MAKING MONEY MAKE SENSE

A STUDY ON MUNICIPAL BUDGET AND DEBT COUNSELORS' USE OF SENSEGIVING TOOLS AND STRATEGIES

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Making money make sense: A study on municipal budget and debt counselors' use of sensegiving tools and strategies

Abstract

This thesis is concerned with how sense is given to financial information in contexts of low financial literacy, investigating the case of Swedish municipal budget and debt counseling. The study is based on interviews with 21 budget and debt counselors and draws on sensemaking and sensegiving theory. The findings show that counselors employ visualization, metaphors, reflective tools, and limit the amount of financial information, to pedagogically translate financial information to make it intelligible. Additionally, the study finds that counselors employ tools aimed at reducing negative emotions and instilling positive emotions, in order to enable receptiveness to sensegiving and motivate action. While supporting prior research on how financial information becomes meaningful through cognitive sensegiving tools, the study argues that such tools can be insufficient. Drawing on theory on emotions and sensegiving, we suggest that to give sense to financial information sensegiving tools addressing emotions may also be necessary in this context.

Keywords:

Financial Literacy, Emotions, Sensegiving, Financial Hardship, Budget and Debt Counseling

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Abbreviations

Term	Abbreviation	Definition
Budget and debt counseling	BDC	A free service provided by Swedish municipalities to help individuals who are struggling with their finances. The counselors offer advice on how to plan a budget, manage and prioritize debts, negotiate with creditors, apply for debt restructuring, and develop better financial habits (Swedish Consumer Agency, n.d.-b).
Swedish Consumer Agency	SCA	A government agency that works to protect consumer rights and ensure a safe and fair market. The agency ensures that businesses follow consumer protection laws, that products and services are safe to use, and that consumers are informed about their rights. It also supports households in managing their finances (Swedish Consumer Agency, n.d.-c).
Swedish Enforcement Agency	SEA	A government agency that helps individuals and businesses get paid and supports those who owe money. Its mission is to contribute to a well-functioning society for both citizens and businesses, and help prevent crime (Swedish Enforcement agency, n.d).

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1. Introduction

Financial literacy has become increasingly important following a shift towards individual financial responsibility, making people's financial welfare increasingly dependent on their ability to make sound financial decisions (Callegari, Liedgren, & Kullberg, 2022). This is especially apparent in Sweden, where deregulations of the credit market (Callegari et al., 2022) and increasing accessibility to credit financing (Ministry of Finance, 2024), have put a larger emphasis on individual financial responsibility. However, despite this accentuation on individual responsibility, many are struggling to manage their personal finances. Household indebtedness has continued to rise above sustainable levels, and the total debt registered with the Swedish Enforcement Authority[1] (SEA) has doubled over the last decade, amounting to 138 billion SEK in 2025, highlighting the growing inability to meet financial obligations (Swedish Enforcement Authority, 2025). For individuals struggling with managing their budgets and debt, they can turn to municipal budget and debt counseling (BDC) for support and advice, which has seen a 41% increase in applications between 2021 and 2024 (Boström, 2025).

Research has shown that sound financial decision-making and debt management are closely linked to financial literacy (e.g. Disney & Gathergood, 2013; Gathergood, 2012; Lusardi & Mitchell, 2011; Lusardi, 2019). While traditionally associated with financial knowledge, the OECD (2020) defines financial literacy as a combination of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors needed to make sound financial decisions. Hence, people that lack financial literacy can struggle with not only interpreting financial information but also taking financially responsible actions.

Bay (2018) problematized the conditions under which financial information can foster financially responsible ways of thinking and acting, asserting that for such information to have an impact, individuals must be able to make sense of it. While this transformative potential of accounting is well-established in research on professional settings, where users typically possess the literacy to interpret financial information, less attention has been paid to how financial information can influence thought and behavior among those lacking this ability (Bay, 2018). Therefore, Bay (2018) argued that it is important to increase the understanding of how financial information can be made intelligible to those with low financial literacy, to whom financial information does not automatically make sense. Moreover, it has been suggested that people in financial hardship often experience strong emotions, such as stress, shame, and anxiety (Gladstone, Jachimowicz, Greenberg, & Galinsky, 2021; Trygged, 2012) and that building financial literacy also is an emotional process as it involves having motivation and confidence to apply financial knowledge (Pettersson & Wettergren, 2021). Hence, this study also explores how counselors navigate

[1] "Kronofogden" in Swedish

emotions in their sensegiving, following the call for more research on "how emotions drive or hinder, enable or circumscribe the way that people read financial accounts." (Bay, 2018, p. 52). It will contribute to this underexplored research area by investigating how sense is given to financial information in contexts where financial literacy – understood as a combination of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and motivation – cannot be presumed. By studying the case of municipal budget and debt counseling, this thesis explores how counselors give sense to financial information through addressing both the cognitive and emotional dimensions that affect clients' understanding and action. To fulfill this aim, the research question reads as follows: *How is financial information given sense to in municipal budget and debt counseling?*

To answer the research question, the study draws on empirical insights from 21 interviews with municipal budget and debt counselors, and on theoretical insights from literature on sensemaking and sensegiving, as well as financial literacy. This study shows that giving sense to financial information in BDC, a setting of low financial literacy, involves not only consideration to cognitive, but also emotional, sensemaking abilities. In BDC, sensegiving needs to involve tools and strategies aimed at both making numbers intelligible and managing emotions.

2. Previous Research & Theory

This section begins by reviewing previous research on financial literacy, highlighting its dual dimensions of understanding and acting. While prior studies acknowledge the emotional and cognitive dimensions of financial literacy, less is known about how financial information is made intelligible and actionable in a situation of low financial literacy. To analyze this, the section then introduces sensemaking theory as a lens for exploring how counselors support clients' understanding and action through sensegiving strategies.

2.1. Defining financial literacy

Financial literacy has gained significant attention in recent years, not only as a predictor of financial behavior but as a crucial skill for navigating personal finances and participating in society (e.g. Gathergood, 2012; Lusardi, 2019; Lusardi & Mitchell, 2011). The OECD defines financial literacy as "knowledge and understanding of financial concepts and risks, and the skills, motivation, and confidence to apply such knowledge and understanding in order to make effective decisions across a range of financial contexts, to improve the financial wellbeing of individuals and society, and to enable participation in economic life" (OECD, 2020 p. 43). As such, financial literacy is not simply about knowing what a loan or interest rate is, but also about having the confidence and capacity to act on that knowledge. This broader understanding moves away from framing financial literacy as a static, individual competency and instead views it as a situational (Bay, Catasús, & Johed, 2014) and affective capacity (Pettersson & Wettergren, 2021), shaped by social experience, emotional responses, and communicative interactions. Thus, from this perspective, financial literacy is understood as both a cognitive and emotional process. In this study, we adopt a holistic definition of financial literacy, informed by the OECD framework, while connecting it more explicitly to the question of how accounting becomes intelligible to those it intends to inform.

The following sections use this broader definition and distinguish between two interrelated dimensions of financial literacy. Firstly, the knowledge needed to understand financial information, and secondly, the confidence and motivation required to apply that knowledge in practice.

2.1.1 Financial knowledge and understanding

The first component of financial literacy, knowledge and understanding, concerns individuals' ability to grasp financial concepts, interpret numbers, and assess financial risks. This dimension has been emphasized in quantitative studies linking financial knowledge to outcomes such as debt accumulation, saving patterns, and investment

behavior (e.g., Disney & Gathergood, 2013; Gathergood, 2012; Gerardi, Goette, & Meier, 2013; Lusardi & Mitchell, 2011;2014). For example, Gathergood (2012) found a correlation between low understanding of financial principles and difficulties to repay debt. Similarly, Lusardi (2019) put forward that financial knowledge equips individuals to make more effective financial decisions, highlighting the need for financial education in order to foster sound financial behavior. Research on financial literacy has mainly been centered on financial knowledge, emphasizing the cognitive and technical aspects of financial literacy. This can be noted in the established way of measuring of financial literacy through testing knowledge about financial concepts, such as compound interest, amortization, risk, and inflation (e.g. Disney, Gathergood, & Weber, 2015; Gathergood, 2012; Lusardi, 2019; Lusardi & Mitchell, 2011), while the emotional aspect of having motivation and confidence to apply such knowledge has received less attention.

These measurements can be seen as reducing financial literacy to an isolated, cognitive understanding of basic financial knowledge, and thus overlooking other aspects of financial literacy influencing how individuals interact with, respond to, and act upon financial information in different contexts (Bay et al., 2014). Furthermore, the conditions under which financial information can help bring about financially responsible ways of thinking and acting have been problematized in accounting literature, suggesting that for financial information to have an impact on someone, they need to be able to make sense of it (Bay, 2018). While the transformative potential of accounting is often assumed in professional contexts, where users are presumed to possess financial literacy, less attention has been paid to how accounting functions in everyday life among individuals who lack the ability to interpret such information. Thus, it is of interest to investigate how sense is given to financial information to people with low financial literacy, to whom financial information does not automatically make sense, but needs to be made intelligible (Bay, 2018). Moreover, Disney et al. (2015) found that individuals with lower financial literacy are more likely to seek credit counseling, treating it as a compensatory instrument for their knowledge gaps. Hence, BDC functions as a space for translating accounting into intelligible and usable forms for those with low financial literacy.

However, as defined above, financial literacy is not only about understanding, but also the skills, confidence, and motivation to apply that knowledge. The next section looks deeper into this aspect.

2.1.2 Motivation and confidence to apply and act

The second component of the definition, applying and acting upon information, emphasizes that literacy also requires the confidence, motivation, and behavioral capacity to act on financial knowledge (OECD, 2020). Acting on financial knowledge is not just a

rational process but one shaped by how individuals feel about their capacity to manage money, make decisions, and engage with financial information. As Pettersson & Wettergren (2021) suggested, emotional engagement is a prerequisite for turning knowledge into action. Attitudes toward money, debt, and budgeting are not purely cognitive, but emotionally invested. Emotions influence what individuals pay attention to, how they interpret financial information, and whether they feel capable of acting upon that (Pettersson & Wettergren, 2021).

Accounting literature has also recognized the impact of emotions. Previous research has shown that accounting is not only cognitively but also affectively charged, shaping and being shaped by emotions in ways that influence behavior and meaning-making (Boedker & Chua, 2013; Baxter, Carlsson-Wall, Chua, & Kraus, 2019). Contrary to the traditional view of accounting as a tool for rational decision-making, Boedker and Chua (2013) demonstrated that accounting also has the ability to influence people's emotions. Their study illustrated how accounting practices can evoke emotions, such as anxiety, excitement, and loyalty, which in turn influence organizational behavior and decision-making. Moreover, Repenning, Löhlein, & Schäffer (2022) and Hidayah, Amyar, & Lowe (2024) demonstrated that financial numbers can act as emotional triggers, provoking stress or shame. Budgeting may serve as a reminder of scarcity and loss, reinforcing negative self-perceptions, and exposing financial mismanagement can trigger shame and feelings of one's integrity being questioned (Hidayah et al., 2024). There has been a call for further research on the role of emotions in meaning-making of accounting (Bay, 2018), and the role of emotions for private individuals' meaning-making of accounts is particularly interesting as prior studies on the interplay between accounting and emotions have focused on organizational settings.

