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EMOTION AS SOFT POWER IN ORGANISATIONS

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Structured abstract

• Purpose

Adopting the critical sensemaking (CSM) lens to the microlevel interaction between leader and employees, the article offers a theoretically informed example of leading with soft power and positive emotions that blurs boundaries in democratic organisations.

• Design/methodology/approach

The research methodology involves videography and interpretive analysis of video-recorded interactions that combines focused ethnography with video analysis. The analysis focuses on face-to-face meeting interactions between a leader and employees in a small service firm.

• Findings

The findings illustrate how restoring the sense of the democratic organisation is an accumulating and complex phenomenon where explicit and implicit organisational rules and changing identity positions are enacted by constructing affective loyalties, moral and reflex emotions that serve as soft power capacities helping the leader and employees to enact meanings attached to a democratic rather than hierarchical organisation.

• Research limitations/implications

Cultural differences provide an emotional context that facilitates and mitigates against leading with soft power. The research data was gathered from a Finnish firm, which calls for further studies within different cultural contexts. In societies characterised by democratic relations and low organisational power levels, sensemaking in organisations calls for soft power rather than any other form of power, which warrants further research.

• Practical implications

The article provides new insight for human resources practitioners and leaders who want to build resilient organisations and pay attention to shared, distributed and relational leadership practices, co-creative work and collective decision-making processes.

• Originality/value

The power explored in previous sensemaking studies has been power over, which is most often associated with the negative aspects of power, such as domination and suppression, in the pursuit of specific performance. The applications of videography method linking ethnography and interpretive analysis of video-recorded interactions are still rare in organisation studies.

Keywords: democratic organisation; critical sensemaking; soft power; productive power; emotion; formative context; rules; discourse; agency; face-to-face interaction; meeting; videography; video ethnography
1. Introduction

Sensemaking provides an often-used lens to study the socio-psychological aspects of organisations. However, the majority of sensemaking studies approach sensemaking as a more or less emotionless process (Holt and Cornelissen, 2014), and few studies address issues of power in sensemaking (Helms Mills, 2003; Helms Mills et al., 2010). Little attention has been paid to the role of emotion and power in influencing the sensemaking of others and exercising one’s agency (Aromaa et al., 2020), especially from the point of view of considering power as a productive and constitutive force for agency (Helms Mills et al., 2010; Mills and Helms Mills, 2004). The aim of this article is to study a particular form of productive power – soft power – and explore how it affects sensemaking through its connection to emotions. In this article, soft power is studied as the ability to affect others’ sensemaking through positive emotions in particular.

This article argues that to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of organisations, it is necessary to explore the association between soft power, emotion and sensemaking through empirical studies. This is highly relevant given the current attention to co-creative work and the shared, distributed and relational processes of social construction in organisations (Fitzsimons et al., 2011; Uhl-Bien, 2011). These developments are changing the landscape of work, with both leaders’ and employees’ expectations of organisational interaction moving away from hierarchical models towards democratic practices (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003; de Waal, 2018; Holbeche, 2018).

The blurring of the boundaries of leaders’ and employees’ roles in democratic organisations further emphasises the need for intensive sensemaking at work. With managerial authority changing in the context of democratising work life, how can the sense of a democratic organisation be constructed and maintained by leaders? Adopting the critical sensemaking (CSM) lens to examine the micro-level interactions between leader and employees, this article offers theoretically informed examples of leading with soft power and positive emotions.

The remainder of this article is organised as follows. First, we offer the theoretical framework of the study around the CSM heuristic that enables us to consider power as a productive force and emotions as cultural and performative long-term affective loyalties, moral emotions and short-term reflex emotions. Then, the use of videography as an interpretive methodology and the context of the study are described. The findings illustrate how the sense of a democratic organisation is restored after it has been disturbed in an office meeting. The study ends with a discussion of the results, followed by conclusions and implications.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Power through the critical sensemaking lens

Sensemaking is understood as a vital social process, relying on reciprocal expression of emerging meanings (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011). Weick et al. (2005) conceptualised power as an accumulation of individual actions and the ability of individuals to mobilise sensemaking resources. Taking a different perspective, CSM approaches power in sensemaking as a systemic, masked and multi-level phenomenon and asks how structural (i.e., formative contexts and organisational rules) and post-structural (i.e., discourse) elements shape the micro-level sensemaking of organisational actors (Helms Mills, 2003; Helms Mills et al., 2010; Aromaa et al., 2019).
Power at the macro-level is well illustrated by the notion of cultural hegemony (Gramsci, 1971), in which world views are popularised by the ruling class that can manipulate the interests of subordinates and gain the acceptance of specific ideologies. At the organisational meso-level, hegemony is sustained by regulating discourses (Fairclough, 2010) that guarantee the consent of the subordinates as opposed to emerging conflict and coercion. The Foucauldian approach to discourses views power as a productive force that explains how a world view is constructed as knowledge through which people draw their soft power. In this view, power operates as a guiding force that defines and guides understandings by seemingly gentle means and makes individuals accept institutionalised practices (Foucault, 1988).

