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# Beyond the Numbers

*A Qualitative Study Exploring the Role of Meaning Making about  
Psychometric Tests in Recruitment*

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We wish the reader a pleasant reading!

Lianna Berglund, Petronella Hjort & Nathalie Nordqvist

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*And then if you don't play. Well, then you get disqualified.*

– Bengtsson

## Abstract

**Title:** Beyond the Numbers: A Qualitative Study Exploring the Role of Meaning Making about Psychometric Tests in Recruitment

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**Advisor:** Emilie Hesselbo

**Key words:** meaning making, psychometric tests, recruiters, frame, objectivity

### **Research question:**

How do recruiters make sense about psychometric testing in the recruitment process?

How do they use strategies to respond to situations that challenge their perspective of psychometric tests?

**Purpose:** The aim of this thesis is to explore how meaning about psychometric testing within recruitment is constructed and sustained through the process of meaning making.

**Method:** To achieve the purpose of this study, nine qualitative interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview method. The study adopted a constructionist perspective with an abductive approach.

**Theoretical perspective:** This study is positioned within the research area of psychometric tests in recruitment, focusing on the theoretical perspective of individual meaning making.

**Result:** The result of the empirical analysis show that recruiters view psychometric tests through a frame of objectivity. To maintain that frame, they use five protective meaning making strategies such as downplaying limitations, using metaphors, analogies, narratives and dialogues.

**Conclusion:** Recruiters make sense of psychometric tests by operating through a frame of objectivity. To maintain this frame of objectivity, the recruiters employ protective meaning making strategies.

## Sammanfattning

**Examensarbetets titel:** Beyond the Numbers: A Qualitative Study Exploring the Role of Meaning Making about Psychometric Tests in Recruitment

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**Författare:** Lianna Berglund, Nathalie Nordqvist, Petronella Hjort

**Handledare:** Emilie Hesselbo

**Fem nyckelord:** meningsskapande, psykometriska tester, rekryterare, ramverk, objektivitet

### **Forskningsfrågor:**

Hur skapar rekryterare mening om psykometriska tester i rekryteringsprocessen?

Hur använder de strategier för att hantera situationer som utmanar deras perspektiv på psykometriska tester?

**Syfte:** Syftet med studien är att utforska hur betydelse av psykometriska tester inom rekrytering konstrueras och upprätthålls under processen av meningsskapande.

**Metod:** För att uppnå syftet med studien genomfördes nio kvalitativa intervjuer med en semistrukturerad intervjumetod. Studien har antagit ett konstruktionistiskt perspektiv och ett abduktivt förhållningssätt.

**Teoretiska perspektiv:** Denna studie är positionerad inom forskningsområdet för psykometriska tester inom rekrytering, med fokus på det teoretiska perspektivet av individuellt meningsskapande.

**Resultat:** Resultatet av den empiriska analysen visar att rekryterare skapar mening av psykometriska tester utifrån en ram av objektivitet. För att upprätthålla den ramen använder de fem skyddande meningsskapande strategier i form av minimerande av begränsningar, användande av metaforer, analogier, narrativ och dialoger.

**Slutsats:** Rekryterarna skapar mening av psykometriska tester genom att arbeta utifrån en ram av objektivitet. För att upprätthålla ramen av objektivitet använder rekryterarna skyddande meningsskapande strategier.

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Motivation

As soon to be graduates we estimated that we had spent roughly 15 hours each on various psychometric tests when applying for different jobs, only within the last few months. It became apparent that nearly every company that we applied to require these tests to be completed. The catalyst for this thesis was a particular test experience, where one of us was asked to undergo a camera-monitored test with sporadic photo captures to counteract cheating. This incident prompted a discussion between the three of us about the nature and significance of psychometric testing. We discovered that many students we spoke to held opinions on these tests. Notably, young graduates often highlighted drawbacks and controversies associated with them. In contrast, recruiters for the positions that we applied to as well as people in our network working within human resources, presented a predominantly positive experience regarding these tests. These differences made us further interested in the recruiter's perspective on the meaning and purpose of psychometric testing. From our previous business studies, we had gained insights in Karl Weick's (1995) influential work on sensemaking, along with other scholars who have expanded and developed the field further. As we delved deeper in our interests, we discovered that research pertaining to how recruiters create and sustain meaning about psychometric test use was heavily understudied. With this thesis, we have therefore chosen to examine the area of psychometric testing in recruitment processes by using meaning making concept and theories.

## 1.2 Background

In today's rapidly changing business landscape, psychometric testing seems to have captured the attention of many organizations. Jenkins (2001) describes that although it may be difficult to establish the exact scale of psychometric testing in recruitment processes, the usage has grown considerably since the 1980's. Turning our attention to the field of psychometric testing within recruitment, it is important to ask the question of what precisely constitutes a psychometric test, which proves to be a complex task. According to Lyle V. Jones (2006) the field of psychometrics have been described as devoted to the development of psychology as a quantitative rational science. However, Lazarsfeld (1961) argues that there is no clear distinction between the field of psychology, the social sciences and economics. Evidently,



psychometric test use has become increasingly apparent also in the organizational setting with the goal of assessing candidates' suitability in relation to different positions (Rothstein & Goffin, 2006). One way of differing between different types of psychometric tests in recruitment is dividing them into personality tests and aptitude tests. In broad terms, the former refers to the assessment of personality traits (Andersson et al., 2016) and the latter refers to the measurement of aspects such as problem solving ability, linguistic ability, numerical ability as well as logical ability (Lindelöw Danielsson, 2003).

Who a company chooses to hire has a direct impact on the profitability of the business (Risavy & Hausdorf, 2011). Hence, it is not unexpected that companies seek methods to guarantee that this is accomplished in the best possible way. One frequently highlighted paper on the validity and predictive value of psychometric testing is the meta-analyses made by (Schmidt & Hunter, 1998) showing that combinations of general mental ability tests with work samples or structured interviews had a higher validity than for example educational background or interests. Recent research by Sackett et al. (2017) supports this notion, although their findings diverge from those of Schmidt & Hunter (1998), regarding the mean validity of certain tests. From the background of predicting work performance, psychometric tests are thereby often seen as an important tool in recruitment processes from the perspective of the organization.

However, as the use of tests has increased, so has the level of criticism surrounding them (Risavy & Hausdorf, 2011). For instance, Rothstein and Goffin (2006) questions if recruiters have sufficient knowledge to be able to understand the complexity that the use of psychometric tests add, and if they are able to apply these in a useful way. Another study by Youngman (2017) suggest that psychometric testing may purposefully or inadvertently screen out candidates in a discriminatory way, when not administrated or interpreted correctly. Furthermore, there may also be issues concerning algorithmic bias (Timmons, 2021), response distortion (Cavanaugh, 2018) and personal integrity (Kramer, 2007). These findings highlight many relevant aspects of psychometric test use. What these studies fail to address, however, is the crucial aspect of understanding how recruiters fundamentally make sense of tests.

The need for finding meaning in events is commonly described as inherently human (Crescioni & Baumeister, 2013). One frequently highlighted concept in sensemaking

literature is the role of individual meaning making, which is the process in which individuals create meaning of events through their mental representations of reality (Heine et al., 2006), also known as frames (Logemann et al., 2019). However, the construction and deconstruction of meaning is also an ongoing social process (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014) which is why concepts from organizational sensemaking are useful in further understanding the meaning making process. One approach to exploring how individuals create and sustain meaning lies in the analysis of language use, as discussed by Wibeck and Linnér (2021).

This study focuses on examining how recruiters, who use psychometric tests in their recruitment processes, make sense of test use. As well as, how they use strategies to respond to situations that challenge their perspective of test use. This study has been conducted by analyzing language patterns and employing concepts from meaning making on nine semi-structured interviews. The aim of this study is to uncover how meaning regarding the use of tests is constructed and maintained throughout the process of meaning making.

### 1.3 Problematization

As described, the discourse surrounding the value of quantitative measurements in psychometric research mainly raises questions about objectivity. For example, much research has been made on the quantitative aspects of psychometric tests, such as validity of personality testing for employee selection (Fisher et al., 2021; Tatman, 2022), as well as comparisons of validity to other types of recruitment tools (Ryan & Tippins, 2004). There are also studies concerned with improving the tests, for example by understanding and reducing response distortion (Arthur Jr et al., 2010; Cavanaugh, 2018; Converse et al., 2009) or improving the models that the tests are based on (Raad et al., 1994; Arthur et al., 2001). Another focus is on technical advancements, such as AI, to offer companies the potential to reduce costs, streamline processing time, and enhance accuracy (Amzile et al., 2022).

In contrast, the qualitative aspects of testing and the role of meaning making in recruiters' understanding of tests have received limited attention. While some studies have explored the role of interpretations, they have mostly been focused on how applicants view the selection process (Ryan & Ployhart, 2000; Hausknecht et al., 2004), in order to better understand how to improve the recruitment process. Similarly, there's studies regarding practitioners' beliefs,

attitudes and reactions to personality tests (Furnham, 2018; Furnham, 2008). However, these studies have not gone so far as to explore the role of meaning making. Furthermore, they refrain from critically examining or questioning the use of tests and instead focus on how to improve them.

With regards to sensemaking, some research has explored sensemaking processes in human resource (HR) professionals, although predominantly in relation to strategic change (Kieran et al., 2022) and the practitioners role as change agents (Brown et al., 2017). There is, however, a lack of studies examining the meaning making perspective in the specific context of psychometric testing. The study by Furnham (2018) examined the reactions and reasonings of test use but focused on the most and least valued criteria when practitioners choose tests. One study by Lundgren et al. (2019) has examined how HR professionals use individual meaning making and organizational sensemaking regarding psychometric tests. However, this research focused primarily on practical approaches to testing within the developmental context (Lundgren et al., 2019). Consequently, there is still much to be learnt about the role of meaning making and sensemaking when using psychometric tests in the recruitment process.

In this study we intend to adopt a critical perspective on the use of psychometric tests. Aligned with Fournier and Grey (2000) characterization of critical studies, our aim is to challenge the conventional understanding of test use and create space for questioning what may be taken for granted. Moreover, we take a non-performative stance, deviating from the common goal of contributing to the enhanced effectiveness of test use, as currently seen in the research field. By incorporating meaning making concepts and inviting recruiters to share their experiences on psychometric testing, we will contribute to previously overlooked areas in the intersection of psychometric tests, meaning making, and recruitment.

## 1.4 Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to explore how meaning about psychometric testing within recruitment is constructed and sustained through the process of meaning making. Given the purpose of the study, the following research question have been formulated:

*How do recruiters make sense about psychometric testing in the recruitment process?*

To also include the role of meaning making in sustaining their perspective on test use, an additional research question has been formulated:

*How do they use strategies to respond to situations that challenge their perspective of psychometric tests?*

## 1.5 Disposition

### *Introduction*

In this section, we present our motivation and the background for our study. We also present and problematize relevant theories concerning meaning making, sensemaking and previous studies on psychometric tests. Furthermore, the study's purpose is presented as well as the research questions that have guided our study.

### *Method*

The method section provides a description of the work process behind our study as well as the methodology that has been used. We argue for the decisions that we have made during the course of the work. Furthermore, we also address potential limitations and their implications.

### *Theoretical overview*

The theoretical overview introduces relevant theoretical concepts for the study, as well as research within the field where the study positions itself. The focus is on psychometric tests, individual meaning making and organizational sensemaking. Additionally, an ongoing argumentation is presented regarding the relevance of the chosen theoretical concepts as well as the limitations that they may have.

### *Analysis of Empirical Data*

In the analysis, the study's empirical material is presented and analyzed. The section begins with an analysis of the recruiter's frame of reference which we have identified as a frame of objectivity. The analysis further explores how recruiters engage in five protective meaning making strategies to maintain the frame of objectivity.

### *Discussion*

In the discussion section, the empirical findings are related to existing theories with the aim of nuancing existing theories and literature as well as making a theoretical contribution.

### *Conclusion*

In the concluding section, the study's conclusions, theoretical and practical implications, limitations, and suggestions for further research are presented.