However, the emotional aspect of dealing with financial information has also been explored in studies looking at individuals' personal financial behaviors. Kramer (2016) demonstrated that an individual's subjective sense of their financial capability, that is, how confident they are in their own abilities, shape financial help-seeking behavior. The study illustrated that people with high confidence in their subjective financial knowledge often choose not to seek financial advice, even when their actual knowledge is less than they think. Therefore, it is typically not the most confident individuals who pursue financial advice (Kramer, 2016). This suggests that BDC clients may not only lack knowledge, but also the confidence to apply that knowledge. Moreover, research has suggested emotions play a central role in financial hardship (Gladstone et al. 2021). The emotional aspect of financial confrontation becomes especially noticeable in situations where clients may be ashamed of their financial position or feel overwhelmed by numbers they cannot fully understand (Gladstone et al., 2021, Pettersson & Wettergren, 2021). Shame has been suggested to not only result from financial hardship, but also leading to avoidance and disengagement, further exacerbating hardship (Gladstone et al., 2021). Additionally, the authors proposed that affirmative acts of kindness can help reduce

internalized shame and sense of failure, thereby interrupting vicious cycles of shame and financial hardship. Similarly, Gilbert (2021) found that cultivating hope through affirming interaction can shift perceptions of debt from a shameful burden to a challenge that they can overcome. In the context of BDC, this indicates that clients may come in with strong negative emotions, but there are opportunities in mitigating these to restore confidence and hope.

2.1.3 Addressing the gap

Altogether, financial literacy plays an important role in shaping financially responsible ways of thinking and acting. However, as Bay (2018) asserted, much of the previous accounting literature on the influence of accounting on thought and behavior has looked at professional contexts, where receivers of financial information are presumed to already possess the ability to make sense of it. Far less attention has been paid to how numbers and concepts are made intelligible, especially among individuals who lack financial literacy (Bay, 2018). As such, it is of interest to explore how sensemaking of financial information can be facilitated in cases of low financial literacy, when financial information does not automatically make sense but needs to be made intelligible (Bay, 2018).

In addition, the term financial literacy has commonly been used interchangeably with financial knowledge (e.g. Disney & Gathergood, 2013; Gathergood, 2012; Gerardi et al., 2013). However, the OECD (2020) definition of financial literacy suggests that literacy requires individuals to also act upon their financial realities, more than merely understanding numbers. Thus, this suggests that studying financial literacy demands consideration to the emotional context that affects confidence, motivation, and hope to act upon financial knowledge. Yet, research exploring how financial information is given meaning to both enhance understanding and motivate action in contexts of low financial literacy, remains scarce. Moreover, how emotions impact how people make sense of financial information is underexplored and calls for further research (Bay, 2018).

2.2 Making and giving sense to financial information

To address the aforementioned gap, the following section introduces sensemaking theory as a framework for examining how meaning is given to financial information in the context of BDC, where financial literacy presumably is low. This framework provides a theoretical lens to examine how counselors help clients make sense of financial information through communicative tools, including both verbal and visual aids.

2.2.1 The foundations of sensemaking and sensegiving

Sensemaking is the process through which individuals construct meaning in response to novel, ambiguous, or unexpected situations (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). This frequently involves a change of roles and routines previously taken for granted, inferring with personal assumptions about how to act and think. Thus, sensemaking is not just about gathering information, but about organizing that information into something understandable and meaningful that guides decision-making and action (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). One of the earliest sensemaking scholars, Weick, identified properties that emphasize sensemaking as a continuous and social process in which individuals use cues to develop a coherent understanding of their environment (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015). These cues may include financial numbers, debt notices, or interactions with financial institutions, which individuals have to interpret to develop an understanding of how they should think and act going forward.

While sensemaking refers to how individuals construct meaning, sensegiving is the deliberate attempt to influence others' sensemaking processes (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Leaders, professionals, and advisors engage in sensegiving by, for example, framing issues, using metaphors, and adapting their language, to affect how a situation is interpreted (Colville, Brown, & Pye, 2012; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007; Rouleau, 2005). Similarly, in their role, counselors have the possibility to shape how clients interpret and understand financial information.

2.2.2 Tools for sensemaking and sensegiving

Sensemaking is a discursive process, shaped by, for example, language, narratives, and metaphors, to construct meaning (e.g. Colville et al., 2012; Bukh, Christensen, & Svanholt, 2021; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015). Additionally, previous research shows that visual tools also may help sensemaking by clarification and instilling reflection (Bay, 2018; Aresu & Monfardini, 2023). Next, prior research on how verbal and visual tools can help give sense to financial information is accounted for.

Verbal tools

Prior accounting research has been concerned with how sensemaking can be facilitated through verbal communication. Accounting talk literature has shed light on metaphors as sensegiving tools, suggesting that by linking accounting concepts with daily work practices, metaphors can reshape understanding of financial matters and drive behavioral change in organizations (Carlsson-Wall, Kraus, Lund, & Sjögren, 2016; Bukh et al., 2021). Beyond organizational settings, the use of metaphors to facilitate comprehension and engagement with accounting has also been investigated in educational settings (Tucker, 2017).

Through a longitudinal case study of a Swedish home-help organization, Carlsson-Wall et al. (2016) studied how a middle manager used accounting metaphors to make front-line employees integrate financial consideration in their everyday work. They found that by metaphorically representing revenues and expenses as money flowing in and out of the employees' personal bank accounts, the manager bridged abstract accounting concepts with a familiar domain. This in turn helped demonstrate how employees' daily actions at work influenced financial outcomes. After outlining the basic parallels between personal finance and accounting concepts, the metaphor was subsequently developed by introducing more conceptual connections between personal finance and accounting to convey several ideas. Through the use of metaphors, the organization's financial issues became easier to understand and more meaningful, bringing about improved financial understandings, attitudes, and behaviors (Carlsson-Wall et al., 2016).

In a similar vein, Bukh et al. (2021) studied managers' use of accounting information in a Danish municipality and found that accounting metaphors were effective for triggering sensemaking and fostering cost-consciousness among social workers. More specifically, managers used a metaphor linking costs to decisions in their daily work and familiar social work values of helping those in need. In turn, this helped establish an understanding of how cost-consciousness in daily practice linked to the quality of care, ultimately influencing the organizational culture towards cost-consciousness (Bukh et al., 2021). Hence, metaphors have been suggested to facilitate sensemaking of financial concepts by connecting it to existing knowledge and values, shaping understanding and behavior in organizations.

The potential of metaphors as a tool for making accounting intelligible has also been explored in educational settings. Tucker (2017) investigated the use of metaphors, analogies, and similes for teaching basic accounting to Master of Business Administration (MBA) students. According to the author, metaphors, analogies, and similes are different types of figurative language, however, the distinction is predominantly linguistic, and functionally they are all ways of translating a more abstract concept by linking it, either explicitly or implicitly, to a familiar concept. Following Tucker (2017), this thesis does not focus on the technical differences between these three forms but instead refers to them collectively as metaphors.

Tucker (2017) accounted for different ways metaphors were used in an MBA-level introductory accounting course. The primary aim of using metaphors in the course was to link accounting concepts to examples that are more familiar to students to make accounting intelligible and meaningful, similar to how metaphors were used in Carlsson-Wall et al. (2016) and Bukh et al. (2021). For example, this was done through a metaphor comparing the difficulties in agreeing upon what makes up performance with what makes up the best movie. In addition, Tucker (2017) stated that the introductory accounting

course was commonly perceived as being very difficult which could evoke anxiety and fear among students. To diminish this, additional metaphors were designed to mitigate potential fear and anxiety, as well as to build students' confidence in their abilities. For example, a metaphor comparing the learnings outcomes to obtaining a car license (possessing the basic knowledge and abilities), rather than becoming a car mechanic (knowing complex, specific, details), was used to reduce fears about the course being overly advanced. Student feedback indicated that the metaphors were indeed perceived as being helpful in making accounting concepts more intelligible by linking them to familiar experiences, while also contributing to motivation and engagement. This suggests that metaphors can also be employed as a tool for managing emotions, specifically reducing fear and anxiety, and instilling confidence (Tucker, 2017).

However, while acknowledging the high potential of metaphors as a device for facilitating sensemaking of accounting information and concepts, extant literature does not claim metaphors to be universally helpful in this regard (Carlson-Wall et al., 2016; Tucker., 2017). Rather, it has been highlighted that choosing a metaphor in which accounting is expressed in terms that are accessible and relevant to the particular audience is critical (Carlsson-Wall et al., 2016), and that this can be particularly difficult when the audience has diverse backgrounds and experiences (Tucker, 2017).

In addition to metaphors, Bukh et al. (2021) also found that managers, as part of their efforts to foster cost-conscious thinking and behavior, limited the amount of accounting information presented to caseworkers. By only including simple calculations, focusing on aggregated numbers that were relevant to their work, rather than going into details, managers effectively changed caseworkers' interpretation of costs. Similarly, Hall (2010) proposed that accounting information is more likely to support managers' understanding when it is structured around issues relevant to their decision-making and doesn't contain accounting jargon. Likewise, Nordlund, Catasús, & Kaarbøe (2024) found that when controllers verbally presented reports to non-accountants, accounting jargon could hamper their understanding of the presentation. Thus, limiting the amount of accounting information to only include simple and relevant information, while leaving out redundant complexity such as detailed calculations or jargon, has been suggested to support organizational members' understanding of financial information (Bukh et al, 2021; Hall, 2010; Nordlund et al., 2024). Although these studies mainly focus on organizational settings, they still offer insights into how accounting can be made intelligible, and support sensemaking of financial information.

