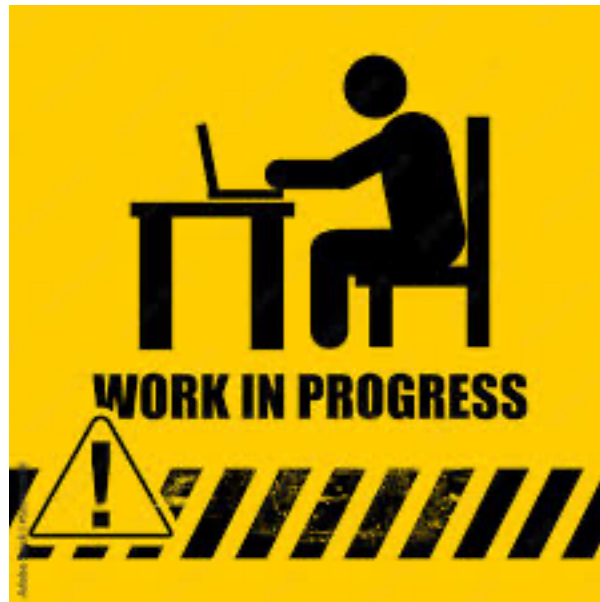


# **Professionalism, sense-making, and morally conscious decision-making in the public sector**

**Mary K. Feeney**

Frank and June Sackton Chair and Professor  
School of Public Affairs, Arizona State University  
[mkfeeney@asu.edu](mailto:mkfeeney@asu.edu)

Prepared for Danish Political Science Association Conference, November 2024



This paper is a work in progress. I am currently spiraling around inductive data analysis to identify emerging patterns, themes, and concepts and working to speak to the literature and newer frameworks on public sector professionalism.

**If you have suggestions for improvement, I would love to hear from you!**

[mkfeeney@asu.edu](mailto:mkfeeney@asu.edu)

# Professionalism, sense-making, and morally conscious decision-making in the public sector

## Abstract

Morally conscious decision-making refers to when an individual sets aside their self-interest to make a reasonable, defensible decision that considers the interests of all, balances needs, and aligns with ethical standards. I draw from Brandt et al.'s (2023) framework for morally conscious decision-making for the public sector and Sonenshein's (2007) sensemaking-intuition model to analyze the role of professionalism in problem solving among public librarians. Applying the case of US public libraries to these three frameworks, I ask the following research question: *How does professional training enable practitioners to engage in morally conscious decision-making and conflict resolution in the public sector?*

To answer the research question, I use case study data including 25 in-depth interviews and observation from 17 libraries in two US states that serve diverse socio-economic communities with populations ranging from 2,058 to 1.6 million; and materials from the American Library Association and master's in library and information sciences curriculum. I describe and analyze how librarians engage in conflict resolution in examples ranging from client interactions to responding to political threats to mission achievement. From the data emerges the key role that professional training and norms play in guiding librarians to engage in morally conscious decision-making to solve problems in practice.

The results outline a professional orientation that centers morally conscious decision making to advance the public library mission – access to information for all. With strong ties between research and practice, librarians apply solutions derived from professional guidance and mission alignment. They use sensemaking and morally conscious decision-making to achieve their professional goals, organizational mission, and serve to the public. The outcomes of their assessments come in the form of applying strict and soft rules, structural change, physical design, and external control, but are nearly always couched within rhetoric of professional norms, ethics, and mission achievement. References to professional training and expectations are embedded in their issue description, action consideration, and post-hoc explanation. This approach to problem solving does not present as a dichotomy between rule following (organizational priorities) and discretion (professional priorities), but rather constant consideration through an ethically-centered professional lens. I conclude with a discussion of what can we learn from public librarians about morally conscious decision-making and problem solving that balances the needs of all parties and does not seek to accommodate one stakeholder at the expense of another.

# **Professionalism, sense-making, and morally conscious decision-making in the public sector**

## **1. Introduction**

Public administration researchers have long sought to understand the gap between organizational requirements and restrictions and individual employee behavior and preferences. This literature often presents a dichotomy of organizational versus individual preferences, ethics, norms, and values. In some cases, the individual is acting based on professional norms and requirements, in opposition to the organization's requirements or expectations. For example, when street-level bureaucrats use discretion to break a rule or workaround an organizational barrier to achieve a positive outcome for a client or citizens. In other research, professionals find their training or values in conflict with organizational goals (CITES). But what happens when professionalism aligns with organizational goals to achieve public outcomes? And is it possible for professional training and socialization to align with organizational missions and goals in a way that enables better outcomes for the public? Can professionalism improve conflict resolution, and the advancement of public sector outcomes?

In this manuscript, I take the case of public librarians to outline an ideal case of public sector professionalism. Public libraries offer an example of organization missions and policies that align with the educational training and professional ethics, knowledge, socialization, and norms of the employees. Professional librarians receive professional training to advance a mission that is core to the advancement of democracy, free and open access to information. In their formal training they become deeply committed to achieving this mission, a mission that is shared by the professional librarian and the public library where they work. Once in the workplace, librarians have this training and ethic reinforced through experience, peer networks, and engagement with the professional association, the American Library Association (ALA). The ALA advocates for and supports the profession by providing timely, evidence-based guidance on practical workplace matters. The ALA seems as a key boundary spanning organization that translates research into practice and communicates practical demands and needs to the research and educational training community. One can easily trace the ties between library practice, academic library research, and ALA documents, advocacy, and support efforts. And the resulting strength of this professional training and socialization is apparent in the narratives that librarians share about their daily work. The data presented in this manuscript

show a deep professional commitment among individual librarians and a strong professional identity that enables them to navigate complex work challenges.

In this research, I draw from two theoretical frameworks: sensemaking-intuition model and morally conscious decision-making, to investigate the role of professionalism in conflict resolution in public libraries. Specifically, I investigate how librarians engage in morally conscious decision making, defined as “cognizant processing of an actor’s core values setting aside self-interest when presented with a dilemma” (Brandt et al., 2003). I find that librarians draw from their professional training and socialization to engage in critical thinking and situational awareness to resolve problems that result in appropriate, accountable, ethical outcomes for the public.

Morally conscious decision making helps librarians to navigate the space between ethical codes, professional training, discretion, experience, and normative assessments. Public librarians also use a sensemaking-intuition model to describe workplace challenges (Sonenshein, 2007). Their professional expectations and training shape how they describe the issues they confront and how they navigate various processes to find solutions. While librarians describe problem solving as sensemaking and centering morally conscious decision-making, there is a clear throughline in the data. Public librarians from across cases present a strong, unified professional identity and a deep reliance on the professional association to resolve workplace conflict and align professional and organizational goals. The profession is core to their post-hoc explanation and justification of actions taken. In testing seeking Brand et al.’s framework for morally conscious decision-making and Sonenshein sensemaking-intuition model, what emerges is a strong presence of professionalism. Library professionalism drives morally conscious decision-making and underlies the sensemaking-intuition model to result in ethical, accountable decisions that align with organizational goals. This offers an ideal case for considering a way forward for professionalism in the public sector, professionalism that does not pit discretion against policy, or professional against organizational values, but instead aligns organizational and professional norms and values in the public interest.

This research uses the case of public librarians in the U.S. to evaluate the following research questions: *How does professional training enable practitioners to engage in morally conscious decision-making and conflict resolution in the public sector? How do professionals working in the public sector resolve conflict when the ethical, normative values of the profession*

*are embedded in the organizational culture, mission, and goals?* Drawing from the evidence provided by libraries, I conjecture that public organizations can use professional librarianship and the ALA as a model to better align professional training and research-driven practitioner guidance to ensure morally conscious decision making in the public sector.

First, I discuss the relevant literature on professionalism in the public sector. Second, I introduce the sensemaking-intuition model and framework on morally conscious decision-making. Third, I present the context for this research, public libraries in the US followed by the data and method. In the data and method section, I describe the stakeholders and issues identified in the data. Fifth, I present the results, highlighting three examples from the data. I then conclude with a discussion of professionalism and sensemaking in morally conscious decision-making and what we learn from the case of public librarians.

## **2. Professionalism in Public Administration Context**

Professionalism refers to occupations that are defined and distinguished by their knowledge base, expertise, licensing, certification of training, and membership or guidance from an established professional association (Abbott 1991, Starbuck 1992). Professionalism is often associated with a specific clientele and expertise, objectivity, and service outlines in ethical codes (Hendrikx 2021.) Professionalism happens through sequenced events that create a training school, a university school, local association, national association, state-level licensing, and a code of ethics (Wilensky (1964). The educational components create a professional identity that is later reinforced by the professional association.

Professionals, while initially defined by specific educational training or certification, go on to further develop professional identity through socialization, common experiences, shared problems and solutions, professional associations, ethical codes, and client and peer engagement. These engagements across professional associations and in profession dominated work sites serves to reinforce a shared set of norms, beliefs, and values (Evetts, 2013). Hendrikx (2021) describes professional identity as shaped by excellence (exclusive skills and expertise), ethics (social responsibility of the profession captured in ethical codes), and engagement (commitment to clients and the professional community).