Understanding organisational life as characterised by intertwined and emerging senses of the democratic and hierarchical organisation calls for understanding those senses as part of the formative context. In CSM, formative contexts are deep-seated assumptions about everyday life that become widely accepted social assumptions (Unger, 1987). In entrepreneurial firms, senses of the democratic and hierarchical organisation are a constitutive part of the formative context. Even if entrepreneurial action is often characterised as non-hierarchical and flexible (Seers, 2004), entrepreneurs may occasionally centralise their decision-making power and create a social reality that limits and trivialises employees’ participation or even excludes them from meaning-making processes (Kets de Vries, 1985). Even if hierarchy is expressed and co-exists with the democratic senses of the organisation (Ezzamel and Willmott, 1998), entrepreneurial organisations strive to avoid conspicuous hierarchical relations and symbolism. They aim to celebrate egalitarian senses of the organisation and its members as elite actors of a leading-edge democratic company rather than a bureaucracy (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Common characteristics of democratic relations are equality, inclusiveness and participation in decision-making (Gastil, 1992). Harrison and Freeman (2004) noted that “any action, structure, or process that increases the power of a broader group of people to influence the decisions and activities of an organization” moves the workplace towards democracy (p.49).

Moving to the micro-level, a sensemaking approach (Weick et al., 2005) defines organisations as meaning systems (Daft and Weick, 1984) which, through social interaction at the individual level constitutes a collective accomplishment (Weick, 1995). Understanding the way that senses of the organisation are created, sustained and changed provides a powerful means of understanding the fundamental nature of leadership as an ongoing social process. By understanding the way that leaders enact their senses and guide their followers into a common interpretation of reality, we are able to understand how leadership works to create a foundation for organised activity. In leading, managers enact a particular form of social reality with far-reaching, but often poorly understood and appreciated consequences (Smircich and Morgan, 1982). Arguably leaders exercise power by making sense of the reality of and for others (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991). This is very often in a constructive way. Sensemaking is an ongoing process (Weick et al., 2005) and unexpected situations may demonstrate a leader’s inability to control multiple emerging meanings that provide seeds of breaking the fundamental senses of the organisation that needs to be restored (Smircich and Morgan, 1982).

Identity construction is pivotal to the sensemaking process (Helms Mills, 2003). In CSM, identities are understood as fluid and changing discursive constructions that can be managed to serve organisational goals (Alvesson et al., 2008). Collective identity can be defined as how a collective...
understands itself as an entity (Pratt, 2003). Identities are tied to wider social and cultural contexts, which is illustrated in how individuals in a flexible way take on social identities based on education, profession, and organisational position (Watson, 2008). The construction of changing identities may include rules about how actors should function within the organisation (Helms Mills et al., 2010).

The CSM heuristic provides analytical elements to analyse power as a multidimensional phenomenon, as both a productive and a restrictive force that actors use when they negotiate senses of organisations (Mills and Helms Mills, 2004). By giving voice to employees and their experiences, the CSM heuristic has opened new insights, especially into the oppressive nature of power. Previous studies have focused on how power over actors is exercised through formative contexts, discourses and rules in multiple ways, and how those elements pre-structure senses of actors in systematic ways, with negative consequences for individuals and organisations. Shenoy-Packer (2014) analysed power as an oppressive phenomenon in micro-level sensemaking processes. Ruel (2018) uncovered a wide spectrum of oppressive power relations and discourses, which led to experiences of marginalisation. Analysing power as a macro-level phenomenon, Hilde (2017) studied the marginalisation experiences of participants when they were confronted with discriminatory practices.

There is a long history of power being dealt with as a positive and facilitative force, as in this article. Mary Parker Follett conceptualised power as a collectively exercised intentional activity through which people inspire each other to achieve common interests and responsibilities (Follett, 1924, cited in Pratt, 2011). The positive theory of power (Parsons, 1964) also conceptualised power as a facilitative force in society, with the capacity to change the nature of things and relations. Kanter (1981) defined power as an accumulating phenomenon based on soft capacities and mutual interaction. Power with intertwined soft and hard elements was connected to social aspects of emotionality by French and Raven (1959). They saw ‘expert power’ (based on actor’s knowledge and skills) as a force for creating trust and respect in social relations. They also viewed reciprocal ‘referent power’ as coming from a person who respects another and identifies with her. Power was understood as a force for strengthening social bonds and affective commitments and loyalties between people.

The current managerial practices of the new soft capitalism favour sophisticated forms of managerial authority that are based on equalised and personalised approaches (Costea et al., 2005). These new ways of maintaining authority have been connected to soft power, which is produced through positive emotions, language, symbols and images through which meanings, identities and social cohesion are constructed (Kantola, 2014). Authority is a creative process of social action having capacity of blurring boundaries between actors who create new forms of more democratic authority (Kantola, 2009). In collective managerial processes, positive emotions have important roles in helping to generate democracy, solidarity and empathy between organisational actors (Collins, 2004). Wilson III (2008) connects soft power and public diplomacy with the lack of rigour argumentation, which may reflect lack of adequate research methodology.
2.2. Cultural, social constructionist and performative approaches to emotion

Cultural, social constructionist and performative approaches to emotion view them as guided by cultural conventions, produced between subjects and performed by individuals. Gordon (1990) illustrates how members of a society are socialised into a culture and learn a vocabulary of emotions – particular linguistic labels for expressive behaviours, autonomic nervous system responses and ways of taking care of social relationships. The cultural and less extreme form of social constructionist approaches view emotions as intersubjective products of the way in which systems of meaning are created and negotiated between people (Parrot and Harrê, 1996). In other words, emotions only have meaning when designated with labels provided by culture. Social constructionists are concerned with how our sensations, thoughts and feelings are expressed and displayed to others (Sturdy, 2003).