Visual tools

Visual tools may also help in giving sense to financial information. Bay (2018) examined how accounting concepts are communicated in everyday life where individuals may struggle to a higher extent to interpret financial information through the Swedish TV-

show “The Luxury Trap”[2]. The show combines education and entertainment to teach participants with financial struggles to become more financially responsible. Bay (2018) critiqued the notion that much prior research assumes financial literacy as a given, overlooking the fact that in many real-life contexts, especially among individuals experiencing financial hardship, financial literacy is limited. In such cases, numbers are not inherently intelligible; they require what Bay calls ‘re-presentation’. In the study, Bay investigated the different exercises performed in the TV-show and explained how they re-presented numbers. This included for example a ‘Budget Board’, where numbers were visually re-presented using physical cash, and a ‘Lego Calculus’, where financial priorities were visualized through physical models. These re-presentations translated financial information into non-numerical, tangible forms that helped participants process the information more intuitively. In this way, visualization promoted sensemaking among participants and helped reshape their financial understanding and behavior (Bay, 2018). On a similar note, Aresu & Monfardini (2023) also examined the use of visualization, but in a different form. Their study focused on how Italian households used visual tools, such as spreadsheets and tables, to present and organize their financial data. They found that this form of visualization enhanced clarity and precision but the numbers were still presented in their numerical form, as opposed to the visualizations in Bay (2018). In this sense, while both studies focus on visualization, Bay (2018) emphasized pedagogical transformation for interpretability, whereas Aresu & Monfardini (2023) highlighted presentational clarity within everyday financial practices. Thus, visualization has been shown to be a useful tool for giving sense to financial information in contexts that are similar to BDC. These findings suggest that counselors can better help clients understand by incorporating visualization techniques, such as budget charts, physical re-presentations of expenses, or spreadsheets.

Both Aresu & Monfardini (2023) and Bay (2018) highlighted bookkeeping as a way for individuals to reflect on their spending. By keeping track of their expenses and visualizing it in a spreadsheet, families could shift their spending habits toward more sustainable consumption by fostering discussion and awareness around financial choices (Aresu & Monfardini, 2023). On a similar note, Bay (2018) examined the use of an "emotional" account book as a self-regulation tool to show how emotions may contribute to trigger financial sensemaking. Before making purchases, people were urged to write down their feelings and justifications, which forced participants to reflect in ways beyond financial tracking. Hence, bookkeeping serves as a sensemaking technique, helping individuals recognize patterns in their behavior, assess their broader lifestyle choices, support more conscious decision-making and ultimately promote a sense of control over financial behaviors (Aresu & Monfardini, 2023; Bay, 2018).

[2] “Lyxfällan” in Swedish

In conclusion, literature concerned with sensegiving of financial information has focused on tools for making the information intelligible. However, people's interpretations of financial information are also influenced by their emotions, which in turn influence how they view and respond to what is presented. Given this influence, the emotional aspect of sensemaking is examined in the following section.

2.2.3 Emotions in sensemaking

Sensemaking is not only a cognitive process but also an emotional one. Financial hardship, such as debt, carries a heavy emotional burden (Gladstone et al., 2021), often inducing shame, guilt, and stress, which can distort financial sensemaking (Maitlis, Vogus & Lawrence, 2013). While research on sensemaking has mainly focused on cognition, the role of emotions in sensemaking has gained attention more recently (Maitlis et al., 2013; Steigenberger, 2015). Bay (2018) suggested that financial numbers are not only interpreted cognitively but also give rise to emotional responses. In the television show The Luxury Trap, indebtedness and irresponsible spending behavior was framed as a shameful failure and activities aimed at provoking emotions. This was suggested to function as a "wake-up call", a sensemaking queue, leading participants to alter their financial understanding and behavior (Bay, 2018, p.52).

Studies have conceptually explored how emotions may affect sensemaking (Maitlis et al., 2013; Steigenberger, 2015). Maitlis et al. (2013) asserted that "the cognitive, identity, and social costs of sensemaking mean that people must be energized to engage in sensemaking activities" (p. 226). However, the energy provided depends on the valence and intensity of the emotion. Moderately intense negative emotions provide the energy necessary to engage in sensemaking, while overly intense emotions consume energy. Maitlis et al. (2013) further contended that their findings suggest that while so-called "burning platform" rhetoric can spur people to act, it can also impair their ability to make sense of the situation and may therefore not be an appropriate means of bringing about change in more complex situations. As such, this suggests that sensegivers need to adjust their approaches to the audience's emotions to bring about desired effects in the particular situation. Furthermore, Maitlis et al. (2013) distinguished between different self-conscious emotions and their impact on social versus solitary sensemaking. They contended that specific self-conscious emotions, such as pride and guilt, often leads to social sensemaking, making clients more open to external guidance. Clients who feel guilty may be more willing to acknowledge mistakes and seek corrective actions as it is attributed to a certain action (feeling bad about something one has done), rather than identity, making financial counseling more effective. Shame, in contrast, is a global self-conscious emotion that is attributed to identity rather than behavior (feeling bad about oneself), which they suggested increases the likelihood of solitary sensemaking (Maitlis et al., 2013). This is also consistent with Gladstone et al.'s (2021) suggestions about shame leading to avoidance. The authors further pointed out that individuals are more

likely to experience shame in connection to making mistakes or mismanaging in contexts where cultural norms stress individual responsibility and accountability (Maitlis et al., 2013).

Moreover, Steigenberger (2015) proposed that emotions serve a dual role in sensemaking: they act as both an input that shapes how individuals interpret events, and as an outcome of the sensemaking process itself. The author emphasized that different emotions, such as anger, fear, anxiety, and hope, have different effects on sensemaking and receptiveness to sensegiving. For instance, anxiety was suggested to increase the likelihood of avoidant behaviors and less motivation to act, while hope could enhance problem-solving and openness to new perspectives, enhancing engagement and receptivity to sensegiving from others. This suggests clients' emotions in meetings can influence the effectiveness of counselors' sensegiving attempts and also impact subsequent action. Hence, how these emotions are navigated in contexts of low financial literacy emerges as an interesting, but unexplored area.

Although prior research has emphasized the interplay of emotions and sensemaking, empirical investigations remain scarce. It has been found that emotions affect the energy to sensemake, but also how receptive people are to sensegiving, and how they feel after having made sense of information, for example, if they feel capable or motivated to act upon that information. Emotions (for instance shame, hope, anxiety) have been suggested to have a strong influence on the sensemaking process (Steigenberger, 2015; Maitlis et al., 2013), however, less is known about how such emotions are dealt with in sensegiving in emotionally charged contexts, such as BDC. Altogether, there is a need to explore how communication strategies can help make numbers intelligible but also foster emotional engagement in the sensemaking process to accommodate low financial literacy, including both cognitive and emotional aspects of it. Hence, this study aims to examine the tools and strategies implemented by counselors in navigating financial illiteracy in BDC.

3 Methodology

3.1 Overall research design

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore how municipal debt counselors give sense to financial concepts to their clients. An interpretivist perspective was applied, which assumes that reality is socially constructed and that meanings are created through interaction, rather than discovered as objective facts (Bryman & Bell., 2025). Hence, meaning-making of financial information was regarded as not simply transferred, but co-constructed through interactions between counselors and clients, which further aligns with the notion of sensemaking as a fundamentally social and narrative process (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). In addition, the study also adopted an abductive research logic consistent with the interpretivist perspective, involving iterating between empirical data and theoretical concepts. The abductive approach involved identifying the best fitting explanation among competing interpretations of the data, allowing for openness to unexpected findings, rather than seeking to confirm previous assumptions (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

Following Qu & Dumay (2011) the qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews which enabled an in-depth understanding of counselors' sensegiving. Semi-structured interviews were also employed as it allows for flexibility and enables follow-up questions that encourages interviewees to further elaborate, and hence provide more nuanced answers, while not deviating from the subject. Furthermore, the semi-structured approach arguably contributed to developing a deeper understanding of how the interviewees perceive and make sense of their experiences by allowing for interviewees elaborating and expressing themselves using their own words (Qu & Dumay, 2011).

3.2 Data collection

3.2.1 Sample selection

To find the sample, a publicly available list with contact information to municipal budget and debt counselors from the Swedish Consumer Agency's[3] (SCA) website was used (Swedish Consumer Agency, n.d.-a). Counselors from this list were requested to partake in the study over email, in which the purpose of the study was described, and anonymity granted. The authors sent out a total of 63 emails, with 23 responding that they wanted to partake in the study, of which two later withdrew from the study due to a lack of time. In

[3] "Konsumentverket" in Swedish

total, 21 interviews took place between the 18th of February and 21st of March 2025. The only criteria for interviewees were that they worked as municipal budget and debt counselors. Counselors were interviewed across municipalities, however, all participants were treated as part of a single sample, reflecting the aim to treat BDC as a case for investigating how financial communication is carried out in contexts of low financial literacy. The form of employment could vary, as some worked full-time and others part-time or hourly. This was not known beforehand and was not deemed to significantly affect the responses. The sample size was regarded as large enough to reach saturation as recurring themes began to emerge across interviews and no substantially new insights appeared in the final interviews (Saunders, Sim, Kingstone, Baker, Waterfield, Bartlam, Burroughs & Jinks, 2018). Hence, the data collected was deemed to sufficiently capture the variations and depth of counselors' sensegiving.

Budget and debt counseling clients were not interviewed for ethical reasons due to the vulnerability of their position. Many clients experience financial, and emotional, distress, and involving them in research could risk exacerbating these feelings or threaten integrity. As this study focuses on sensegiving strategies from the counselor's perspective, it was deemed enough to focus on the counseling side of the interaction.

3.2.2 Performing the interviews

All interviews were conducted through online video calls during the course of five weeks. Due to the sample being geographically dispersed, face-to-face interviews were not a feasible option due to time and cost constraints. Conducting the interviews digitally also allowed the interviewees to participate in the interview from any place of their convenience and comfort. Video calls were preferred over phone interviews as it offers visual cues, and research suggests they do not significantly hinder the interviewer's ability to build rapport compared to face-to-face interviews (Bryman & Bell, 2015). At the beginning of each interview, the interviewers presented themselves, reminded the interviewees of the purpose of the study, and asked if the interviewee had any questions before commencing, as recommended by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009). In addition, interviewees were reminded of their anonymity. Subsequently, the interviewees were asked if they consented to the interview being recorded, to allow the interviewers to focus on the subject and the conversation dynamics (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) and to not lose used phrases (Bryman & Bell, 2015). All interviewees gave their consent to be recorded and quoted in the study. Each of them was also informed that if there was anything they said that they did not want to be mentioned in the study, that would be fully respected. All interviews were conducted in Swedish, which was preferred since it was the interviewees' working language. During interviews, one author led with questions while the other one took notes and asked follow-up or clarifying questions. The interviews were guided by an interview guide (see Appendix A), covering key themes such as their

communication style, how they assess and adapt to clients' levels of financial understanding, as well as the roles of visualization, metaphors, and other tools to help clients make sense of the information. As a semi-structured method was employed, the interview guide was used as a framework, but the exact questions asked in each interview depended on how the interview unfolded. Furthermore, the interview guide was not handed out to interviewees before the interview (except for two interviewees who explicitly demanded it) as this was argued to probe more authentic responses. On average, each interview lasted 43 minutes (measured from the first interview question), totaling to approximately 15 hours of interview material.