## 2. Method

*This following chapter provides a description of the work process behind our study as well as the methodology that has been used. This is a qualitative study with an abductive and interpretative approach based on a constructionist ontological position. In this chapter we will argue for the choices that we have made, as well as explain the considerations and decisions made during the course of the work. We will also consider potential limitations and implications as well as how these have been addressed.*

### 2.1 Theoretical Background

The purpose of this study is to explore how meaning about psychometric testing within recruitment is constructed and sustained throughout the process of meaning making. To achieve this, a constructionist ontological position has been used since it aims to understand reality as something that is made real by the actions of humans and the meanings which people attach to them (Bell et al., 2019). Furthermore, we decided on a qualitative research strategy with an abductive approach. The qualitative research strategy means that the epistemological orientation of our study is carried out from an interpretive perspective which suggests that people and institutions fundamentally differ from the study objects of natural science, and therefore require a different logic for the research process (Bryman & Bell, 2017). Our study is based on interpretations in two stages. The analysis is based on our interpretations of the recruiters' descriptions, which in turn is shaped by how the recruiters experience and interpret themselves and their social context (Bryman & Bell, 2017). In relation to our constructivist position, we have decided on an abductive approach meaning that we seek to develop explanation for the phenomena that we see by working between theory and data (Bell et al., 2019). The reason that we decided on an abductive approach was in order to nuance existing theory and identify new perspectives that can contribute to explain our observations, rather than testing existing theories or focusing on generating new (Bell et al., 2019).

## 2.2 Qualitative Interviews: Why and How

Our aim was to conduct eight to ten qualitative interviews with recruiters who used psychometric tests in the recruitment processes. We asked open-ended questions in order to gain the respondent's point of view and rich detailed answers (Bell et al., 2019). The interviews were conducted by using a semi-structured approach, where we had decided on certain themes, questions, and possible follow-up questions, that were all to be answered freely by the respondents (Bell et al., 2019). The themes that the interview questions were based on were emailed to the respondents beforehand with the purpose of stimulating their thoughts about the topic, while also aiming to minimize time consuming contemplation during the interview. We did, however, not send out the exact questions in order to reduce revised answers and the risk of answering in a socially desirable way.

The semi-structured interviews were designed to allow the recruiters to express their thoughts and experiences regarding psychometric tests without being led to specific answers. Thus, minimizing the risk of the study to be biased by our own preconceptions (Bell et al., 2019). One of the strengths of semi-structured interviews is to discover new information that may not have been discovered otherwise (Bell et al., 2019). However, a weakness of using semi-structured interviews is the possibility for the interview process to be time-consuming, as the discussion may touch on topics that may not be relevant (Bell et al., 2019). Nonetheless, this research strategy is better suited to answer the purpose of our study which is to explore how meaning is constructed and sustained, rather than testing a predetermined research question.

Some ethical considerations in the interview process were informed consent. This included giving sufficient information about the research so that the respondents could make an informed and free decision about their involvement (Bell et al., 2019). Furthermore, the recruiters were all anonymized in order to protect their privacy and make them feel comfortable expressing their opinions freely.

## 2.3 Selecting Respondents

We used a purposive sampling method, meaning that the respondents were selected based on a criterion that would make it possible to answer the purpose of the study (Bell et al., 2019).

This criterion was that the respondents worked with recruitment and used psychometric tests in their recruitment process. All respondents worked for organizations based in Sweden. We therefore acknowledge that cultural and geographical context may influence their views on psychometric testing. We conducted a total of nine interviews with the respondents, who were all contacted via email or LinkedIn. Out of the nine interviews, three of the respondents worked for the same company. However, it is important to highlight that each interview was conducted separately and without any knowledge of the other participants' answers. To minimize the risk of answer adjustments or biases, an additional criterion was that none of us had any prior associations with the recruiters.

## 2.4 Conducting Interviews

In order to not be limited by geographical distance in our selection of respondents, all interviews were conducted over Zoom. This also enabled recording of the audio which further eased the transcribing of the material as well as gave the opportunity to relive the interview (Bryman & Bell, 2017).

The three of us participated in all interviews. We had one main interviewer who led the interview and made sure all themes were addressed, the other two researchers were active in asking follow-up questions when necessary. We decided on this structure in order to organize the interviews in a way that would be time-efficient and make sure that every theme from the interview guide was addressed. The reason that all three of us participated in the interviews was to reduce any risks of misinterpretations as well as the possibility of multiple and diverse viewpoints which brings greater opportunity to perceive interesting aspects (Bryman & Bell, 2017).

Since the recruiters were mainly from Sweden, except for one recruiter, we decided to conduct the interviews in Swedish. The foundation for this decision is that we wanted the recruiters to express themselves in the best possible way. Since the interviews were held in Swedish, the material was also transcribed in Swedish. We then translated the quotes presented in the final thesis to English, as we believed this to be the most effective way to work. One potential disadvantage with the decision to conduct interviews in Swedish was that



there could be some meaning lost in translation considering that certain words and phrases cannot be directly translated from Swedish to English.

After the first three interviews, we slightly revised the interview guide. There were two main reasons for this. The first reason is related to our decision to use an abductive approach. This meant that we read articles parallel to conducting interviews and thereby found aspects and concepts that we believed would better address our research purpose. Secondly, we realized that the initial answers we got were too shallow and didn't answer the purpose of this study. Initially, we had decided to focus on control, culture and sensemaking. This was later revised to concentrate more on sensemaking concepts due to our observation of the respondents consistently incorporating said concept in their answers.

The interviews took an hour each to complete. Immediately following the interviews, we discussed the material and brainstormed our initial thoughts. The collected material reached a satisfactory saturation after nine interviews, and we were able to identify patterns as well as contradictions. The interviews were divided equally and transcribed. In order to prevent self-enhancement bias, we made sure that no one transcribed an interview where they were the one leading it.

## 2.5 The Analysis Process

When all nine interviews had been conducted and transcribed, we began our analysis process. All transcriptions were read through with the aim of identifying interesting perspectives and patterns. We decided to color code all quotes and statements that we thought captured interesting aspects related to sensemaking. We also made comments on certain quotes and statements, in order to express thoughts and ideas. This can be described as an initial coding of the empirical material, which has a purpose to create clarity and facilitate further processing (Charmaz, 2002; cited in Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2011). We then read through the transcriptions again to identify more patterns. Parallel to this, potentially suitable theoretical concepts were searched for which could contribute to explain our observations, as is characteristic of the abductive approach (Bell et al., 2019).

We categorized our findings and quotes under several sub-headings and added our short interpretations which can be described as a more focused coding (Charmaz, 2002; cited in Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2011). Once this was done, we then began to analyze the material more in-depth. Further reductions were made and quotes from all the participants were processed within each category. During this process we also began to argue for our findings, which is important in order to create independence and to add to existing theories and literature within the field (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2011). To be able to argue for our findings, it was also necessary to use a theoretical vocabulary that would enable a discussion of the observations (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2011). We therefore focused on searching for concepts and theories that were related to sensemaking and meaning making, that would aid in our analysis. During this process, we frequently discussed the material within the group and with our supervisor, which naturally led to the use of certain terms and concepts that could be used to explain the observations.

As a last step, we then focused on assessing the significance of the concepts within our empirical material, which is in line with Rennstam and Wästerfors (2011) model of defining, combining, relating, and nuancing concepts to provide meaning. Throughout the entire research process, we adopted a critical and reflective perspective on existing theories, as well as on our observations, to further challenge the existing theories surrounding the subject of psychometric testing.

## 2.6 Limitations

The study is based on interviews with nine recruiters who use psychometric tests. This can be considered a small sample size which would limit generalizability of the findings to other contexts. However, the purpose of this study is not to make empirical generalizations about all recruiters using psychometric tests, but rather to explore how meaning about psychometric testing withing recruitment can be constructed and sustained. The sample size is thus considered sufficient to achieve that purpose.

Another limitation of this study is the potential risk for bias related to the qualitative research method. According to Bell, Bryman, and Harley (2019), participants may be more likely to present themselves in a positive light or be reluctant to speak candidly about their experiences

due to social desirability bias or concerns about retribution. We actively tried to mitigate this risk by providing anonymity, not asking leading questions and maintain a neutral position when interviewing.

Lastly, the study is reliant on the interpretation of the data by us researchers, which introduces the risk of researcher bias. Qualitative research is inherently subjective, meaning that our preconceptions and assumptions can influence how we analyze and interpretate the data, potentially leading to a distorted or biased understanding of the studied situation (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2019). We tried to reduce this risk by being transparent about the decisions and selections that we have made and how we arrived at our conclusions. However, we recognize that the chosen perspective and conclusions may be influenced by our own individual perceptions about psychometric tests. Nevertheless, we tried to minimize this risk by discussing our findings between ourselves, during peer reviews and with our supervisor in order to prevent us from becoming too isolated within our own perspectives.

### 3. Theoretical Overview

*In this section, relevant theoretical concepts for the study are presented, as well as research in the field in which the study positions itself. The focus is on psychometric tests and meaning making. We have chosen to utilize concepts that recognizes individual meaning making. This is due to the critical nature of our study on psychometric tests in which we aim to challenge the conventional understanding that often characterizes the discourse surrounding psychometric testing. Our objective is not to promote a uniform or generic subjectivity in order to enhance organizational efficiency in test use. Instead, we aim to invite diverse perspectives from individual recruiters in order to nuance this notion. However, we include organizational sensemaking concepts as we recognize that recruiters are acting within organizations and thus are affected by, and affect, meaning about psychometric tests on an organizational level. Furthermore, we will present an ongoing argumentation regarding the relevance of the chosen perspectives, as well as in which regards, they exhibit deficiencies and gaps.*

## 3.1 Psychometric Tests

### 3.1.1 Psychometrics, Quantification & Objectivity

The field of “psychometrics” was defined in the journal *Psychometrika* in 1936 as devoted to the development of psychology as a quantitative rational science (Lyle V. Jones, 2006). Although quantitative methods had been previously used within psychological research, Louis Leon Thurstone’s founding of the Psychometric Society and the journal *Psychometrika* can be used to temporally indicate the beginning of the formal discipline of psychometrics (Lyle V. Jones, 2006). Related to the field of psychometrics is the introduction of quantitative rational science to the field of sociology as a means of measuring and interpreting data on different social aspects (Lazarsfeld, 1961). However, there is no clear distinction between the field of psychology, the social sciences and economics (Lazarsfeld, 1961). In other words, quantitative measures can be applied to different disciplines on the shared belief that the methods are superior in measuring, explaining, and indicating human behavior. Within this study, the term psychometric testing is considered useful to describe the measurements used by the recruiters to evaluate personality and cognitive abilities. Additionally, the term is valuable in order to separate from other types of tests used in the recruitment processes.

Psychometric tests sheds light on an interesting human phenomena, namely the want and need for quantification and objectification. Porter (1996) states that there is a moral demand for impartiality and fairness and that we try to answer this demand by using scientific objectivity. He continues by explaining that when making a decision based on numbers it at least has the appearance of being impartial, impersonal and without biases (Porter, 1996). Quantification and numbers can further be perceived as a pursuit for a universal language. McCosker and Wilken (2014) argues that visual representations of big data can create a ‘a fantasy of knowing, or total knowledge’. Rettberg (2014) further draws on this argument by stating that quantitative self-representation is similar to visualizations of big data as it highlights the belief that numbers tells us an objective truth. In a study of psychometric tests Furnham (2008) concluded that the tests were generally regarded as high validity whereas personal hunch and references were regarded as low validity. Turning our attention to the field of psychometric testing, let’s examine previous studies regarding various types of tests as well as their potential limitations.

### 3.1.2 Different Types of Psychometric Tests

According to Lindelöw Danielsson (2003), psychometric tests are becoming increasingly common when recruiting. The tests are used in recruitment processes, oftentimes when recruiting for higher positions within large organizations or as an assessment tool in mass recruitments. Lindelöw Danielsson (2003) has divided the most common tests and questionnaires into eight categories: knowledge tests, skills and aptitude tests, personality tests, questionnaires evaluating group roles and cooperation style, projective exercises, simulation exercises, interest inventories and leadership instruments. In our study we will focus on aptitude and personality tests which we will collectively refer to as psychometric tests.

