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Pors, Justine Grønbæk

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# **Local meaning-making in discursive, embodied and affective registers**

Justine Grønbæk Pors

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## **Introduction**

In recent years scholars have focused greater attention on how local meaning-making practices serve not only to implement policy but also to change and transform it (e.g. Ball, 2006; Brøgger, 2016; Lingard et al., 2013; Ball et al., 2012). Leadership scholars have also begun to criticise policy narratives and mainstream leadership theory for assuming public leadership to be an individual, disembodied practice performed in cognitive and rational registers (Pullen and Vachhani, 2013; Kenny and Fotaki, 2015; Pullen and Rhodes, 2015; Ford et al., 2017), noting that such narratives and theories rarely account for the collective, embodied and mundane aspects of leadership (Orr and Vince, 2009; Sinclair, 2013; Orr and Bennett, 2017; Ford et al., 2017). This paper presents an ethnographic study of a leadership development programme run in a Danish local government, taking an analytical interest in how the local meaning-making processes of leaders also occur in embodied and affective registers.

The paper stands among the current attempts to study public policy and policy implementation for the purpose of drawing attention to the ‘vernacular versions’ of policy discourses (Lingard et al., 2013). Scholars have argued that any detailed and nuanced understanding of policy processes and public leadership requires close attention to local context, embeddedness and enactment (Ball et al., 2012; Ozga et al., 2006, p. 8). They have further worked to bring attention to policy as an ongoing process of re-articulations and re-writings in myriad local settings, each with its own ongoing tangle of histories, competing narratives, habits, teleologies and actors (Thomson et al., 2010, p. 639). More specifically, this paper is informed by a decentred theory of governance (Bevir, 2002, 2013; Bevir and Rhodes, 2001), as it takes an approach highlighting the diversity of governing practices, the way multiple traditions inform policy and practice and the ongoing processes through which people interpret and reinterpret policy. A key achievement of this approach has been to emphasise the contingency of governance processes. As Bevir (2013, p. 26) states:

No practice or institution can itself fix the ways in which its participants will act, let alone the ways in which they might innovate in response to novel circumstances so as to transform it. Practices are thus radically contingent in that they lack any fixed essence or any predetermined path of development.

This emphasis on the contingent and contested nature of all modes of governance opens up the possibility of empirically exploring not only the diversity of beliefs and discourses, but also the constant renegotiations and processes of contestation that characterise processes of policy interpretation and implementation (Bevir, 2013, p. 26). This paper extends this focus on the emergent, contingent and unpredictable ways in which public leaders make and remake the world through their local reasoning and situated agency (Bevir, 2013; Orr and Bennett, 2017). Drawing on a theory of decentred governance, the paper examines the messy and contested nature of public leadership practices by investigating how policy, often itself a bricolage of ideas and discourses, is specifically taken up in particular sites (e.g. Brøgger, 2016; Ball, 2006). More precisely, I will explore how multiple narratives intersect in the policy setting studied and how leaders on the ground seek to make sense of these narratives by translating and challenging them in particular ways.

I also shine a spotlight on leadership as a lived and embodied practice, my purpose being to further unpack the multiplicity and contingency of leadership practices and the struggle public leaders undergo to make sense of and navigate complex policy imperatives. Drawing on a rich tradition in education policy studies that undertakes to account for and explore emotions and affect (Sellar, 2015; Blackmore, 2009; Staunæs, 2011; Ratner and Pors, 2013), I endeavour first and foremost to call attention to the affective dimensions of leadership. While a concern for affect has spread to other social sciences informing studies of educational leadership (Blackmore, 2009; Staunæs, 2011), military command (Ashcraft and Muhr, 2018) and policy implementation (Brøgger, 2016), such a concern has made few inroads into studies of public leadership. This paper aims to employ what has been coined *the affective turn* (Massumi, 2002; Blackman and Venn, 2010; Clough and Halley, 2007; Thrift, 2010) to advance our understanding of how public leaders experience, make sense of and navigate in complex policy transformations.

The paper reports on an ethnographic fieldwork designed to study leadership in after-school care institutions in Denmark. I have chosen to zoom in on a particular moment where a person

burst into tears during a management seminar aimed to increase the management capacities of the leaders studied. The atmosphere in the room grew very tense, and the other leaders successively began to think and feel about political transformations currently underway in their institutions, and about what these changes might mean for the children and young people their organisations are meant to educate. Focusing on this particular moment allows me to consider and explore the surprising twists and turns meaning-making processes can take in local settings. Aimed at contributing to studies of decentered governance, the paper draws attention to the role of embodiment and affect, thus pointing to the importance of those intense moments that sometimes emerge and suddenly cause ‘normal’ ways of making sense to collapse, thereby opening up other possible interpretations for particular policy landscapes.