Emotions have social consequences in organisations (Ahmed, 2014). Emotions tie people together and established social relations make them stay in social institutions. Thus, the power of emotions commits people to maintaining and re-creating social structures. Emotions also separate people from each other and make them disrupt social structures (Ahmed, 2014). The uniqueness of humanity arises in the ability of human beings to maintain and build social relations and unique social structures with a wide variety of emotions (Turner and Stets, 2005). Understanding emotions as part of culture that is socially constructed calls for studying emotion as a multidimensional phenomenon. Based on his studies on social movements, Jasper (2011) defined long-term affective loyalties and short-term reflex emotions as playing important roles in social interaction. Affective loyalties or orientations are attachments such as love, liking, respect, trust and admiration. Moral emotions involve feelings of approval and disapproval based on moral intuitions and principles, as well as the satisfaction we feel when we do and feel the right thing. Long-term affective loyalties and moral emotions are relatively stable and long-term emotions and are often the background to reflex emotions (Traïni, 2009). Short-term reflex emotions are understood as culturally constructed shared ways of showing emotions as reactions that shape meanings and social environments. These temporary emotions may include culturally specific ways of showing joy, enthusiasm, surprise or anger (Jasper, 2011).

Performances can be defined as all the activity of the actors with speech and body which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants (Goffman, 1959). Emotions are understood as an essential part of interactively constructed performances that serve to shape meanings (Ng and Kidder, 2010). In line with cultural and constructionist views on emotion, Goffman (1959) emphasised performances as deriving from cultural knowledge that makes people reflexive strategists who can deploy emotion through narrative and expressive devices, such as tone of voices and gestures, to shape meanings that advance their collective senses of the situation (Turner and Stets, 2005).

By connecting the abovementioned conceptual underpinnings, this article makes a theoretical contribution to the CSM literature. Previous CSM studies have focused on power as an oppressive phenomenon in micro-level sensemaking (Shenoy-Packer, 2014), discriminatory discourses and practices (Hilde, 2017), and on oppressive power relations enacted through discourse (Ruel, 2018).

The CSM heuristic provides a framework to understand hierarchical and democratic senses of an organisation as a deep-seated social structure that guides assumptions and provides a continuum for everyday social life. Analysing power from a CSM perspective as a productive force in discourses,
rules and identities (Helms Mills, 2003; Helms Mills et al., 2010) that leaders and employees enact in social interactions when they restore democratic senses of organisations calls for analysing the role of emotionality (and especially positive emotions) in helping to generate democracy, solidarity and empathy between organisational actors (Collins, 2004). This article enriches CSM analysis by analysing emotion as a multidimensional phenomenon performed between subjects (Goffman, 1959; Parrot and Harré, 1996) and based on cultural conventions (Gordon, 1990) as long-term affective loyalties, moral rights and duties that guide reflex emotions (Jasper, 2011) and serve as a productive soft power for agency in helping to restore the democratic sense of an organisation.

3. Methodology, data and analysis

The micro-sized rental and real estate firm studied in this article (hereafter referred to as ‘the Firm’) was opened in 1999 by Paula (referred to as ‘the Leader’), who is the CEO of the Firm located in the east of Finland. The Firm is part of a franchise (hereafter ‘the Chain’) and was one of the organisations studied in a two-year research project during which the Firm employed four people (Anna, Emma, Irene and Rosa, referred to as ‘the Employees’). Study participants, their roles and experience in the firm and the chain are illustrated in Table I. All the names that appear in the text are pseudonyms.

Table I. Study participants, their roles and experience in the firm and the chain

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name*</th>
<th>Career stage</th>
<th>Tenure</th>
<th>Member of the board</th>
<th>Ownership**</th>
<th>Position in the firm</th>
<th>Main tasks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paula</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>14 years</td>
<td>14 years</td>
<td>70 %</td>
<td>Founder entrepreneur, CEO</td>
<td>Strategic, operative and human resource management; business development and innovation in the firm and the franchising chain; chair of the office meetings; customer service; flat showing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irene</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>15 %</td>
<td>Employee</td>
<td>Payment transactions, financial controller, purchases and sales ledger; updating contractual instruments, forms and websites; customer service; flat showing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosa</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Employee</td>
<td>Administrative tasks; arranging rental agreement meetings and flat showing schedules with the customers; customer service; flat showing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>4 months</td>
<td></td>
<td>Employee</td>
<td>Marketing; advertising; customer service; contact information updating; flat showing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>3 months</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Employee</td>
<td>IT expert; customer service; flat showing; contact information updating</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*pseudonym ** Former employee NN 15 % ownership

The research took place in a situation in which Paula initiated major changes in the Firm’s business (e.g., expanding into the real estate business and introducing new service products to new customer groups), which reflected the increasing competition in the rental and real estate market in Finland.
The situation created some tension between the Leader and the Employees during office meetings when new services were discussed. The gathered research data provide fruitful opportunities to study soft power and the role of emotions in sensemaking.