Aptitude tests are developed to go beyond a person's knowledge and evaluate underlying abilities and intellectual prerequisites (Lindelöw Danielsson, 2003). The common abilities that the aptitude tests measure are linguistic ability, numerical or mathematical ability and logical ability (Andersson et al., 2016; Lindelöw Danielsson, 2003). Lindelöw Danielsson (2003) argues that the idea is to look at abilities that are more general and enduring than actual knowledge, which is changeable and developable. Andersson et al. (2016) believes that since aptitude tests have certain validity and are often cheap to use, there is a risk of using them blindly as a selection method. Andersson (2016) also believes that there may be a risk of missing out on creative and social skills when only measuring aptitude skills, as well as that a person can perform well even if they have had a bad test result.

Additionally, personality tests are designed to reveal aspects of a person's character or personality traits (Andersson et al., 2016). They are used to measure underlying aspects of a person's emotions, motivations, and attitudes (Andersson et al., 2016). Rothstein and Goffin (2006) state that personality tests are commonly used as a tool in the recruitment process to assess a candidate's future work performance as well as to assess the suitability of candidates in a position and organization. In line with this, Barrick and Mount (1991)'s study show that some personality traits can predict work performance.

The candidates complete the personality tests themselves and estimate the answers based on their own self-perception (Andersson et al., 2016). Lindelöw Danielsson (2003) therefore argues that personality tests are about how a person sees itself, the person's own view of themselves, rather than an objective truth. Furthermore, a typical personality test consists of words or statements that the person must either rate how well they match or choose which one best or worst describes their way of functioning. According to Lindelöw Danielsson (2003), personality is therefore a difficult dimension to measure as it involves softer dimensions that are more difficult to measure than knowledge or analytical skills. One of the reasons why it is difficult to measure personality is that it relies on language and that it requires a shared understanding of the words and concepts by the one who formulated the test, the test taker and the one who interprets the test result (Lindelöw Danielsson, 2003). This places very high demands on the person who interprets the results. Another risk with personality tests, according to Andersson et al. (2016), is that personality is not the same as behavior. In relation to these complexities, Rothstein and Goffin (2006) raise doubts regarding the recruiters' level of expertise in comprehending the complexities associated with the usage of personality tests and their ability to effectively apply them.

Moreover, Mabon (2004) states that many personality tests stem from the five-factor model of personality. Rothstein and Goffin (2006) have also seen an increasing interest in using the five-factor model of personality. The five-factor model consists of the five personality traits extroversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability and openness to experience (Schmit et al., 2000). According to Mabon (2004) measuring these five characteristics makes it possible to create relatively good forecasts for selection in recruitment. However, Barrick and Mount (1991)'s study indicated that only one dimension of personality, conscientiousness, showed consistent correlation with all the researched job performance criteria. For the remaining personality dimensions, the estimated true score correlations were low (Barrick & Mount, 1991). This shows that there are ambiguities within the use of personality testing and the five-factor model. There are also other important aspects associated with psychometric testing which we will now go into more detail about.

### 3.1.3 Limitations of Psychometric Tests

#### 3.1.3.1 The Complexity of Modelling Personality

The strong discourse about the value and superiority of psychometric testing in recruitment is not uncontested. There are several issues connected to the use of personality tests, and more specifically the five-factor model. For example, there is the issue of applying linear models for personality variables, which means considering higher scores on certain personality dimensions as more desirable (Arthur et al., 2001). Although underexplored, some studies suggests that the relationship may be more nonlinear (Day & Silverman, 1989) possibly providing an explanation as to why personality and performance relationships generally are weak (Arthur et al., 2001). Additionally, personality theories may not recognize the complexity and interconnectedness between the different types of personality dimensions (Arthur et al., 2001).

Continuing on the complexities of testing, are the lexical difficulties in conceptualizing personality. Raad et al. (1994) highlights that there are more words for describing certain traits than others which makes it difficult to create accurate models. Capturing personality thus becomes a complex task that requires consideration of various factors such as accuracy, user friendliness and economy and striking the right balance between these aspects remains a significant challenge (Raad et al., 1994). This is further illustrated by the fact that many stand-alone scales for evaluating the five-factor model have been developed, suggesting that the framework is not widely accepted by researchers and indicating that some important traits are still considered beyond the scope of the model (Bainbridge et al., 2022). The findings of Bainbridge et al. (2022) suggests that a majority of these scales could in fact be considered variations of the same, which raises the question of why an unified framework for the scales hasn't been demonstrated yet. This accentuates one of the many ambiguities associated with psychometric testing and suggest that sensemaking may be crucial in navigating these complexities.

### 3.1.3.2 Concerns Regarding Response Distortion

Another concern is the prevalence of “cheating” in ability and personality tests, an area that has not been widely examined in empirical studies (Arthur et al., 2001; Kantrowitz & Dainis, 2014; Cavanaugh, 2018). Cheating highlights one of the complexities involved in interpreting test results. In the context of our study, we argue that sensemaking concepts become crucial in understanding the process of evaluating the validity and accuracy of test scores and determining their relevance in the selection process.

Cheating in ability tests can be done by for example having someone else take the test for you, or searching the internet (Cavanaugh, 2018). Within personality testing, cheating is commonly referred to as “response distortion” describing the tendency to give positive self-descriptions and answer in what is believed to be a socially desirable way (Paulhus, 2002). Some studies suggest that cheating in unsupervised tests may be relatively low (Kantrowitz & Dainis, 2014) and can be counteracted by a speeded test (Arthur Jr et al., 2010). Other studies describe cheating as a pressing issue that require immediate strategies, such as correcting the score or removing applicants, in order to reduce the effect of response distortion and maintain validity (Hough, 1998). A recent study by Christiansen et al. (2021) examined the relationship between cognitive ability and response distortion on personality tests and found that this was more prevalent amongst applicants of higher cognitive ability and during high situational press. Similarly, Cavanaugh (2018) showed that an increased cognitive ability, paired with the use of effective cheating methods, lead to increased cheating effectiveness in unsupervised internet testing. A practical implication may then be that organizations hire individuals with lower integrity on the basis of higher test scores (Cavanaugh, 2018).

Without strategies to reduce cheating, individuals that distort their answers may end up at the top of the distribution (Hough, 1998). Combined with a top-down selection strategy, in which the best matches are hired first, this may lead to hiring the wrong person (Hough, 1998). However, findings by Converse et al. (2009) suggest that cheating on personality tests may be less of a concern when assessments are used alongside other valid predictors, such as cognitive ability tests and structured interviews, and that cheating is more likely to undermine results when used as a single predictor. Consequently, cheating may represent a concern in psychometrical testing and have implications in the selection of candidates, although more studies are required within the area.



### 3.1.3.3 Balancing Workforce Diversity, Validity and Individual Rights

Elaborating further on the complexities of psychometric testing, Ryan and Tippins (2004) discuss psychological selection tools in relation to workforce diversity. They suggest that human resource practitioners should strive for two goals: identifying the most capable candidate and creating diversity. However, they also describe great difficulties in reconciling these two goals without reducing the validity of the tests (Ryan & Tippins, 2004). For example, using only noncognitive measures could improve diversity but reduce the validity of the selection process (Hattrup et al., 1997). The same pattern was identified in a study made by Ng and Sears (2010) showing that cognitive tests were associated with lower representation of racial minorities whilst personality tests were associated with higher. Interestingly, this differed from the HR managers belief that personality tests would be more biased against minorities (Ng & Sears, 2010). The mechanisms behind the racial gap in cognitive tests are not clear, with some research attributing it to factors such as test-taking motivation (Chan et al., 1997), threat stereotypes (Steele, 1997) or the perceived fairness of testing (Schmit & Ryan, 1997). Nevertheless, Ryan and Tippins (2004) explains that the complexity of reconciling validity and diversity may lead to reluctance from HR professionals to employ any of the tools that could reduce the adverse impact on diversity.

Lastly, there is the question of jeopardizing the rights of the individual to not disclose disabilities by taking the tests. A meta-analysis made by Malouff et al. (2005) on the relationship between the Five-Factor Model of personality and symptoms of clinical disorders showed a pattern between the prevalence of various clinical disorders and a profile of high neuroticism, low conscientiousness, low agreeableness, and low extraversion. The authors conclude that “individuals who have a disorder or symptoms of disorder tend to have a similar pattern of Five Factor characteristics regardless of the specific disorder.” (Malouff et al., 2005, p.112). This opens for the question whether psychometric tests may be used to identify candidates with psychiatric issues.

Exploring further on psychometric testing and disabilities Timmons (2021) describes the notion that algorithmic bias may perpetuate the exclusion by certain individuals due to the underrepresentation of individuals with disabilities in the population that the test was built upon, especially if it was built upon the most successful employees in the company. Furthermore, Timmons (2021) highlights that in order to obtain reasonable accommodation

an applicant must disclose their disability which creates a risk that the employer will intentionally discriminate against them. Sweden's Equality Ombudsman (DO) deemed it a violation of the Discrimination Act to automatically exclude individuals with neuropsychiatric disabilities from being assessed for military service (Diskrimineringsombudsmannen, 2021). This case raises an interesting point about the potential implications for psychometric testing if it is mishandled or misused, although further research is needed to explore this issue more thoroughly.

Most studies exploring fairness within selection have been focused on the applicants' perceptions rather than the practitioners (Smither et al., 1993; Hausknecht et al., 2004; Bauer et al., 1998) with few exceptions (Landon & Arvey, 2007) and (Ng & Sears, 2010). If continuing to be understudied, this may lead to a potential misuse of employment tests in selection processes (Ng & Sears, 2010; Kramer, 2007; Timmons, 2021). The findings from the above studies underscores the importance of recognizing limitations with psychometric testing. While this is true, it is also important to consider qualitative aspects and the role of meaning making in the specific context of psychometric testing. Moreover, most of these studies avoid engaging in critical examination in the use of tests and instead concentrates on methods for enhancing their effectiveness. Therefore, exploring concepts from meaning making and sensemaking may prove useful in enriching our understanding of psychometric testing.

## 3.2 Sensemaking and Meaning Making

### 3.2.1 Individual Meaning Making

The terms meaning making and sensemaking are two concepts that are often used interchangeably. However, for the purpose of this thesis, we will use the term meaning making which will be defined as the human impulse to relate events to each other and to the self through mental representations of reality (Heine et al., 2006). Our conceptualization of meaning making is therefore focused on how meaning is shaped within the individual rather than through social interaction between individuals (Lundgren et al., 2019). One reason for this is that although meaning is commonly described as a human need to view their lives, and the self, as purposeful and worthy (Crescioni & Baumeister, 2013) it is not necessary

experienced in the same way by different individuals. In fact, recent studies on individual meaning making show that the need for meaning may vary between individuals (Cantarero et al., 2023; Cantarero et al., 2019). Additionally, there is commonly a disagreement about shared meanings within organizations which makes it important to recognize the differences between individuals and groups (Brown et al., 2008).

An important part of individual meaning making are mental representations (Heine et al., 2006) which are also sometimes referred to as frames (Schön, 1983). Frames, or the act of framing, can be described as using language to provide an interpretive frame of reference (Logemann et al., 2019). Frames are created through a process of accentuating or selecting certain dimensions of a concept and by doing so, the individual is shaping the meaning of the concept itself (Entman, 1993). Framing, then, becomes a way of defining problems, diagnosing causes, making moral judgements and suggesting remedies (Entman, 1993). The concept of framing has been described as an “unavoidable reality” of communication by Nisbet (2009, p.15) who suggests that framing of information is always done, whether intentionally or intuitively.

