Emotional rhythms of power: reframing emotion rules through aesthetic modes of embodied interaction

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ABSTRACT
This paper examines how emotion rules are socially constructed and how and why they are enacted and challenged through specific modes of embodiment in face-to-face interactions. The paper broadens the understanding of emotion rules by connecting them to aesthetics to explore face-to-face interactions. This paper is based on ethnographic data gathered from a two-year study of a micro-sized service company. It explores the structure, function, and meaning of three emotion rules: (1) the emotionality rule, (2) the enthusiasm rule, and (3) the nice way rule as enacted by the company’s chief executive officer (CEO) and employees. This paper enhances the understanding of the role of emotion rules in establishing an innovative and democratic organisation. It offers insight into how emotion rules were enacted, challenged, and broken in an unexpected situation when the CEO announces her non-consultative decision that affected the company’s employees.

Introduction: considering embodied emotion rules

There is a lack of understanding in the management and organisation literature on how emotion rules-in-use shape face-to-face interactions. This is partly due to positivist politics and their written articulation, rooted in ‘sanitized academic discourse’ (Mandalaki, van Amsterdam, and Daou 2022). Thus, the aim of this study was to examine the structure, function, and meaning of emotion rules and their aesthetic elements in face-to-face meetings, drawing on a feminist embodied writing approach (Mandalaki, van Amsterdam, and Daou 2022). Hochschild’s (1983, 56) study of the emotional labour performed by flight attendants defined ‘feeling rules’ (or emotion rules, which is the term most commonly used in the literature) as guiding ‘emotion work by establishing the sense of entitlement or obligation that governs emotional exchanges’.

Hochschild’s pioneering work has stimulated considerable debate and research interest (Fineman 2006), much of which has focused on the cognitive control strategies used by employees to deal with emotional exchanges in customer service interactions as expected by their employers (Bolton and Boyd 2003), as well as those used in employer organisational activities, such as employee selection and training (Callaghan and Thompson 2002). These studies have approached emotion rules as stable entities and employees as a rather homogenous group that complies with employers’ expectations of emotional performance. Constructionist and critical studies have deconstructed and developed Hochschild’s work. For instance, flight attendants have been placed under the gender...
microscope (Taylor and Tyler 2000), and postfeminist and neoliberal feeling rules have been theorised as gendered ‘technologies of the self’ (Goedecke 2021) that subject women to strict requirements to demonstrate resilient individuality (Kanai 2017). These studies have continued Hochschild’s legacy to highlight timely issues on the dark side of work life, such as alienating and subjugating work practices.

Previous studies have mostly approached emotion rules as an organisational or global phenomenon. Hochschild’s studies have been criticised for portraying employees as passive conformers to rules (Callaghan and Thompson 2002) and ignoring emotional exchanges as relational and interactive phenomena (Theodosius 2006). Prior research has paid little attention to micro-level analyses of how emotion rules and the power attached to them are enacted in face-to-face interactions. The extent to which emotion rules shape the emerging meanings of an organisation and how they are negotiated in face-to-face interactions remains unknown (Aromaa, Eriksson, and Montonen 2020). Surprisingly, few studies on emotion rules have considered the interactions between managers and employees (for an exception, see Glasø and Einarsen 2006). To contribute to the research on emotion rules in organisations, our main research question was: How are emotion rules socially constructed through face-to-face interactions? We also aimed to answer two sub-questions: How are these emotion rules enacted, and how is the power embedded in them negotiated? How does the enactment of emotion rules promote productive interactions and shape the meanings of an organisation? We considered these questions by drawing on ‘collaborative embodied practice’ (Mandalaki, van Amsterdam, and Daou 2022) to study the role of experience in interactions through constructions of emotionality. To tackle these questions, we conceptualised emotions as socially constructed (Harré and Parrott 1996) and embodied (Lyon 1997; Küpers 2013) phenomena performed in face-to-face interactions between individuals (Sturdy 2003), through which meanings regarding saying and doing are enacted and negotiated (Harré and Parrott 1996). Mills and Murgatroyd (1991) studied organisational rules as socially constructed phenomena through which both established and loose structures are constantly enacted, challenged, and resisted, helping actors negotiate emerging meanings through micro-level face-to-face interactions. In this paper, we examine emotion rules as a similar phenomenon.

In organisations, emotion rules are performed by human bodies and entangled with physical objects, spaces, and technologies (Leonardi and Barley 2010). This happens by matching the rhythm, timing, and feeling of what is taking place (Reckwitz 2017). Enacting emotion rules requires skilful bodily performance and sensible knowledge (Strati 2000). In social interactions, emotion rules serve as negotiators of meaning.

During the past three decades, organisational scholars have shown an increased interest in organisational aesthetics (Strati 2018; for literature reviews, see Strati 2000; Taylor and Hansen 2005). Aesthetic studies on organisations have examined specific ways of interpreting events and negotiating values, symbols, and meanings (Strati 1992). Aesthetic and emotional experiences are closely related, but prior studies on emotion rules have rarely examined them from an aesthetic perspective. This paper, taking an aesthetic interaction perspective (Taylor 2002, 2013), reveals the constant balancing and negotiation of ‘beautiful and ugly’ face-to-face interactions (Strati 2000). Maintaining constructive interactions depends on judging how and when to enact a certain emotion rule.