In what follows, I first review how public leadership studies have addressed emotions and affect. I then present my ethnographic methodology and proceed to describe the complex policy landscape in which the studied leadership programme took place. Next, I zoom in on a particular conversation that took place in a management development training session. I especially explore how concerns no longer holding any apparent place in the discursive ordering of the policy landscape resurfaced in embodied and affective registers, thereby informing the conversation.

### **Emotion and affect**

The so-called ‘affective turn’ in social and political theory (Clough, 2008; Massumi, 2002; Connolly, 2002; Bennett, 2001; Clough and Halley, 2007) has had an immense impact, garnering a great deal of attention and spurring much theoretical and analytical development in disciplines such as organisation studies (Ashcraft, 2020; Beyes and Steyaert, 2013; Borch, 2010; Kenny, 2012; Vachhani, 2013; Pullen and Rhodes, 2014) or studies of education policy (Sellar, 2015; Staunæs, 2011; Sellar and Lingard, 2018; Ratner and Pors, 2013; Bjerg and Staunæs, 2011). However, little has been written about the role of affect in public leadership (for important exceptions see Fotaki and Hyde, 2015; Ford et al., 2017; Fotaki, 2014), although studies of public service delivery have a rich tradition of accounting for the emotional work nurses, teachers or social workers perform when caring for citizens (Ljungholm, 2014). Such studies often describe emotional work as part of a holistic approach to professional work that includes getting to know patients and clients and interpreting their concerns or anticipating their needs. Emotional work is defined as an “empathetic concern” where the professional

deploys a grander repertoire of personal competencies than her strictly professional skills (Luker et al. 2000; McQueen, 2004). Specifically targeting public leadership, Newman et al. (2009, p. 17) begin with the observation that ‘the formal language of our field misses the mark when applied to care-centred and emotion work,’ arguing that a comprehensive understanding of public leadership should include what they term “affective leadership”. Building on Daniel Goleman’s work on the concept of emotional intelligence, Newman et al. (2009) contend that public leadership should be seen as including the art of managing one’s own emotions as well as the emotions of those one is meant to lead. They argue that successful leadership ‘requires the artful sensing of the other’s emotional state and crafting of one’s own affective expressions so as to elicit the desired response on the part of the other’ (Newman et al., 2009, p. 14). Thus, in this work, the concept of affect is used interchangeably with emotion to signify something that someone is capable of doing, and something that can be captured and named as a competency a leader or professional needs in order to perform successfully. Affect is thus something people should master to achieve certain purposes such as getting employees to follow them. As scholars have critically noted, this appropriation of emotion for organisational or managerial purposes is not unproblematic (e.g. Andersen and Born, 2007; Stenner and Andersen, 2020). For example, portraying emotion or affect as an individual competency and as something individuals can master constitutes an overly instrumental idea of affect that underestimates its many unintended extra effects or the attempts to manage them (see also Bjerg and Staunæs, 2011). For the present purposes, one should also note how in such approaches the concept of affect remains rather undertheorised, as its definition is, for example, not set distinctly apart from a general idea of emotions. As I will argue below, a more elaborate theorisation of affect can help enable an analytical appreciation of the messy, unpredictable and ungovernable aspects of meaning-making processes.

In recent studies of education policy and leadership, scholars have challenged this view of affect as something individuals can control or master as a means to better leadership. By theoretically distinguishing between emotion and affect, scholars have argued that affect, in contrast to emotion, is not something an individual innately has or can learn to master. Instead, affect is defined as a pre-individual force that “inhabits the margin of experience” (Sellar, 2015, p.133). Affect is a force that not only exceeds but also accompanies and continually modulates consciousness. In a study of policy initiatives like performance measurements or data-informed management, Sam Sellar (2015) argues that although certain data-driven policies are considered rational, scientific and evidence-based, the ways in which they are interpreted, acted