Public administration research and scholarship often theorizes and analyzes professionalism across and within the public sector. Some research looks at public sector professionals generally. For example, research on professionalism as related to public service (Jos & Tompkins, 2009), city management (Reddick et al. 2020), and administrative reform. Yet, most of the research on professionalism in public organizations investigates specific professions and contexts within the public sector. For example, research on how medical professionals within public organizations can integrate their professional identities and expertise to complement organizational logics and reforms (Noordegraaf et al., 2016). In another example, researchers investigate the professional identity of police officers and its alignment with personal identity (Headley 2022) and how professional identity among police shapes their resilience and responses to reforms (Monties & Gagnon, 2024). These various professions (e.g. police, engineers, medical doctors, social workers, architects), when working in the public sector, are assumed to advance public values and the public good, yet they operate from different socialization, culture, ethical, and training backgrounds. Adler and Kwon (2012) note the need to integrate individual professionals with professional organizations and the broader institutional field. In the case of public organizations, there is the challenge of managing societal and organizational pressures on professional identity and values (Adler and Kwon 2013; Broadbent, Dietrich, and Roberts 1997; Noordegraaf and Steijn 2013). Researchers present examples where professional identity and norms clash with culture, agendas, and reform in public organizations, and examples of how professional expertise can conflict with public organization goals. In some cases, professional values align with public sector values and ethical codes, in other cases professional codes of ethics supersede or contradict the ethical codes of the public organizations where they work, for example the Hippocratic Oath for doctors or conflicts of interest outlined in the Attorneys' Code of Ethics.

Of particular interest to this paper, is public administration research investigating the role of professionalism in managing conflict and challenges in the workplace. Research often frames professionalism and professional principles and values in conflict with organizational goals and reforms (Noordegraaf et al., 2016; Schott et al. 2016). For example, Schott et al. (2016) investigate occupational professionalism, when principles of veterinary medicine guide veterinarians to be more pragmatic or pay less attention to formal procedures and organizational principles. Schott et al (2016) conclude that veterinarians exhibited different levels of conflict

based on their balance of professional principles versus organizational principles. They find that those who adopted organizational perspectives and suppressed professional principles had lower levels of work-related tensions.

In public administration research focused on front line workers, professional values are also often framed in opposition to organizational principles. Where organizational principles are about the enforcement of rules, policies, and neutral competence, professionalism is used to justify discretion. Discretion is often viewed as how a bureaucrat “does the right thing” or makes the morally conscious or ethical decision (CITES). Discretion and workarounds are often justified by professional ethics, expectations, and norms (Monties & Gagnon, 2024; Noordegraaf et al., 2016; Schott et al. 2016). More recently, research has sought to bridge this gap between professional and organizational principles in the public sector, suggesting that hybrid professionalism, defined as BLAH BLAH BLAH (Noordegraaf, YEAR), enables professionals to navigate ambiguous public domains (Noordegraaf, 2007).

Though a good deal of research places these two perspectives as opposing: professional versus organizational, what happens when normative values and ethical considerations are deeply embedded in the profession and the organization? How do professionals working in the public sector behave when the ethical, normative values of the profession are embedded in the organizational culture, mission, and goals? Can public organizations align professional training and research-driven practitioner guidance to ensure morally conscious decision making? I draw from two theoretical frameworks: sensemaking-intuition model and morally conscious decision-making to investigate these questions.

### **3. Approaches to professionalism in public sector organizations – Guiding frameworks**

Sonenshein (2007) offers a starting point for aligning the professional and the organizational with his sensemaking-intuition model. He criticizes rationalist approaches to moral decision making, arguing that individuals often engage in sensemaking, rather than deliberate rational decision making to respond to ethical issues to balance professional and organizational expectations. He notes that rationalist approaches privilege moral reasoning rather

than intuition and the ways that individuals use social stimuli including expectations, motivation, and interactions with others to solve problems.

The sensemaking-intuition model is comprised of three steps: 1) issue construction, 2) intuitive judgment, and 3) post hoc explanation and justification. Sonenshein (2007) argues that issues are constructed based on individual environments, expectations, and motivations which drive intuitive judgments that are shaped by experience and social and organizational pressure. Individuals then make sense of their decisions through post-hoc explanation and justification. The sensemaking-intuition model moves away from describing responses to work pressure and ethical dilemmas as balancing rules versus discretion, to decision making based on intuition, expectations, motivations, experience, social pressure, and experience that shape issue construction and intuitive judgments. This model leaves a great deal of space for the influence of professional identity and socialization, where education, training, ethical codes, professional guidance, and peer networks serve as social anchors and pressures that shape issue construction, judgment, and post-hoc explanation of responses to dilemmas in the workplace. In the sensemaking-intuition model, individuals make sense of rules, discretion, professionalism and social needs to address workplace dilemmas.

Brandt et al. (2023) define morally conscious decision making as “cognizant processing of an actor’s core values setting aside self-interest when presented with a dilemma” (page 184). They argue that morally conscious decision making can guide public sector leaders to create an organizational culture built on trust and integrity that ensures decisions are made to advance the best interests of stakeholders. Their model centers the role of moral responsibility and normative values when faces with organizational challenges. They argue that morally conscious decision making requires more than codes of ethics, training, or rational decision making. Morally conscious decision making requires individuals to think critically and draw from situational awareness to assess the situational and contextual ethics, assumptions, motives, circumstances, theoretical questions, and empirical questions to then make the moral decision. Ultimately, Brandt et al. (2023) suggest their framework leaves room for “flexibility, improvisation, and context-dependent thinking” (page 191).

The morally conscious decision-making framework has four components: the moral dilemma, cognizant processing, core values, and setting aside of self-interest. Brandt et al (2023) suggest that cognizant processing that requires constant assessment of core values and setting



aside self-interest is key to morally conscious decision making. Cognizant processing means the individual must identify the dilemma and choose to address the situation, balancing information, context, and interests. Core values in this model include individual, professional, and organizational values. These are enduring beliefs that shape the individual's world view and their cognitions. In their assessment of the dilemma, the individual must be aware and set aside their self-interest, apply appropriate values, and assess the potential outcomes and interests that will emerge from the outcome. Brandt et al (2023) describe outcome assessment as critical thinking and situational awareness used to determine if the outcome is "logical, defensible, and morally conscious" (page 194). This assessment of the outcome is done by considering who benefits from the outcome and the appropriateness of the outcome. They suggest that decision makers must continually reconsider, reevaluate, and realign if self-interest becomes influential in the decision (Gawthrop 1990). Morally conscious decision-making framework requires critical thinking and situational awareness, and though it is not explicit in their model, it relies on sense-making to get there.

Drawing from in-depth US public library case study data, I find that public librarians in the US rely on a sensemaking-intuition model guided by professionalism to engage in morally conscious decision-making. This process, as described by librarians can be used as a guide to reconsider how public administration scholars and practitioners think about professionalism, organizational values, discretion, and individual morality when addressing challenges in the workplace. I find that professionalism and organizational values and norms can align to advance morally conscious decision-making that benefits stakeholders and advances mission achievement.

#### **4. Public libraries – the context**

In the public sector, professional norms, values, and ethical codes vary by organizational type and profession. US public librarians are an ideal case for examining the role of professionalism in the public sector. They have a strong professional identity and are at the forefront of public service delivery across all population subgroups. Librarians interact with political and bureaucratic systems (e.g. cities, districts, states), interest groups and individuals, and all sectors and organizational types. They are public servants, librarians, and increasingly social workers,

but they identify as librarians first. Next, I describe the context of professionalism in US public libraries.

Librarianship, as a profession, is defined by educational training (MLiS), strong association leadership (ALA), ethics codes, academic journals and practitioner communications, and an identity centered on a commitment to providing access to information for all. The work of librarians has evolved over centuries, yet modern public librarians maintain control over their profession and the organizations where they work. While public libraries are funded and operated by government and serve community interests, the professional expertise of the librarian guides collections decisions, staff management, budget allocation, program development, and community engagement. This expertise is shaped by academic training and reinforced through continual professional development and socialization. A master's degree in library sciences is required for employment as a professional librarian.

The master's degree in library science is a requirement of the profession. In response to changes in information and digitization, many library science schools now include information sciences or are information schools. The modern degree is a master's in library and information sciences (MLiS). MLiS degree programs typically include core course work on reference and information management, intellectual freedom, leadership, research methods, planning and marketing, and ethics and values. Electives in these programs vary based on specialization, but for those seeking a career in public libraries, there are additional courses focused on programing, public service, crisis management, youth or teen services, cataloging, special collections, digital curation, accessibility, storytelling, and so on (see Appendix for a sample list of MLiS course offerings). Top programs for library sciences in the US and Canada are accredited by the American Library Association (ALA).