Video-based methods have been used to investigate the role of emotions in group interactions (Christianson, 2018), but research designs that employ video-based methods and visual data are still rare (Whiting et al., 2018). The videography method adopted in this study aims at interpretive analysis of video-recorded interactions that links video analysis with focused ethnography (Knoblauch, 2006). The objective of videography is to reconstruct situations where actions are guided by meanings and cannot be merely observed. This requires data collection by observation, which allows the researcher to gain subjective knowledge of the field (Knoblauch and Tuma, 2011). Hence, the first author of this article conducted ethnographic fieldwork prior to video analysis to better understand actors’ sensemaking processes (Heath and Hindmarsh, 2002). Participant observation was conducted by shadowing (Bruni et al., 2004) the Leader and the Employees in their daily work for one week. The observation focused on interaction, rights and duties between the Leader and the Employees and the meanings attached to the organisation. The first author asked questions that arose naturally in the course of observation (Wilson and Sapsford, 1996). Fieldwork resulted in 40 pages of handwritten field notes, which were used to build an ethnographic understanding of the organisation. The first author also conducted four interviews with the Leader and one interview with each of the four employees. The interviews yielded more than 15 hours of audio material. All interviews were transcribed verbatim.

During two years of data collection, the first author participated in 11 office meetings, of which seven videotaped meetings yielded more than 15 hours of video footage that was transcribed verbatim. After the first four meetings, when the first author was sure that all Employees were accustomed to her presence at the meetings, she asked for and was given consent by the Leader and the Employees to videotape the forthcoming meetings (Musante and DeWalt, 2010). The meetings dealt with everyday practicalities and decision-making processes on topics such as the adoption of new services. Meetings were held once a month in the back room of the Firm’s premises outside office hours and each meeting lasted for about two hours.

When the first author started to conduct videotaping in the rather small back office, she noticed that it was not possible to locate the camera far from the participants and leave the room as suggested by LeBaron (2005). Hence, the first author located the camera far enough from the participants and remained in the room to be able to follow the participants by turning the camera lens. Video studies that seek to capture naturalistic data are said to be confounded by the observer’s paradox (Hazel, 2015). This view is based on the positivist research tradition, in which the presence of the observer and the video camera is seen as inhibiting access to the ‘real’ interactions between research participants (Hutchby et al., 2012).

In this article, a constructionist approach guided the methodological choices, which emphasise a reflexive stance towards what participants are doing in the presence of the video camera and the researcher (Speer and Hutchby, 2003). Gordon (2012) focused on understanding those opportunities that the presence of the video camera and the observer might offer for the researcher and study participants alike. Heath et al. (2010) emphasised that research participants become familiar with the presence of the camera and the researcher. This was the case in the videoed meetings, where the
participants did not seem to pay any attention to the video camera or the first author sitting next to the camera. The critical and constructive interaction style of the Leader and the Employees followed the lines they described at the interviews and workshops. However, the presence of the camera and the researcher might have had some influence on the interactions between the participants, because protracted arguments that were described by the Leader and the Employees in the interviews were missing from the videotaped meetings.

In the first phase, qualitative content analysis (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2015) was used to analyse personal interviews with the Leader and the Employees. This analysis produced an understanding of the Firm as a rather democratic organisation. In the second phase, the videotaped meetings were watched and the transcripts of these meetings were analysed. In this phase, it was noticed that in the meetings, the sense of a democratic organisation was broken and then restored repeatedly. In the third phase, qualitative content analysis was used again to analyse how both democratic and hierarchical senses of the organisation were shaped by performed emotions. Together, the authors chose two conversations in one particular meeting as the focus of a more detailed inspection in the fourth phase of the analysis. The first conversation concerned a situation in which the Leader unexpectedly cancelled a planned customer event that was considered important by the Employees. The second conversation on a service idea was chosen to demonstrate a situation in which the broken sense of a democratic organisation was collectively restored.

Both conversations were analysed through the CSM lens, focusing on structural (i.e., formative contexts and organisational rules) and post-structural (i.e., changing identity positions) elements. Taking the analysis a step further and aiming to show how the sense of a democratic organisation was restored, in the second conversation the discursive elements and emotions performed were analysed based on contextual and cultural understandings of the Finnish context. In the analysis, the meeting transcript was the main source of the analysis. The visual elements of the video recording nuanced and fine-tuned the interpretive analysis of the speech and enhanced the creditability of the research. Our previous research has illustrated how sensemaking research should employ multimodal strategies to avoid misinterpretation of the data (Aromaa et al., 2020). The analysis of verbal and non-verbal elements enabled the development of an understanding of the role of emotions as a tool of soft power that through rules and changing identity positions shaped the collective meaning construction of the Firm as a democratic accomplishment.

4. Findings

4.1. Constructing the sense of a democratic organisation

In the Firm, the Leader expected Employees to participate in the conversations and decision-making as active meaning-makers during the meetings. Even though the Employees had different areas of responsibility, usually they all were keen in sharing their opinions and contribute to the decision-making on every issue at hand. The ongoing production of new ideas was a matter of pride to Paula and the Employees, who considered the Firm to be an innovation leader in the Chain. The Leader introduced many ideas and all of them were collectively discussed before final decisions were made. As part of the team effort, the Leader encouraged the Employees to generate new ideas for improving customer service and the easiest ones were implemented on the go. In the interviews, the Leader
emphasised that she listens to and respects Employees’ viewpoints. When the Leader and the Employees discussed new ideas in the meetings, specific emotions such as enthusiasm for new ideas, pride and hope for the collective effort were collectively constructed. Negative emotions such as anger, disappointment and frustration were also habitually expressed in order to pinpoint injustice.