By connecting the above-mentioned conceptual underpinnings, this article makes a theoretical contribution to the emotion rules literature by providing new knowledge on the emotional rhythms of power from a relational, feminist perspective. First, the paper provides a new understanding of the socially constructed emotion rules enacted in face-to-face interactions between managers and employees. Second, it shows how emotion rules are enacted, resisted, and negotiated through aesthetics, as well as through perceptive and rhythmic sensations. This paper is based on ethnographic data gathered from a micro-sized service company over two years. The intensive case study methodology drew on ethnographic and narrative research traditions, allowing us to explore emotion rules as socially constructed and organised through narratives that structure human experience. Through narratives, ‘life’ comes to imitate ‘art’ (Bruner 1991).
We begin this paper by examining the theoretical literature on emotion rules, embodiment, rhythmicity, and the aesthetic interaction perspective as a relational epistemology. Next, we present our methodology, which is based on intensive case study research and the visual ethnographic tradition. The first part of the analysis introduces the three emotion rules of a company, and the second part illustrates how the emotion rules were enacted through face-to-face interactions and what purposes they served. Finally, we present the discussion and conclusions.

Theoretical threads of embodied emotion rules and their rhythmic enactment

Socially constructed emotion rules can be understood both as established entities (Hochschild 1979; 1983) and as loose, fuzzy, and unclear structures (Mills and Murgatroyd 1991). As established entities, emotion rules embed and intertwine emotional performances with routinised power relations. The ways in which actors shape their own and others’ performances reveal embodied and established ways of interpreting emotion rules. Based on feedback from others, actors shape their presentations and enact the emotion rules appropriate for a particular situation to gain the approval of others and continue their interactions (Goffman 1967). On the other hand, emotion rules, like other organizational rules (Mills and Murgatroyd 1991), are loose, fuzzy, and unclear structures that are renegotiated and restructured when they are followed, resisted, misinterpreted, and broken in the dynamic interactions between social actors.

Reckwitz (2017) claimed that emotion operates by matching the rhythm, timing, and feeling of what is taking place. Rhythmic enactment is performed and sensed by bodies through, for instance, changing facial expressions, the focus of the gaze, tone of voice, pace of breathing, and other sensorial means (Blackman and Venn 2010). Organisational actors learn to make aesthetic judgments regarding the more-or-less ‘proper’ enactment of these rhythms (Gherardi and Strati 2012). Therefore, an affective and moving body serves as a tangible medium through which the meanings of an organisation are negotiated, resisted, or integrated (Lyon 1997; Küpers 2013). Katila, Kuismi, and Valtonen (2020) argued that being proficient actors in an organisation requires individuals to learn the rhythmicity of how to present their emotions and embody their skills in practice, which influences their capacity for meaning-making and acting.

The aesthetic interaction perspective

The aesthetic interaction perspective (Taylor 2002, 2013) and its notion of beauty (Strati 1990) enabled us to analyse how emotion rules uphold constructive interactions. In this paper, we interpret Taylor’s work through a relational epistemological lens. Connecting aesthetics with relational epistemology (Soilla-Wadman and Köping 2009) allowed us to analyse the knowledge acquired through senses such as hearing and sight; whether socially constructed emotion rules were followed, resisted, and/or broken; and how, when, and why certain emotion rules were enacted in face-to-face interactions.

Taylor (2013) used the term ‘little beauties’ to refer to small moments of social interaction during which an actor skilfully manages to control an emerging interaction dynamic that otherwise might turn ugly and unconstructive. Aesthetic interactions are unique combinations of performances by actors in an interaction dyad (Taylor 2013) whereby the parties act and move in relation to each other (Morieau, Mairesse, and Fronda 2020). White (1996) referred to a heuristic use of aesthetic experience by enquiring into beauty to gain insight into the craft skills of organisational actors, rather than trying to analytically explain beauty. In everyday life, when an action catches our attention, we may say that someone has done something ‘beautiful’ (Schein 2005).

Beauty has been defined in various ways that resonate with the aesthetic interaction perspective. The relational leadership literature emphasises the importance of the experience of beauty in establishing and maintaining connections between people who are close (Taylor and Karanian 2009). Beauty has been defined as the capacity to connect to others and as a persuasive and convincing
force and harmony (Strati 2000). Ugly is a category that is antithetical to beauty and is absent in the presence of beauty. In organisational life, negotiation between beauty and ugliness is ongoing; unexpected issues may easily cause interaction dynamics to turn ugly (Strati 2000).

Taylor (2013) noted that aesthetic interactions in organisations are based on craft skills. He differentiated between craft and art, asserting that craft skill is a disciplined performance that draws on diverse skills to produce a desired end result. In contrast, aesthetic interactions in organisations are artful performances based on the actors’ original insights and capability to express themselves and their emotions (Barry and Meisiek 2010).

Methodology

In this study, we used an intensive case study methodology that drew on ethnographic and narrative research traditions. The intensive case study research emphasises contextual interpretation and understanding of the case from the perspective of the participants (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2015, 134–136), which allowed us to explore emotion rules as socially constructed and narrated (Bruner 1991) according to Finnish emotional culture and organisational face-to-face interactions. Additionally, we adopted a reflexive scientific approach to examine intersubjective engagement with the phenomena under investigation (Burawoy 1998), aiming not to position subjects as mere objects under investigation. In practice, this meant close interactions between the researchers and the research subjects in many different situations, as we explain later in this section.

The empirical material consisted of transcribed data from office meetings and workshops, thematic interviews, and field notes based on participant observation conducted by the first author of this paper. The data collection was facilitated by a large two-year research project focusing on innovation practices in small Finnish companies. During the project, we adopted an action research strategy (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2015, 165–180) to produce rich empirical data and examine how the study participants constructed their contextual reality (Blichfeldt and Andersen 2006). An important aspect of understanding the participants involved meetings between the three researchers, during which we played and replayed various aspects of the taped material, followed by discussions about the observations, how we arrived at our understandings, and our own role in constructing those understandings.

The studied small service company employed four employees, Linda, Julia, Laura, and Anna, who were all aged 20–25 (the names given are pseudonyms). Helena, a chief executive officer (CEO) in her 50s, had 14 years’ experience and was the founder of the company. Anna was the CEO’s daughter, an upcoming CEO, and the company was a family business, in which business and internal relationships were deeply entangled with emotions (Astrachan and Jaskiewicz 2008). In Nordic countries, the emotional culture of small businesses allows for a wide range of emotional expressions (Brundin and Melin 2012). Together with the informal emotional culture, its explicit emotion rules made the company an excellent case for studying embodied emotions.

