate for the lack of face-to-face contact with team members. These skills include “additional communication skills, depth of understanding in collaborative technology, ability to influence and facilitate team member engagement, an appreciation for cultural diversity, and an ability to influence and build trust and relationships with their geographically dispersed team members” (p. 570). While the findings from this study confirmed that middle managers value face-to-face contact with organizational members, there is a need to explore how these technological changes affect human dynamics and managerial
discourse in organizations. Future research could investigate how middle managers in government organizations mediate changes in their work environment due to technology use for communication.

This study provided agent-based perspectives in a government organization. The site of this research was a government military training institute where civilian middle managers strive to meet mission requirements while supporting a wide range of emerging needs in local units. As explained in previous sections, middle managers navigate complex organizational contexts by serving differing roles that they determine are needed. They orient dynamic social contexts as mediators of organizational gaps, influencers of people, balancing wheels, and generators of collective efficacy. The findings from this study presented unique data on middle management in a highly structured government organization.

**Chapter Summary**

Scholars confirmed that middle managers’ perspectives in public sectors are understudied in organizational literature (Chen et al., 2017). This study explored how middle managers in a hierarchical government organization make sense of their positions through lived experiences. Analysis of the semi-structured interviews provided personal narratives that offered unique perspectives of managerial discourse. Through the in-depth analysis of interviews, four themes were identified regarding how middle managers in a government educational institute orient themselves between senior leadership and faculty. The findings from this study contributed to the field of organizational studies in the following ways.

First, this study provided crucial perspectives of managerial discourse by focusing on the experiences of middle managers at a government institute. The discussions offered *thick description* of their interpretative work within a hierarchical organizational context. The four
themes that emerged from the interviews revealed how middle managers in a highly-structured
government organization orient themselves in complex organizational contexts by playing
multiple roles. Second, the results from this study provided a deep understanding of middle
managers’ identity construction through meaning-making processes in social contexts. In
particular, the voices of the participants shed light on how they construct self-concepts in relation
to others in fluid organizational contexts. Third, the findings illustrated how middle managers
perceive institutional influence in a hierarchical organization and connect macro perspectives to
micro-level actions in organizational discourse. Fourth, this study offered valuable
recommendations for government organizations based on the unique perspectives of middle-level
managers to promote positive organizational outcomes.

Van Manen (1990) stated that people’s lived experiences consist of intricate meaning
associated with thoughts, emotions, values, and assumptions and cannot be rationalized by
scientific approaches. The findings from this study confirmed that middle managers’ meaning
construction is in fact a responsive process to other elements such as organizational reality,
expectations of people above and below, and their retrospective experiences. Their sense of self
and relationships with others provided rich insight into how government middle managers
interpret organizational reality and their positions between senior leaders and faculty at a
hierarchical government institute. The recommendations from this study would allow
government organizations to view current organizational phenomena from fresh perspectives.

As Weick (1995) and other social constructionists claimed that organizations are socially
constructed, and members find meaning to various events through dynamic interactions. Further
research is needed to gain better understandings of the discourse of middle management from
different organizational levels and in diverse contexts of government organizations. As this
study highlighted middle managers’ unique perspectives of their realities as human phenomena from relational perspectives, each of the four themes would make a good starting point to further explore the lived experiences of middle managers.
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Appendix A

Informed Consent Form

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies

Name of Investigator(s): Masako Boureston

Title of Project: Managerial sensemaking and sensegiving: Understanding middle managers’ perspectives at a government institute

You are invited to take part in a research study on middle managers’ experiences. This form will inform you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask the researcher any questions that you may have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
You are being asked to participate in this study because you work as a Dean/Director at this institute and have significant experiences as a middle manager.

Why is this research study being done?
The purpose of this study is to investigate middle managers’ experiences at this institute.

What will I be asked to do?
If you decide to take part in this study, you will be asked to answer questions verbally.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?
The interview will take place on post and will take about 60-75 minutes. Your answers will be recorded and transcribed. The confidentiality of the data will be protected by using pseudonyms and generic information for the name of language (e.g. X department/program).

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?
There should be no risk or discomfort for you during the interview.

Will I benefit by being in this research?
There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in the study. However, the information learned from this study may provide valuable input to improve this institute’s organizational practices.

Who will see the information about me?
Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researchers on this study will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way or any individual as being part of this project. The data will be stored in a password-protected computer. The audio recording of the interview will be deleted upon completion of the research. You will verify the transcripts to ensure that no personally identifiable information is disclosed.

Can I stop my participation in this study?
Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if
you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time.

**Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?**

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact:
*Dr. Sandy Nickel, s.nickel@northeastern.edu*, the person mainly responsible for the research.
You can also contact *Masako Boureston, boureston.m@husky.neu.edu*, the Principal Investigator.

**Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?**

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 490 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

**Will I be paid for my participation?**

There will be no monetary compensation for participating in this research.

**Will it cost me anything to participate?**

There will be no cost to participate in this study.

**Is there anything else I need to know?**

N/A

**I agree to audio recording of this interview.**

Signature of the person participating in the research  Date

**I agree to take part in this research.**

Signature of the person participating in the research  Date

Printed name of the person above

Signature of the person who explained the study to the person above and obtained consent  Date

Printed name of the person above
Appendix B

Interview Protocol Form and Interview Questions

**Interview Protocol Form**

Interviewee:

Interviewer: Masako Boureston

Research Question:

How do Deans and Directors at a highly-structured, educational, government institute make sense of their position between senior leaders and faculty members?