Building on the topic of framing, it is important to consider how individuals respond when situations fail to align with their existing frame of reference. (Thomas, 1996/1962) describes two main responses to anomalies that challenges paradigms, namely revising the structure to fit the anomaly or reinterpreting the anomaly to fit the structure. Another alternative as described by Heine et al. (2006) is to adhere to other, sometimes unrelated, mental representations with the purpose of maintaining meaning. Another significant aspect related to meaning making is how the individual attaches meaning to specific language descriptions (Entman, 1993). Consequently, analyzing language becomes crucial for understanding meaning and dominant frames which (Entman, 1993, p.55) illustrates by explaining that “...the power of a frame can be as great as that of language itself”.

Given the significance of analyzing language to discover meaning; metaphors, analogies, stories and narratives can be employed (Wibeck & Linnér, 2021). In short, metaphors are terms from one domain that are projected onto another domain to meaningfully organize experiences (Küpers, 2013). Analogies, as described by Küpers (2012), instead represent a specific way of reasoning. In essence, analogical reasoning suggests that if two or more things are similar in some respects, they are likely to be similar in others (Küpers, 2012). Within analogical reasoning metaphors can be used to make the analogies more clear by

translating an abstract experience into something concrete or familiar (Küpers, 2012). As a result, metaphors and analogies are distinct yet interconnected linguistic concepts that can be employed in language analysis to uncover meaning.

Additionally, analyzing stories can be useful to further identify meaning making. This is due to the fact that story-telling is believed to play an integral part for expressing and handling experiences (Küpers, 2013). Consequently, it is also described as a fundamental function in the concept of sense-making (Wibeck & Linnér, 2021). Cronon (1992) explains that humans seem to configure events into casual sequences (stories) in order to simplify and give meaning to these events. These stories may be personal or shared amongst a group and oftentimes the term “story” is used interchangeably with “narrative” (Cronon, 1992). However, for the sake of this thesis, the term “story” will refer to the individual’s description of events and “narratives” are considered repeating lines of arguments in the individual stories (Wibeck & Linnér, 2021). To further specify, narratives are seen as a shared storyline that draws on the power of sequencing to mobilize actions for change over time, in accordance with what Brown and Humphreys (2003) describes as “group narratives”. It is evident that all of these aspects of individual meaning making are also considered important for organizational praxis (Küpers, 2013) which brings us to the notion that sense-making is a social process.

### 3.2.2 Organizational Sensemaking and Sensegiving

Weick (1995) states that there is a connection between individual and group-level sensemaking processes, as the interpretations of individuals contribute to the collective sensemaking efforts. Maitlis and Christianson (2014, p. 57) provides the following definition for sensemaking which effectively encapsulates the concept “Sensemaking is the process through which people work to understand issues or events that are novel, ambiguous, confusing, or in some other way violate expectations.”. Furthermore, sensemaking is a social process of making sense, interpreting, and giving meaning to information and experiences and occurs in the ongoing interactions between people as they enact their environments (Pye, 2005). Weick (1995) states that there are forces within organizations pushing towards a generic subjectivity. The pressure for this generic sensemaking stems from organizations' need for rapid socialization, measurable outcomes, control over dispersed resources and

accountability (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking, whilst naturally occurring and ongoing its intensity varies (Sutcliffe, 2016). Specifically when faced with situations that requires meaning to deal with uncertainty the process of sensemaking becomes especially clear and visible (Sutcliffe, 2016). The social aspect of sensemaking is important because it highlights that sensemaking occurs between people. Because of this, scholars have acknowledged the importance of language in sensemaking (Whittle et al., 2023; Weick et al., 2005). Stigliani and Ravasi (2012) suggests that a combination of conversational and material practices facilitates the shift from individual-level sensemaking, referred to in this study as meaning making, to the formation of a collective group-level sensemaking, thereby enabling the development of shared understandings.

Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991, p.442) argue for a distinction to be made between sensemaking and sensegiving and provides the following definition for the concepts “Sensemaking has to do with meaning construction and reconstruction by the involved parties as they attempted to develop a meaningful framework for understanding the nature of the intended strategic change. 'Sensegiving' is concerned with the process of attempting to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others toward a preferred redefinition of organizational reality.”. Weick et al. (2005) builds upon Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) definition by stating that as such sensegiving may affect the sensemaker as well as the target. Notable is also the fact that sensegiving is not just a top-down process as employees are also active in forming their own interpretation and can thus resist change from top managers and leaders (Sonenshein, 2010). Moreover, agents at any level within an organization can engage in sensegiving processes (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007).

Sensemaking, Weick (1995) argues, is about plausibility. Within organizations there is a need for speed, consequently creating a speed-accuracy trade off in which speed is often favored by managers (Weick, 1995). This speed-accuracy tradeoff has been noted in fields outside of sensemaking. As Weick et al. (2005) notes, the discourse in several management studies is often that accuracy is favorable and desirable by management yet paradoxically it is as previously mentioned something that is rarely produced.

Weick (1995) states that sensemaking is social and enactive of sensible environments, meaning that when people react to cues from their environment, they also take an active role in shaping their environment. With those characteristics in mind, we believe it important to

put sensemaking into a larger perspective that stretches beyond the organization. Scholars have criticized the view of organizations as a separate and isolated entity (Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001). Scott (1995, p.151, cited in Lounsbury and Glynn, 2001, p.556) states that “institutionalists remind us that no organization can be properly understood apart from its wider social and cultural context”. Prior to Scott, DiMaggio and Powell (1983) stated that firm behavior is shaped by larger cognitive, normative and regulatory forces. These forces are furthermore enforced by actors such as mass media, governmental agencies, professions, and various interest groups (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001). Rouleau (2005) also argues for a similar point as organizations today are more and more open and that this is important to recognize as it is through their encounters with the actors outside of the organization, that they shape their environment. The reason why acknowledgment of a larger societal discourse is of interest for our study is because of the context or frame by which the interview subjects perceive the world and consequently shaping their meaning.

### 3.2.3 Human Resources and Sensemaking

Research on sensemaking processes among human resource practitioners (e.g. recruiters) is still relatively limited, with a predominant focus on strategic change (Kieran et al., 2022). Studies on sensemaking have primarily focused on leadership (Pye, 2005; Bartunek et al., 1999; Foldy et al., 2008) or middle-managers (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Rouleau, 2005; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011), leaving sensemaking processes among HR professionals relatively unexplored. However, the role of HR and middle managers can often seem similar. Middle managers are described as being change agents enabling new organizational structures (Balogun & Johnson, 2004). In similar studies, regarding strategic change analyzing HR through sensemaking, human resource practitioners are also described as change agents, enabling change by developing, coordinating and facilitate change activities (Brown et al., 2017). These wordings demonstrate the role many HR professionals have within organizations, oftentimes working similarly to middle managers which is why the literature regarding middle managers is still of value when analyzing HR professionals.

In their study about middle managers role in strategic sensemaking, Rouleau and Balogun (2011) argued that as strategic sense makers, middle managers must navigate some of the

tensions that may occur between different stakeholders in the organization. Rouleau and Balogun (2011) identified three characteristics that make middle managers effective in sensemaking – discursive competence, cognitive diversity and social capital. The term discursive competence is used by the authors to describe the middle managers’ ability to craft and share a meaningful and engaging message within the specific context of operations (Rouleau & Balogun, 2011). Further, they explain two main activities, “performing the conversation” and “setting the scene” which are essential in the sensemaking process. Performing the conversation is about knowing what to say and how to say it whilst setting the scene is about knowing who to speak to and how to set up the conversation. When engaging in these activities, the middle managers draw on the specific context that they belong to.

### 3.2.4 Sensemaking and Psychometric Tests

There’s a number of quantitative studies regarding practitioners beliefs, attitudes and reactions to personality tests (Furnham, 2018; Furnham, 2008). Furnham (2018) found the five most valued criteria for test practitioners to be validity, reliability, feedback candidate, feedback assessor, and acceptability to employees. Interestingly, predictive validity which Furnham (2018) argues is the criteria they should be the most interested in is also the data which most well-known test are missing. Whilst these studies (Furnham, 2018; Furnham, 2008) have analyzed their reactions and reasonings for test use they have not gone so far as to analyze the practitioners subjective meaning making and sensemaking. However, Hesselbo (2023) has explored this area by focusing on how norms and social actors play a crucial role in determining what is considered acceptable and valid in terms of leadership measures.

Studies regarding HR professionals' sensemaking of psychometric tests are frugal but existing. Lundgren et al. (2019) examined how human resource development (HRD) professionals employ organizational sensemaking and individual meaning making when using personality tests in a developmental context, not in recruiting as is the purpose of this study. Lundgren et al. (2019) found that HRD professionals make use of various meaning making and organizational sensemaking structures to form strategies when implementing and dealing with criticism of personality tests. Lundgren et al. (2019) further found that HRD professionals experienced contradicting "truths" regarding test use and as a result they were challenged by both cognitive dissonance and paradoxical situations. When faced with two

contradicting beliefs causing feelings of discomfort, they found that the perceived strategies of HRD professionals might be explained by them reducing dissonance and engaging in socially conforming behavior. Another possible explanation was the paradox in organizations by which actors try to solve conflicting beliefs through consistency, something often achieved by working more closely with colleagues and as such establishing a more singular approach.

### 3.2 Positioning of this Study

To summarize, there is a strong discourse within psychometric research related to the value and superiority of quantitative measurements. This can be seen as stemming from the belief that quantitative knowledge is superior in providing objectivity, impartiality and fairness which can also be seen as a reflection of a larger discourse within society (Porter, 1996). However, few studies have been made on the qualitative aspects of testing through a constructivist viewpoint, apart from Hesselbo (2023) and Lundgren et al. (2019). More specifically, the role of meaning making in the field of psychometric testing is underexplored, which our study aims to address.

The conceptualization of psychometric testing has been greatly concerned with assessing personality and aptitude tests in order to predict work performance (Rothstein & Goffin, 2006; Lindelöw Danielsson, 2016). This research has been done through a psychological perspective in order to establish the value and validation of the use of psychometric testing (Rothstein & Goffin, 2006; Mabon, 2004; Youngman, 2017; Ryan and Tippins, 2004). This extends to some studies concerned with examining psychometric testing in recruitment processes by highlighting issues connected to the use of linear models within personality testing (Arthur et al., 2001), lexical difficulties with the models (Raad et al., 1994), implications on diversity (Ryan & Tippins, 2004) as well as response distortion (Arthur Jr et al., 2010) and personal privacy (Kramer, 2007; Timmons, 2021). Nevertheless, these studies are focused on contributing to the improvement of the tests and not concerned with critically exploring how individuals make sense of the use of tests.

As Kieran et al (2022) stated, previous studies have mostly focused specifically on HR's professionals' sensemaking processes in relation to strategic change. There are also studies



done on HR related to psychometric testing in assessing the importance of different criteria made by Furnham (2008;2018). However, what these studies lacks in relation to our study, is a meaning making perspective. A study made on sensemaking, HR and psychometric testing has been made by (Lundgren et al., 2019). However, Lundgren's study focused on practical strategies for personality testing in human resource development to explain the sustained use of personality tests. Like Lundgren et al. (2019) we utilize meaning making and sensemaking concepts, but our study is set in another context and focuses on how meaning about tests is constructed and sustained, rather than strategies for implementing personality tests. Furthermore, Hesselbo (2023) has critically examined quantitative measures by refocusing away from the assessments and recognizing how norms and social actors play a crucial role in determining what is considered acceptable test measures. However, Hesselbo (2023) focuses on measurement tools for leadership assessment and our study focuses on how recruiter's meaning about psychometric testing is constructed and sustained.

As a result of the earlier positioning of psychometric tests, sensemaking, and HR, we aim to position our study towards the previously underexplored areas. Our study brings in the perspective of the recruiters and the role of meaning making in constructing and sustaining psychometric testing.

## 4. Analysis of the Empirical Material

*In the following chapter, the study's empirical material is presented and analyzed. The section begins with an analysis of the recruiter's frame of reference which we have identified as a frame of objectivity. The analysis further explores how recruiters engage in five protective meaning making strategies to maintain the frame of objectivity when faced with situations that do not align with it.*

### 4.1 Constructing the Frame of Objectivity

The main identifiable pattern is that the recruiters operate through a frame of reference that significantly emphasizes the value of objectivity. This is seen through the accentuation of

certain dimensions, such as objectivity and diversity, as well as by emphasizing a rational need for testing.