In the company, emotion rule formation was shaped and strengthened by the multiple power relations that were part of the operational business environment. As a franchise-based company, power relations with chain management necessitated balancing dependence and autonomy (Dant and Gundlach 1999). In the business environment, the pressure of local competition, even in the small city in the eastern part of Finland where the company was located, pushed the company to develop new services regularly. Therefore, the ongoing production of new ideas was a matter of survival and pride for the CEO and employees, who saw the company as an innovation leader in the franchising chain.

During the research project, the first author took on several roles, collecting four kinds of empirical material. At the beginning of the project, she acted as a participant observer, conducting observations by shadowing (Bruni, Gherardi, and Poggio 2004) the CEO and the employees in their daily work for one week. During this intensive fieldwork period, she was allowed to attend all social gatherings that involved the CEO, employees, and customers during office hours. This meant that she
participated, among other things, in internal company discussions, informal lunch or coffee appointments, and service encounters. In these situations, she asked questions and did her best to capture every conversation and story – which were told spontaneously – in detailed notes. Pachirat (2017) emphasised that ethnography, as a method of knowledge gathering, is about immersion and power. To understand what is happening in an organisation, ethnographers need to join the world they are trying to understand.

In the field notes, emotions intertwined with everyday office work. Colourful, dramatic, and sometimes sad stories illustrated that all kinds of disturbances and frustrations were understood as a normal part of the work, and managing one’s own and each other’s emotions was seen as an inherent necessity. Interviewees telling stories about their experiences is a method for gaining access to the aesthetic dimensions of organisational life (Warren 2008). Gabriel (2000) emphasised that stories are rich tapestries of organisational life that allow emotional undercurrents to bubble up to the surface. The fieldwork resulted in 40 pages of dense handwritten field notes.

The first author served as a facilitator for two company development workshops, each lasting for two days at four hours per day. The first workshop focused on developing customer service processes, which produced an ethnographic understanding of the interaction practices of the company. In the second workshop, in which the CEO and employees were asked to reflect on the company’s innovation practices from various perspectives, including emotions (Reckwitz 2002), encouraged the participants to act out short sketches and role-play moments of conflict. Through these, the participants described their difficult experiences using humour, jokes, and laughter. The workshop, which turned into a theatrical play (Biehl-Missal 2012), enriched the research data from the aesthetic interaction perspective (Taylor 2002, 2013) and made the emotion rules of the company visible. The workshops yielded 16 h of video footage, which was transcribed verbatim.

Four thematic interviews were conducted with the CEO and one with all the employees, besides several informal conversations with all of them. The interviews covered a wide range of issues, including challenges related to the company’s innovation practices. The interviews yielded 15 h of audio material and were transcribed verbatim. Furthermore, the first author acted as a non-participant observer in 11 office meetings, seven of which were videotaped. These yielded 15 h of video footage, which was transcribed verbatim. To increase ethnographic understanding of the context, the first author attended customer and franchising meetings arranged outside the company and took detailed field notes. She also organised a photographic evening in the spirit of participatory photography (Clover 2006). This is an arts-based methodology that enhances the aesthetic richness of data. During the photographic evening, the CEO and employees discussed the emotional and other aspects of the development of the company’s services through the photographs they had taken over one month. The audio material from the event was transcribed verbatim, and photographs were used as supporting data.

All the data were subjected to data-driven qualitative content analysis, from which key themes and characterisations of the context were established, and analytical memos were written (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2015). Based on this, talking about emotions, showing them to others, and having explicit rules regarding them were key themes in the data.

The rich data gathered in the two-year research project allowed the three authors to work together in a collaborative ethnographic spirit (Gilmore and Kenny 2015). We watched video footage of meetings and workshops together on a large screen, which helped us to co-construct interpretations. LeBaron (2005) emphasised that such data sessions are useful research practices that facilitate analytical discussions. Gaggiotti, Kostera, and Krzyworzeka (2017) noted that ethnography is a way of developing sociological and organisational imagination that encourages researchers to take a reflexive stance on organisational processes, enabling them to link individuals and groups, roles, and societies, both past and present (Mir and Mir 2002). Van Maanen (1998, XX) noted that the ‘cultural picturing of how it is to be someone else’ is not just about observing and describing: it is also about extracting data from multiple sources and engaging in several iterative data sessions and collective discussions, which are necessary for developing an understanding of what happens
in the interactions between participants (LeBaron 2005). The metaphor of walking (Ingold and Vergunst 2008) led us to conceptualise thinking and feeling as a rhythmic movement with others along paths that are both shared and crossed.

During the fieldwork, the first author paid particular attention to Linda, an employee who was exceptionally skilled at dealing with difficult interactions and adapting her emotional expressions by reading her colleagues’ body language. Craft skills, such as proficiency in interactions, can result in a strong aesthetic experience that is perceived as beautiful (Ramírez 2005). Taylor (2002) argued that organisational actors may not intend to act beautifully and may be unable to articulate their aesthetic experiences, which he called ‘aesthetic muteness’. In this paper, we relied on the researcher’s views of what constitutes an aesthetic and beautiful interaction. Humphreys, Brown, and Hatch (2003) conceptualised the ethnographer as an artist or craftworker who shapes ethnography through a process in which imagination and an aesthetic sense play crucial roles (Watson 1994).