4.2. The first episode: breaking the sense of a democratic organisation

As usual, the office meeting was held in the back room of the Firm’s premises outside office hours. The idea of arranging customer evenings for young customers was the seventh item on the meeting agenda out of 15 items. The other franchisees of the Chain had some experience in arranging evenings and the Leader and the Employees of the Firm had previously enthusiastically agreed to arrange such an event within a few months. However, at the beginning of the meeting, Paula announces that the customer evening has been buried for now.

The first episode shows how the Leader breaks the sense of the organisation as a team that makes collective decisions. In the previous month, the Firm had adopted the social media platform Yammer to enhance internal communication. Employee Emma, who was responsible for customer service and had been most enthusiastic about the idea because young customers were close to her heart, had not been reading Yammer. In the meeting, Anna asks about the background of the Leader’s decision. However, instead of giving more information to her Employees, Paula quickly answered, yes, I put it on Yammer, yeah...yeah I did. The non-consultative decision announced through social media was in marked contrast to the ideal of a democratic workplace and produced a sense of the organisation as strongly dominated by the Leader. While the new social media platform was adopted to enhance internal communication, the Leader used it in a way that broke the rule of democratic decision-making.

Realising that Paula had ignored her in decision-making, Emma asks who did you talk to about this? Paula answers with a few words umm...with Anne and Helena, who are two franchisees of the Chain and Paula’s oldest confidants. Paula is especially used to having long conversations with Anne – pondering issues and hash out problems during their 15-year history as franchisees. In this particular situation, the negotiation with other franchisees seemed to ignore Emma as a competent customer service expert who has inside knowledge of young customers’ preferences. With her quiet voice, Emma briefly answers okay, staring down at her agenda, seeming resigned to her destiny.

Announcing with a loud voice, I absolutely don’t want to bury this forever because we can’t do anything if we don’t try, Emma attempts to restore the meaning of the idea as worth trying. This oscillation between the I-centred perspective, which reflects Employee’s self-interest and the we-centred perspective, which reflects the collective interest reveals a paradox in the power relations in this new situation, potentially causing some uncertainty for the Employee. By enacting two strong discourses of the Firm – innovation and we-discourses – at the same time, the Employee positions the Firm as a democratic organisation in which the Employee has equal opportunities to the Leader to motivate the team to adopt new ideas. However, Paula’s minimal gestures where she sits stock-still for a couple of seconds, nods slightly and agrees very shortly Mm. These minimal gestures are unusual for her and indicate that Emma has broken the implicit rules of power relations.
Paula reflects on how this particular idea has been an exceptional one in the Firm’s history and has turned the roles of the Leader and the Employees upside down. Looking at the Employees, she begins to smile …you’re trying to motivate me to do this. Usually I am the one who is the first to want to try everything new. Now this idea was a complete stop to me. With these arguments, the Leader breaks the sense of a democratic organisation by making sense of the organisation as one with a juxtaposition between the Leader and the Employees, where the parties adopt either positive – usually the Leader – or negative – usually the Employees – attitudes towards ideas. Furthermore, with her smile and amused voice, Paula enacts the power relations of the Firm by making clear that the employees cannot influence her decision. By enacting herself as an open-minded and enthusiastic prime mover of ideas, the Leader invalidates her Employees’ active role in innovation practices, which is very far from the idea of innovation democracy emphasised as a fundamental value of the Firm. Finally, after positioning herself – not the team – as a leading innovator of the Firm, the Leader enacts the idea as the worst idea ever, which is strongly against the rule of never disregarding those ideas that are important to the Employees.

4.3. The second episode: restoring the sense of a democratic organisation

The idea of starting to hire moving boxes made of heavy plastic that is commonly offered by professional moving firms in Finland was one of the ideas implemented by other franchisees of the Chain. The idea of renting moving boxes was discussed in the meeting after the customer evening idea during which the sense of a democratic organisation was repeatedly broken as illustrated above. Prior to the meeting, the Leader and the Employees of the Firm had agreed to start the new service. Part of the conversation was chosen for detailed analysis of how the Leader and the Employees managed meanings in a way that obfuscated the various voices. Analysis shows how emotions such as affective loyalties, moral and reflex emotions, and CSM elements such as explicit and implicit organisational rules and changing identity positions, served as productive boundary blurring mechanisms in the restoration of the democratic sense of the organisation.

In the first extract, the Employees’ empathy for the customer perspective, collective identity as helpful and caring of others’ needs and enactment of the Chain rather than the Firm perspective as a meaningful sensemaking context serve as boundary blurring mechanisms between the Leader and the Employees.