The recruiters' descriptions of the reasons for using psychometric tests shows an overall shared belief that the tests are objective. They emphasize this in various ways but consistently as something positive, leading to better recruitments that are unaffected by personal interests or assumptions. This can be seen in Eriksson's quote:

*We will always be influenced by our previous experiences, bias and such, and the tests are an objective measurement tool that all candidates get the same treatment regardless of what they bring with them. So, in this way, it also gives support that we know we are as objective as we can be. – Eriksson*

Eriksson's statement describes that psychometric tests support the recruiters to be objective by not having any prejudice or preconceptions about a candidate. Similarly, other recruiters made references to dimensions of objectivity, such as statistically proven tests and validity. For example, Gabrielsson highlights the statistical dimensions connected to the tests: "*the tests are statistically proven to predict job performance in a better way and with higher credibility.*". What further confirms this analysis is another statement regarding the validity of the tests, which can be seen in Davidsson's quote: "*As a validation, it is an area to validate that we actually choose the right candidate who has the ability to handle the job.*". By using certain terms such as 'objective', 'proven' and 'valid' the recruiters are establishing the objective, accurate and trustworthy status of the tests. However, the recruiters generally refrain from discussing the statistical foundations or internal aspects of the tests in detail. Instead, they emphasize the exclusion of the human bias as the key determinant for achieving objectivity:

*It's easy to make a lot of assumptions when you constantly have to make decisions about another person [...]. So that can also be the basis for actually starting from what is important for me to choose the right one and not end up in my subjective image of what is good and bad, and the tests help with that. – Fredriksson*

Fredriksson's statement about how psychometric tests reduces the risk of subjectivity further strengthens the notion that they are working from an objective frame of reference. Our

analysis suggests that the absence of supporting numbers and figures in discussions reflects a prevailing assumption that objectivity is a given and rarely challenged. Given the prevailing discourse of objectivity and the information provided by test providers recruiters may not see a need to delve deeper or scrutinize this aspect further. Instead, they place importance on general principles of objectivity and eliminating biases.

The concept of objectivity thus represents a shared experience amongst the recruiters. Meaning, that they all share the belief that humans can be affected by pre assumptions as well as their own interests. Therefore, by incorporating psychometric tests in the recruitment process, they believe that the assumptions and human factors can be eliminated or reduced. Furthermore, by operating through a frame of objectivity, the recruiters also believe that diversity will improve. This is another dimension within objectivity that is accentuated by the recruiters which will be analyzed further in the following section.

#### 4.1.1 The Objective Frame Holds the Promise of Diversity

As mentioned, the recruiters are working from the belief that psychometric tests will lead to objective recruitments. In addition to this, the recruiters frequently highlight unbiased and diversified recruitment as one of the main benefits of utilizing the tests. This overall agreement can be seen in various statements and can be understood as something aspirational. As one respondent argues:

*At some point you get more information about a candidate. If you use it properly, that you don't probably share that much information, for example with the hiring manager in advance, you can kind of eliminate a little bit of bias when you are going into reading the results. – Bengtsson*

This could be understood as psychometric tests reducing bias, thus leading to hiring a candidate based on test result instead of personal preference. Further expanding on unbiased recruitment, Gabrielsson states that:

*After all, everyone gets the same type of tests. You put a stencil over the test result, which means that, it works, you can't, I can't discriminate against someone based on that, but these are ready-made parameters that we use. – Gabrielsson*

Gabrielsson highlights that every candidate gets the same test, thereby making it impossible to discriminate. This is illustrative to the collective desire for objectivity and diversity, seen in all interviews. Davidsson builds on this by stating that by using tests the role of gut feeling is reduced:

*Then I also think that if we have an organization that recruits with methods that do not have a high validity, but you go by gut feeling, you think to yourself "I think this guy is good because he is you know 42 years, white, two children and live in the suburbs and drive an ordinary car", so then it will be us who also create a culture. That you build an organization with human capital on stereotypes, as well as on gut-recruitment [...] But what we're trying to do is have a more objective recruitment process so hopefully that creates a better company culture. – Davidsson*

Davidsson means that psychometric tests are a recruitment method that eliminates gut feeling which may be influenced by the recruiters' own interests. By creating a strong opposition between 'objective', 'fair', 'ethical', 'anti-bias', 'diversity-supporting' tools versus 'gut-recruitment' the recruiters are strengthening the notion that they are working with psychometric tests through a frame of objectivity that also holds the promise of diversity.

#### 4.1.2 Establishing a Rational Need to Support the Frame of Objectivity

The construction of the frame of objectivity is accentuated by the recruiters through the many descriptions of a rational need for testing. For example, they argue that the large number of applicants, the poor predictive value of prior experience for future performance, and the unreliability of gut feelings are rational justifications for utilizing psychometric testing. To begin with, there is a recurring advocacy for tests as a screening tool in recruitment processes with many applicants, as explained by Gabrielsson:

*When it comes to volume recruitments, the [test] is a very good selection method to use at an early stage. [...] Then everyone gets the same conditions, since everyone answers the same test, which means that we don't choose anyone for the wrong reasons... – Gabrielsson*

Gabrielsson highlights the shared belief amongst recruiters that tests are necessary in high volume recruitments, since they believe there are no better alternatives for screening many applicants. This rationalization is further strengthened through the following quote by Eriksson: *“But it's also because we know that previous experience on a piece of paper like a CV is not a good predictor of whether you will perform well in a role.”*. Eriksson thereby underpins the belief that CV and previous experience is not as good of a predictor for future performance as are psychometric tests, thus rationalizing the need for testing.

Furthermore, what seemed to be an even worse predictor for future work performance was gut feeling. Eriksson highlights this by the following statement: *“The gut feeling cannot say anything about how well a person will perform in a role, so I think that trying to get rid of it as much as possible is the biggest advantage that I see.”*. Similarly, Davidsson states that *“I live in the belief that you cannot recruit based on gut feeling.”*. Thus, recruiting on gut feeling can be seen as unobjective and undesirable. Using tests then fills the purpose of giving recruiters something objective to work with.

## 4.2 Protective Meaning Making Strategies

Building on the analysis of the recruiter's objective frame of reference, we have identified protective meaning making strategies that the recruiters utilize when faced with situations that do not align with it. Our analysis shows that they respond in five main ways when faced with challenges or limitations: by downplaying limitations, using metaphors, employing analogies, constructing narratives, and participating in dialogues. These strategies have all been identified as meaning making strategies since they all are used by the recruiters to sustain meaning about psychometric tests. However, one of the protective meaning making strategies – participating in dialogues – is recognized by its practical and social component. Therefore, we have decided to treat it as a practical meaning making strategy.

### 4.2.1 Downplaying Limitations

One protective meaning making strategy identified is that the recruiters downplay limitations with the tests. These are limitations such as cheating and risks of misinterpretations. By participating in this protective meaning making strategy, they can uphold their already existing frame of objectivity instead of questioning it.

When asked about the limitations in using psychometric tests in recruitment processes, many of the recruiters find it difficult to find and articulate limitations. This can for example be seen through Andersson's quote: "*Erhmmm, but the limitations... I don't know. God how difficult.*". Andersson hesitates and displays that limitations have not been considered, indicating a lack of reflection on the potential drawbacks. To the same question, Fredriksson responded that whilst limitations may exist, these can be overcome by simply choosing the right test: "*There are some psychometric tests that are bad as well, so it's using the right test, maybe?*". Like Andersson, Fredriksson's response also displays a degree of hesitation and lack of reflection on limitations. The recruiters frame of reference is, as shown, rarely contested. However, the extent of objectivity is sometimes reflected upon:

*Unfortunately, there is nothing that is 100 % certain that you choose the right one and 100 percent completely objective, because it is people that we make decisions about.* – Fredriksson

With the claim that nothing is 100 percent objective, Fredriksson mitigates the limitations of psychometrics tests and maintains the frame of reference. The above quotes highlight how the recruiters refrain from questioning or revising their objective frame and instead downplay potential limitations to fit their frame of reference.

Another limitation that is downplayed by the recruiters is the role of interpretation when analyzing tests. Although described as a theoretical limitation by several recruiters, the general belief is that the tests can, are, or will be, administrated and interpreted in a similar way within the organization. Thus, not presenting any major hindrance for objectivity.

*But I think that for us in our organization, it's a question of knowledge. So we also need, if I say we're going to use this and we're going to do it for these positions, the 120 people need to be able to do it. They need to have the ability to understand these tests, understand how to give feedback and ensure that the managers understand that it is not an absolute truth but that the results should be interpreted in a correct way. You have to be knowledgeable and that is our biggest challenge. – Davidsson*

The need for interpretation of the test is therefore acknowledged but also recognized as unavoidable. However, when done correctly, it is believed to strengthen objectivity. Noticeable here is the focus on interpretations being performed correctly and by people with knowledge of the tests as it otherwise can appear to challenge the presumed objectivity of the tests. This can be identified as a protective meaning making strategy in which limitations are reinterpreted to fit the existing frame of objectivity.

Moreover, the recruiters believe candidates can theoretically cheat but tend to respond to this by generalizing and comparing psychometric testing to other types of tests. Gabrielsson shows this by saying: “*Well, I would say, it is possible to cheat on everything really.*”. Instead of reflecting on cheating as a potential limitation of the tests, it is downplayed by the recruiters. Interestingly, all the recruiters said that cheating was a possibility, yet no one had ever detected any cheating in practice. Adding to the previous statement Gabrielsson says:

*But I certainly think that people, well, they certainly try to cheat sometimes, but there's nothing that we've seen that it's common to cheat that we've reacted to, because if we were to do it then maybe it would have been reviewed in a different way as well. – Gabrielsson*

This suggests that they do not deem cheating to be a specific nor significant issue for psychometric tests, since they have not encountered it. Similar to previous limitations, none of the recruiters mention any statistical evidence supporting that this does not occur or that it is insignificant, thereby reinforcing the notion that they are operating from an objective frame of reference that is rarely contested.

Initially, the recruiters claim that one of the main advantages of psychometric tests is that it removes the need to make decisions based on gut feeling – thus strengthening objectivity and

validity. However, they also discuss the difficulties of removing gut feeling, and as Carlsson puts it *“although you shouldn't decide on gut feeling, but people tend to do that, it's in our nature.”*. Essentially, this statement shows how the human factor is still constantly present and difficult to remove from the recruitment process. Furthermore, it was also shown by Bengtsson, that the tests function not by removing gut feeling but by validating it: *“OK. Now I know the true self. I understand what was my gut feeling. I don't want to continue with this candidate further in the process.”*. The recruiters face a dilemma regarding the role of gut feeling in the decision-making process of whether to prioritize the test or rely more on their own feelings. To overcome this, they engage in a process of reinterpreting the concept of gut feeling to align it with the psychometric tests and their existing frame. This phenomenon is evident in the following quote by Hansson:

*Sometimes people talk about not going with their gut feeling. But I think, research says that you shouldn't, but I think, what is gut feeling really? Somewhere, you know that if you put certain things together, you can see that this will be good [...] but if you can add an aptitude test and feel that this is actually at a certain level, I feel much more confident. – Hansson*

Consequently, the tests can also be seen as tools to confirm the recruiter's gut feeling and further legitimize their decision. Despite the previous acknowledgment that gut feeling is regarded as a poor foundation for decision-making, recruiters engage in a protective meaning making strategy by downplaying this aspect. They do so by questioning the true nature of gut feeling or emphasizing that the tests will ultimately validate it. Hence, the objective frame is upheld by reinterpreting gut feeling as an insignificant issue within psychometric testing.