In **table 1**, an overview of all interviews is provided. Interviewees' names have been replaced with aliases to protect anonymity.

Table 1. Overview of interviews

Interview nr.	Name	Date (yyyy-mm-dd)	Duration (min:sek)
1	Alice	2025-02-18	43:11
2	Bianca	2025-02-19	44:29
3	Claire	2025-02-19	39:48
4	Diana	2025-02-19	33:26
5	Eric	2025-02-20	35:59
6	Freya	2025-02-21	49:04
7	Gabriella	2025-02-21	54:11
8	Hanna	2025-02-24	40:39
9	Isabelle	2025-02-24	30:27
10	Jane	2025-02-26	54:52
11	Marcus	2025-02-28	38:40
12	Nicole	2025-02-28	41:14
13	Omar	2025-02-28	43:18
14	Patrik	2025-03-03	42:05
15	Rebecca	2025-03-04	47:14
16	Sarah	2025-03-04	48:14
17	Toby	2025-03-05	40:22
18	Uno	2025-03-05	46:27
19	Vera	2025-03-12	34:54
20	Kate	2025-03-12	43:32
21	Yasmine	2025-03-21	42:02

3.3 Data analysis

As a first step, all interviews were transcribed within 24 hours. The recordings of the interviews were transcribed using an AI-tool (see Appendix B) for time efficiency reasons, and the output was then manually checked for accuracy by listening through the audio and comparing with written notes. Within this time frame, initial coding and familiarization of the data was also conducted through scrutinizing the transcriptions, in line with Bryman & Bell (2016). This included marking extracts deemed surprising or interesting, including similarities and differences compared to previous interviews and literature, and highlighting relevant quotes. To limit potential researcher bias affecting the validity of the interpretations of the data (Ryan, Scapens, & Theobald, 2002), data was analyzed independently before discussing the findings and agreeing on an interpretation.

Subsequently, a thematic analysis was conducted, meaning the data was organized into themes related to the research focus (Bryman & Bell., 2015). This was done in a systematic fashion with the use of a spreadsheet matrix in which data and codes were collated and categorized into themes, consistent with the framework approach recommended by Bryman & Bell (2015). The analysis iterated between analysis of individual interviews, cross-interview comparisons, and connections to previous research. Flexibility and openness to unexpected findings were made possible by the abductive process (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Initially, the thesis focused on counselors' strategies and tools to help clients understand financial information, emphasizing the cognitive dimensions of sensegiving. However, as the interviews progressed, the centrality of emotions in counselors' sensegiving emerged as an unexpected, but significant, pattern. When asked about how they worked with numbers, counselors commonly described that they spent a lot of time not discussing numbers and finances directly but instead providing emotional support. Emotional distress was seen as obstructing clients' sensemaking, and as a response counselors employed various strategies and tools aimed at fostering emotional readiness to engage with financial topics. These emotional aspects of counselors' sensegiving were not accounted for in the initially reviewed literature, which led us to consult theoretical work on sensemaking and emotions (Maitlis et al., 2013; Steigenberger, 2015) to better theorize our findings.

It became apparent that counselors' tools and strategies served two primary functions: either facilitating understanding of financial information or providing emotional support. The thematic analysis was guided by this realization, leading to the categorization of the tools and strategies according to function rather than form. For example, metaphors served different functions as some metaphors were used to explain financial information and others to instill motivation, and were accordingly categorized into different themes, rather than grouped into a single theme of metaphors. After establishing these two broader functional categories, subthemes within each were identified. In the first category,

different forms of tools were distinguished, for example separating between metaphors and visualizations as different types of tools for fulfilling the overarching purpose of making financial information intelligible. In the second category, emotional support strategies were further differentiated, as it was identified that some strategies aimed at instilling positive emotions, and others at reducing negative emotions.

As the interviews were conducted in Swedish, the presented quotes have been translated to English. The translation aimed to remain as direct as possible while preserving the intended meaning of specific Swedish terms and expressions. Furthermore, filler words such as ‘uhm’ were removed from the quotes to enhance readability and more clearly convey the meaning of the statements, while also aiming to present the interviewees’ statements in a respectful and ethically appropriate way, following Kvale & Brinkmann (2009). The data analysis resulted in the empirical analysis presented in the following section.

4 Empirical Analysis

In the following section, the empirical analysis is presented, drawing on the previous research within financial literacy, emotions, and sensemaking. First, we present the context and background affecting counselors' sensegiving. Secondly, we present how counselors understand their role considering this context, to lastly examine how this translates into different sensegiving tools and strategies.

4.1 Context and background

To understand how counselors engage in sensegiving, it is first important to understand the broader context in which they operate. In this section, context and background relating to the conditions that shape their work at large are outlined, showing how a lack of guidelines contributes to a role ambiguity requiring counselors to define and develop their own practices.

Swedish law stipulates that municipalities are responsible for providing budget and debt counseling to indebted people, including throughout debt restructuring, and that the Swedish Consumer Agency (SCA) is responsible for providing support and guidance for the counseling (Social Services Act, 2001, 12 §). The Swedish Enforcement Authority (SEA) handles debt collection and restructuring and is therefore another central organization which counselors work with. In addition to their recommendations, the SCA provides courses to counselors. Despite counselors highlighting the importance, as well as challenge, of effective communication in this setting, the SCA provides little guidance on how to concretely communicate with clients. Rather, their courses are centered around the law and how the Enforcement Authority works. The counselors also reported that they have no guidelines or instructions on how to structure or perform the meetings. As Erik put it: “No, we have no guidelines. We just go for it.”

In addition to the SCA, the counselors mentioned that they have a national BDC association, and some have regional conferences or meetings with colleagues in their municipality, through which they can get support, advice, and discuss challenges in their role. However, according to Patrik: “[The regional meetings] are more about changes in the rules at the Enforcement Authority or the Consumer Agency, which is our supporting authority, their changes. I feel that we haven’t quite reached the level where we’re talking about what we actually do.” Many of the counselors were also the only one in their municipality, which several noted could be a challenge as they lacked the opportunity to discuss challenges and get support from colleagues.

Several also mentioned their prior educational or professional background as being influential in their way of working and communicating. While most of the interviewees have a background in social work, some have backgrounds in law, statistics, psychology etc. For example, Toby said that "Some things you have picked up from your previous work experience, and probably from having worked with statistics I think some things are easy to visualize with tables and charts."

The counselors are autonomous in their work, and while they receive some input and support from colleagues and the SCA, there was a consensus among the interviewees that their way of working and communicating are primarily based on their experience of what works well and not, developed through trial and error. However, several also noted that it can be difficult to develop and refine their approaches, both due to a lack of feedback systems as well as a lack of time, and that they would prefer to have more guidance. As Sarah said:

> There is a high demand among colleagues [of guidance] in how to communicate, for example to people with neuropsychiatric disorders. [...] But we don't have anything like that. It's very much up to the individual to recognize the gap and find a solution. But that takes time, and it's hard to prioritize when everything is on fire everywhere.

The involvement of multiple stakeholders and the absence of formal guidelines appeared to result in role ambiguity. This necessitates that counselors themselves actively interpret and define their role, mission, and how it should be performed. As such, understanding how counselors interpreted their role in this context becomes central to understanding the foundations of their sensegiving practices.

4.2 The dual role of budget and debt counselors

In the interviews, it was found that counselors, both implicitly and explicitly, understand their role as two-folded; that of an advisor and that of a supporter. Each role aimed at addressing a corresponding challenge in the sensegiving process and, consequently, how counselors understood their role appeared to guide their choice of sensegiving tools and strategies. In the following section, an empirical analysis of how counselors interpreted their own role is presented, first looking at counselors' role as advisors, addressing lack of financial knowledge, and secondly, looking at their role as emotional supporters, before presenting how these roles were carried out through corresponding sensegiving tools and strategies.

4.2.1 Pedagogical advising: addressing lack of financial knowledge

When asked to describe their role and areas of responsibility, the interviewees described that in their role they offer budget advisory, debt advisory, guidance and support throughout debt restructuring, and work preventatively. As previously mentioned, the counselors receive no guidelines for meetings. Claire elaborated on this matter and explained that:

> I follow my own approach entirely. Of course, I have a certain routine before meetings, and it's mostly about gathering as much information as possible to be able to compile it in a simple way. I have a form that I send out where they can fill in some details. But again, that doesn't work for everyone. Many also find it complicated. But we start with that. They take the lead. [I ask them:] what has happened, what do they need help with, and what does the situation look like? And from there, I ask further questions.

Many of the counselors gave similar descriptions as Claire, underlining that they are highly autonomous in their work. In addition, because they usually have little to no information about new clients, the first meeting is usually centered around understanding the client's situation and what they want help with, and to do so many of them have a set of questions that they usually start with and then they work their way from there. Sarah said that:

> It is a voluntary service, so the overall goal is first and foremost to listen to what the person seeking advice expresses as their needs. So that must be number one and then from that I can see that okay but here something is missing. And then when they express their needs, I can see that they lack understanding of certain things that would perhaps make them want something else. So then I try to broaden the picture. And from that then, it is of course to help them to have as good a financial situation as possible based on what they want.

Toby described that: "The main goal is really to help to self-help, first and foremost. People should come out of the sessions a bit more knowledgeable and better equipped to manage their situation." The expression, 'help to self-help' was used by several interviewees when describing their purpose. Omar had a similar view and explained that: "You could say that I provide financial education, really. I'm trying to spark interest. [It is] not only [about] solving the acute situation but providing takeaways for the long term." The interviewees commonly acknowledged the importance of providing knowledge to help their clients become self-sufficient in managing their finances, and that in doing so they need to adapt to the knowledge-level of the client. Moreover, in line with previous research on the relationships between debt, financial decision-making, and financial literacy (Disney et al., 2015; Gathergood, 2012) most interviewees described that, based on their experience, the financial knowledge among their clients is generally low. As

Marcus said: “Most often the level of knowledge is very low. [...] They don’t know what interest is.” Several others had a similar experience of clients recurrently not understanding how interest works, although it was also noted that there are large variations among clients with regards to financial knowledge. For example, Nicole noted that “Some are really knowledgeable, and then there are others who barely understand that [they] took a loan that has interest, and it will get more expensive to pay back.” Rebecca also shared her view on this and explained that “My perception is that personal finance is very abstract [to the clients].”

According to Patrik, even the term ‘finance’[4] can be ambiguous:

> I think one example of this is when people hear the word 'finance.' For many, it might mean becoming wealthier, if you put it a bit casually or simply. So, it's like… how should I put it? Often, you have to clarify that it’s not about that kind of finance. It’s about household finance and how to use money so that the household can live well. The term 'finance' itself is a bit complicated to use.