**Part I: Introductory Session Objectives** (5 minutes)

Build rapport, describe the study, answer any questions.

Introductory Protocol:

*Thank you for volunteering to participate in this study. You have been identified as someone who has a great deal to share about the managerial experience. My research project focuses on the experiences of middle managers. Through this study, I hope to gain more insight into middle managers’ perspectives. There are many interpretations of the definition of middle managers. For this study, I am interviewing Deans and Directors who report to the Associate Provosts and serve as the leaders of a school or a unit. Hopefully this will allow this institute and other government organizations to identify ways in which we understand the position of middle managers.*

*Because your responses are important and I want to make sure to capture everything you say, I would like to audio tape our conversation today. Do I have your permission to record this interview? [if yes, thank the participant, and turn on the recording equipment].*

*I will also be taking written notes. I can assure you that all responses will be confidential and only a pseudonym will be used when quoting from the transcripts. To ensure anonymity, from now on and throughout the interview, I will not be referring to you by your real name but by your chosen pseudonym. I will be the only person with access to the interview tapes which will be eventually destroyed. After the interview is transcribed, I will provide you with a copy of the transcript for your review to ensure accuracy and completeness. To meet our human subjects requirements at the university, you must sign the form I have with me [provide the form]. Essentially, this document states that: (1) all information will be held confidential, (2) your participation is voluntary and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and (3) we do not intend to inflict any harm. Do you have any questions about the interview process or how your data will be used?*
This interview should last about 60-75 minutes. During this time, I have several questions that I would like to cover. If time begins to run short, it may be necessary to interrupt you in order to push ahead and complete this line of questioning. Do you have any questions at this time?

Part II: Interviewee Background (5 minutes)

Objective: To establish rapport. This section should be brief as it is not the focus of the study.

1. Please tell me your brief career history at the institute.

2. Could you tell me about your current position?

Part III: Interview

One of the things I am interested in learning about is your perspectives as a Dean/Director. I would like to hear about your experiences in your own words. To do this, I am going to ask you some questions about the key experiences you encountered. If you mention other people, please use pseudonyms.

Interview Questions:

(Follow-up questions will be used as needed.)

1. How would you describe your position as a middle manager in the context of this institute? Based on your experience, what are some of the things that are expected of you in your position? (Follow-up: Why do you think they are important?)

2. How do you see your job in relation to the people in your school/division and to the people above you? (Follow-up: What kind of roles do you play?)

3. How do you see your position in relation to your peers?

4. Can you tell me about a challenge you have experienced as a middle manager working between the top leaders and the faculty? (Follow-up: Why was it challenging? How did you navigate the situation?)

5. Please tell me about the time when you brought a change or new idea into your school/division as the Dean/Director. (Follow-up: Why did you make the decision? How did the faculty respond?)

6. Please tell me how you dealt with the situation where you saw a gap between the expectations of the senior leaders and the reality of your school/unit or the expectations of the faculty. How did you position yourself in that context and why?
7. If someone wants to apply for your position, what are some of the experiences, qualities and skill sets that they should bring to your position to work between the top leadership and the faculty members?

8. If you are to use a metaphor, what would you use to illustrate your position as a middle manager at this institute and why?

9. Please tell me a story about the time when you noticed your school/unit was functioning smoothly. (Follow-up: How did you know?)

10. Can you tell me how you know how well you are doing as a Dean/Director who works between the senior leaders and faculty members?

11. Are there any questions or anything else you would like to add?

**Part IV: Closing the Interview (2-3 minutes)**

Objective: To thank the participant for his/her participation, to review the next steps in the study and to answer any questions the participant may have.

*Thank you very much for participating in this interview. I’ll email a copy of your transcript to you within the next week so that you can review it by [date and time]*
Appendix C

Overview of Interview Questions

*Each question covers several areas in the seven properties of sensemaking (Weick, 1995) as indicated here. Besides the marked areas, the participants may indicate additional elements.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Identity</th>
<th>Retrospective</th>
<th>Enactment</th>
<th>On-going</th>
<th>Plausibility</th>
<th>Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. How would you describe your position as a middle manager in the context of this institute? What are some of the things that are expected of you in your position? (Follow-up: Why do you think they are important?)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. How do you see your job in relation to the people in your school/division and to the people above you? (Follow-up: What kind of roles do you play?)</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>Social relation, being in-between</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. How do you see your position in relation to your peers?</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Social relation, Identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Can you tell me about a specific challenge or a story you have experienced as a middle manager working between the top leaders and the faculty? (Follow-up: Why was it challenging? How did you navigate the situation?)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Finding plausible solution in difficult situation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Please tell me about the time when you brought a change or new idea into your school/division as the Dean/Director. (Follow-up: Why did you make the decision? How did the faculty respond?)</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>Making actions based on extracted cues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Please tell me how you dealt with the situation where you saw a gap between the expectations of the senior leaders and the reality of your school/unit or the expectations of the faculty. How did you position yourself in that context and why?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>Identity construction and finding the balanced position</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. If someone wants to apply for your position, what are some of the experiences, qualities and skill sets that they should bring to your position to work between the top leadership and the faculty?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>Retrospective lived experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. If you are to use a metaphor, what would you use to illustrate your position as a middle manager at this institute and why?</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Image of middle manager based on experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Please tell me a story about the time when you noticed your school/unit was functioning smoothly. (Follow-up: How did you know?)</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Extracted cues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Can you tell me how you know how well you are doing as a Dean/Director who works between the senior leaders and faculty members?</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>On-going interpretation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Are there any questions or anything else you would like to add?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>