Furthermore, in order to maintain the promise that unbiased recruitment leads to diversity, the recruiters downplay elements such as actively looking for candidates that fit into the organizational culture. When asked about what the test were testing against, it was made clear that the applicants were matched against a ready-made company profile. As described by Andersson: *“Or no, it says like what fit you are; good fit, very good fit, bad, or no it doesn't say bad fit. [...] Like how good fit you are for [company name].”*. This can be seen as contradictory to the promise of the objective frame – that the tests will lead to diverse recruitment. The recruiters respond to this contradiction by stating that some personality traits are simply incompatible with the role. This can be considered a clear example of the



protective meaning making strategy of downplaying limitations in which reinterpretations are made to reduce a potential conflict to the notion of objectivity and the promise of diversity.

Additionally, when asked about how tests accommodate those with disabilities there were more examples of contradictions showing that tests are not unbiased and in fact often unable to adapt to candidates with these disabilities. Some of the recruiters acknowledged this limitation:

*So dyslexia, color blind people, with some type of attention disorder and this kind of stuff. They could be a little bit disadvantaged for any of these tests in case that they are not well adapted to them, so you could still find some discrimination, if you say so. – Bengtsson*

Yet, it was noticeable that it is something that many of them had never reflected upon or accommodated for. This can be seen in Isaksson's statement when asked about this: *"I have not had any cases like you said, that anyone has had any issues with those things."* Across all interviews, this aspect was downplayed and described as something unproblematic. By employing this protective meaning making strategy, explaining that it rarely occurs or that it is not an issue, it can effectively be disregarded as a threat for diversity and objectivity. Again, it is noteworthy that the recruiters, in their argument, rarely place emphasis on statistics or numbers, which can be seen as conflicting considering their previous advocacy for objectivity and validity. Instead, they prioritize their own experiences for making sense of these concepts. These aspects further strengthen the notion that the process of meaning making is a crucial part in maintaining the objective frame of reference.

#### 4.2.2 Using Metaphors

When the recruiters are faced with experiences that threaten their frame of reference, they resort to meaning making strategies to uphold the frame. One way that this manifest is by the usage of different metaphors. During the interviews, several of the recruiters employed a metaphor by describing tests as a just a complementary tool. This is illustrated in the following quote from Bengtsson: *"It is just a tool to have more information for the hiring managers to decide upon one candidate or another when they have probably two candidates*

*to decide upon.*”. Interestingly, this attempt to reduce the significance of psychometric testing usually came as a response to the recruiters reflecting on questions regarding the potential disadvantages of utilizing psychometric tests which further strengthens the notion that it is used as a protective meaning making strategy.

Similarly, the description of tests as a complementary tool was also emphasized by Eriksson: *"But I think, fundamentally, that it's a very good tool, a complementary tool, together with structured interviews and cases if you use it then."* This idea of using tests as a complement can be considered contradictory to the previously described rationalization of using psychometric tests for screening, in which candidates were removed only based on tests results. When advocating for screening, they highlighted that there was no need for complementary tools since the tests in and of themselves were objective enough. This was sometimes recognized as a conflict by the recruiters but quickly downplayed by explaining the necessities of using screening.

Thus, the metaphor of psychometric tests as a tool is used by the recruiters for making sense of experiences, such as disadvantages and flaws, that may threaten their objective frame. By projecting psychometric testing onto an object such as a “tool”, that is only designed to aid and as something that is under human control, the recruiters effectively minimize the test’s overall role in recruitment and thereby also the potential limitations associated with testing.

Furthermore, the recruiters employ various metaphors to downplay the potential limitations that could undermine the notion of objectivity. One such metaphor is used by Hansson:

*...you can then say that this person, this grouping, will most likely succeed better, although I usually see it like a cake. This is just a slice of the cake. You can't take everything, but the fact remains that if you succeed in absorbing instructions on a test, then you will probably succeed better with that task in/on the career choice as well.*

– Hansson

The metaphor of tests as being “just a slice of the cake” suggests a cautious approach and an advocacy for a more comprehensive evaluation. By employing this metaphor, Hansson implies that test results alone are insufficient in making accurate judgments. However, he quickly mitigates this sentiment by explaining that test results correlate with career success.

This raises an intriguing question: If this correlation holds true, why does it matter to emphasize the limitations of tests in capturing all aspects? A possible analysis could be that by employing the metaphor simultaneously in two ways, by acknowledging limitations as well as emphasizing relevance, the recruiters can effectively navigate the potential critique surrounding the objectivity of the tests, which can be seen as an example of meaning making.

A final recurring metaphor used by the recruiters is the comparison of psychometric tests to games. One such example is made by Bengtsson, who relates it to an overall trend of gamification of tests:

*Even though now it's becoming a little bit of a trend into gaming before applying to a position. And then if you don't play. Well, then you get disqualified. So there is a risk as well. And in my opinion every test should be followed up by some sort of confrontation interview. – Bengtsson*

By describing psychometric tests in relation to a game, Bengtsson is criticizing the simplified way of looking at tests. To mitigate the risks, Bengtsson believes that the tests should be followed up by interviews with the candidate. This can be seen as a protective meaning making strategy of the objective frame because although criticizing the simplification and gamification of test use, Bengtsson is also minimizing the potential risks by simultaneously introducing a complementary element – thus the objective frame is upheld. Moreover, the game metaphor can be seen in another quote from Andersson in which psychometric tests are described like a game of a sudoku:

*Their logic is that you should see a pattern and see like what is, like a Sudoku, and see what is missing. And I think that, well... I myself used to play a lot of Sudoku when I was little, so I thought it was quite easy with them back then, but I wouldn't say that I'm like the best problem solver. So they become a bit difficult. I mean, it could be a bit wrong then, I don't know. – Andersson*

Andersson is diminishing the role of the test as objective and accurate by describing that it may be a result from the Sudoku games played as a child, and not necessarily reflecting the abilities that they are set out to measure. By relating tests to games, the recruiter is highlighting aspects that may question whether the tests are accurate. However, this

sentiment is quickly diminished by Andersson stating that they do not know if this is the case. Hence, the frame is upheld.

The metaphors employed by the recruiters thus serve a very interesting purpose of acknowledging limitations by presenting tests as just complementary tools, a slice of a cake or even games. Conversely, they are used to emphasize the relevance and objectivity by highlight complementary elements to the tests, or even by diminishing their own opinions about the test, through self-censoring sentiments. Utilizing metaphors in this way can therefore serve as a protective meaning making strategy by introducing a flexibility that helps the recruiters navigate potential challenges to their objective frame of reference.

#### 4.2.3 Using Analogies

The recruiters commonly use analogical expressions to explain the meaning of using psychometric testing in recruitment processes. For example, Fredriksson relates the use of tests to medicine by explaining that you wouldn't want your doctor to base their decision on guesswork. Similarly, you wouldn't want recruiters to guess who the best candidate for the role is:

*But I wouldn't want to go to a doctor who just said, "yes, but I'm guessing what was the best". Instead, I want to base it on research and create the best possible conditions for me to choose the right person for the job. – Fredriksson*

Through this comparison, Fredriksson is making a point of increased reliability by using the tests. This can be seen as an example of a meaning making strategy in which analogical reasoning is used to rationalize the need for the tests by effectively contrasting the medical field with recruitment.

Additionally, is the following analogy made by Fredriksson about "quality checking" candidates: *"Then it's exciting to see what the manager thinks, because they're usually the ones who meet these maybe three people that I've quality checked before."* The term quality checking can be associated to manufacturing and making sure products are up to standard. By this comparison, Fredriksson shows that the tests are used to turn abstract concepts into

something tangible that can be checked for quality. By measuring what cannot be seen they are maintaining the frame of objectivity and comparability of the candidates. However, there are some clear tensions between the perceived value of using tests to make personality more tangible and keeping the flexibility and dialogue associated with working in a field that deals with people. This can be illustrated by the following quote by Hansson:

*As I usually say, you want Superman, but maybe you can settle for the Spider-Man. OK, you don't have to be able to fly, but you are damn good at climbing. OK, so can we rethink this a bit? I would see that as a challenge, and there you have to be a bit smart and flexible in the process and in the dialog about how to take it forward. Then you should not adjust too much, but to a certain extent. –Hansson*

This comparison between wanting Superman but settling for Spider-Man clearly highlights one of the many conflicting descriptions seen in the interviews. The analogy challenges the objective frame by acknowledging its inflexibility as a limitation, however by making certain adjustments to the tests the objective frame remains intact.

Another analogy that is drawn is between choosing a romantic partner and selecting an employee. Bengtsson explains that similarly to a relationship, the company would like to get to know the candidates for several months before making a long-term decision. However, this is not possible which is why they use psychometric testing.

*So the only way that you can make sure probably that you really like your boyfriend or your girlfriend or your partner is living together with them for a couple of months and then deciding upon if you'd like to sleep on that side of the bed, like how they leave the toothpaste. Like just wandering there. If they are clean enough for you, and this kind of stuff. So it's kind of the same type of process with a company and a candidate, but then you cannot take all the candidates inside and try them out and then just let go of those that you don't want. [...] So at the end you're looking into a long term relationship. – Bengtsson*

One interesting aspect with this analogy is the inherent human aspect of a relationship which is highlighted here, an aspect which is usually downplayed within test use because tests are supposed to be based on numbers and statistics. Arguably, decisions to enter relationships are

often based on immeasurable and intangible aspects such as feelings. By introducing emotions in the analogy, Bengtsson challenges the frame of objectivity whilst simultaneously upholding it through the rationalization that it is impossible to get to know all the candidates in the same way as you would in another relationship.

It is clear that analogical reasoning is used to protect the objective frame of reference by highlighting similarities to situations where guessing is unacceptable, such as the doctor's office. It is also supported by drawing on similarities to the well-known need for quality checking often associated with manufacturing. Furthermore, by introducing analogies that describe certain adjustments to the tests, the objective frame remains intact. Finally, the analogy of a romantic relationship presents an interesting attempt to rationalize testing whilst also challenging the frame of objectivity by introducing emotions.

#### 4.2.4 Creating the Narrative of the Modern Company

Throughout the interviews the recruiters used various stories to make sense of why and how they used psychometric tests in the organization – as well as navigating potential challenges to objectivity. Some stories were individual whilst some were recurring narratives across different companies and recruiters.

The main narrative was that tests today are seen as an integral part of the modern company. These stories were told across several interviews describing tests as not only objective, unbiased and valid but also modern. For example, Fredriksson referred to recruitment processes that only use interviews as “*old-fashioned recruitment*.” When later questioned more on the subject, Fredriksson developed the argument by stating: “*Yes, probably it has become like this, ugly to work without [tests] almost, that you are outdated as an employer*.” Working without tests is referred to as “old fashioned” and “outdated” and as such these stories also paint a picture of tests that goes beyond objectivity by also highlighting them as modern. Moreover, the narrative of the modern company is strengthened by another recruiter highlighting the widespread acceptance of test use:

*But my feeling just spontaneously, it's that in recent years, I think, it has become more like, well, universally applicable. It feels like people know that there are tests and it's*

*not such a big deal. In the past, it was a little different, it wasn't a big deal either, but in some industries, maybe it was a bit like, why should we do it, but now it feels like it's so widely accepted.* – Davidsson

This emphasizes not only that tests are important for the modern company but also tells a story about a larger acceptance in how extensively they are being used today, compared to before. These modern stories are told individually, yet they seem to be a part of a larger societal discourse that tests are something modern and that to recruit without tests are not only considered to be less valid or objective as demonstrated through their frames earlier but unmodern and almost passé. Especially the last quote by Davidsson demonstrates how psychometric tests today within recruitment is established to such a degree within recruitment and organizations that little reflection on them is made.

### 4.3 Dialogue as a Protective Strategy in Practice

A recurring pattern in all interviews was the importance of dialogues when using psychometric testing. We believe that this is also a meaning making strategy that the recruiters use in order to protect the frame of objectivity. However, we have distinguished this strategy from the linguistic strategies because of the dialogue's practical nature.