Most interviewees also noted that the SEA uses a lot of technical terms in letters, which clients usually don’t understand and therefore the counselors often have to explain what they mean. Two of the counselors elaborated on this matter:

> The language used by the Swedish Enforcement Authority is from the eighteen hundreds. It hasn’t changed. There are terms like 'reserve amount calculation'[5] [...], a lot of terms like that. People just want the information they actually need to find their solution. There’s rarely a personal finance interest in understanding effective interest rates, nominal interest rates [etc]. – Sarah

> I think that the Swedish Enforcement Authority uses difficult terms. When I worked there I was informed that we should use more colloquial language and describe things in a better way. [...] In my experience the Enforcement Authority’s written communication is difficult to understand because that's one of the most common questions: What do they want? – Toby

It was highlighted that communicating in a way that clients understand is critical. As Bianca said, “The most important thing is that we sit here and that my client, or clients, understand what we’re talking about and grasp it — because only then can they start to accept, process, and change.” On a similar note, Patrik said that:

> I’ve come to understand more and more that [the role] is really about pedagogy. It’s about illustrating finances in different ways, depending on the person sitting next to me.

[4] “Ekonomi” was the Swedish term used
[5] “Förbehållsbeloppsberäkning” in Swedish

Thus, consistent with Bay (2018), the counselors emphasized that in order to have an impact on clients with little financial knowledge, they have to illustrate financial information in a pedagogical way that is adapted to the client's abilities. In particular, low financial knowledge and language barriers arising from old-fashioned, legal language in the SEAs communication were seen as recurring obstructions to clients' ability to make sense of the information presented. Accordingly, the counselors saw their role as pedagogical advisors, aiming at overcoming these challenges, in order to ultimately help clients make sense of personal finance to become self-sufficient in managing their finances.

4.2.2 Emotional supporting: addressing emotional barriers for sensegiving

Counselors not only need to attend to clients' level of financial knowledge, but also the emotions clients experienced. While pedagogical tools and strategies were seen as important for promoting cognitive understanding, counselors emphasized that making financial information meaningful also generally required dealing with the emotional distress among clients. The counselors described how their clients often experience strong emotions, aligning with previous research proposing that confronting financial realities can evoke a range of feelings (Gilbert, 2021; Gladstone et al., 2021). The counselors noted that this was particularly the case in the first meeting, where strong negative emotions including sadness, anxiety, and stress are common. As Alice described:

> I usually say that 80% of the people who visit me for the first time cry. They are sad. Yes. Sad, devastated. Angry, no. […] I always have tissues in my room.

Clients' emotional burden strongly shapes counselors' role, extending beyond that of a budget and debt advisor. Counselors often find themselves offering emotional support, similar to that of a therapist, as they assist clients in navigating both financial and personal distress, rather than just financial advice. As Uno put it:

> I sometimes say that the role is about 50% financial expert and 50% therapist.

Several counselors made similar statements and described that the role requires not only financial competence, but also the ability to respond to people in distress. Clients often feel bad, not only with regards to their financial situation, but also other social issues. As Patrik explained:

> It's also often the case that there are combined issues, so to speak. [Financial issues] are frequently connected to what might be defined as social problems or mental health issues and such, which also need to be managed in the conversation.

Maitlis et al. (2013) suggested that very intense emotions can impede sensemaking by consuming the energy required to engage in sensemaking at all, and similarly Steigenberger (2015) suggested that emotions affect the likelihood that a person will be open to others' sensegiving activities. In line with this, the counselors reported that clients' emotional distress makes it difficult for them to get through to the clients as they do not have the energy to digest new information. As Sarah described:

> It's also something that's often forgotten in these contexts, [...] how cognitive ability is affected by stress. [...] For example, if someone has PTSD from domestic violence, they hear what you say, but it disappears. It's not stored, and they can't handle or process the information. [...] If they are living in acute stress, it's hard to reach them. You can have a meeting, and then they run off and forget what you said. We try to be pedagogical, draw on the board, ask them to take pictures of the board, and have an interpreter if needed, and so on. [...] It took quite a while before I realized how many meetings I've had with people who sit and nod, so you really think they've understood, but they haven't remembered a thing.

Client's emotional state does not only affect their ability to handle new information, but also their ability to do tasks and make changes to turn their financial situation around, aligning with Steigenberger's (2015) suggestion that certain emotions, like anxiety, negatively affect the motivation to act. Yasmine explained that:

> After a while, it comes up that they are feeling unwell or that there are other things that they need to deal with. Debt restructuring is maybe not sufficient to solve everything. [...] Because as long as [the client] is feeling bad, they might not have the energy to be strict with themselves in their budget.

As the above quotes illustrate, the counselors commonly conveyed that they've experienced that being pedagogic is oftentimes not enough to bring about cognitive and behavioral change among clients as understanding and acting on financial information requires emotional engagement (Pettersson & Wettergren, 2021). Hence, counselors do not only have to adapt to the client's knowledge level, but also their emotional state, which further supports theory on the impact of emotions in sensemaking and sensegiving (Maitlis et al., 2013; Steigenberger, 2015). In cases where a client's emotions are overwhelming, counselors noted that they need to address other issues and calm down the client's emotions before moving the discussion about debt and budgets forward. Thus, moderating intense negative emotions was seen as a foundational step to be able move forward with giving sense to financial information at all. This corresponds with Maitlis et al. (2013), asserting that while extremely intense emotions can hinder sensemaking, moderately intense negative emotions energize sensemaking.

As previously mentioned, the counselors regularly brought up anxiety, stress, and sadness as prominent emotions among clients. However, the most prominent emotion that all

interviewees mentioned that they often see and hear clients express is, consistent with prior research on financial hardship (Gladstone et al., 2021), intense shame. As Alice described it:

> There is so incredibly much shame. I didn't understand when I first started working with this that being in debt is [associated with] one being failed. One lacks character. One lacks motivation. One lacks drive. There is so much [...] external shame and blame that they internalize.

As suggested by Maitlis et al. (2013), shame, as a global self-conscious emotion, appeared to bring about more solitary sensemaking among clients. Often, clients told counselors that they are the first person they have ever talked to about their indebtedness because they are so ashamed, and that this shame also makes them more closed off. The counselors also experience that people refrain from seeking help because they are afraid that they will be shamed and blamed, and that they wish clients would contact them earlier. One of the interviewees shared that they believed the word 'debt' is strongly associated with shame and therefore choose to use the titles "Budget Counselor" or "Financial Advisor" instead, to make clients feel more comfortable and encourage them to seek their help. As such, the counselors explained that an important part of the job is reducing shame among clients:

> But also [my job is] to remove as much of the blame and shame as possible. Because I believe that is the worst part, that it is so shameful. – Gabriella

The perception of indebtedness as shameful was described as an ingrained societal or cultural construct. Clients having previously been shamed and blamed by people in their surroundings was mentioned as one reason clients expect the counselors to treat them the same way. This echoes the notion of individual responsibilization of finance being a societal trend (Gilbert, 2021), and that irresponsible financial behavior is seen as a sign of personal failure (Gladstone et al., 2021; Gilbert, 2021). Furthermore, this aligns with the suggestion that the likelihood of experiencing shame following mismanagement being higher in contexts where cultural norms stress individual responsibility and accountability (Maitlis et al., 2013).

Many counselors also brought up the television show the Luxury Trap which they critiqued in this regard, for reinforcing feelings and expectations of humiliation, shame, and blame. As Uno put it: "What [people] see on TV, the Luxury Trap, for example, it's like, 'What the hell were you thinking?', and that makes for good TV. That's what they expect." Alice also shared her view on this:

> [Clients] haven't wanted to seek help because they're afraid it will be like the Luxury Trap. But when they come, it's nothing like the Luxury Trap at all. [They can say things like] 'I thought you were going to start selling my things at the market.' And then I can laugh to myself, like, as if I would. But that's their fear. So the Luxury Trap — and I might be sticking my neck out here — ends up being an entertainment show for those of us who aren't in debt.

Bay (2018) also emphasized that the show frames indebtedness and irresponsible spending behavior as shameless, but in sharp contrast to the findings above, suggested that provoking such emotions among participants pushed them "to interpret and relate to their finances differently" (p. 52) and that the show provides support and inspiration viewers as well. This contrast will be further elaborated on and discussed in section 5.2.

All in all, the preceding section illustrates that counselors, in their efforts to provide effective sensegiving, must attend to several aspects of financial literacy. It is not just about a lack of knowledge but also a lack of motivation and confidence to do something about the situation. Building on Steigenberger (2015) and Maitlis et al. (2013), emotions play a threefold role; if they are energized to engage in sensemaking, if they are receptive to sensegiving, and subsequently if they feel motivated and confident to act upon this information. Thus, even if financial information is made intelligible, it may not be enough. Hence, the tools and strategies used for sensegiving need to also address this threefold impact of emotions on financial literacy.

4.3 Tools and strategies for sensegiving

In the following section, we present more concretely how the counselors aim to give sense to their clients. The tools and strategies employed are used for different purposes, corresponding with the dual roles described in section 4.2. While some tools are used to address financial knowledge, making numbers and information intelligible, other tools are used to combat negative emotions hindering sensegiving and address the confidence and motivation to act upon information. Although the latter does not involve numbers or financial concepts, they are equally, if not more, important in supporting clients' sensemaking.

4.3.1 Dealing with numbers: making financial information intelligible

Below, a set of strategies and tools counselors use for accommodating low financial knowledge when giving sense to financial information is presented. The various strategies and tools repeatedly used for this broader purpose have been categorized into four subthemes. The first theme revolves around counselors' choice of what accounting information to include and not, making simplifications to make it less overwhelming. The

second theme covers figurative verbal language, through which abstract or complex financial concepts are verbally expressed in more familiar, relatable terms. The third theme includes visual modes of communication, such as graphs, drawings, and spreadsheets to help clients retain information and make it more graspable. The fourth theme is centered on practical tools for encouraging clients to reflect on their spending behaviors and prioritization, for example by accumulating costs over time to put them in a new light.

Limiting the amount of financial information

One common type of strategy among counselors is limiting the amount of information, only introducing the most important, core information that is relevant to the client's situation. This includes avoiding using unfamiliar jargon or terminology and instead using colloquial language and rewording complex notions and terms with simpler words, in line with Hall (2010) and Nordlund et al. (2024). For example, Nicole explained that:

> I believe that using difficult words adds no value if the person doesn't understand them anyway. [...] I'm thinking about amortizing – paying back, reducing the loan. Then there are also terms [I avoid when] explaining how the Enforcement Authority works with payment capacity or reserve amount calculation. With these kinds of words, I try to explain what they actually mean; what you're allowed to keep and what they will take or seize.