Emma turns others’ attention to the needs of their customers by talking about the marketing stickers that have been sent from the Chain. With her soft voice, she points out that just the name of the Chain in the stickers may not help our customers to return the boxes. Anna looks at Emma and by drawing on the we-discourse, suggests we could add the information by using the sticker of the Firm. All other members of the team show their agreement by nodding. With we-discourse, if we do that it would provide more information for our customers, Emma with her seemingly kind voice re-constructs the team as a helpful and considerate actor who focus on customers’ needs. This shift in perspective that returns the team to one with a common goal – instead of focusing on the needs of individual team members – and the enactment of the team as consisting of actors who are called to participate in collective activity seems to energise Anna. Cognitive empathy generated through taking the role of the other has been found to breed emotional empathy regarding sharing
positive emotions in face-to-face interaction (Davis, 2006). Gesturing forward with her hands, smiling and saying in a voice full of enthusiasm it helps to identify us as a housing agency, Anna makes sense of the team as a group of actors with a collective identity as professional service providers. Nodding emphatically several times, coupled with supporting sounds hmm, hmm, hmm, Paula co-constructs her empathy for the customer perspective.

Other members of the team join the conversation. Irene, with her lively voice, says I think it was funny that the address is missing, enacts the Chain as lacking perspective on the needs of their customers, which strengthens the sense of the Firm as sensitive to the needs of others. Anna offers a thumbs-up, saying with enthusiasm in her voice how they could use the stickers sent from the Chain saying the Chain unites. Her suggestion is regarded as unexceptional, because as the most short-serving employee, she is have never before seen to have enacted the Chain as a meaningful sensemaking context in the meetings. Enthusiasm serves the social function of creating a fantasy of ‘we’ as a team (Kantola, 2014). Enacting a new service that symbolises collective values seems to have a strong connective effect on all team members, who look at Anna, smiling and nodding. Emma quickly agrees yes, yes! Exactly like that!

In the second extract, the Leader obfuscates the various voices, blurring the boundaries between herself and the Employees. This happens by building team identity as a collective of actors against the Chain and by enacting an implicit rule that guides the Firm as a team that strives for innovation and excellence in the Chain context. Using soft power, the Leader expresses moral emotions pride and hope for the collective effort, and the Employees express their affective loyalty by showing enthusiasm for teamwork.

Raising her chin, looking at her Employees, Paula suggests in a prideful and deep voice let’s make more stickers. Let’s do this again in our own style. By expressing pride and hope for the collective effort, Paula constructs an emotionally attracting future-oriented narrative, which seems to appeal to her Employees’ sense of duty to implement the customer service ideas. Pride is a moral emotion dealing with rights and obligations, as well as feelings of approval and disapproval (Jasper, 2011). By explicitly mentioning how they are going to make more stickers, again with their own style compared to other firms of the Chain that have implemented the moving box service, Paula constructs the team as a collective by enacting the implicit rule that guides them to strive for innovation and excellence, even in minor issues such as personalising their boxes. Further, instead of enacting herself as a Leader who commands her Employees to take care of such minor issues, the Leader by drawing on we-discourse constructs moving boxes as a symbol of the team effort within the Firm, and enacts herself as a whole-hearted team member and equal participant. This is an important move in restoring the sense of the Firm as a democratic team where each member contributes to idea implementation.

The Leader’s construction of pride and hope, and enactment of the team as a collective which has its own identity as the innovation leader in the Chain, seem to create a sense of collective pride and enthusiasm in the Employees. Irene, the longest-serving employee of the Firm, agrees through a sense of pride in her voice, yes, we will do everything. Emma agrees with a deep voice, yes. Seemingly energised, Rosa stretches her upper body closer to Paula. Anna hums, with a wide smile on her face. By constructing positive feelings, all Employees clearly show how they understand
their duties both as moral actors who are expected to show their commitment to the innovative image of the Firm and as social actors who are expected to build a sense of the team as a participative collective of actors.

In the third extract, the Leader obfuscates the various voices, blurring the boundaries between herself and the Employees. This happens by enacting the team identity of members who respect others’ ideas and implement ideas together, and by enacting an explicit rule of Employees as decision-makers in minor issues of the Firm. Using soft power, the Leader expresses her appreciation of the Employees’ ideas and the Employees express their affective loyalty for the team by showing enthusiasm and energy for teamwork.

Paula summarises the Employees’ ideas on the stickers with ceremonious manners. Carefully, she draws the outlines of the stickers in the air and says with her deep voice, *we could have the sticker showing the name of the Chain and the logo of our own office below.* Even though at the beginning of the conversation Paula noted that the Firm was not going to use the stickers sent from the Chain, she seems to have changed her mind based on Anna’s exceptional enactment of those stickers as symbolising connectedness between people.

Looking delighted, knowing that they have done right, all Employees, one after another, say *yes, yes.* Giving extra attention to Emma, who came up with the idea about the new service by showing empathy for the perspective of others, Paula continues, *and then our address on the other side.* Emma says with enthusiasm in her voice, *yes, yes.* This move seems to further energise the Employees, who chuckle, pleasure in their voices. Irene raises her chin, and says with a deep and emphatic voice, *Yes.* The polyphony of agreement continues. Turner and Stets (2009) emphasised how people who are given deference make a positive evaluation of themselves, experience pride and are motivated to construct interpersonal harmony, which promotes social bonds and solidarity, and increases the flow of positive emotions.

In the fourth extract, the Leader and the Employees obfuscate the various voices. First, the Employee blurs boundaries by acting as a team leader who reminds other Employees about breaking the rule of all Employees being decision-makers on minor issues of the Firm. Then, the Leader blurs boundaries by breaking the same rule by participating in the discussion and building collective identity between the Leader and Employees as equal decision-makers. Using soft power, the Leader and Employees express calm, kind and deliberative voices to avoid opinions that are too straightforward.