Association is required for any profession because it enables mutual support, information exchange, and control of work (Abbott 1991). Control of work, typically enforced through licensing and education, ensures professional and personal status, separates the professionally trained from the untrained, and drives power, income, and economic security (Larson 1977). Strongly defined professions have control (association and educational), practical knowledge, dominated worksites, and specialized knowledge. The ALA is the professional association of librarians in the US and has been since 1876.

Today the ALA serves as the primary organizing association for librarians in the US, accrediting university degree programs, publishing academic research journals, hosting conferences, offering subgroups and support for local communities, lobbying, and offering professional guidance through magazines, trainings, webinars, and more. The ALA advocates for the profession, responding to book challenges and articulating the importance of public libraries to society. For example, in 2023 the ALA published the *Public Library Services for Strong Communities Report*, outlining how public libraries serve and sustain local communities. The ALA provides regular guidance and advice to librarians on how to interact with and respond to public needs and demands. For example, in 1990 the ALA adopted *Policy 61, Library Services for the Poor*, which developed guidance to ensure public libraries are accessible and useful to lower-income community members. During the COVID-19 pandemic shutdowns, public libraries received practical guidance from the ALA on how to maintain services to customers, for example boosting wi-fi networks to be available outside of the library facility to ensure information access for patrons and wi-fi support to community members in need (cite Magazine article). In addition to practical guidance, the ALA offers guidance on policies for operating a public library, responding to patron needs, managing conflict in the library space, and processing book challenges. Most public libraries have policies related to behavior, collection development, technology use, fines and fees, requests for reconsideration, patron confidentiality, customer rights, and freedom for information. These policy documents available on nearly all public library websites are often a variation of (or the original version) of the ALA policy document.

The ALA produces an array of publications including peer-reviewed academic journals, newsletters, magazines, blogs, practitioner guidance, and policy documents. These resources are available to all members and serve the needs of librarians working in research and academic settings, archives, and medical, school, and public libraries. Key resources for public librarians include the *American Libraries Magazine*; *Library Leadership & Management* – a journal that blends peer-review publications with practitioner-oriented content; *Library Worklife* – a publication focused on library worker issues including salary, human resources, recruitment, and work-life balance; and *Public Libraries Online*, a companion website to the official magazine of the Public Library Association (PLA). *Public Libraries Online* offers content on current issues and opportunities for visitors to interact, comment, and share. *American Libraries Magazine* is packed with professional guidance, much of which is driven by evidence and research. One clear

advantage of a professional field full of information scientists and researchers is a well-developed, evidence-based approach to translating research into practice. These close ties between profession and practice are evident in the influence and reach of the ALA.

My analysis of the interview data revealed a strong professional identity among public librarians. They were nearly uniform in their description of their mission and professional goals, their moral and ethical responsibilities to advance the interests of all patrons, and a desire to approach workplace challenges with a strong moral compass and professionalism. The challenges described by librarians are all addressed in the professional materials produced by the ALA and often appear in the modern MLiS curriculum. The data show a profession that is deeply engaged in using sensemaking to use professional skills, guidance, and ethics to make morally conscious decisions.

## **5. Data and Method**

To understand how public librarians engage in problem solving, I applied qualitative research methods that enable the investigation of underlying mechanisms associated with the phenomena (Yin 2009). I used in-depth interviews and document analysis to examine public librarians' conflict resolution approaches and professional activities and information sources. The qualitative interviews enabled deep examination of detailed descriptions of challenges in the workplace and how librarians process information to resolve conflict (Marshall and Rossman 2014).

The research team completed 25 qualitative interviews with librarians from June 7, 2023, to May 31, 2024. All participants work directly with the public and exercise discretion in applying rules and procedures in the workplace. Participants were initially selected through purposive and snowball sampling to ensure they represented a variety of communities and demographics. Table 1 reports descriptive information about the interview subjects. All the librarians hold degrees in library sciences (MLiS), and most are female (80%) and white (80%). The librarians interviewed included those working in large cities, small towns, on Indian reservations, and in library districts and state libraries. Half of the sample works in public libraries in Arizona, the other half in Indiana. Ten librarians (40%) have the title of Library Manager, Supervisor Librarian, or Director and about 16% focus on adult services, 20% teen or children services, and 16% outreach.

Their experience varied from working two years to more than 20. Observation notes and photographs were taken at 16 libraries. In-person interviews included a tour of the library and 1-2 hours of observation. Field notes and photos were taken during observation. Documents relevant to services provided were collected at each research site. Additionally, I collected and reviewed two decades worth of materials from the American Library Association.

All interviewees provided informed consent to participate in the study (STUDY00017438 Arizona State University, #18358 Indiana University, HS23-0343 Northern Illinois University). Interviews were conducted in English, at the subject's place of work (n=19) or via Zoom (n=6) and were recorded. Interviews lasted a bit over an hour (ranging 69 to 83 minutes). Recordings were transcribed using Otter.ai and then checked by the research team. The interview protocol is in Appendix 1.

#### **a. Analytical approach**

The transcribed interviews, a total of 448 pages, were uploaded to NVivo qualitative analysis software. The interview data were coded using a Flexible Coding approach<sup>1</sup> (Deterding & Waters 2021), which starts by coding the data around a set of key research questions and themes that guided the interview protocol. Deterding and Waters (2021) argue that a Flexible Coding approach that starts with indexing codes enables better use of the qualitative software to support rigorous, reliable, valid, transparent, and flexible analysis by grounding the data to the interview protocol. We started with eight broad index codes that reflected the protocol: Organizational Culture/Values; Professional Values and Identity); Conflicts & Challenges; Community engagement, access, inclusivity; Technology; Rules & Policy; Inter-organizational; Juicy Quotes. We assigned two researchers to each transcript, purposely assigning coders to interviews they had not conducted to reduce bias and increase exposure to the data.

For this manuscript, I did interpretive analysis of the text that was coded into the Conflicts & Challenges Index. The data analyzed here draw from any challenge or conflict described in the interviews, but most of the data were in response to the following questions:

- (1) Can you describe an event that has been or would be troubling to your organization?

---

<sup>1</sup> Deterding, N. M., & Waters, M. C. (2021). Flexible coding of in-depth interviews: A twenty-first-century approach. *Sociological methods & research*, 50(2), 708-739.

- (1a) How would/did you address this problem?
- (2) Can you describe a recent event that created a moral or ethical dilemma for you at work?
- (2a) What actions were taken to address this problem?

I coded Conflicts & Challenges Index data with the following five codes: 1) stakeholders, 2) workplace challenges, 3) librarian considerations, 4) resources expended, and 5) outcomes or actions taken. The subcodes were overlapping and sought to identify key components of the challenges described by librarians within the sensemaking and morally conscious decision-making frameworks. Within each code, I subcoded the data into additional categories and groups as described below.

#### **b. Describing challenges in public libraries**

**Stakeholders – conflicts with or about whom.** Librarians noted a variety of stakeholders when discussing challenges they face in the workplace. Stakeholders included individuals or groups causing conflict and those affected by conflict, those seeking services or resources and offering them, actors internal and external to the library, and peers, subordinates, and superiors. Table 1 lists the stakeholders discussed in the interview data. The most common stakeholder was the public (e.g. patron, customer, citizen, user) or a subset of the public, typically a population described as marginalized (e.g. people without housing, people in jail, people with substance abuse issues). Librarians also noted conflicts with government actors, including issues of coordination, turf and program provision, or coordination challenges and solutions provided by or in partnership with government actors. In many cases, these stakeholders shifted roles and responsibilities in different scenarios. Because of the variation of actors and roles in the data, I did not anchor the subsequent coding based on stakeholder. The stakeholder identification presented here is a starting point for contextualizing who librarians talk about when discussing challenges in the workplace.

**Table 1. Stakeholders identified in librarian descriptions of challenges in the workplace**

		<b>Public</b>	<b>Government</b>	<b>Library</b>
general public	Public	People who experience domestic violence or abuse	Agency heads in state government	American Library Association
	Citizens of the area	Retirement home	Board of Supervisors	New librarians
	Community	Foster homes	Boards - governing bodies	Large administration team
	Customers	Day places for adults w/mental disabilities	Case workers	Part-time staff
	Library users	Homeless veterans	Chamber of Commerce	Full-time employees
	New users	Jail services	City	Library staff
families	Caregivers	Low-income communities	City government	
	Parents	Marginalized communities	City manager	
	Children, ages 0 to 18	Non-English-speaking community	County	
	Rich kids	Patrons who are struggling mentally	County commissioners	
	Teens	Patrons who are unsheltered	Experts in the city	
Interest Groups	Ranchers	People who are vulnerable & homeless	Fire department	
	Farmers	Rehab homes	Governors	
	Purple for Parents of Indiana	Spanish speaking communities	Legislators / legislature	
	Indiana Library Federation	Transitional homes	Local government	
	Moms of liberty	Principals	Mayor's office	
	Authors	Teachers	Parks & Recreation	
	Publishers	School partners	Police	
	Friends of the library	Middle school	Politicians	
	Volunteers	Fourth and fifth graders		
		Home school families		

**Workplace conflicts.** Because these data are not drawn from a representative sample and we did not anchor responses on specific conflicts or issues, the types of issues that librarians described varied. When asked “*Can you describe an event that has been or would be troubling to your organization? . . . [or] that created a moral or ethical dilemma for you at work?*”, some respondents talked about broad, controversial issues facing libraries (e.g. book challenges, budget cuts, political tension), while others noted a recent event or issue they had with a colleague or patron. For example, a librarian described “*I had a patron who he was he had some dementia. And so sometimes he would come in and would be convinced that he was Michael Jackson's brother. And he would start asking us for the social security numbers of the Jackson Five. And I'd have to explain to him without him getting agitated with me*” (273).