The strategy also includes not going deeply into details, but focusing on the bigger picture, for example by making very simple and crude budgets, similar to how managers presented accounting information to caseworkers in Bukh et al. (2021). Marcus elaborated on this:

> I'm also out there fighting a bit, especially with the Consumer Agency. They create these nice budgets, Excel sheets they want people to use. But the people who come to me, they can barely read two lines before they lose interest. It's just boring. [However, doing] a simple budget: one income entry, usually salary or benefits, and then four or five expense categories; food, rent, electricity, car, and other, then people have the energy to manage it.

To further direct the focus to the most relevant, useful information in these simple budgets, counselors commonly divide up the monthly budget into weekly or even daily budgets, making it easier to manage and follow. Hanna explained that:

> When we work with simple budgeting, it's mostly about sorting out what expenses [the client] has, and you tell them that the ones that are important they have to pay as soon as they receive their income. Then, whatever is left is divided week by week. So if you have 4,000 [SEK] left, that means you have

> 1,000 [SEK] per week at your disposal. This makes it easier to handle. I'm not a fan of making overly advanced budgets because they just become too difficult.

By using these simplifications and avoiding jargon, counselors limit the amount of financial information to the most relevant and decision-useful information in line with Hall (2010), Bukh et al (2021) and Nordlund (2024). Counselors chose which elements to emphasize and reworded technical terms to make them more accessible and avoid details deemed irrelevant to the client. In this way, counselors help transform potentially overwhelming information into something more manageable, intelligible, and actionable for the client.

Metaphorical language

In line with previous accounting literature (Bukh et al., 2021; Carlson-Wall et al., 2016; Tucker, 2017), several counselors reported that they use metaphorical language to give sense to unfamiliar financial concepts and notions. For example, Bianca could sometimes describe compound interest using metaphorical representation:

> "We might talk about the compound interest method, for example, to show how money grows. It's like a small snowball that, over the years – if we're talking about pensions – the more years that pass, I almost get up and say, 'Look, it grows this big in the end.'"

Some other examples of metaphorical representations that counselors mentioned that they use was describing high-interest costs as "flushing money down the drain" to illustrate how using borrowed money instead of disposable income for regular expenses leads to unnecessary costs. Additionally, budgeting was compared to cooking, where income is like ingredients, highlighting the importance of assessing what you have, before deciding how to allocate it.

Patrik frequently uses metaphors and explained that he often draws a house on a whiteboard to illustrate household finances, stating, "A house is a nice, simple symbol for a household." He then extends the metaphor by representing money as water flowing through the house's pipes; income flowing in, which can be directed to different areas such as savings, amortization, and expenses. Additionally, he uses a water tank to symbolize a financial buffer.

However, some counselors reported that they refrain from using metaphorical language, because they thought it risks confusing clients. Toby argued for metaphors to be helpful for simplifying a concept "It requires that we have the same basic understanding to begin with. If we don't share the same view of it, then it becomes difficult." In line with Carlson-Wall et al. (2016) and Tucker (2017) this indicates that the usefulness of metaphors as

sensegiving tools is dependent on finding an appropriate metaphor that is accessible to the audience, which can be challenging.

Visualization

The counselors reported that they often present numbers and concepts visually through graphs, drawings, objects, writing, and spreadsheets, similar to Bay (2018) and Aresu & Monfardini (2023).

One way this was done was by presenting, writing down verbalized words or numbers as they are, and sometimes drawing arrows to illustrate relationships between them. By textualizing and structuring what is said on either spreadsheets, paper, or whiteboard while talking, counselors aim to help clients follow along and retain key information. Writing or drawing while explaining was also seen as a useful technique for keeping clients focused as it engages multiple senses, while also making it easier for them to revisit the material later, either by taking notes home or photographing the visuals. This is similar to how Aresu & Monfardini (2023) used visual tools to enhance the clarity and precision of financial information. When presenting large amounts of information, visualizing was described as particularly helpful for creating a clearer overview. As Sarah explained:

> I might write 'enforcement' as a heading, for example. Then I draw an arrow pointing downward to symbolize the path to becoming debt-free. Along this arrow, I illustrate [the different steps]. [...] I think that the whiteboard, it's a helpful tool to get all the information [compiled] in front of you at once. Instead of just talking – where the information comes and goes in your head and you lose track of where you even started – you can compare one thing to another and see clear cause-and-effect relationships.

Using pen and paper was also considered beneficial, as it allowed clients to actively engage by filling in numbers themselves, further helping them to follow along and retain focus. As Yasmine put it:

> I think there is value in them writing and filling in [the budget] themselves. [...] And for that purpose I think paper and pen [...] are good. Writing, looking, and listening – it's classic – to engage multiple senses.

Another type of visualization counselors reported to use was to present numbers not just as they are, in their numerical form (as in the preceding examples), but in a different, more accessible form to enhance understanding. Similar to what Bay (2018) found, counselors use visualization to re-present numbers when they do not make sense to clients in its numerical form. For example, Bianca explained that drawing can be helpful when

discussing percentages, saying: “Yes, and what is 25%? Some people don’t know that either. What is 25%? It’s like [one of] four parts of a circle. So you have to draw it because it can’t just be explained with words.”

Other examples of re-presentations (Bay, 2018) include using visual aids like graphs, most commonly bar charts, to illustrate numerical comparisons, such as the size of expenses relative to income. Vera, one of the counselors who use this technique, explained: “Otherwise, I have a budget template that displays a graph of income and expenses. Once you enter rent, electricity, food, and everything else on the left, it builds up. Then you can clearly see with two bars whether expenses exceed income.”

Several counselors also use faux paper bills in order to make income and expenses easier to understand, or as Patrik said: “in case you need to concretize”. It was further argued that by only seeing money digitally in your internet bank, just as numbers going back and forward, makes it harder for people to feel its value. Bay (2018) also found that re-presenting numbers with bills, as tangible objects, to be useful for giving sense to numbers as they allow people to see and feel the numbers, arguing that it brings the numbers closer to reality. However, other counselors chose to not use faux money, as few people use physical money these days, making faux paper bills unfamiliar and rather confusing, they reasoned. This suggests that when re-presenting numbers through visualization, attempting to bring it closer to lived reality (Bay, 2018), one may have to consider variations in those experiences, for example how bills may be further away from reality to some.

Spending awareness through reflective practices

Previous research (Bay, 2018; Aresu & Monfardini, 2023) has found that keeping account books of everyday spending is a useful tool for bringing about reflection about spending habits and how they relate to one's financial situation. Similarly, counselors described that they sometimes ask clients to bookkeep all their purchases and save their receipts, letting them see, compute and reflect for themselves on how much they spend on different categories, to bring about awareness of costs and priorities. However, contrary to the emotional bookkeeping used in the Luxury Trap (Bay, 2018), the counselors did not ask clients to write down or reflect on the emotions evoked from the spending. Jane explained that:

> If they want to take it a step further, then [I recommend them to start] keeping a spending journal for two to three months, at least to begin with, and see well, how much [do they spend on different categories]? Looking at receipts – How much soda do I buy? [...] Coffee on the go, and so on? When you add it all up, it turns into a lot of money. I try to emphasize that you have to make conscious choices about what to spend your money on.

In addition to bookkeeping, counselors also mentioned another strategy for illustrating spending priorities and giving sense to the relationship between everyday spending habits and one's financial position is by enlightening clients verbally how their spending habits adds up over longer periods. Some counselors then tell clients what they could have bought for that accumulated amount instead, putting their priorities in a new light. Eric described how he use this method:

> For example, someone who smokes, I never tell anyone to quit smoking, instead, I tell them what it costs. What do you think it costs to smoke a pack a day for a year? Around 25,000 [SEK]. For many, that's more than a month's salary. I usually [ask]: Do you think it's worth working for a month just to afford smoking? Or [tell them that] that money could pay for a pretty nice vacation instead.

This is similar to how Bay (2018) described the function of the Lego Calculus exercise in the Luxury Trap. Applying Bay's (2018) argument to the above example, Erik moves between numerical and non-numerical re-presentations, measuring different qualities (cigarettes, a vacation, one month's work) with a common numerical metric (25,000 SEK) to make client to evaluate spending habits in a new way.

In summary, one main part of counselors' sensegiving revolves around making financial information intelligible and this is done through limiting the amount of accounting information, using metaphorical language, utilizing visualization, and tools encouraging reflection. However, a second set of tools and strategies served another instrumental sensegiving purpose.

4.3.2 Beyond the numbers: managing emotions in sensegiving

The second set of tools and strategies counselors rely on in their sensegiving are used with the purpose of providing emotional support to energize the clients' sensemaking process, making them more receptive to sensegiving, and subsequently making them feel motivated and confident to act upon this information. These tools and strategies are thus employed for a different type of purpose than the first set described above. The separation between the two is thus not based on the form of tool or strategy, but on the type of purpose or function that they serve. Similarly, these tools and strategies presented below further have been divided into two subcategories, as some tools aim at reducing negative emotions, while others aim at instilling positive emotions and motivation. Hence, both aim to address emotions, but still serve different functions in the sensegiving process.

Reducing shame, anxiety, sadness and stress

As mentioned in section 4.2.2, the counselors perceived that clients coming in often exhibit intense negative emotions, especially shame, but also anxiety, sadness, and stress, illustrating the emotional complexity of BDC. Counselors reported that these intense emotions make it difficult for them to get through to the clients when trying to give sense to financial information. As a first step, the counselors employ strategies and tools to reduce, or calm down, such negative emotions for clients to become receptive to their sensegiving efforts at all, or in Maitlis et al.'s (2013) terms, moderate clients' emotions to energize their sensemaking process.

Many explained that just listening to clients, as a fellow human being, can help them a lot, especially in the first meeting. As many clients haven't told anyone about their situation before, just letting it out could be an emotional relief. As Sarah put it:

> The first meeting might just be about them sitting, talking, and crying. They may never have told anyone about this before. Simply getting the space to share something that carries so much shame and stress can be a release, so to speak. [...] They talk, they cry, and they're terrified that we'll be harsh and judgmental — but we're not. And just that brings relief, and then you can move the conversation forward because they feel seen and heard. So many times, that alone goes a long way.

Being calm, not so serious, and playing down the situation a bit, explaining that it is not the end of the world and that there is no need to panic, could also help a lot in bringing down clients' intense emotions, such as stress and shame. As Gabriella said:

> I'm also quite easy-going in here. I might throw in a little joke too, just playing it down as much as possible. This isn't the end of the world. We'll look at it and take it one step at a time.

Counselors argued that moralizing language can reinforce feelings of shame among clients, which, in line Gladstone et al., (2021), could make them engage in avoidance behaviors and reluctant to engage in the counseling process. Consistent with what Gladstone et al. (2021) suggests about affirmative kindness, counselors described that not being judgmental or moralizing was key to dealing with shame constraining the sensegiving process. Toby explained that:

> I try to always be objective and not include any form of judgment in how I behave and speak. They are already so good at judging themselves, so they don't need another person doing it too.