In this study, we drew on the visual ethnographic tradition (Pink 2013) that emerged from enthusiasm for connecting ethnography and arts practice (e.g. Grimshaw and Ravetz 2009). More broadly, visual ethnography evolved from critical postmodern theoretical approaches to subjectivity, experience, and knowledge, as well as the development of visual technologies during the 1990s (Pink 2013). Visual ethnographers recognise that visual research must accommodate embodiment and the senses (MacDougall 2005), and video recordings help make embodied affective experiences visible. Using video fosters researchers’ reflexivity in understanding the cultural context in which they use the camera and how awareness of the camera affects participants’ interactions. Pink (2013) observed that appreciation of media and familiarity with ‘being on stage’ can enhance the use of video. All company members were familiar with being videotaped during external training sessions and for social media purposes.

In the first phase of the analytical process, based on the reflections of the CEO and employees during the interviews and workshops, besides the observable behaviour from the video-taped meetings, we identified several organisational emotion rules enacted in the company. The first and second authors of the paper, who have a Finnish cultural background, were capable of understanding and interpreting the various performances of emotions in the data. For reasons of space and simplicity, we selected three key rules: the ‘show your emotions’ rule (hereafter the emotionality rule), the ‘show your enthusiasm’ rule (hereafter the enthusiasm rule), and the ‘show your criticism in a nice way’ rule (hereafter the nice way rule). The CEO of the company reflected on these rules in the interviews, and they were also mentioned in the interviews with the employees. We analysed the rules by focusing on the expectations of emotional expressions, power relations, and agency embedded in each emotion rule.

In the second phase of the analysis, we selected office meetings as more specific targets because they produced naturally occurring data (Silverman 2015), unlike the development workshops organised by the first author. This stage included a new cycle of qualitative content analysis (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2015) of seven videotaped and transcribed office meetings. Together, the authors chose a three-minute conversation as the focus of more detailed analysis, during which three emotion rules were variously followed, challenged, and resisted. The chosen video footage captured a highly unexpected situation in the company. The CEO, who usually welcomed all ideas for developing customer services, reversed her decision to organise an event for the company’s young customers despite the idea being enthusiastically planned with the employees over several months. From that conversation, we chose two scenes that were fruitful for analysing the data, using the aesthetic interaction perspective (Taylor 2002, 2013) as a relational epistemology. The two scenes constituted a short film with a relatively linear storyline (Bordwell 2006), comprising a shocking event at the beginning, a power struggle in the middle, and a happy ending (Voytilla 1999). Films construct a cultural story about power and organisations; therefore, they can help us gain insight into the world of organisations (Panayiotou and Kafiris 2011). When analysing the two scenes, we focused on naturally occurring temporary breakdowns (Sandberg and Tsoukas 2011), which allowed us to analyse how emotion rules were enacted. Those moments made emotion rule performances visible.
In the third phase of the analysis, we conducted a multimodal analysis of emerging contextual meanings, including speech, tone, and intensity of the voice; gazes and gestures; and body movements (Stivers and Sidnell 2005), combined with material elements (Leonardi and Barley 2010; Leonardi 2013). The purpose of the analysis was to discover how the enactments of the emotion rule were performed in interactions with human and non-human elements and how these embodied emotion rules shaped emerging meanings. Letiche (2019) argued that a great deal of elucidation and explanation is needed to ensure that viewers of audio-visual data with different cultural backgrounds understand what is happening between the actors. In conducting this analysis, we examined the meanings of verbal and non-verbal sayings and doings intertwined with rhythmic and material elements. We did our best to provide vivid, real-life portrayals of specific incidents (Erickson 1986) during the meetings that illuminated the chosen theoretical concepts (Jarzabkowski, Bednarek, and Lê 2014) based on our contextual understanding of the field. By writing detailed descriptions of the emotional performances of our study participants, we also challenged masculine forms of writing (Höpfl 2007).

In the following section, we reveal the emotional and embodied realities that normative practices of organisational life render invisible and hidden (Panayiotou 2021).

**Findings: aesthetic modes of embodied interaction**

The first part of the analysis presents three of the company’s emotion rules: (1) the emotionality rule, (2) the enthusiasm rule, and (3) the nice way rule. The descriptions below focus on the cultural background, the expectations regarding emotional expressions, power relations, and the agency embedded in each of the rules.

**Embodied emotion rules of the company**

**The emotionality rule**

Concerning the emotionality rule, Helena noted during the interviews her expectation of free expressions of emotions in her company, referring to her youth experiences in a large Finnish public sector organisation. She referred to this organisation as a silent workplace, where employees used to ‘mutter behind managers’ backs without daring to raise issues directly’. Because ‘things do not progress in companies of that kind’, Helena emphasised that everybody, including herself, should be able to show every type of emotion at work. When talking about her expectations regarding emotions as the force for moving things forward, Helena included both positive and negative emotions. By encouraging young employees to show their emotions, Helena wished to give each of them a voice, empower them to discuss new ideas and problems at work, and obtain constructive criticism on her leadership of the company.

Helena’s qualities are in line with those generally thought to be appreciated by Finns, including honesty, openness, and consistency (Valtonen 2007). Although Vuori (2011) argued that open displays of emotions are uncommon for Finns in organisational settings, in the meetings and workshops, both Helena and the employees seemed comfortable talking about and showing their joys, sorrows, and empathy for others. In the workshops, the employees described the emotional setting of their office meetings: ‘The spectrum of our emotions … uhh … is everything!’ However, the employees also emphasised the need to control, not just express, their emotions (Petersson McIntyre 2016). The employees did not agree with the CEO that all emotions had positive consequences for their relationships and the company’s success, especially in meetings. The employees gently criticised the company culture because ‘everything is done with such emotion’, referring to the CEO’s tendency to discuss issues with great emotion.
The enthusiasm rule
The enthusiasm rule was connected to the emotionality rule because it concerns a specific emotional state that is often displayed in a company. This particular rule was reflected in Helena’s and the employees’ repeated statements that ‘we are always so enthusiastic about everything’. According to a study of the public performances of Finnish CEOs since the late 1970s, corporate capitalism has led to an emotional regime in which enthusiasm and personal passion have become the new normative emotions expressed by Finnish CEOs (Kantola 2014). In her study, Jokinen (2015) found that for Finnish young people, continuous enthusiasm and throwing oneself into new situations is an appreciated contemporary way of being, particularly for young women.