I coded the key issues into the following categories: access, book challenges, budgets and resources, drugs, general conflicts, government, human resources, marginalized populations, mental illness, political tensions, professional challenges, security, and unsheltered populations. I then organized the data into three groups: organizational, professional, and patron issues. Organizational issues include human resources and staffing challenges, reduced budgets, and security, and conflict with external government actors. Professional issues include challenges to the profession’s commitment to open access to information for example, book challenges or conflict around collections decisions. The third category is issues specific to patrons (e.g. library users), including drug abuse, noise, bad behavior on site, or balancing the interests of multiple groups. Table 2 lists examples for the three groups and the sub-categories.

**Table 2. The types of workplace problems librarians confront**

<b>Organizational Issues</b>	<b>Government &amp; Politics</b>	We don't get along great with the city and the parks department and things like that. And that's because we're free. And they're not... (221) tensions right now between the community and the library board and the library boards appointing authorities (251) I think most of the people have a fair view of us. There's certain council members who are not supportive of anything that helps the homeless population. So they try to be subversive in ways. Although they don't want to outright say that. That's what they're doing. There are some that aren't overly supportive about anything that takes tax funding, in general, and so they just like hate everybody. (131)
	<b>Human Resources</b>	underpaid and understaffed (162) But like with libraries . . . we're trying to establish relationships. And when you change out the staff every couple of years that loses that connection, you have to rebuild and rebuild (163)
	<b>Budget</b>	funding, funding is always an issue. (273) library funding is, it's less and so that makes it challenging (2181)
	<b>Security</b>	we had our front doors shot out. And two weeks later, another front door shot out. (163) In terms of moral, I think the hardest part of security, because that's just every day, there's always security incidents that are happening (271)



Professional Issues	<b>Access</b>	So we have patrons who come in, they don't even have a photo ID, but we find a way to at least give them access to the public computers, at least they can access our electronic materials. (111) folks that couldn't physically get to the library or working families that couldn't get there during our hours (112)
	<b>Book Challenges</b>	libraries are under immense pressure. Nowadays, censorship has become a key political issue that is going on books being removed from school libraries, library board members having to field questions from the public about what does and doesn't belong in a library (2171) probably the thing that's most upsetting is getting ready for those challenges to programs or services (241)
	<b>Professional Training</b>	the profession as a whole. I think it's becoming increasingly politicized as a profession. And I think it becomes increasingly difficult for people to trust a profession that gets more political. Libraries have always been apolitical, we never want to get involved in politics, we make sure everybody gets served, we make sure all resources are available (1121) the library also is we, I want to say the field has become a little bit more political and divisive. I never felt that maybe until the last 10 years or so (222) But that vision that being able to see where we want to go and where the world is going, I think is a challenge (1111)
Patron Issues	<b>Unsheltered</b>	how can we provide service to and assist our homeless population because it's a big population here. (242) the number of unsheltered people has just skyrocketed over the past couple of years. (111)
	<b>Drugs</b>	there's a lot more activity around our building, and we're right next to a park. So there has been an increase of like, drug use or alcohol consumption on library property, city property. So that's a security concern. (161) But the opioid epidemic has also impacted librarianship. We've had multiple overdoses over the five years that I've been here um in the building or on the property somewhere. And it's terrifying. I mean, it's absolutely terrifying (111)
	<b>Marginalized</b>	you know, [name], under age, she's, she's a minor. Last week, came in with a bruise on her face... And she was, she kept making up reasons to be at the library, so she wouldn't have to go home (2142) And we started building our programming, focused primarily around our Hispanic users are African American users, and even our folks that are in the LGBTQ community. And it was wild to watch how many more people started coming to the library that prior really didn't feel like they had a place in the town, and telling us that they finally felt like they had a safe place in their community. The flip side of that, now that more of those people are congregating in an area or attending programs or feel that they're heard. Kind of the negative side of that was people then didn't want to have those programs didn't want to see those programs. And to me that that's just a mirror of okay, well, this is something that's missing. And this is why it's missing is because there is this negative perception. (112)
	<b>Mental Illness</b>	this special needs adult I work with, he's also schizophrenic bipolar, and I could tell when he came in for tutoring, that he hadn't had his medication, and he was off. (2142) mental illness and the increase of people with mental illness or struggling with addiction of some kind, has been an increasing problem (131)
	<b>Book Challenges</b>	obviously censorship right now is insane. You know, what's going on at [library name], they have halved their teen collection or less. They had some people get onto their, their library board. And the purple parents people get on to their library board, and basically take it over. And now they have rewritten their collection development policy. And all of their librarians have to read every single book in the collection in order to decide where it goes. And if it has too many of certain words. It has to go in the adult section. If it mentioned sex basically at all. It goes to the adult section. It's insane. (221) And so there's one particular presumably well-meaning grandmother went over into the educator section and pulled out a couple of books on Braille and took them over to the circulation desk and plopped them on the circulation desk. Why are these things up here? These This is not appropriate reading level four, why are these even here? (2142)

## 6. Results – considerations, resources, and outcomes

I returned to each of the workplace challenges described by the librarians, to analyze the considerations they outlined when describing the problem, the resources used to resolve the issue, and the decision outcomes. I coded considerations, resources, and outcomes for each of the challenges noted in Table 2. I analyzed the considerations along the sensemaking intuition and morally conscious decision-making frameworks to assess issue construction, intuitive judgement

in their post hoc explanation and justification (Sonenshein 2007) and identify key values, motives, professional goals and norms, organizational rules and policies, and ethics (Brandt et al 2023).

With each challenge I asked the following questions: How do librarians describe the problem? What do they consider to be the key challenges, values, ethical issues, or problems? How did the librarian respond? Did the response include policy or rule enforcement or workarounds? Did the response require financial, physical, human, or emotional resources? And how do they now evaluate and justify the response? Below I outline **TWO/THREE** examples that were described in multiple interviews: Book Challenges, Wi-fi Access, and **THREE**. When presenting the example, I note the issue construction as described by the librarians and evidenced in the ALA materials, their descriptions of intuitive judgment, and their post hoc justifications. The interview data reveal an emphasis on and integration of professional guidance, training, ethics, motives, values, and organizational rules and policies when addressing workplace challenges. The librarians also note the use of formal and informal resources, that inevitably cause emotional, personal, and work-life strain.

### **Issue I: Book Challenges**

Book challenges were mentioned in many of our interviews. In some cases, the issue was described as one of managing a single patron or complaint. For example, “*somebody walking through the front door of the library and challenging a book or, you know, challenging a policy or a program that's in place*” (101). In other cases, librarians were describing a challenge or threat to the profession. For example, “*libraries are under immense pressure. Nowadays, censorship has become a key political issue*” (2171) and “*in today's political environment, public library directors are having more book challenges, and they're having more issues working with their boards*” (2181).

When describing book challenges, librarians note conflict with library boards members, city leadership, individual patrons, marginalized communities served by or described in the books under question, and political groups including First Amendment auditors. Librarians describe the source of the problems as political conflict, individual viewpoints, shifts in community norms and values, and misunderstanding the mission and goal of the library (e.g free and open access to information for all).

When speaking about the issue in broad terms, librarians note stress, pressure, fear, and concerns mostly related to how this might shape the profession, create problems for staff, and eventually result in face-to-face conflict in the workplace. For example, one librarian noted “*probably the thing that's most upsetting is getting ready for those challenges to programs or services*” (241). Another noted “*our community is pretty, very supportive of the library, but they're, you know, there's like a tide of people thinking about censoring items*” (243). “*book banning and limiting what books can be where and who can check out what, that's really on our mind a lot recently, too, because what are we gonna do with people start ramping that up, and it could very easily happen. And so how are we going to deal with that*” (242). In these cases, the librarians are describing a potential threat to the profession and their workplace.

*“The book bans are troubling, and how government was going to go about making it criminal for us to have materials on the shelf that I know school librarians are in a different category than we were in the legislation that passed. But that was scary in itself. Like, we're going to have book displays, and is it going to offend somebody that they're going to want to take action against us?”* (271)

Others stated that they are responding to these potential challenges by pursuing professional training. One librarian noted “*tomorrow afternoon, I'm taking a training on the first thing about book banning and all that kind of stuff.*” (242). Another noted they had not experienced book challenges yet, but drawing from their colleagues’ experiences, they were training and preparing for it.