#### 4.3.1 Dialogues Between the Recruiter and the Candidates

There is a discourse amongst the recruiters that there is a need to have a dialogue with the candidates' post-test to discuss the results. This was noted across all nine interviews with the exception for the processes where psychometric tests were used for screening by which no follow up interviews were held. The recruiters often described the role of the dialogues as a way of validating the tests and avoiding any inaccurate estimations from the candidate. This can be seen in Davidson's quote:

*Then I have a dialogue with the candidate to look more into it. I see it more as a validation interview, you could almost say that you are validating the result that the candidates have estimated for themselves.* – Davidsson

The same belief is also elaborated on by Gabrielsson:

*What I'm thinking, which is important, is that this is an estimate that the person in question has made and we have to be aware that you can think that, that is, you know yourself in different ways and you can think it's either simple or difficult to different degrees to complete these tests. – Gabrielsson*

It is recognized that there is a certain level of uncertainty with the self-estimation that comes with the candidates' subjective experience and self-image, as well as ability to accurately provide this estimation in the tests. By participating in dialogues, the recruiters explained that they could make sure that the candidates had estimated themselves in a correct way, and should there be any uncertainties, they could easily be addressed. The dialogues thereby help to validate the result and protect the objective frame. Building on this is the risk of misinterpreting the questions, which can be seen in Erikssons quote: *"No, but there is always a lot about the candidate's interpretation of the questions that may mean that you don't always reach the correct result."* Since the tests are sensitive to the subjective interpretation of the candidate, how they answer will not only be determined by how they understand themselves, but also by how they perceive the test question. A correct result would mean that both the recruiter and the candidate had interpreted the questions similarly, and that the candidate had provided an accurate self-assessment. Therefore, by discussing the tests with the candidate, they believe that misinterpretations can be reduced which further validates and protects the objective frame and the usage of psychometric tests. Furthermore, the need for dialogues was also motivated by reducing the risk of incorrectly removing a candidate from the process:

*Then it is important that when we receive this result that we provide feedback so that the candidate has an opportunity to respond to the result that: "yes, but these are the results, this is how you estimated yourself and what do you say about that" so that a candidate is not removed somewhere in the process solely on the basis of a test result.*  
– Gabrielsson

Gabrielsson's reluctance to exclude someone solely based on their test result demonstrates the belief in the necessity of engaging in dialogues. If they didn't have dialogues after the tests, they might remove someone who is a good fit for the role. By incorporating the dialogues,



they can protect themselves from this risk. The dialogues with the candidate are then predominantly described in terms of improving the validity of the test results by reducing any potential misunderstandings. However, there were a few recruiters that believed that dialogues may undermine the objectivity by allowing candidates to explain themselves out of undesirable traits:

*But if they don't come up with a good example of how they actually do it, then we trust the test more than someone who can talk. It could be that you don't think it's such a wonderful quality to have and therefore want to explain yourself out of it. –*

Fredriksson

Fredriksson's statement that you should not let a candidate explain him or herself out of a certain test result can be viewed as contradictory to the previously described need for dialogue in order to make sense of the tests. This tension is usually overcome by referring to context. For example, many of the recruiters differentiate in the need for dialogues in large volume recruitments, smaller recruitments, internal recruitments and when actively searching for candidates. By referring to context in this way, the potential threat to objectivity is diminished and thus the frame is upheld.

#### 4.3.2 Dialogues Between the Recruiter and Hiring Managers

Throughout the interviews, one identified pattern was the importance of dialogue about the psychometric test results between the recruiters and the hiring managers. All the nine recruiters made clear that it is always the hiring managers that make the final decisions on who to recruit and that the recruiters play an important role in this process by conveying the test results to the managers and supporting their decisions. This can be highlighted through Eriksson's statement: *"it's definitely the manager who makes the sort of final decision, that's how it is. Definitely, but I still feel that they listen quite a lot and take in the information from us as well. – Eriksson.* This shows how the recruiters make sense of the psychometric tests and convey it to the hiring managers for them to make final decisions, and as such are working with sensegiving. The recruiters thus work as facilitators in making sense of the test results.

The dialogues can be considered crucial since, in all nine interviews, it was explained that only the recruiters were certified by the test providers and none of the hiring managers. The recruiters describe risks associated with hiring managers not understanding the test results correctly which may lead them to base their final decision on irrelevant factors. This can be seen in Hansson's response to the question of how the hiring managers consider the test results in their final decision:

*Oh, very varied. Some, I can't answer exactly, but I've been in a lot of strange situations where people say like, I want, on a ten-point scale, it has to be a seven and up. Why does it have to be a seven? – Hansson*

Hansson's statement highlights that a hiring manager who is lacking adequate knowledge may prioritize hiring a person with the highest test results, without fully understanding why or the possible implications. The dialogues between the recruiters and hiring managers thereby serves as a protective meaning making strategy to minimize this risk, which in turn upholds the notion of objectivity and validates the use of psychometric tests. This is further elaborated on by Eriksson:

*And there I may have to step back and look like, how do I talk about these tests based on that then maybe I don't have to share numbers with this manager. It probably won't give us anything. So that some, I think if you don't understand how this type of test works, you probably have an image that if I get someone who has like as close to 100 as possible, it will be like the perfect candidate. And that it will be a rather one-sided picture, then it may be that I might not give a lot of information about the tests to all the managers either [...] like maybe adapting how you talk about it and so on. – Eriksson*

Eriksson shows that in order to overcome this risk, they limit and adjust the information, as well as how they speak to the manager. Once again, this can be seen as a way of protecting the positive frame of psychometric test by minimizing elements that may threaten it. Furthermore, it also justifies the recruiters' work as facilitators and the role of dialogues as they use them to navigate the managers towards a decision. Since the final decisions can be based on other things, such as gut feeling, the role of the recruiter as well as the need for psychometric tests is further strengthened.

## 4.4 Summary of Analysis

The recruiters are filtering psychometric tests through a frame of objectivity. Meaning, that by using psychometric tests they will reduce the risk of being affected by preconceptions, thus improving objectivity. Furthermore, the recruiters share the belief that psychometric tests hold the promise of diversity. The frame of objectivity is further supported by the many descriptions of a rational need for testing, for example high volume recruitments, lack of better options and the unreliability of recruiting on gut feeling.

The first protective meaning making strategy is downplaying limitations to protect the objective frame. This is seen through limited reflection, downplaying the role of interpretations and cheating. Similarly, regarding diversity, they downplay the role of premade cultural profiles and not being able to accommodate for certain disabilities. By downplaying these limitations, the objective frame remains intact. The second protective meaning making strategy is using metaphors, such as a “complementary tool”, “slice of a cake” and “game”. By projecting psychometric testing on these objects, the metaphors serve a role of minimizing disadvantages and flaws that may threaten their objective frame. The third protective meaning making strategy is using analogies to protect the objective frame by highlighting situations where objectivity is needed, such as the doctor’s office and in manufacturing. By using certain analogies, they also introduce some flexibility and emotion to the objective frame whilst still effectively upholding it. The fourth protective meaning making strategy is the modern company narrative. This narrative seems to be a part of a larger societal discourse and that utilizing tests is a sign of modernity, validity, and objectivity. The fifth and final protective meaning making strategy can be considered a practical strategy. In this strategy, the recruiters participate in dialogues with the candidates and hiring managers in which they discuss the test results. On one hand, the dialogues can be seen as attempts to challenge the frame of objectivity, as they allow candidates and managers to reinterpret the results, potentially introducing subjectivity. On the other hand, the dialogues are mainly described as elements that enhance objectivity as they promote a more correct evaluation.

## 5. Discussion

*In the following section, the empirical findings will be put in relation to existing literature. The opening part discusses the frame of objectivity that we have identified. We then continue to the meaning making strategies that the recruiters use to uphold this frame of objectivity. In the concluding part, the problematization of these findings are concretized, with the aim of nuancing existing theory.*

### 5.1 Contributing to Meaning Making

Our analysis shows that the recruiters are utilizing, what we have decided to label, protective meaning making strategies in order to construct and maintain their frame of objectivity. Similar to Logemann et al (2019) we were able to identify this construction of the frame through language use. Entman (1993) describes that these frames are created through a process of selecting certain dimensions and by doing so individuals shape the meaning of the concept itself. Our findings correspond with these studies on framing by showing how the recruiters create this frame by highlighting certain dimensions, such as objectivity and validity. Additionally, we add empirical examples on meaning making to the many studies that recognizes language use as crucial to discover meaning (Wibeck & Linnér, 2021; Küpers, 2013; Weick et al, 2005).

### 5.2 Challenging the Objectivity Discourse: Recognizing the Human Factor

Our findings problematize the existing literature on psychometric testing in recruitment which focuses on validity and predictive value for work performance (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Rothstein & Goffin, 2006; Mabon, 2004). Existing literature on psychometric testing has been predominately quantitative which also extends to studies on limitations. Some of these limitations include difficulties conceptualizing and measuring personality (Arthur et al., 2001; Raad et al, 1994; Bainbridge et al., 2022), cheating and response distortion (Cavanaugh, 2018; Christiansen et al., 2021) as well as balancing diversity with validity and personal integrity (Ryan & Tippins, 2004; Malouff et al., 2005; Kramer, 2007). Although we recognize these areas as important, we also note that they are all aspects of

maintaining and developing tests. Our qualitative and critical study challenge this discourse by showing that meaning making is a crucial component in understanding the phenomena of psychometric testing. This is primarily because tests are designed and constructed by humans, administered to humans, and utilized by humans to make important decisions. Consequently, the human factor introduces complexities that cannot be overlooked, but rather needs to be recognized and understood.

## 5.3 Protective Meaning Making Strategies to Navigate Challenges

### 5.3.1 Downplaying Limitations

Our analysis reveals that the recruiters often handle limitations by downplaying or not acknowledging them. Moreover, they tend to lack critical reflection about these limitations and minimize elements that could challenge their belief in the objective status of the tests. These findings resonate with the concerns expressed by Rothstein & Goffin (2006) regarding the recruiters' level of expertise in comprehending the complexities associated with test usage. Building upon the perspectives of Lundgren (2019) and Hesselbo (2023), we emphasize the significance of moving beyond the tests themselves and critically examine aspects of their usage that relates to norms and meaning. Additionally, our findings align with Lundgren's (2019) observation that recruiters employ strategies to overcome criticism against tests, as well as to reduce cognitive dissonance.

Related to this lack of critical reflection, our study shows that the recruiters did not refer to any supportive statistical studies when minimizing limitations. This further indicates their reliance on meaning making strategies to overcome these challenges. We believe this finding to be significant since the understudied limitations of psychometric tests may potentially lead to misuse, as recognized by Ng and Sears (2010), Kramer (2007), and Timmons (2021). By drawing attention to these areas, we therefore emphasize the need to critically examine psychometric test both in research and in practice. Thus, our study recognizes how meaning making strategies protect and reinforce the perceived objectivity of tests, potentially discouraging recruiters from challenging them. Thereby, we underscore the significance of the human component in understanding psychometric testing.

### 5.3.2 Metaphors: Minimizing the Risks of Testing

Moreover, our analysis shows that as a way of protecting the frame of objectivity, the recruiters use metaphors. Our findings are aligned with Küper's (2013) description of metaphors as terms from one domain that are projected onto another domain to meaningfully organize experiences. However, our analysis suggests that they do not only serve the purpose of organizing experiences in creating meaning – they also play an active role in sustaining meaning. By projecting psychometric testing onto certain objects such as a “tool”, that is only designed to aid, and under human control, the recruiters effectively minimize the test's overall role in recruitment and thereby also the potential disadvantages associated with testing. We therefore add to the existing sensemaking theories by suggesting that the recruiters utilize metaphors as a way of overcoming potential threats to their frame of objectivity. By employing these metaphors, the recruiters effectively navigate the potential critique surrounding the objectivity of tests, which can be seen as an example of a protective meaning making strategy.