When Anna poses a practical question about the number of moving boxes needed to start the new service, Rosa answers, *we are going to have ten of them.* With her straightforward opinion, Rosa breaks the explicit rule of the Firm that Employees act as decision-makers on minor issues. The rule violation does not escape Emma’s attention, who takes the role of the team leader by reminding Rosa and others in a sophisticated way with her calm, kind and decisive voice that *the decision is up to us.* By enacting Rosa’s opinion as one that breaks the sense of the organisation as a team, Emma’s remedial action receives quick confirmation by Paula: *yes, it’s up to us.* By participating in the discussion and drawing on we-discourse, Paula breaks the explicit rule set by herself that the Employees act as decision-makers on minor issues of the Firm. This tells us that
there is a special need for managing meanings and blurring the boundaries in a constructive manner when both the Leader and the Employees equally participate in the decision-making process.

Even though at the beginning of the meeting, Paula had pointed out the limited time available for the meeting, she opens space for collective discussion by lightly making an unrealistic suggestion about the number of the boxes, saying lightly, *how about five?* Knowing that starting the rental service with five moving boxes would not meet customer demand, the Leader opens space for her Employees’ negotiation. The Leader’s enactment of the Firm as one where deliberative interaction patterns are preferred seems to be taken by Rosa as a cue to adjust her performance. Saying in a gentle voice with ascending intonation that *twenty of them would be too many*, Rosa carefully reframes her opinion as making a kind and re-negotiable suggestion, which constructs the moving boxes as having a symbolic meaning in re-structuring the sense of the team as consisting of equal decision-makers.

Following Rosa, all members of the team strive to enact egalitarian senses of the organisation by inviting each other to participate in the decision-making. When Irene with her deliberative voice offers her point of view, saying *I think twenty boxes is too few if you are really going to move out*, Paula frames her view as a question with an ascending intonation: *twenty of them would be too many to start with.* Anna contributes by providing her point of view with her soft voice: *but we could store them.* With their rhetoric, every member of the team seems to take care to present herself as considerate towards other members’ opinions, which establishes the sense of the Firm as a team consisting of equal decision-makers. The negotiation, during which a conversation emerged about considering each other’s perspectives, resulted in fast turn-taking and the light articulation of proposals as questions, which came close to the idea of actors as soft and fast subjects provided by Thrift (2006).

5. Discussion

This article shows how sensemaking processes central to people and performance management are intertwined with power and emotions and need to be understood in these terms. This study illustrates how democratic values in organisations materialise in leader-employee relations that emphasise equality, inclusiveness and participation in decision-making (Gastil, 1992). However, even in organisations that prefer democratic values, these compete with hierarchical values that are enacted in certain situations, such as when a democratic leader makes a non-consultative decision, as in the empirical example of this article. Such situations showcase leaders’ inability to control emerging multiple meanings, and how this can break the current sense of the organisation, which then needs to be restored.

The findings illustrate how restoring the sense of a democratic organisation is an accumulating and complex phenomenon. Multiple identity positions and explicit and implicit organisational rules are enacted by constructing affective loyalties and moral and reflex emotions that serve as soft power capacities. These help to enact meanings attached to a democratic rather than a hierarchical organisation (see Table II). We have demonstrated how sensemaking may require obfuscating the voices of the employer and employees. The analysis showed how the roles and boundaries, not only
between the Leader and the Employees, but also between the Firm and the Chain as meaningful sensemaking contexts became blurred.

Table II. Emotional performances, organisational rules and collective identity positions as soft power

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Extract 1</th>
<th>Emotional performance</th>
<th>Organisational rules</th>
<th>Collective identity positions</th>
<th>Restored senses of democratic organisation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Empathy, enthusiasm (lively hand gestures) and joy (tone of voice) out of helping others</td>
<td>Firm takes care of the needs of the other people</td>
<td>We as helpful and caring of others’ perspectives</td>
<td>A helpful and caring organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extract 2</td>
<td>Pride and hope (raised chin, sublime and warm tone of voice) for collective effort</td>
<td>Firm strives for innovation and excellence in the Chain context</td>
<td>We as a team against the Chain</td>
<td>A unified and equal organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extract 3</td>
<td>Appreciation for employees’ ideas (visualising ideas with hand gestures, narration of each idea with a festive tone of voice)</td>
<td>Employees are decision-makers on minor issues of the Firm</td>
<td>We as a team who respect others’ ideas and implement ideas together</td>
<td>A collective and appreciative organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extract 4</td>
<td>Calm, kind and deliberative voices to avoid opinions that were too straightforward</td>
<td>Equal possibilities to participate in decision-making</td>
<td>We as considerate and skilled negotiators</td>
<td>An inclusive organisation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Our findings contribute to the CSM literature by illustrating how positive social emotions (Hareli and Parkinson, 2008) such as empathy, enthusiasm and joy (extract 1), pride and hope (extract 2), appreciation (extract 3), and calm, kind and deliberative voices (extract 4) helped to exercise soft power in the sensemaking process. Social emotions are sensitive to the context from which they emerge and serve important social functions. We have demonstrated how situational sensitivity to enact emotions as soft power shaped sensemaking in a way that came close to the idea of prosocial sensemaking, in which actors interpret their actions and identities as caring (Grant et al., 2008).