For example, when going through clients' spendings, rather than telling them that a certain spending habit is bad and that they shouldn't spend money on X or Y, counselors aim to

be as neutral as possible by simply stating the amount, and then letting them decide themselves whether that is good or not. As Nicole explained:

> Using their money in the way they want – that usually resonates with people. [How they spend their money] it's up to them, rather than me claiming that spending money on this is good or bad. I don't place any judgment; they have to make that evaluation themselves.

A common way of reducing shame to make clients more comfortable to open up is to explain to clients that they are not the only ones in this position, that anyone can make mistakes and that they shouldn't blame themselves for doing what they thought was a good decision in the moment. Alice was one of many counselors who like to share stories about themselves, illustrating that anyone, even them, can make mistakes or unsound decisions:

> I can share a story about myself. [For example, saying something like] That damn water bottle I buy at the store every single time, it's just so ridiculously unnecessary.

By sharing relatable stories and normalizing mistakes, counselors offer what could be seen as acts of affirmative kindness (Gladstone et al., 2021) that resists the idea that debt is a sign of personal failure or social deviance. Instead, these stories position financial struggles as a common, human experience, which not only reduces stigma but also opens up space for new interpretations and emotional responses. In this way, counselors reframe clients' indebtedness as being attributed to specific mistakes rather than their competence or character to make them open up more, which corresponds well to Maitlis et al. (2013) notion of self-conscious emotions in the sensemaking process. Drawing on this notion, we can understand this strategy as encouraging clients' negative self-conscious emotion to shift from a global attribution ("I am bad") to a more specific one ("I made a bad choice"), in turn encouraging a shift from solitary to more social sensemaking.

Instilling motivation, hope, and confidence

Previous research has suggested that not only negative, but also positive emotions affect people's openness to sensegiving (Maitlis et al., 2013; Steigenberger, 2015). When describing their way of communicating with clients, counselors highlighted not only the importance of moderating negative emotions like stress and shame, but also instilling positive emotions, like motivation, hope and confidence. Hope has been suggested to make people more likely to be receptive to sensegiving, and potentially motivate action (Gilbert 2021; Steigenberger, 2015), and pride which is associated with confidence, has been suggested to generate more social sensemaking (Maitlis et al., 2013), aligning with

what counselors suggested about instilling positive emotions being a useful strategy in their sensegiving.

For instance, a conversation method known as ‘motivational interviewing’ is used by several counselors. They explained that this method is all about motivating the client by focusing on solutions and ensuring that they follow along. Focusing on solutions and being future oriented, rather than dwelling into the past and what made them end up in their current situation, was highlighted as a key in bringing about hope and motivation. Rather than focusing on what had been done in the past making the situation worse, they focus on what can be done ahead to make the situation better. Rebecca elaborated on this approach:

> [Clients] are often sad and [say things like] How could I be so stupid? [Then I tell them that:] Unless you have a time machine, it doesn’t matter what you think — you can’t change it. Now, let’s look forward. And that makes them a bit happy. I let them talk it out, and then I say, Yes, that was a mistake, but you can’t change it. Now, we lock that door, throw away the key, and look ahead. Because that gives them hope for the future.

Building clients' confidence was also mentioned as a key part of meetings, for example by giving positive feedback and being confirmatory, in line with what Gladstone et al. (2021) suggested about acts of affirmative kindness. Claire highlighted the importance of building confidence:

> I think an important part [of helping clients regain control over their finances] is making them feel that they are the ones who can actually do it. In the end, it comes down to building confidence and feeling like I can handle this somehow.

To bring about motivation and shift clients' mindset, several counselors also use different metaphors, similar to Tucker (2017). For example, one metaphor that was used by several counselors was explaining that debt restructuring is like a marathon, implying that it is a long process rather than a race you need to rush. Omar provided another example:

> It feels like I use [metaphors] all the time. I often make inferences to sports in different ways. [...] [For example], something like ‘The more shots you shoot, the bigger is your chance of scoring.’

Thus, these metaphors has another functional purpose in the sensegiving process than the metaphors described in section 4.3.1. While accounting talk literature studying the use of accounting metaphors in professional settings has focused on how it can help make accounting more intelligible (Bukh et al., 2021; Carlsson-Wall et al., 2016), this supports

Tucker's (2017) finding that metaphors can also serve sensegiving as a tool for instilling motivation.

In summary, the second aspect of counselors' sensegiving focuses on reducing negative emotions that hamper clients' sensemaking and instilling positive emotions such as hope that encourage the sensemaking process. Furthermore, counselors highlighted the importance of instilling motivation and confidence, to help clients apply, and act on, the information presented, aligning with the definition of financial literacy (OECD, 2020).

5 Discussion

In the following section, the empirical findings are first summarized. Subsequently, how the findings relate to prior literature is discussed, and contributions are accounted for.

5.1 Summary of findings

The empirical analysis shows that counselors recognize that their sensegiving efforts need to include both pedagogical advising and emotional support. Pedagogical advising focus on making financial information intelligible despite low financial knowledge, and emotional support to provide clients with energy to sensemake, increase receptivity to sensegiving, and enhance motivation and confidence to act upon that information. Furthermore, it shows how each of these two dimensions are concretely addressed through different sets of sensegiving tools and strategies. To give sense to numbers, counselors limit the use of financial information, use metaphorical representation, visualization, and reflective practices. Through these tools they aim to make financial information intelligible by adapting to clients' experiences and abilities. To provide emotional support, counselors reduce negative emotions such as shame and stress by, for example, sharing stories and listening. Additionally, they instill positive emotions like hope and confidence, for example through the use of metaphors and a future and solution-oriented approach. These tools target clients' emotional state in order to make clients receptive to sensegiving efforts and motivate action. Thus, while serving different purposes, both of these sets of tools and strategies were seen as important to help clients make sense of financial information. Next, we discuss these findings in more detail and how they relate to prior research.

5.2 Discussion of contributions

First, this section will account for the study's contributions to literature on how financial information is made intelligible. Secondly, contributions to literature on emotions in sensegiving and sensemaking, and how that relates to financial literacy, will be put forward.

5.2.1 Making financial information intelligible

Our findings show that counselors need to make financial information intelligible to clients who generally have low financial literacy, which requires them to re-present the information in a more pedagogical way. This supports Bay's (2018) assertion that for financial information to be impactful, it needs to be made interpretable to the receiver

through pedagogical translations. We find that counselors make such pedagogical translations through the use of certain tools and strategies, resonating with previous literature studying how financial information is made intelligible in other contexts. We distinguish between four types of tools and strategies, whose usage points to more specific connections and contributions to prior literature on these different forms of making financial information intelligible, as discussed below.

First, prior research has shown how professionals use metaphors to explain financial concepts in more familiar terms, positioning metaphors as powerful sensegiving tools (Bukh et al., 2023; Carlsson-Wall et al., 2016; Tucker, 2017). We extend this work by examining how metaphors are used to convey personal financial concepts to individuals with low financial literacy. In Carlsson-Wall et al. (2016), personal finance was used as a metaphor for accounting, which worked because personal financial management and budgeting was already familiar to the audience. In contrast, in the BDC setting, personal finance itself is unfamiliar to many clients. Consequently, rather than using metaphors drawing on financial experiences, counselors turned to particularly tangible, non-financial metaphors – for example linking compound interest to a snowball rolling downhill, more in line with Tucker's (2017) metaphors. Counselors' metaphors tended to have fewer conceptual linkages and were generally used to illustrate a single point, unlike the accounting metaphor in Carlson-Wall et al (2016), which was extended across multiple ideas. Consistent with previous studies, our findings underline that selecting relevant metaphors is challenging; a metaphor must connect abstract concepts to experiences that are truly familiar to the audience, or it risks simply replacing one abstraction with another (Carlson-Wall et al., 2016; Tucker, 2017). Thus, we support the notion of context-dependency of metaphors and further suggest that contexts of low financial literacy constitute a setting where finding an appropriate metaphor can be particularly difficult.

Second, counselors' use of visualization and reflective practices rendering financial information intelligible also resonates with prior research (Aresu & Monfardini, 2023; Bay, 2018). We find that counselors used bookkeeping as a tool to encourage reflection about spending habits and facilitate understanding about how it links to clients' financial situation, consistent with previous findings in literature (Aresu & Monfardini, 2023; Bay, 2018). Similarly, counselors' use of visual tools when presenting large amounts of financial information to enhance clarity also supports previous research (Aresu & Monfardini, 2023). Furthermore, we support Bay's (2018) suggestion that re-presenting numbers visually in non-numerical, more tangible forms to make them more accessible and understandable, can serve as a sensegiving tool in settings where the ability to interpret numbers is limited. Bay (2018) argued that such tangible re-presentations can make numbers intelligible by bringing them closer to 'reality'. However, our discoveries nuance this perspective. Since the physical form of fake bills is disconnected from the reality that some clients experience, some counselors purposefully avoided using them.

This implies that visual re-presentations, such as material objects, depend on the audience's experiences and understanding of reality, rather than being intelligible on their own. With this, we contribute to Bay (2018) by proposing that efforts to make numbers more relatable through visualization must account for variations in audiences perceived realities. In line with prior discussions on the context-dependency of metaphors (Carlson-Wall et al., 2016; Tucker, 2017), the usefulness of visual re-presentations of numbers appears to hinge on the selected re-presentations being relevant to the audience.

Third, previous accounting research studying how accounting information becomes meaningful within organizations has suggested that leaving out accounting jargon, and other more complex accounting information that is less important and relevant to the recipient of the information can also make it more intelligible and useful (Bukh et al., 2021; Hall, 2010; Nordlund et al., 2024). We find that counselors make similar adjustments, in particular avoiding jargon and making crude, simple budgets, thereby limiting the amount of accounting information to what was deemed most relevant and decision-useful to the client. Apart from the aforementioned translation activities, we also find that counselors use a different set of tools and strategies, managing emotions, as part of their sensegiving efforts, bringing us to our next contribution.

5.2.2 Managing emotions in sensegiving

Accounting literature has looked at how numbers intersect with emotional experiences (e.g. Repenning et al., 2022; Hidayah et al., 2024; Boedker & Chua, 2013; Baxter et al., 2019; Bay, 2018). Within this broader discussion, we contribute more specifically to Bay (2018) by suggesting that attempts to give sense to financial information cognitively through pedagogical illustrations may not be enough to facilitate sensemaking for individuals with limited financial literacy. Drawing on Maitlis et al. (2013), we find that clients often display very intense negative emotions, stripping them of the energy required to make sense of the information, even if it is translated. Hence, accomplishing to give sense to financial information relies not only on the sense-givers pedagogical skills (Bay, 2018), but that it also critically depends on the provision of emotional support to fuel the energy required for sensemaking to occur at all. Thus, to help make financial information understandable and acted upon in this context, emotional support may be necessary before attending translations of financial information.