In the company, the enthusiasm rule tended to reinforce the understanding that the CEO and the employees formed a democratic team. However, the rule also legitimised Helena’s passion for her own ideas and pushed the employees to support those ideas. The strength of the enthusiasm rule became explicit when Helena exclaimed to the employees during the workshop, ‘Get excited! Or cry and get excited!’ The employees were very conscious that enthusiasm was an expected emotional state, as Linda reflected: ‘Sometimes we try things even without everyone really being excited about them’. Contrary to Petersson McIntyre’s (2016) study, the employees did not take for granted that they should be interested in and enthused by goods and services. In the workshop, Linda opined, ‘We get too enthusiastic about too many ideas’. In the data, expressions of enthusiasm varied considerably between emotionally energetic, demonstrated through lively voices and bodies, and more subtle, as shown by controlled bodies. Emotions, such as enthusiasm and passion, as manifestations of energy and vitality (Patrick, Hisley, and Kempler 2000; Petersson McIntyre 2014), took distinct cultural forms. In company meetings, the desire to promote an idea sometimes came close to the characteristic Finnish sisu, which has been described as a special kind of willpower – an internal flame that one must keep going and not give up, although it is expressed outwardly in an unassuming way (Stoller 1996).

The nice way rule
The nice way rule was based on Helena’s expectation that the employees should offer constructive criticism to her when new ideas were discussed because ‘I have hired them to criticise my entrepreneurial actions from the point of view of their areas of expertise’. The agency expectation embedded in this particular rule encouraged employees to be helpful and kind critics who aided Helena in developing her ideas. Helena also expected that the criticisms would be expressed, including by herself, in a ‘nice way’. In the meetings, whereas the senior employee Laura expressed her criticism by providing technical facts with her rational voice, the more recently hired employees Julia and Linda formulated their arguments and questions politely and appreciatively by, for example, saying, ‘May I ask …?’ to indicate their consideration of the receiver. Diefendorff, Morehart, and Gabriel (2010) noted that power relations shape the expression of emotion rules, meaning that actors in lower power positions tend to express themselves more positively and politely.

Based on the videotaped observations from the office meetings and workshops, the employees seemed keen to engage in critical discussions. As noted by employee Julia, ‘We are very successful in the critical handling of issues’. However, the paradox embedded in the nice way rule was that it turned the educated and skilled employees into critics of the half-done ideas of the CEO, while also empowering employees to display their expertise and knowledge of finance, information technology, and everyday customer service practices. Embodying credibility, expertise, and knowledge has been emphasised as an important aspect of aesthetic labour (Petersson McIntyre 2016).

Emotional rhythms of power in an office meeting
This particular office meeting was held in the company’s coffee room. Holding a coffee mug in her left hand and a pencil in her right hand, Helena sat on a stool surrounded by four employees. Linda
sat opposite Helena. They each had a meeting agenda. Organising the customer event was the next item on the agenda.

**Scene 1. ‘Yes, I put it on Yammer, yeah … yeah, I did’**

Scene 1 illustrates how the CEO managed to encourage the employees to continue their constructive interactions – rather than prompting them to attack her non-democratic decision. First, the scene illustrates how the CEO announced her unexpected decision by breaking the enthusiasm rule and then opening space for the employees to continue the conversation, following the nice way rule. The scene illustrates how both of these emotion rules were enacted by voicing emotion (Leonardi and Barley 2010) and positioning the body – the gaze in particular – relative to objects (Leonardi 2013), such as the meeting agenda. Later in the scene, the CEO showed remorse for her own non-consultative decision by enacting another emotion rule – the emotionality rule – and carefully matching the timing of her emotional performance (Reckwitz 2017) and the position of her body (her gaze in particular) in the meeting space (Leonardi and Barley 2010).

Scene 1. Helena looks at the meeting agenda and says in a low voice, ‘Okay, now we are on this item here, and it says that the customer event has been buried for now’.Referring to the item on the agenda with her gaze and speech, Helena enacts the agenda as a co-actor, equally responsible for the highly unexpected decision. The lack of enthusiasm in her voice and the shift of her focus to the meeting agenda—not to the employees—signal her disinterest in the idea, thereby breaking the enthusiasm rule. In an organisation where employees are accustomed to calling a spade a spade, Helena knows that the employees will not accept her decision. Julia, who is responsible for customer service, is the most enthusiastic about the idea because young customers are especially close to her heart, so she might be very active in criticising the CEO’s decision. In this particular situation, the CEO faces a real challenge in maintaining the constructiveness of interactions with the employees.

Helena laughs a little. Then, she returns her attention to the meeting agenda, and says in a soft and friendly voice, ‘There is a question mark here’. By kindly asking who put the question mark on the agenda, Helena enacts the nice way rule. She blurs her power position as the CEO by not looking at any of the employees, which opens up a space for all of the employees to start a conversation and ask questions regarding her decision. The CEO hides her surprise and curiosity about who put the question mark on the agenda by enacting the nice way rule, carefully voicing emotion—friendliness—and sensitively positioning her body (Leonardi and Barley 2010), directing her gaze towards a physical object (Leonardi 2013) – the meeting agenda. Her use of her voice and gaze in the enactment of the nice way rule seems to create a safe space for the employees to continue the conversation.