### 5.3.3 Analogies: Supporting Objectivity Whilst Addressing Limitations

We also identified several analogies that aligned with Küpers (2012) suggestion that analogies are used in a specific way of reasoning, wherein similarities in certain aspects imply similarities in others. Our study reveals that analogical reasoning is used to support the objective frame of reference by drawing parallels to situations where guessing is unacceptable, such as the medical field and manufacturing. These analogies serve to emphasize the necessity of objectivity in the recruitment process and reinforce the tests status as objective. Additionally, recruiters employ analogies like “wanting Superman but settling for Spiderman” and the analogy of a romantic relationship in order to introduce flexibility and emotions into psychometric testing. These analogies attempt to address and adapt to limitations, whilst still maintaining the overall objective frame of reference. This expands on Küper's (2012) description of analogical reasoning, as we demonstrate that analogies are not only used to concretize the meaning of tests but also as a strategy to maintain this meaning by introducing flexibility and humanity when necessary. Thus, the recruiters may employ analogies to reason in different ways, all with the aim of upholding the legitimate and objective status of psychometric tests.

### 5.3.4 Narratives: Upholding Objectivity

Our analysis showed that the recruiters' main narrative about psychometric tests is that tests are an integral part of the modern company. This is aligned with meaning making theories which emphasizes shared stories as a tool for creating meaning to events (Wibeck & Linnér, 2021; Küpers, 2013). Our analysis shows that the narrative of the modern company is mainly a strategy to uphold the necessity and objectivity of psychometric tests. By tapping into a larger societal discourse on objectivity, where objectivity is regarded as something desirable (Porter, 1996; Rettberg, 2014), recruiters can establish and maintain a positive perception of test usage. The narrative can thus be seen as further establishing the tests' legitimacy and superior status. Furthermore, this narrative creates an opposition between old and new, where no one want's to be recognized as outdated. Therefore, in order to be regarded as a modern company, they accept psychometric tests without much reflection. For organizations this narrative may improve the efficiency of test use, as all members of the organization share a similar understanding. However, we identified that it may also silent critical voices or minimize critical thinking. This lack of criticism on the organizational level can also be understood in terms of the speed-accuracy trade off as described by Weick (1995). We see a tendency amongst the recruiters to focus on what is plausible rather than what is accurate which may stem from the need for efficiency, where accuracy and critical thinking is perceived as too time consuming.

We therefore believe that it is crucial for organizations to recognize the significance of this narrative when incorporating psychometric tests. As literature suggests, achieving shared sensemaking within organizations may be difficult, undesirable, or even impossible to achieve (Weick, 1995). Finding the right balance between consensus, efficiency, and accuracy within the organization while encouraging critical reflection on test use can thus be a challenge.

### 5.3.5 Dialogues: Aligning Understandings

Our study shows that the recruiters use dialogues as a protective meaning making strategy. In line with existing sensemaking literature such as Rouleau and Balogun (2011), the recruiters participate and initiate dialogues to further their own, as well as candidates and managers, interpretation of psychometric tests. Moreover, our findings add to existing literature by showing empirical examples of HR professionals as facilitators (Brown et al, 2017) and the

ability of any agent within an organization to engage in sensegiving (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007).

By emphasizing the significance of dialogues, the recruiters employ a protective strategy that upholds the frame of objectivity by protecting it from any challenges or risks. This insight expands upon the empirical material of how language and conversation contribute to the sensemaking process (Whittle et al., 2023; Weick et al., 2005). Furthermore, the description of dialogues is an empirical example of how meaning is not solely constructed within the individual but also through social interactions, with conversations facilitating the shift from individual meaning making to organizational sensemaking (Stiglani and Ravasi, 2012).

Additionally, by performing dialogues with the candidates and hiring managers, the recruiters try to reduce risks such as inaccurate self-estimations and misinterpretations. As Lindelöw Danielsson (2003) argues, personality tests are self-estimations and thus represents a person's own view of themselves, rather than an objective truth. As a protective strategy, the dialogues therefore serve a purpose of eliminating this risk in order to keep the frame of objectivity intact. Furthermore, our analysis is in line with Lindelöw Danielsson (2003), who argues that the tests requires a shared understanding of the words and concepts between test takers and the interpreter of the result. The dialogues then serve as a protective strategy as a way of aligning interpretations.

The need for dialogues is interesting because it could be argued as introducing subjectivity in testing, thereby challenging the objective frame. However, our analysis shows that the recruiters all seem to believe that the dialogues strengthen objectivity. Utilizing dialogues for interpretation is something that is subjective in nature, yet here, this subjectiveness somehow works to enforce the objectiveness of the tests. It appears paradoxical, yet it works to enforce and strengthen the objective frame of reference. As such our study provides additional empirical examples on the complexities of maintaining a frame of reference.

#### 5.4 Frames and Individual Meaning Making: Complex Adjustments

To further advance the understanding of psychometric testing beyond the tests themselves, we have proposed that recruiters use these protective meaning making strategies to uphold the frame of objectivity. Like Thomas (1996/1962) and Heine et al (2006) we have



discovered that the recruiters respond to challenges that threaten their frame. More specifically, the recruiters reinterpret the anomalies to fit their frame of reference, which is similar to what Thomas (1996/1962) describes as one of the main responses to situations that challenge the existing discourse. Our analysis shows empirical examples on the complex adjustments of responding to challenges. For example, when faced with the notion of limitations the recruiters downplay it by generalizing, which can be seen as a reinterpretation of the anomaly to fit said frame, aligned with Thomas (1996/1962). In addition, the recruiters also incorporate elements of flexibility within their frame in order to maintain it. For instance, they introduce dialogues and emotions, enabling some degree of adjustment while still preserving the overarching frame. We believe that these attempts to introduce flexibility and humanity to the otherwise objective and impersonal frame is a way to overcome the dissonance that the challenges of psychometric tests introduce to the recruiters' work.

Altogether, we believe that these insights can contribute to the underexplored area of the role of meaning making about psychometric tests in recruitment. Our study challenges the stream of quantitative literature on psychometric tests that perceive them as objective and consistently overlooks the human aspect involved in testing. We have shown that the area of psychometric testing has limitations and risks which brings complexities and paradoxical conflicts that the recruiters must overcome. To navigate these complexities, we have identified that the recruiters use five protective meaning making strategies that maintain their frame of objectivity. Through this study, we contribute with significant insights into the role and influence of recruiters' meaning making strategies. This is important because these strategies are upholding the tests status as objective, discouraging a more critical examination of them. By understanding this better, we might be able to challenge tests and their rationales better, as well as explore the role of different actors in test use.

## 6. Conclusion

*The following section presents the conclusions of the study, as well as its practical implications. The section ends with the study's limitations and suggestions for further research.*

### 6.1 Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore how meaning about psychometric testing within recruitment is constructed and sustained through the process of meaning making. With support in the analysis, we have been able to identify that the recruiters tend to filter psychometric tests through a frame of objectivity. The analysis suggests that the recruiters' approach psychometric tests with the belief that they provide an objective assessment of candidates that ultimately will lead to diversity. The frame of objectivity is further supported by the rationalization of the need for tests through factors such as a belief that previous experience and decisions based on gut feeling are insufficient in predicting work performance. It is also supported by the need for efficiency in high volume recruitments.

Furthermore, we have shown that the recruiters utilize what we have decided to label protective meaning making strategies to uphold the frame of objectivity. The recruiters employ five strategies to maintain the perception of objectivity in psychometric testing. These strategies include downplaying limitations, using metaphors and analogies, creating a narrative of the modern company as well as engaging in dialogues to facilitate a shared understanding.

Our analysis shows that the recruiters tend to downplay potential limitations of psychometric tests, such as cheating, diversity concerns, and the role of interpretations. They may disregard or minimize these limitations to reinforce the belief in the objectivity of the tests.

Furthermore, they use metaphors and analogies to protect the frame of objectivity by making the concept of psychometric testing more concrete and relatable. Metaphors are employed to emphasize the controllable and limited nature of tests. Analogies are used to highlight the need for objectivity. Reversely, some analogies are used to challenge the frame of objectivity by introducing emotion and flexibility.

Moreover, our analysis show that the recruiters construct a narrative which position psychometric tests as an integral part of the modern company. They describe recruitment without tests as outdated and emphasize the positive aspects of test use. This narrative aligns with the societal discourse on objectivity which helps validate the use of psychometric tests within organizations. Additionally, our analysis highlights the role of dialogues in protecting the frame of objectivity. The recruiters engage in dialogues with candidates and hiring managers to facilitate interpretation of test results, as well as to reduce risks associated with self-estimations. By having these dialogues, recruiters aim to create a shared understanding of the psychometric tests.

## 6.2 Theoretical Implications

The theoretical contribution with our study can be summarized in three key aspects. First, we confirm meaning making theories suggesting that that individuals work from a frame of reference and that they respond in various ways to protect this frame. Second, we challenge the discourse of quantitative studies on psychometric testing by introducing a qualitative perspective that moves beyond the focus on the tests themselves. Our findings also add to the critical voices suggesting that recruiters utilize strategies to overcome criticism against tests and reduce cognitive dissonance. Third, our study contributes to this area by showing how the construction of the objective frame can provide insights into how recruiters make sense of psychometric testing. Additionally, we present five protective meaning making strategies that recruiters employ to address challenges that may undermine this perspective on psychometric testing. We believe that by understanding the role of meaning making in upholding the objective status of the test, we might be able to examine tests and their underlying justifications better. Consequently, we advocate for increased critical examination not only of the limitations inherent in tests, but also of the roles and actions of individuals involved in constructing and perpetuating the meaning surrounding testing.

## 6.3 Practical implications

One practical implication with our study is directed towards recruiters utilizing psychometric tests. Our study shows that there are paradoxes and limitations with using psychometric tests

that the recruiters must address which may impact their decision making. Recognizing this could improve awareness about these limitations and their perceptions of them. This may encourage more critical reflection and lead to more conscious utilization of the tests.

Furthermore, our findings can be of practical importance for organizations. By recognizing that a unified sensemaking of tests may increase efficiency but also lead to reduced critical reflection on test use, organizations can become more aware of potential risks associated with psychometric testing. Thus, the organizations can better acknowledge the role of psychometric tests in their recruitment process.

Moreover, our study has practical implications for test takers. We show that when psychometric tests are used, the test takers play an important role in the recruitment decision both by participating in the tests themselves and in the following dialogues. The test takers play an active role in this process by interpreting the tests and providing their self-estimations. Therefore, our findings remind them of this and further encourages critical reflection about the role and limitations of the tests.

Lastly, one practical implication of this study is in the development of psychometric tests, which could be of interest for test providers. Moving beyond the focus on validity and predictive value, they must be aware of their own role in providing meaning about testing and understand how the recruiters work to construct and maintain the meaning of the tests. Furthermore, it may be important for the test providers to recognize that recruiters rely heavily on the promise of objectivity and diversity offered by psychometric tests, perhaps without fully understanding the underlying statistics or studies. This places a responsibility on test providers to ensure that their tests are reliable and that limitations are recognized, given that psychometric tests play a significant role in the recruitment process.

## 6.4 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Regarding the study's limitations and the implications these entail, we have identified several factors that may have influenced the study's results. Firstly, the small sample size of nine respondents limits generalizability. However, this study is the result of an exploratory

approach and not conducted with the purpose of making empirical generalizations. Even so, we still recognize that our analysis may be incomplete or leave out some important details.

Another limitation is that the recruiters' perspective on psychometric testing have exclusively been studied through interviews, meaning that no direct observations were made of how psychometric tests were used in practice. Furthermore, no analysis has been made of documents associated with the psychometric tests. Complementary analyses of these areas could further develop our findings by confirming or challenging them.

Another limitation was that recruiters, who do not use psychometric tests, were not interviewed. Due to our purposive sampling of recruiters who worked with psychometric tests, it is possible that the respondents are biased and predominately focused on the positive aspects of tests to validate their own use of them. It would therefore be interesting to further investigate how recruiters who don't use, or stopped using, psychometric tests resonate and make sense of psychometric tests.

Furthermore, we believe that an interesting area for further research is to investigate test-takers' sensemaking process of test use in recruitment, and to compare the recruiters and candidates' perspectives. Further research could also explore organizational sensemaking's role in creating and sustaining meaning about psychometric testing, as they strategically work towards establishing a uniform meaning. Additionally, investigating the influence of the societal discourse role in the use and interpretation of tests would be valuable to improve the understanding of psychometric test use. We believe that psychometric testing is a very rich area for further studies on sensemaking.

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