In addition, by studying how counselors concretely manage emotions we contribute to sensemaking literature concerned with emotions' conceptual effect on sensemaking and sensegiving (Maitlis et al., 2013; Steigenberger, 2015) by suggesting how emotions can be practically navigated to advance sensegiving. Below, these emotional support practices and their more specific connections to prior literature are discussed. We first discuss how counselors' efforts to manage negative emotions, particularly shame, connect to and extend prior research. Then we turn to how counselors instill positive emotions, including

the use of metaphors for this purpose, and discuss how these practices relate to and extend extant literature.

First, we find that this emotional support includes calming down very intense negative emotions like stress, anxiety, sadness, and shame, by for example providing a safe space for clients to talk about their situation, not placing judgement, and using an easy-going rather than serious tone. Following Maitlis et al., (2013), these strategies can be understood as a way of bringing down negative emotions to a moderate intensity, making it more likely that clients will engage in sensemaking.

Shame was a prominent emotion that counselors devoted particular effort into reducing as it was seen to make clients closed off. This is consistent with prior research, suggesting that shame increases the likelihood of avoidance behaviors (Gladstone et al., 2021), and solitary sensemaking (Maitlis et al., 2013). To reduce shame, counselors reframe indebtedness as something being attributed to specific mistakes rather than one's general competence and character. Following Maitlis et al., (2013) these shame-reducing efforts can be interpreted as an attempt to shift clients' self-conscious emotions from global to specific, in turn encouraging a shift from solitary to more social sensemaking, increasing their receptiveness to sensegiving.

This emphasis on reducing shame appears to contrast with findings from Bay (2018), who suggested that reinforcing emotions such as shame could help participants interpret finances and approach them differently. Maitlis et al., (2013) provides potential explanations for this variation. First, it might stem from the participants Bay (2018) analyzed initially experiencing no, or less intense, shame compared to what counselors in the current study witnessed among clients. In that case, instilling or reinforcing shame may have brought about moderately intense shame, energizing participants' sensemaking process, rather than contributing to overly intense shame inhibiting the process. Moreover, in line with Maitlis et al.'s (2013) assertion about "burning platform" rhetoric, it could be the case that the shame-inducing framing, accentuating the severity of the situation, led participants to relate to their finances differently because it motivated action without necessarily enhancing interpretability. As such, we argue that these findings are not necessarily contradictory but instead underscore the complex role of emotions in sensegiving.

Secondly, we find that counselors instill positive emotions to enhance receptiveness to sensegiving, and motivate action. In particular, they aim at instilling hope aligning with Steigenberger's (2015) assertion that hope makes people more open to others' sensegiving efforts and has the potential to motivate action. To instill hope, counselors employ a future- and solution-oriented focus which frames debt as a more manageable challenge, consistent with Gilbert (2021). Moreover, we find that counselor's use metaphors to instill a motivational mindset, suggesting that in addition to the more acknowledged role of

facilitating cognitive sensemaking of financial information (Bukh et al., 2021, Carlsson-Wall et al., 2016), metaphors can also target the emotional ability to make sense of and act on such information (Tucker, 2017).

6 Conclusion

Following Bay's (2018) call for more research on "how emotions drive or hinder, enable or circumscribe the way that people read financial accounts." (p. 52), this study has qualitatively explored BDC as a topical case where financial literacy cannot be presumed, and intense emotions are present. To investigate the tools and strategies used by municipal budget and debt counselors to sensegive financial information in this context, the following research question was posed: *How is financial information given sense to in municipal budget and debt counseling?*

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with Swedish municipal budget and debt counselors and later analyzed drawing on prior research on financial literacy and sensemaking.

The study's findings support Bay's (2018) assertion that in cases of low financial literacy, financial information does not automatically make sense but needs to be translated into intelligible forms. The study further extends this finding, suggesting that even if the information is intelligible, individuals can struggle with making sense of and act on the information due to emotional barriers, and in that case, sensegiving of financial information also needs to incorporate emotional support. Sensemaking literature has suggested that some emotions benefit, and others hinder sensemaking, receptiveness to sensegiving, and motivation to act (Mailtis et al., 2013; Steigenberger, 2015). Consistent with this we find that counselors employ strategies to reduce such obstructing emotions and promote beneficial emotions among clients. However, we acknowledge the complexity of such sensegiving tools and strategies targeted at emotions and encourage future research to explore this further.

In line with previous accounting literature exploring how numbers are made intelligible, we find that counselors use metaphors to verbally explain financial concepts (Carlson-Wall et al., 2016; Bukh et al., 2021; Tucker, 2017), limit the use of financial information (Bukh et al., 2021; Hall, 2010; Nordlund et al., 2024), use visualizations to present and re-present financial information, and exercises to encourage reflection about spending (Aresu & Monfardini; Bay, 2018). However, the findings also highlight the context-dependence of metaphors, supporting Carlsson-Wall et al., (2016) and Tucker (2017), as well as visualizations. We contribute to Bay (2018) by suggesting that visual re-presentations, like faux bills, may not be inherently perceived as more tangible, 'real' or intelligible, as this depends on the individual's experiences and perceptions.

This study is subject to limitations related to its contextual validity following Ryan et al. (2002). First, as the data has been collected solely through semi-structured interviews,

only a singular source of evidence, using a singular method, has been used. The absence of data and method triangulation limits the ability to assess the contextual validity in this regard. Second, the data analysis has been conducted by the two authors who have fairly similar backgrounds and experiences, which can pose a risk to the validity of the interpretations. However, measures have been taken to guard against potential individual bias by independent analysis at each step, which were subsequently discussed before agreeing on the final interpretations presented (Ryan et al., 2002).

Furthermore, this study has been concerned with counselors' sensegiving, and for ethical reasons not investigated clients' sensemaking. As such, how sensegiving efforts are received by clients and the effects of the various strategies and tools remains inconclusive and our empirics therefore display a relatively one-sided point of view. However, our findings indicate how certain tools should impact clients' sensemaking based on previous research (e.g., Carlsson-Wall et al., 2016; Maitlis et al., 2013; Steigenberger, 2015), yet this remains an indication rather than evidence. Accordingly, we encourage future empirical research to investigate how individuals' sensemaking and motivation to act is impacted by emotional support from others in similar contexts. Particularly, as our findings suggest, there is a practical need for more research on the effectiveness of different tools and strategies for giving sense to personal finance following counselors' lack of guidance and best practices.

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8 Appendix

8.1 Appendix A – Interview guide

Background and context

a. How would you describe your role and your areas of responsibility as a municipal budget and debt counselor?
b. How would you define the main goals of your counseling sessions?
c. What are the most common financial challenges your clients face?
d. How would you describe the financial literacy level of the clients you meet?
e. What does a typical counseling session look like?
    a. What does the process look like?
    b. How many meetings do you usually have with each client?
    c. Which financial terms/concepts are the most central?
f. Can you briefly tell me about your educational and professional background?
g. How do you work internally?
    a. Do you have instructions or guidelines for these meetings?
    b. Do you have internal training sessions?
    c. Do you have internal discussions/meetings among advisors?
        i. What is discussed in these?

Communication strategies

a) How do you explain financial terms and concepts to clients?
    a. Do you use any special tools?
b) Do you use any visual aids to present/explain information??
    a. If yes:
        i. What is the purpose?
        ii. In which situations do you use them?
        iii. Could you give an example of when you have used it?
        iv. Are there any tools you find more or less effective?
    b. If no:
        i. Why not? Have you considered doing it?

c) Do you adjust your language to the client?
d) Do you use metaphors, similes, or other figurative language during meetings?
    a. If yes:
        i. What is the purpose?
        ii. In which situations do you use them?
        iii. Could you give an example of when you have used it?
        iv. Are there any tools you find more or less effective?

b. If no:
    i. Why not? Have you considered doing it?

e) Are there any other tools, tricks, or approaches you use to make financial information more understandable for clients?
    a. If yes:
        i. What is the purpose?
        ii. In which situations do you use them?
        iii. Could you give an example of when you have used it?
        iv. Are there any tools/tricks/approaches you find more or less effective?
    b. If no:
        i. Why not? Have you considered doing it?

f) Do you adjust your communication strategies, such as language, metaphors, and advice, for different clients, for example based on:
    a. Previous knowledge (financial literacy)
    b. The severity of the situation?

g) What challenges do you face during the counseling process?
    a. Do clients ever get upset?
        i. If so, how do you handle it?

h) Do you feel that clients become overwhelmed by the information from the sessions?
    a. If so, do you have any strategies to prevent that?

i) What do you consider to be the most important factor in helping clients regain control over their financial situation?

j) Do you believe that popular culture or societal phenomena have in any way influenced your clients' views on debt and counseling?

Closing questions

a) Is there anything we haven't touched on that you would like to add?
b) Is there anything you would like to clarify?
c) Can we contact you at a later time if we need further or clarifying information?

8.2 Appendix B – AI transparency note

Two AI tools were utilized to boost efficiency and hence indirectly, quality. *ChatGPT-4o* was used to refine writing, finding appropriate synonyms, structuring, and translating content. This tool contributed indirectly to increasing the quality of the thesis by increasing efficiency through providing quick suggestions that could then be adapted or revised by the authors. It also helped the authors enhance the quality of the language by suggesting improvements in sentence clarity, tone consistency, wording and phrasing, and reduced redundancy without altering meaning. For example, the chatbot could be asked to give its evaluation if a point was conveyed clearly. Yet, any edits made through *ChatGPT-4o* were carefully judged and reworked to fit the thesis before potential implementation.

Potential risks like overreliance, loss of authentic voice, oversimplification, and inaccuracy were acknowledged. These risks were mitigated through making sure that AI was used intentionally as a supportive tool, rather than a content generator, ensuring that the authors remained the primary source of all content and arguments. Furthermore, every AI-generated suggestion for text refinement was carefully reviewed and revised to maintain accuracy of original texts and tone to prevent oversimplifications or inaccuracy. In addition, *Klang.ai* was used for transcribing the interviews. *Klang.ai* was deemed an appropriate choice for transcribing the interviews as it is a Swedish company that is developed for highly sensitive organization, complying with GDPR. All files are encrypted, and users always own their own data, meaning that when data is deleted from the system, it is completely deleted from the tool as well, and the company does not train their models on customer data. The risk of inaccuracy was mitigated firstly by having one of the authors taking notes live and secondly, by checking the AI output manually by listening through audio and comparing with written notes.

The insights gained from using AI tools in the thesis process was that AI serves as a strong editorial assistant, in particular for language polishing, summarization, and transcription. However, no AI has been used to collect or analyze data. All meaning and depth to arguments come from the researcher's own engagement with material, and one learning from this process is that human judgement of materials is irreplaceable.