Helena’s way of enacting the nice way rule is successful. Linda answers in a confident voice, ‘Yes, I put it there. Apparently, no general information has been shared about this, but I noticed it on Yammer’. In the previous month, the company adopted the social media platform Yammer to enhance internal communication. However, in the company culture, ideas agreed upon are not ones the CEO can abandon without negotiating with the employees. She cannot simply announce her solo decision on Yammer, but the new technology has revealed her deliberate way of making decisions in the company. However, Linda does not comment on the CEO’s decision or the way it was announced on Yammer.

Julia has not read Yammer and asks in a high-pitched voice, ‘On Yammer? Julia, who has been particularly enthusiastic about the idea, makes it clear that she is surprised by the CEO’s announcement of her decision on Yammer. This is one of the critical moments when an employee could turn an interaction into a battlefield of prosecution and defence. The CEO’s solo decision announced on social media contrasts sharply with the ideal of the company as a democratic workplace, as emphasised by the CEO and the employees. Helena knows that the situation is dangerous in terms of keeping the interaction constructive.

Without any hesitation, Helena rushes to admit this mistake and hurriedly replies, ‘Yes, I put it on Yammer, yeah … yeah, I did’. With a serious face, she looks at an empty space between Julia and Linda, not making eye contact with either of them. Rather than giving an apology or showing annoyance, she conveys emotion by matching her body language with the ‘right’ position relative to spatial elements. Matching the timing (Reckwitz 2017) of the emotionality rule performance—her admission of fault—with the positioning of her body and her gaze in the space (Leonardi and Barley 2010) of the meeting room seems to facilitate a constructive interaction with the employees. By acknowledging her personal responsibility for the non-consultative decision, Helena gives the impression of a company dominated by the CEO. However, by admitting her mistake in this situation, her
skilful performance of the emotionality rule, since she is widely known to be passionate about trying new ideas and has unexpectedly made a negative decision, seems to keep the interaction constructive. The relational leadership literature emphasises establishing and maintaining connections (Taylor and Karanian 2009). In this challenging situation, the CEO has succeeded in maintaining responsive interactions (Cunliffe and Eriksen 2011). This is apparent in the way Julia, looking at Helena, formulates a question in a constructive way: ‘May I ask, who did you talk to about this?’

Scene 1 illustrates how emotion rules were performed, followed, and resisted within the social, spatial, and material setting of the face-to-face meeting interactions in the small entrepreneurial company. The analysis considered a particularly critical moment in organisational life when the CEO announced her non-consultative decision by breaking the enthusiasm rule. This particular situation shows that socially constructed emotion rules are open to contestation through resistance. Our analysis suggests that emotion rules – especially when the emotional expectations attached to them are broken, constitute a powerful structure that triggers a meaning-making process and outcomes. In particular, by breaking the enthusiasm rule, the CEO violated understanding about the democratic workplace that was associated with the company’s emotion rules. Furthermore, scene 1 illustrates the CEO’s expertise in intertwining her emotion rule performance with temporal, spatial, and material elements (Jarzabkowski and Seidl 2008; Leonardi 2013) by using her body and nonverbal expressive elements, such as her voice and gaze.

**Scene 2. ‘So, in the springtime, it would be worth trying’**

Scene 2 illustrates the employees’ craft skills in performing three emotion rules to encourage the CEO to recognise the idea as worth trying. First, the scene illustrates how the rhythmic elements of one specific emotion rule – here, the emotionality rule – connected to the power position of the CEO, have a powerful effect on the emerging meanings of the organisation. Second, the scene demonstrates craft skills – here performed by an employee – in presenting the right emotion rule at the right time, based on another actor’s nonverbal performance in a dyadic interaction. The scene aims to demonstrate skill in performing elements that strengthen the power effect of the emotion rule presentation, such as skill in using non-verbal communication, the rhythmicity of hand gestures and voice, the tone of voice, fixed and changing objects of the gaze, and references to organisational ‘we’ and innovation discourses, which have a powerful effect on other actors’ understandings.

Scene 2. The idea of arranging a customer event for young customers has its origins in the company’s 10-year history of arranging successful events for senior customers annually. Helena starts to defend her decision not to organise a customer event for young customers by drawing on how they used to organise events for their senior customers.

Helena enacts the emotionality rule by showing her reluctance towards the idea and speaking slowly with a slightly bored voice: ‘Thinking about Tapiola’s [a large insurance company’s] venues, with a lecturer from Helsinki, only a handful of people showed up, and I feel …’ Suddenly, the rhythmic sequence of the emotion rule presentation changes. Helena stresses the first word to emphasise her negative emotion: ‘ … anguished about …’ After a short pause, she again stresses the first word to emphasise that arranging such an event will be a massive effort: ‘Organising … something like that’. Trying to convince the employee that the idea is too risky, the CEO powerfully enacts the emotion rule by matching rhythm, timing, and feelings (Reckwitz 2017). Here, specifically, the rhythmic enactment of the stresses, pauses, and weighted and unweighted words make her presentation of the emotionality rule intense and powerful. Pelzer (2005) noted that negative emotions effectively hide and maintain social hierarchies, support exclusion, and act as gatekeepers of borders between social groups. Connected to the power position of the CEO, her presentation of the emotionality rule cements the idea that a customer event is not worth implementing. Even more critically, it enacts a sense of the company as strongly dominated by the CEO, which may have far-reaching consequences for the meaning of a democratic organisation (Aromaa et al. 2020). Besides these potentially detrimental emerging understandings of the organisation, there is a risk that the interaction dynamic may turn ugly—that is, become far too emotional—because the CEO risks crossing a line and overstepping the company’s emotionality rule. Emotional performances emerge from cultural background knowledge of how, when, and what kind of emotions to present in
certain situations (Harris 2015). For the CEO and the employees, losing control over their emotions and breaking the rules of how to present their emotions—especially in meetings—are retrospectively perceived as annoying situations that should be avoided.