*“we have not experienced a surge in challenges to program services or materials. We're preparing for that and training and everything. I just watched with some webinars and sent out to my staff on book banning others really heart rending one from a librarian in [state], what was going on in her community. So we're lucky that that hasn't hit us yet. But we're definitely getting ready for all of that, especially with some of the stuff that passed the Indiana legislature over the past three or four months, that doesn't target us yet, but does target our colleagues in school libraries or educators. And so that's going to mean that we have to be very aware of how we interact with them.* (241)

The ALA offers extensive training, support, and advocacy for librarians in the field. [Book bans and challenges](#) (a component of intellectual freedom) is one of the key topics on the ALA website (along with privacy, literacy, and equity, diversity, and inclusion). The ALA notes that “Intellectual freedom--the right to read, seek information, and speak freely-- is a core value of the library profession, and a basic right in our democratic society” (website,

<https://www.ala.org/advocacy>). The ALA collects and publishes national data tracking book challenges, bans, and removals; reports and appears in legal challenges and court cases; provides advice and support to individual librarians; and since 1982 has supported Banned Books Week, an annual event to raise awareness about the issue.

When librarians described specific book challenges, they focus on a professional response to defuse the issue. Librarian responses were nearly always to direct the patron to a form or library policy. Most public libraries have a Request for Reconsideration form available, at the front desk and online. These forms are typically a variation on the sample provided by the ALA (ALA, [Sample forms](#)). The patron was often unprepared to complete the form or articulate a detailed complaint. In some cases, librarians describe themselves as muddling through (or sense-making) when addressing book challenges but underlying that sense-making it's clear they are drawing from formal policies and arrangements. In many larger libraries and systems, there are formal committees and structures that process book challenges. One librarian described serving on a committee that processed book challenges for her library:

*“We do have book challenges, it's happened, I've been involved in several where I've had to sit on the committee, there's usually I don't know, three or four of us, a lot of times we ask a community member, where I've had to sit on the committee where we have to, you know, read the book, read why the person wants it to be removed from the library, and then you know, construct, why or why not? We're going to get rid of the book. We've never gotten rid of a book. We just don't do it. But we always have to have we have to have reasons. And we have to have reasons that makes sense within a library institution. Like why would you not do that?” (242)*

In most cases, when the patron complaint was processed, the librarians either did nothing or moved the book to another location in the library. Librarians refer to this as “soft censorship”, placing a book in a less visible location. None of the librarians in our interviews reported removing a book from their collection because of a book challenge. Though one librarian described a case of weeding out a book that was currently on a challenge list, because that book had not been checked out in two to three years. When another librarian asked her, “*Why did you weed that book? They're banning it*” (221). She replied that the book hadn't been checked out, so they removed it from the collection. The librarian went on to note that she really liked the book and wished people had wanted to read it, but that “*we can't just hoard them because they are the*

*ones that we like*” (221). The decision to remove the book was about what user access, not to make a political statement about book banning.

The interviews clearly show that the librarians view book challenges as a threat to the profession and their mission achievement. They describe the issue and justify their actions with explanations based on professional integrity, ethics, rule and policy compliance, and “doing what is right”. As one librarian described “*I’ve had to keep some materials in that I really didn’t like and didn’t want to keep in. But it’s not my job. Like, this isn’t the library that I like, this is the library of all the information. So. So yeah, I’ve had to keep some things that I wasn’t thrilled about keeping. It’s your job*” (242). Their professional responsibility is to stand up against book challenges and “[make] sure that we have materials on a wide range of subjects, and people can see themselves reflected in the books that we have, even if some people don’t necessarily agree” (271). This professional goal is achieved through professional training and preparation, policy enforcement, and negotiating conflict with political officials and patrons. Librarians clearly receive extensive support from the ALA and other librarians in their networks. They do not view themselves as using discretion, breaking rules, or facing a conflict between professional training and organizational goals. Their post hoc explanations and justifications are consistently frames as professional judgements and actions that align with their formal training, professional guidance, and organizational mission.

## **Issue II: Wi-fi Access**

Free access to information is foundational to the library. The profession centers on this mission. In the digital age, free access to information entails access to the Internet, in addition to access to the library. Multiple librarians discussed conflict around issues related to access to the library (e.g. shortened working hours due to budget cuts and security issues) and access to the Internet. In a few interviews, librarians noted that free wi-fi access at the library was a “solution” to the inability to be open on weekends or later in the day and in the evening. Providing free wi-fi ensures people can access information and library digital services when the building is closed. While offering wi-fi outside the building or boosting it to the parking lot was a debate in the library community prior to COVID19, the pandemic necessitated the shift to expanding wi-fi access. Many libraries, in response to community needs and building closures, opted to boost their wi-fi across their parking lots of in neighboring areas so users could father outside the

library and access wi-fi. The Library Magazine published articles and advice for other libraries on why this would be a good practice to ensure serve communities, including many students who did not have internet access and home, but were required to attend school via Zoom. After the pandemic, when libraries returned to in-person services, many opted to keep the wi-fi boosted – applying for grants or providing evidence to the city council that extra funds were needed to maintain this vital service. One librarian noted “*we kind of petitioned the city and talked about things and they got us boosters. So we got a boost around. So now you can sit in our parking lot and access our Wi Fi*” (131).

Multiple librarians described how important wi-fi access is for community members, including enabling people to get online from their car at night to work or study to providing access and safety for unhouse patrons outside the building.

*So I mean, there's always been the haves and the have nots in terms of technology, just because historically, it was very expensive. By some people's standards, it's still really expensive to have internet access in your home and Wi Fi in your home, is so. So we're the great leveler . . . (111)*

*So making the decision to turn off the Wi Fi at night is an issue ethically that I have trouble with, particularly when I heard the story of this one person who is sitting sleeping in a car with with no access to calling 911. There's no pay phones, you know, she could be sexually assaulted [and no] way to call for help. (1131)*

Librarians noted the challenges with keeping the wi-fi on. They described the need to balance the provision of digital access for users, but also note that it can result in less desirable activities happening outside the building at night and raising security concerns.

*we did that before COVID. And then we started having some issues in some of the libraries, we turned it off for a while during off hours and put it back on for COVID. And most of our libraries still have it on. We run into some challenges with some of our libraries, where they'll be doing drug deals and whatnot in the parking lot at some hours at night. So we tried to, for the sake of some of the neighbors discourage some of that activity. And sometimes they may be using the Wi Fi for that. On other hand like [area in Arizona], right? I mean, [area in Arizona] is a combination public K 12. School. So our libraries, we do both there. And so we keep it on all hours. And many people will go there and work on school related stuff. At the library at any one of the principal there, the former principal, got her degree going, sitting in the parking lot at the library doing her classes. (1121)*

*We're, you know, providing hotspots for people who don't have a home and they're literally sitting in their car, using a hotspot. That's an example of how we're contributing to society, providing Wi Fi had a really sad story come up, we had a discipline problem, where the police asked us to turn our Wi Fi signal off at night. So we went back and forth, and we compromise that we would turn it off from 10, 10 to four, we felt like that would still protect, you know, give service to the majority of people without having this be a place of chaos for the police out in the out in the parking lots in the street. (1131)*

At the core of their professional mission is the commitment to ensuring free and open access to information for all. To achieve this, they often find themselves working around resource barriers or seeking to balance the need for digital access to information and the neighboring area's need for security. When describing the challenges around boosting wi-fi or keeping the library wi-fi on 24 hours a day, they did not approach the decision as a zero sum, security or access. They worked with city officials and the police to negotiate, re-negotiate, and consider a variety of solutions that might serve both agendas. This approach aligns with Brandt et al.'s (2023) morally conscious decision-making framework that seeks to advance outcomes for all.

**Issue III:** TO BE DETERMINED - may or may not develop, probably too long already.  
**Security – patrons without homes, patrons with mental health issues, drugs**

### **Resources and Outcomes**

In each explanation of a challenge in the workplace and their response to it, librarians described the resources expended. Resources included money, time, staffing, knowledge and training, space, and emotional effort. Public libraries are under considerable budgetary strain the US (CITES). **The ALA reports (DATA HERE)**. Many librarians describe the ways that budgets limited their programing, services, and abilities to do more. One noted that “*a lot of it's going to come down to funding and staffing*” (101) another “*But there are just limits, like the need of the community is greater than what public libraries can provide at this point*” (161).

Because budget cuts and limitations are the norm, while most librarians discussed the challenge to find resources, write grants, and balance priorities, when describing conflicts or challenges in the workplace, they were more focused on the informal resources expended and their concerns that relying on these informal resources leads to burnout and damaging the profession. It was nearly universal that librarians described what Lavee (2021) calls informal personal resources, including time investment, emotional resources, instrumental resources, and

material resources. One librarian talked about the “*deeply interpersonal nature of the work that you're going to do. And the fact that a lot of it is going to take a heavy emotional toll on you*” (241). They described the job as stressful, difficult, dangerous, challenging, exhausting, and frustrating. One librarian noted the need to address the mental health of librarians, because “*we are repeatedly exposed to trauma and stress on a day-to-day basis through our work. And particularly in the case of the part timers, we don't provide the responses to that trauma*” (251).