Based on a micro-analysis of the face-to-face interactions between the Leader and the Employees, the article has shown how soft power circulates through expressed emotions as an essential part of meaning construction. Based on the Foucauldian conceptualisation of power (Foucault, 1988), CSM scholars (e.g., Thurlow, 2007) have studied how power disperses and circulates through discourses within an organisation and presents itself in the implementation of actions, through which some understandings and practices become preferred. We have illustrated how a particular form of productive power – soft power – circulates through social emotions and presents itself by attracting others to accept meanings and enact formative contexts – such as the democratic values of the organisation – through persuasion rather than coercion.
Previous CSM studies have mostly addressed power as restricting and marginalising, while our findings open new paths to study power as a productive and facilitative force. Focusing on the structural (such as formative context and rules) and post-structural elements (such as discourses and changing identities) of power, prior studies have illustrated how systemic macro- and meso-level elements create differences in power dynamics within and around the organisation, and between people whose sensemaking accounts marginalise or dominate others’ voices (Helms Mills, 2003; Hilde, 2017; Ruel, 2018; Thurlow, 2007). In those studies, identity construction and resistance are understood as central aspects of power and agency (Carroll et al., 2008). Only recently has the CSM perspective developed insights into how emotions shape sensemaking by being part of the social formative context as deep-seated and collectively accepted social assumptions about everyday social life (Aromaa et al., 2020).

Our focus on emotions as social and cultural phenomena (Gordon, 1990) opens new vistas to study emotions as soft power. It is suggested that further research be conducted to determine the extent to which cultural differences provide an emotional context that facilitates and mitigates leading with soft power. Cultural differences in emotions may have an impact on ethnic relations at work (Hilde, 2017; Shenoy-Packer, 2014) and sharing social emotions as a form of soft power within a diverse group of employees. Shenoy-Packer (2014), for instance, described the potential for misunderstanding emotional exchanges in culturally diverse workplaces. In line with the notion of cultural differences, there is some evidence that Finland might differ from many other countries regarding sharing social emotions (Vuori, 2011), which can be considered a limitation of this study and calls for further studies within different cultural contexts.

The findings also raise implications for further research questions on the interplay of power and emotion in sensemaking. Emotions as socially constructed phenomena involve social rules and norms (Hochschild, 1979), which raises the question of how various forms of power, including soft power, are enacted when rules concerning emotions are followed and resisted. This question and others illustrate that addressing the interplay of emotions, organisational rules and changing identities as soft power in the management of meaning offers fertile ground for further studies. Constructing respectful relationships at work requires continuous attention, and previous research emphasises that training interventions are not adequate to eliminate incivility in the workplace (Lee Smith and Kelloway, 2016).

The article provides new insight for HR-practitioners and leaders who pay attention to shared, distributed and relational leadership practices, co-creative work and inclusive decision-making processes. For them, the research gives new insight on how blurring the boundaries between leaders’ and employees’ roles might be one of the key mechanisms in terms of motivating people and strengthening the bonds between the organisational members and therefore enhancing team performance and effectiveness especially in the workplaces striving for the democratic relations. Our article guides practitioners to consider power as an everyday productive phenomenon not connected with gaining economic benefits or practised only through organisational rules as bureaucratic accomplishments set by the rulers.

Building resilience helps organisations to adapt in the rapidly changing contexts. Cheese (2016) has highlighted how organisation cultures need to be developed based on trust and respect. Our article has illustrated how the Leader and the Employees who as resilient actors – instead of blaming others
after the conversation episode that turned sour and the sense of a democratic organisation was broken in many ways – actively engaged in the collective restoration of the senses of themselves as democratic and inclusive actors. Thus, the article illustrates how soft power as the ability to affect others’ sensemaking through positive emotions provides one important aspect for building organisational culture that supports resilient behaviour during the challenging times.

For the teams, the situations where team members engage in the conversation mode where the senses of themselves as democratic and inclusive actors are strengthened are valuable moments for reciprocal on-the-job learning. The article illustrates how the experienced leader has an opportunity to learn about the meaning of empathy and joy as powerful emotions for leading her young employees with soft power. The employees, who may work in the managerial positions in the future, have an opportunity to learn about the importance of showing acceptance and appreciation for the colleagues.

Finally, we suggest that in societies characterised by democratic relations and low organisational power levels (Lindell and Sigfrids, 2008), such as Finland, sensemaking in organisations calls for soft power rather than any other form of power.

6. Conclusion

This article has illustrated multiple ways in which emotions serve as soft power and shape sensemaking situations in people management. Specifically, the article illustrated how restoring the sense of a democratic organisation is an accumulating and complex phenomenon. Changing identity positions, organisational discourses as well as explicit and implicit organisational rules are enacted by constructing affective loyalties, moral and reflex emotions. These serve as soft power capacities that help to manage and establish preferred meanings of the democratic organisation. Methodologically, the findings indicate the relevance of combining ethnography and detailed micro-analysis of videotaped research data to study sensemaking between leaders and employees. Further, the article has illustrated how understanding emotions as cultural, social constructionist and performative accomplishments enacted in everyday, face-to-face interactions provides a fruitful starting point to study soft power as a productive force and context-sensitive phenomenon for prosocial sensemaking.

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