Helena inhales as if to continue her emotional outburst. Next, an employee demonstrates her emotional labour skills (Hochschild 1983) by controlling the CEO’s emotional performance. Julia’s voice and gestures seem to be effective in calming Helena. Julia enacts the nice way rule by making slow, circular movements in the air with her right hand, speaking slowly in a soft voice: ‘Right, but we talked about making people sign up beforehand’. Keeping her appearance calm, maintaining fixed eye contact, talking with empathy, and not using an accusatory tone towards Helena for cancelling the customer event, Julia gradually contains Helena’s outburst with her soft voice and soothing gestures. Controlling her emotion, Helena nods, pursing her lips. ‘Yes, yes, mm …’ Julia continues, still making slow circular movements with her right hand and speaking in a convincing voice: ‘We will then have the possibility, if a certain number of people do not sign, of cancelling the event’. By adopting a ‘we’ discourse, she revives the interpretation of the organisation as a team (Gastil 1994) that makes decisions collaboratively. This is a strong reminder for the CEO that the conversation in the meeting may have violated the commonly agreed-upon value of the company as a democratic and inclusive organisation. Using a ‘we’ discourse seems to strengthen the powerful effect of the emotion rule, which has an impact on the CEO’s meaning-making.

Looking calm and no longer pursing her lips, Helena agrees with Julia, ‘Mm, mm, yes, right’. Helena’s more positive reaction causes the employee to abandon the nice way rule and try another rule that will help her achieve her goal.

Quickly, Julia enacts the emotionality rule by lowering her gaze and expressing disappointment: ‘Now it’s over for this year …’ Compatible with her behaviour as an empathetic CEO who considers her employees’ concerns, Helena presents herself as a responsive listener, using positive cues such as maintaining eye contact with Julia and nodding twice: ‘Yes, yes’. This seems to give Julia the courage to test the power of the enthusiasm rule.

Looking at Helena intently, Julia says optimistically, ‘So, in the springtime, it would be worth trying’. She enacts the enthusiasm rule by drawing on innovation discourse, which can be defined as a ‘big D’ discourse at the company (Alvesson and Karreman 2000). Enactment of the rule combined with a future-oriented discursive formulation typically used by the CEO constitutes a powerful structure for meaning-making outcomes (Helms Mills, Thurlow, and Mills 2010). In this particular situation, the CEO does not seem to have any other choice but to revive the idea as one worth trying. Using an optimistic tone of voice, Helena answers, ‘Let’s think about it. Let’s start it in a way that …’ Talking about the idea with interest in her voice, Helena adopts the enthusiasm rule and thereby revives the idea as worth trying.

Scene 2 illustrates the employee’s skill in performing the three emotion rules – first the nice way rule, then the emotionality rule, and finally the enthusiasm rule – in a dyadic interaction through which she managed to convince the CEO that the idea was worth trying. The analysis illustrated that power is an inevitable part of relational processes (Hosking 2011) and that emotion rules reinforce systemic power that provides actors with ‘the power to’ shape meaning-making outcomes in their favour (Schildt, Mantere, and Cornelissen 2020). Furthermore, our analysis showed that power embedded in the emotion rule structures was strengthened by organisational discourses (Helms Mills, Thurlow, and Mills 2010), which had a powerful effect on the meaning-making outcome.

The employee’s skill in performing emotion rules was based on her ability to use non-verbal elements of communication with rhythmic enactment of gestures and speech, tone of voice, and a fixed or changing gaze. Katila, Kuismin, and Valtonen (2020) stated that being a proficient actor in an organisation requires learning the rhythmicity of how to present one’s emotions and embodying one’s skills in practice, which affects an actor’s capacity to act. Performing emotion rules demonstrates aesthetic labour skills by which actors create value by using their bodies, voices, or gestures in ways that are pleasing to others (Warhurst et al. 2000; Witz, Warhurst, and Nickson 2003). Strati (2012) emphasised that organisational actors learn to make aesthetic judgments regarding the more-or-less ‘proper’ ways that other organisational actors rhythmise things and actions. Our analysis showed that the CEO seemed to accept the way her young employee handled the challenging situation by enacting three emotion rules in a rhythmic sequence.
Discussion: reframing emotion rules

In this paper, we reframe emotion rules by focusing on aesthetic modes of embodied interaction. We connect the literature on emotion rules as a socially constructed phenomenon (Hochschild 1983; Mills and Murgatroyd 1991) with the aesthetic interaction perspective (Taylor 2002, 2013). Our report of the findings draws on a feminist embodied writing approach (Mandalaki, van Amsterdam, and Daou 2022). This article makes a theoretical contribution to the emotion rule literature by providing new knowledge on emotional rhythms of power from a relational, feminist perspective.

This paper contributes to the emotion rule literature by providing a new understanding of embodied emotion rules enacted in face-to-face interactions between managers and employees. The first part of the analysis introduced three of the company’s emotion rules and showed how they masked position power – or at least mitigated it. These emotion rules reflect the current managerial practices of the new soft capitalism, which favours sophisticated forms of managerial authority based on equalised and personalised approaches (Costea, Crump, and Holm 2005). Kantola (2009) described authority as a creative process of social action with the capacity to blur the boundaries between actors who create new forms of democratic authority. In the small service company, the emotionality rule helped create a non-bureaucratic culture in which everybody was free to express themselves, whereas the enthusiasm rule promoted consensus politics and the idea of a democratic workplace. The nice way rule served to diffuse criticism through the performance of friendly critique by all participants, which played an equalising role.