*you're doing triage on folks who life has chewed up and spat back out. And adult services librarians are out there trying to pick up, help them pick up the pieces and patch them back up. And that can mean some it's emotionally draining work. And so it can be emotionally harder, and therefore just harder to do. (251)*

*you have an understanding of the deeply deeply interpersonal nature of the work that you're going to do. And the fact that a lot of it is going to take a heavy emotional toll on you, as well as you interact with people who are going through really rough times and you can't, there's not a lot that we can do to intervene other than provide resources and a kind ear. (241)*

*I learned firsthand how to do that how to take what is dysfunctional, break it down, like what are the things, you know, that we can do to make everyone feel valued, make everyone feel part of the team, make everyone know that their contributions count. And so it's a lot of work, but I've done it in more than one place now. So and culture and climate, to me is the most important aspect of a workplace. (111)*

Other librarians noted that the emotional strain and is affecting their personal and family lives and causing burnout among librarians:

*you're working in an environment where it becomes very stressful. People sometimes say, you know, this just isn't worth it. It's affecting me, it's affecting my family. And I just can't do this anymore. And libraries are facing a real problem that way. (2171)*

*mission creep. And the professional . . . I worry that we overextend ourselves, I am worried that we are burning ourselves out, I am warning, I'm worried that we take on more than we have capacity for and burnout doesn't happen to us, we do it to ourselves. (251)*

*I've heard libraries described as being radically open, which is to say that we are open many times when other institutions aren't, and that is absolute hell, on our personal lives, and our ability to, frankly, sometimes work necessary second and third jobs because we are not paid enough. (251)*

*you're having people yell at you, and scream at you and calling you a groomer, or calling you a pedophile. You know, that's hard to just brush off and say, yeah, that doesn't bother*



*me. And, you know, unfortunately, you are seeing people leaving the field of libraries.*  
(2171)

Lavee (2021) finds that street level bureaucrats provide these informal personal resources when there is a lack of formal resources, professional commitment, managerial encouragement, and a work environment that values these approaches. In contrast, librarians regularly noted professional commitment to using informal resources and managerial encouragement. While they need more pay, staff, and increased program budgets, they note the provision of informal resources to solve patron problems as their professional duty, obligation, and achievement of the organization's mission. Informal resources, for public librarians, is part of the job and the professional and organizational responsibility, they just need more of it. In sum, librarians noted doing the right thing – the moral decision or the policy compliant decision – created emotional burden, stress, burnout, and strain. But they did not report this resulting emotional response as outside of their professional training and identity. In fact, they often viewed the resulting response as carrying out their professional duty and fulfilling the organization's mission.

Finally, I coded the outcomes or resulting actions that were taken following conflicts described by librarians. I was careful to pay attention to outcomes or resolutions related to procedural work, role, rules, or policies – whether that entailed following or enforcing a policy or finding a workaround. In some cases, these were examples of how librarians resolved a problem that an individual was experiencing or resolution of a single incident. For example, calling the police, removing a person, cleaning up vomit, rearranging space, or saying, “thank you for your concern” and then doing nothing. In other cases, librarians resolved the issue by activating organizational policies or managerial processes. In none of the interviews did the librarian describe their decision as breaking a rule or violating the organizational agenda, mission, or goals. They did not articulate a discretion-policy challenge or divide when addressing workplace challenges, rather they described a professional training and process that including negotiating rules, policies, and priorities to achieve what was best for patrons and the organization mission. They demonstrate the morally conscious decision-making processes described by Brandt et al (2023), using situational awareness and critical thinking to resolve the issue in a moral and responsible manner. However, their situational awareness and critical thinking is steeped in their professional training, identity, and networks and that professionalism aligns with the organizational goals and mission.

## 7. Concluding discussion

Schott et al (2016) present research on confused professionals, seeking to balance the pressures of their professional work with organizational and social pressures. Their starting point is one where professional norms and values conflict with the organizational and societal factors, requiring an analysis of how professionals cope and managed conflict. This is a common approach in public administration research on professionals, a starting point where professional norms or agendas conflict with the mission, agenda, or policies of the public organization where they work. Schott et al. (2016) conclude that stress and conflict will be reduced when professionals accept organizational factors and integrate the two, profession and organization. In this research, I argue that morally conscious decision making requires the professional to align with the organizational and the societal. By analyzing a variety of situations in the library context, we see public librarians use sensemaking, intuition, and professional training to address issues and resolve conflicts in a manner that achieves organizational and professional goals. For public librarians, acting on professional training and norms aligns with the organizational mission and advances benefits for society. As one librarian notes:

*“But essentially, what we are trained to do. In a situation like this, if somebody comes in, and they have a disagreement about something that you have in your building, whether it's a book or a DVD, whether it's a program, we do have, libraries are all about policies, we have so many different policies that govern the way that we do things. And one of them is a collection development.” (2171)*

For public librarians, the formal education, professional training, support, and advocacy, and the organizational policies and priorities mostly align. This is a stark contrast to previous research that sets occupational professionalism in conflict with organizational rules and procedures, where professionals use their professional training as a mechanism to deviate from organizational rules (Schott et al 2016). Public librarians offer an ideal case for considering a new way forward for professionalism in public organization, one where the profession and the organization align, thus reducing the tension between policy enforcement and bureaucratic discretion.

Sonenshein (2007) offers a starting point for alignment of the professional and the organizational with his sensemaking-intuition model. When applying Sonenshein's sensemaking-intuition model, I find that librarians have a mental model of their role and how to

respond to conflict. They have expectations and motivations and social anchors that drive their responses. Librarians rely on experience, intuition, and culture to decide how to respond and over time develop “moral intuitions” that they apply to solve problems. This sensemaking approach moves away from the dichotomous view of rule-following versus discretion. But I find that librarians are not just sensemaking or stumbling through, using intuitive judgement and learning over time, they are also drawing on policy, professional guidance, academic training, advice, peers, mentors, and a professional society that values and prioritizes evidence-based research to advance organizational and professional missions (e.g. free speech and open access to information for all). The librarian interviews confirm Sonenshein’s post hoc explanation and justification, but also reveal that intuitive judgement relies heavily on professional identity, socialization, and guidance from the ALA. In the case of librarians, formal professional guidance and policy plays a role in driving issue construction, judgment, and post hoc explanations.

Figure 1 illustrates Sonenshein’s original Sensemaking Intuition Model on the left. To the right, I highlight the components that are driven by professionalism, in the case of public librarians. Motivational drives remain the same, but all other components are shaped by professional training and socialization – expectations, experience, social anchors, social pressures, representation and justification.