Second, the paper contributes to the emotion rule literature by showing how emotion rules are enacted, resisted, and negotiated through aesthetic, perceptive, and rhythmic sensations. The second part of the analysis focused on micro-level face-to-face interactions in office meetings. In the analysis of the two scenes, the aesthetic interaction perspective (Taylor 2013) and its notion of beauty (Strati 1990) helped us focus on the emotion rule performances in moments when the interaction between the CEO and the employee risked becoming unconstructive. Woźniak and Kostera (2020) claimed that aesthetic research on organisations has failed to pay attention to power relations. We have shown that emotion rules are established structures and have demonstrated the power of rule performances through the seemingly minor but powerful effects of intertwined embodied performances with temporal, spatial, and material elements, which constitute a powerful structure for meaning-making outcomes. By interpreting the reality of and for others, organisational actors (re)construct, stabilise, and transform relational realities and relations (Hosking 2011) and exercise power (Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991).

Theodosius (2006) pointed out that Hochschild’s emotion rule theory does not view emotional exchanges as relational and interactive phenomena. Our study has illustrated that emotion rule enactment is a collective performance that opens up new opportunities to study emotion as an aesthetic, embodied, and relational phenomenon. We suggest that further research should be conducted to determine the extent to which national and cultural differences provide emotional contexts that facilitate but also mitigate socially constructed emotion rules. Cultural differences in emotion rules and how power is performed through those rules may affect ethnic relations at work (Shenoy-Packer 2014). Emotions, as a form of power within a culturally diverse group, may cause cultural shocks and challenges in interpersonal communication and strengthen inequality and exclusion (Lowe, Hwang, and Moore 2011).

Our analysis of the three emotion rules in the small service company illustrates neoliberal values operating through organisational rules shaped by national- and global-level discourses on enthusiastic emotionality. Penz and Sauer (2019) stated that the intertwining of entrepreneurialism and affectivity is a dominant mode of neoliberal governance. In their study of Finnish young people’s affective orientation towards the entrepreneurial self, Ikonen and Nikunen (2019) revealed that this is a part of the social reality in Finland. They argued that neoliberal governance is a productive force that encourages individuals to practice responsible self-management by adopting an entrepreneurial mindset rather than focusing on disciplinary control through individual authority. Löfgren
(2013) described rapid and radical changes in the emotional landscape of a Nordic context since the late 1990s. ‘The New Economy’ has often been described as ‘a passionate economy’, fostering expectations of emotional charges, creative energy, and intensity in work. In our neoliberal era, the push towards emotionalised ways of being is evident at many levels of society. Penz and Sauer (2019) noted that company managers are especially concerned with the affective work commitment of their subordinates, who are asked and encouraged to open up and display their feelings, illustrating the affective saturation of their current work life. Fleming (2017) highlighted the dark side of this neoliberal era, showing that adopting the right emotional attitude in the office can be stressful. He suggested that contemporary employment has something of a ceremonial feel to it, and that work life is becoming a type of theatre or spectacle.

Methodologically, in our study, the aesthetic interaction perspective (Taylor 2002, 2013) served as a relational epistemological lens. The growing scholarly interest in empirical studies on organisational aesthetics (e.g. Satama and Huopalainen 2018; de Souza Bispo and Lino da Silva 2021; Helin, Dahl, and Guillette de Monthoux 2022) has been accompanied by an ongoing debate about the appropriate research methodology for aesthetic research (e.g. Warren 2012; Taylor 2013; Strati 2016). In this paper, we suggest that adopting different research strategies, such as intensive case studies, narrative enquiry, and ethnographic research (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2015), may help researchers produce rich empirical data on aesthetic aspects to study how participants construct their contextual realities (Blichfeldt and Andersen 2006) and thereby overcome ‘aesthetic muteness’ (Taylor 2002). Our study suggests that supporting a narrative construction of reality (Bruner 1991) during participant observation and interviews and facilitating workshops in an inclusive way that provides a space for spontaneous theatrical play (Biehl-Missal 2012) may encourage research subjects to talk about and perform their feelings and overcome aesthetic muteness (Taylor 2002). Furthermore, the analytical method of participatory interpretation introduced by De Molli (2021), which considers both the researchers’ and the actors’ interpretations, might be useful for preventing total reliance on the researchers’ own interpretations of the aesthetic and emotional aspects of organisations.

In closing, the relational leadership literature has emphasised the need to sensitise leaders to the impact of their interactions and to help them become more reflexive and ethical practitioners (Cunliffe and Eriksen 2011). While the relational leadership literature has brought us closer to understanding the micro-processes of interactions, the approaches too often focus on linguistic processes rather than on leaders’ experiences of struggling with ‘small details’ and making judgements in the present moments of their interactions. We hope that our study has provided new openings to study organisational life as an artful constellation of emotional, embodied, expressive elements through which organisational actors understand their realities and enact power in face-to-face interactions. In terms of academic publications, we hope that by including two scenes in the empirical part of our paper and drawing on a feminist embodied writing approach (Mandalaki, van Amsterdam, and Daou 2022), we have engaged in narrative and feminist writing that challenges traditional, masculine forms of managing and understanding life in organisations (Boncori and Smith 2019). Narratives help to construct reality because they allow individuals to connect with the experiences of others, and they serve as the zeitgeist of the culture, place, and time (Bruner 1991). We hope that we have managed to tell a convincing story that constructs a framework for future studies on how emotions are used in organisational settings.

Finally, we suggest that in societies characterised by democratic relations and low organisational power levels (Lindell and Sigfrids 2008), such as Finland, emotion rules that support democratic relations may serve as a purposeful form of soft power rather than any other form of power. Relational leadership calls for emotional reflexivity that facilitates sophisticated, inclusive, and ethically responsible forms of managerial authority. According to Pullen and Rhodes (2015), while ethics and responsibility in business are well-established fields of research and practice, the dominant approaches still favour rationality, codification, and masculinity. Therefore, they are blind to social injustice and affectual relations, care, compassion, or any form of feeling experienced through the
body. We suggest that there is a need for studies on culturally nuanced and embodied ways of creating and maintaining meaningful, personalised, egalitarian, and inclusive relations at work – especially between leaders and employees.

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