**Figure 1. Professionalism in the sensemaking-intuition model**

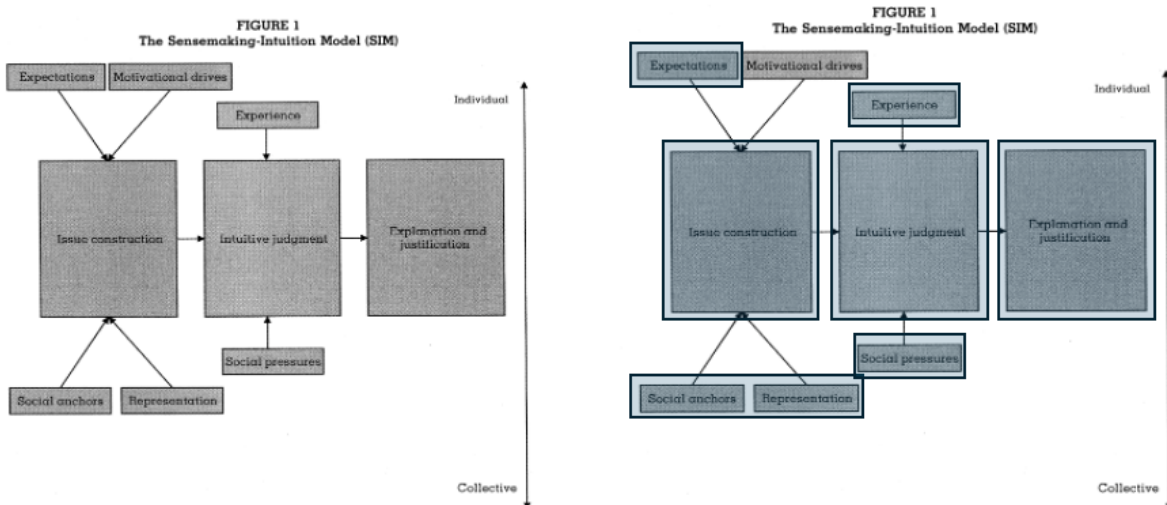
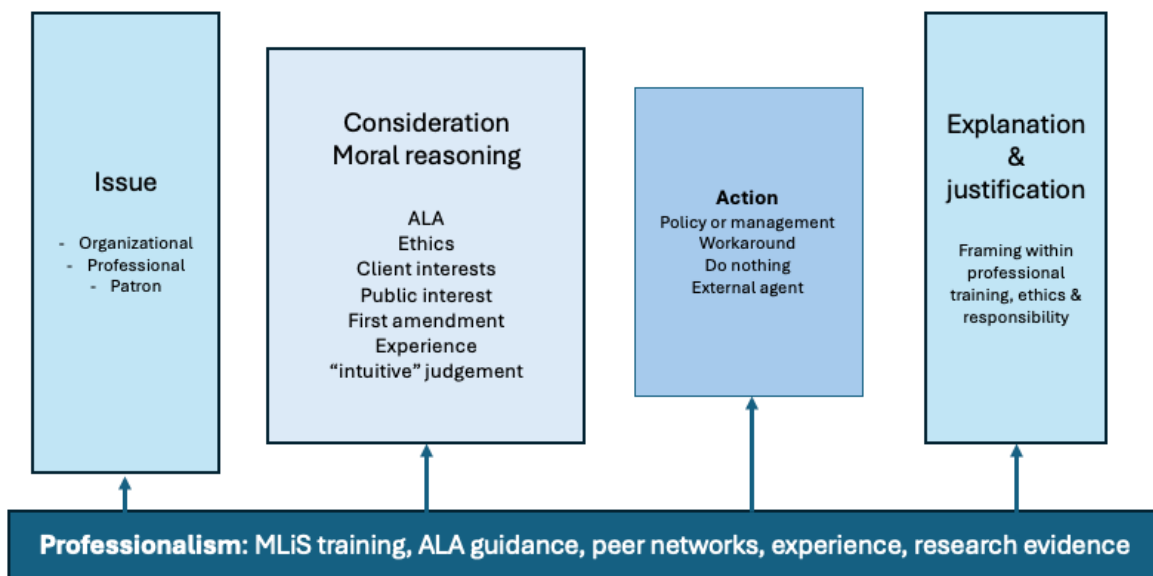


Figure 2 illustrates the unification of the sensemaking-intuition model and morally conscious decision-making framework from the public librarian data. In this model, professionalism shapes issue construction, moral reasoning and intuitive judgement, and explanation and justification for the actions taken. All actions, whether applying policy, working around rules, doing nothing, or calling an external actor (e.g. the police) are explained within a professional frame.

**Figure 2. Professionalism in morally conscious decision making and sensemaking intuition in the public sector**



**Conclusions for other public organizations and professions**

Of note, in the case of US public librarians is that first, the professional association is large, powerful, and effective. The ALA has played a key role in shaping the profession, managing the evolution of the job, from keeper of books to managers of information. The ALA is closely tied to the educational professional, e.g. the MLiS accreditation system, and offers valuable support, advocacy, and resources of librarians of all types (e.g. academic, public, school). One explanation for this close tie between professional association and practitioner is the core training and identity of the librarian as a professional information agent, a researcher. While other professions, take for example public administration, struggle to bring academic

research to practice or translate academic peer-review journal articles to practice, librarians are researchers and practitioners. Their practice is to consume information and research. Thus, they offer the ideal example of a tightly couple research and practice community, there the association simultaneously serves both and information churns across the two communities, with research guiding practice and practitioners being modern challenges to researchers.

A second key characteristic of this case study is that the professional librarian is the front-line worker and the library head. The management structure in public libraries is relatively flat. There are staff roles, library assistants, technology experts, and sometimes volunteers. While the flat organization means there are *“that was a hard part of being a librarian - that I didn't realize was, there's not a lot of ways to move up”* (221), it also means the person at the very top has the same professional training, affiliation, and socialization as the front-line librarian working in adult services, the archive, or children services. In a small local library, there might be only one level of management. In a large city or a library district system, each branch will have a head librarian, and the main city library might have multiple librarians with specialty training or roles, but they all have an MLiS and identify as a professional librarian. The effect of this flatter organization and unified professional training might play a key role in unifying organizational and professional goals and priorities. It might also offer a model for other public organizations that seek to better align organizational and professional norms and values.

## **8. Next steps**

Public librarians are engaged in morally conscious decision making, they consider the situation, the interests of others, and action based on organizational values. However, they are not frequently engaging morally conscious decision making as a discretionary tool to break rules or workaround policy. In fact, the interview data show that public librarians are addressing challenges and resolving conflict in alignment with the formal guidance, policy, and support offered by the professional association (e.g. ALA). Public librarians guided by organizational and professional values, are weighing the interests of multiple stakeholders, and engaging in morally conscious decision making. I find that their sensemaking, individual considerations, explanations, and calculations nearly always align with ALA professional guidance. For public librarians, morally conscious decision making is not contrary to professional norms, organizational values, and policy, but instead is in alignment. In many of the issues discussed by

librarians, discretion is being used to make the moral and the policy compliant decision, not as a workaround or a violation of policy and practice. Public librarians are doing the hard work to negotiate solutions that are professional, ethical, and sustainable and in the best interests of all stakeholders.

The question remains: Is it possible to construct professional and organizational alignment in other types of public organizations? Can sensemaking intuition be embedded in professional training and socialization? Can a public sector professional association create, design, and support a community of morally conscious decision makers in the public sector that are able to balance the interests of multiple stakeholders to achieve morally substantiable outcomes? Is it possible for other public organizations to codify morally conscious decision making in policy and practice via professional training, education, ethical codes, journals, and practitioner support?

Public librarians, with their commitment to open access for all, and a base assumption that everyone belongs and everyone deserves, come to public sector work with a set of values that define the organizational mission, professional code, and day-to-day work. The core value and professional ethos is one of universal access. What would it look like if the values and professional training in the department of transportation, parks & recreation, and public works department looks like this? Imagine if our public transit and police departments resolved conflicts and approached problems using the morally conscious framework and the application of that framework aligned with the organizational mission, policy design, and practical guidance from the association. Public librarians and the ALA are a model for morally conscious public sector professionalism and alignment between academic research and knowledge, professional training, and support for public sector practitioners at the front-line.

## References

- Abbott, A. 1998. Professionalism and the future of librarianship.
- Abbott, A. 1991. The order of professionalization: An empirical analysis. *Work and occupations*, 18(4), 355-384.
- Adler, P. S., and S. Kwon. 2013. "The Mutation of Professionalism as a Contested Diffusion Process: Clinical Guidelines as Carriers of Institutional Change in Medicine." *Journal of Management Studies* 50 (5): 930–962.
- American Library Association. 1939/2019. Library Bill of Rights, Art. I, II. Adopted June 19, 1939, by the ALA Council; amended October 14, 1944; June 18, 1948; February 2, 1961; June 27, 1967; January 23, 1980; January 29, 2019. Accessed on May 13, 2024 at <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill>
- American Library Association. 1953/2004. Freedom to Read Statement. American Library Association "Freedom to Read Statement." Accessed May 13, 2024. <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/freedomreadstatement>
- American Library Association. 1990. 61: Library Services for the Poor, American Library Association, Chicago, IL, available at: [www.ala.org/aboutala/governance/policymanual/updatedpolicymanual/section2/61svctopoor](http://www.ala.org/aboutala/governance/policymanual/updatedpolicymanual/section2/61svctopoor)
- Brandt, E., Rodriguez, A., Nwakpuda, E., & Bezboruah, K. (2023). Redefining morally conscious decision-making for the Public Sector: a theoretical analysis. *Administration & Society*, 55(1), 184-205.
- Broadbent, J., M. Dietrich, and J. Roberts. 1997. *The End of the Professions? The Restructuring of the Professional Work*. London: Routledge.
- Bundt, Julie. 2000. Strategic Stewards: Managing Accountability, Building Trust, *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, Volume 10, Issue 4, October, Pages 757–778, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordjournals.jpart.a024290>
- Evetts, J. 2013. Professionalism: Value and ideology. *Current sociology*, 61(5-6), 778-796.
- Hendrikx, W. 2021. Managerialism and its consequences for professional identity: A comparative analysis of GPs and secondary school teachers. *Administration & Society*, 53(8), 1178-1202.
- Kerpershoek, Emiel; Groenleer, Martijn ; de Bruijn, Hans. 2016. Unintended responses to performance management in Dutch hospital care: Bringing together the managerial and professional perspectives.

- Lavee, E. 2021. Who is in charge? The provision of informal personal resources at the street level. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 31(1), 4-20.
- Larson, Magali Sarfatti. 1977. *The Rise of Professionalism: A Sociological Analysis*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Lounsbury, Michael. 2002. Institutional Transformation and Status Mobility: The Professionalization of the Field of Finance. *Academy of Management journal*, 2002, Vol.45 (1), p.255-266
- Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. B. 2014. *Designing qualitative research*. Sage publications.
- Monties, V., & Gagnon, S. 2024. Responding to reforms: resilience through rule-bending and workarounds in the police force. *Public Management Review*, 26(1), 142-161.
- Noordegraaf, M. 2011. "Risky Business: How Professionals and Professional Fields (Must) Deal with Organizational Issues." *Organization Studies* 32 (10): 1349–1371. doi:10.1177/0170840611416748.
- Noordegraaf, M., & Van der Meulen, M. (2008). Professional power play: Organizing management in health care. *Public administration*, 86(4), 1055-1069.
- Noordegraaf, M., Schneider, M. M. E., Van Rensen, E. L. J., & Boselie, J. P. P. E. F. (2016). Cultural complementarity: reshaping professional and organizational logics in developing frontline medical leadership. *Public Management Review*, 18(8), 1111-1137.
- Schott, C., Van Kleef, D., & Noordegraaf, M. (2016). Confused Professionals?: Capacities to cope with pressures on professional work. *Public Management Review*, 18(4), 583-610.
- Sonenshein, S. 2007. The role of construction, intuition, and justification in responding to ethical issues at work: The sensemaking-intuition model. *Academy of management review*, 32(4), 1022-1040.
- Starbuck, W. H. 1992. Learning by knowledge-intensive firms. *Journal of management Studies*, 29(6), 713-740.
- Yin, R. K. 2009. *Case study research: Design and methods* (Vol. 5). Sage.
- Wilensky, H. L. 1964. The professionalization of everyone? *American Journal of Sociology*, 70(2), 137-158.
- Woodrum, P. 1988. A haven for the Homeless. *Library Journal* 113: 55–57.
- Wray, Wendell L. 2009[1976]. Library services for the poor: Implications for library education. *Public Library Quarterly* 28 (1): 40–48.



## APPENDIX:

### Interview Protocol

*We are going to ask you some questions about your work experience as related to culture and work environment; community outreach; and technology.*

**Individual & Professional Identity / Norms / Values** - We are going to start by asking you some questions about your professional training with an MLS, the norms and culture at your library, and values and norms as a public servant.

1. Tell us a little bit about why you decided to become a librarian/pursue library work
  - a. Prompt: What drew you to the profession
  - b. Prompt: In what ways does your daily work life align with or not align with your expectations of the job when you entered?
2. What contributions do you see libraries making to society?
3. What does it mean to be a librarian today
4. How did the MLS train you for this job?
  - a. Prompt: In what ways did your professional training not prepare you for this job?
5. What are the most pressing/important issue facing libraries and librarians today?
  - a. [The ALA has identified book banning, DEI, intellectual freedom, censorship, and literacy as core issues facing libraries today. How do these issues impact your library specifically?]
6. Can you describe an event that has been or would be troubling to your organization?
  - a. How would/did you address this problem?
7. Can you describe a recent event that created a moral or ethical dilemma for you at work?
  - a. Did that dilemma challenge your MLS / professional training?
  - b. Did the dilemma challenge your role as a government employee?
  - c. What actions were taken to address this problem?
8. How has the role of libraries in society changed over the last 20 years (if applicable)?
9. How would you characterize your library's relationship with other city departments, and city management and elected officials?

**COMMUNITY OUTREACH** – Now we want to hear about how you and your library engage in community outreach and inclusion

1. What are some of the ways that your library engages in community outreach and public service?
2. Can you describe some of the communities your library has been targeting with outreach in the last 5 years?
  - a. Prompt: *What are the communities that you find easiest to engage?*
  - b. Prompt: *What populations have been the most challenging for your outreach, and why?*
  - c. Prompt: *Are there ways you would like to see community outreach change or evolve in the next 5-10 years? What would it take to make that happen?*
3. Are there activities or programs at your library that help people access government services?
  - a. Prompt: Do you offer government services through the library?
4. How do libraries (as organizations) and librarians (as public servants and professionals) enable effective public service delivery to vulnerable populations?
5. How has your library used volunteers from the community?
  - a. Prompt: What sorts of challenges arise regarding managing/using volunteers?

**TECHNOLOGY** – finally, we would like to hear about your experiences with technology in the workplace.

1. How has technology enabled librarians to alter or change their jobs?
  - a. Prompt: Is technology helping you do more? Creating efficiencies
  - b. Prompt: Duplicating your workload
2. How does technology alter your relationships with the community you serve?
  - a. Prompt: Has technology work in the library changed the type of clientele you serve/encounter?
  - b. Prompt: How does technology enable you to reach new/different audiences, if at all?
3. Do you offer programs that target digital literacy and digital inclusion?
  - a. Prompt: Can you offer specific examples?
4. How has technology enabled your organization to broaden its mission?
  - a. Prompt: Do you work with people to help them navigate government technology systems?
  - b. Prompt: How has technology enabled your organization to expand its impact in the community?
5. Can you talk about how digital technologies have shaped community outreach?
  - a. Prompt: *Has technology been a barrier to community outreach and engagement? Can you give specific examples?*
  - b. Prompt: *How has technology created more opportunities for reaching specific communities? Can you give specific examples?*

Thanks so much for your time – we really appreciate your assistance with this project.

- Are there other librarians that you recommend we speak to? (if yes, ask for contact info)
- Would you be open to us contacting you again in the future, if necessary?

## APPENDIX

### Sample of MLiS course offerings

**UNC:** <https://sils.unc.edu/msls-and-msis-curriculum/>

---

#### **CORE**

INLS 776: Ethics, Values and Society

INLS 777: Perspectives on Information, Technology, and People

#### **SERVICE AND ORGANIZATIONS**

INLS 490: Storytelling: Designing Your Professional Narrative

INLS 501: Information Resources and Services

INLS 525: Electronic Records Management

INLS 556: Introduction to Archives and Records Management

INLS 582: Systems Analysis

INLS 585: Management for Information Professionals

INLS 700: Scholarly Communication

INLS 711: Crisis Management for Libraries

INLS 719: Usability Evaluation and Testing

INLS 721: Cataloging Theory and Practice

INLS 733: Administration of Public Library Work with Children and Young Adults

INLS 740: Digital Libraries: Principals and Applications

#### **PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES**

INLS 490: Social Problems in an Information Society

INLS 500: Human Information Interactions

INLS 660: Social Media and Society: A Theoretical and Empirical Overview

INLS 690: Philosophy and Ethics of AI

INLS 690-323: Community Archives

INLS 690: Social Informatics

INLS 690: Information Professionals in the Makerspace

INLS 690: Disability Information and Informatics

INLS 690-313: Humanistic Theories for LIS Inquiry

INLS 690-324: Design for Accessibility

INLS 735: Youth Services in a Diverse Society

INLS 737: Inclusive Information Services for Diverse Populations

INLS 739: Information Services for Specific Populations

INLS 754: Access, Outreach, and Public Service in Cultural Heritage Repositories

INLS 758: International and Cross-Cultural Perspectives for Information Management

INLS 890: Networks of Racial Capitalism

**St. John's University** <https://online.stjohns.edu/online-programs/mslis/curriculum>

LIS 203 Information Organization

LIS 204 Introduction to Library & Information Science

LIS 205 Information Sources & Services

LIS 239 Research & Evaluation Methods

LIS 240 Management of Information Organizations

#### **Public Librarianship Specialization**

LIS 221 Planning and Delivering Information Literacy Programs

LIS 222 Materials & Services to Diverse Populations

LIS 233 Public Libraries & Community Information Centers

LIS 238 Web Design for Libraries & Information Centers

LIS 260 Information Use and Users  
LIS 275 Cultural Competence for Information Professionals  
LIS 302 Genealogical Sources & Services  
LIS 320 Fake News and Misinformation

**University of Arizona:** <https://infosci.arizona.edu/ma-library-information-science/curriculum-specialties-courses>

LIS 518: Information Trust, Manipulation, and Deception  
LIS 521: Children's and Young Adult Literature in a Multicultural Society  
LIS 523: Early Childhood and Public Libraries  
LIS 530: Cataloging and Metadata Management  
LIS 532: Information Intermediation  
LIS 550: Information Environments from Non-Dominant Perspectives  
LIS 557: Documenting Diverse Cultures and Communities  
LIS 558: Social Justice in Information Services  
LIS 559: Marketing of Library and Information Services to Communities  
LIS 560: Collection Management  
LIS 563: Readers' Advisory Services in Public Libraries  
LIS 567: Leadership and the Information Organization  
LIS 570: Database Development and Management  
LIS 571: Introduction to Information Technology  
LIS 572: Government Information: Policy & Resources  
LIS 575: User Interface and Website Design  
LIS 582: Young Adults and Public Libraries  
LIS 584: Intellectual Property/Copyright  
LIS 587: Information Seeking  
LIS 608: Managing the Information Organization  
LIS 671: Digital Curation and Digital Preservation  
LIS 672: Introduction to Applied Technology  
LIS 673: Management for Information Professionals