upon and implemented are inflected by all manner of unpredictable “side-perceptions” (Massumi, 2002, p. 36). For this reason, Sellar uses the concept of affect to challenge an idea of rational, scientific or evidence-based policy and draw attention to the affective life that flows through policy interpretation and implementation (see also Sellar and Lingard, 2018). Similarly, Webb and Gulson (2012) have argued that interpreting policy texts and contexts involves an encounter in which affective sense-making modulates the reading of policy. They highlight how policy is negotiated in affective registers, and how its meaning is also derived from wisps of sensed and intuitive instances of policy (Webb and Gulson, 2012, p. 91). Focusing specifically on educational leadership, Bjerg and Staunæs (2011) have studied the implementation of a new policy focus on Appreciative Leadership. They show how the policy was intended to mobilise positive energy among teachers and educational leaders, but also led to a range of other anxieties and negative feelings like shame. Thus, Bjerg and Staunæs (2011) demonstrate how theoretical inspiration from the affective turn can help shed analytical light on the ungovernable and unpredictable nature of policy and leadership processes.

Drawing on this work, I situate this study in the affective turn (Massumi, 2002; Blackman and Venn, 2010; Clough and Halley, 2007; Thrift, 2010) and more specifically in current attempts to use this turn to advance our understanding of the complexity and unpredictable nature of policy processes (Sellar, 2015; Brøgger and Staunæs, 2016; Staunæs, Brøgger and Krejsler, 2018; Brøgger, 2019). As mentioned, a central concern of the affective turn is to distinguish between affect and emotion (see Massumi, 2002, p.27; Thrift, 2007, p. 221). Whereas emotions are something that can be expressed and given names such as anger, joy or shame, affect is understood as ‘a pre-personal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body’s capacity to act’ (Massumi, 1987, p. xvi). With the concept of affect, the focus is not on the psychological individual as a container of particular emotions but rather on extra-subjective intensities that emerge between bodies (Massumi, 2002, p.27; Thrift, 2007, pp.221, 222). Affect is not the property of individuals, but rather of singular events: ‘territories of becoming that produce new potentials’ (Thrift, 2004, p. 88). In the affective turn inspired by Massumi, Thrift, Clough and others, a key departure from the affective leadership study conducted by Newman et al. (2009) is that affect ceases to be defined as something an individual has or that can be captured and represented in language, much less as something that can easily be managed. Affect is non- or pre-individual and is not something anyone can “be” or “possess”. Instead, it unfolds and seizes subjects and relations by affecting, moving and touching them. As Clough has put it, affect can

be defined in terms of ‘bodily responses, autonomic responses, which are in-excess of conscious states of perception and point instead to a visceral preceding perception’ (Clough, 2008, p. 3). The important point here is that this concept of affect enables a specific analytical interest in the open-ended, ungovernable and unpredictable nature of the dynamics involved in policy implementation (Staunæs and Pors, 2015). Thus, what I take from this understanding of affect is an appreciation for how leadership, as it is lived, entails processes of affecting and being affected by energies, atmospheres and tensions that cannot easily be captured in language or fully understood consciously, but that still inform how leaders think, feel and act. Against a tendency in the existing literature within public leadership studies to simply see affect as interchangeable with emotions or to argue that affect is something public leaders need to master (Newman et al., 2009), I consider theoretically and explore empirically how meaning-making processes are informed by affects in unpredictable ways. Moreover, in the context of decentred governance, this approach makes it possible to emphasise questions about how individuals are not always in control of the way they make sense of the complex mixes of governing initiatives and local traditions in which they find themselves.

## **Methodology**

Although a growing number of scholars are becoming interested in ethnography, ethnographic studies remain marginal in public administration research compared to in other related disciplines. As Rhodes (2014, p. 318) notes, there is ‘little public administration in the ethnographic literature and even less ethnography in the study of public administration’ (for important exceptions see Boll, 2014; Orr and Bennett, 2017). Ethnographic work entails efforts to gain rich and nuanced insights into a particular setting by spending considerable time in the setting itself and becoming acquainted with the people in it as well as their particular culture, processes, beliefs and routines (Yanow, 2000; Orr, 2014). Ethnographic works aim to provide texture, depth and nuance to knowledge about particular organisations (Rhodes, 2014), often by paying close attention to the complexities of organisational actors’ meaning-making processes. The empirical material presented in this paper was amassed during a broader study of management practices in Danish public education – a research project designed as an ethnographic fieldwork in three local governments beginning in 2016 and conducted in collaboration with a national association for educators. The project was initially designed to follow how local leaders developed their practices to meet new political and organisational conditions brought about by a comprehensive national school reform. As such, an explicit

intention from the outset was for the knowledge that emerged from the ethnographic work to benefit educational leaders. Using methods such as interviews (Staunæs and Søndergaard, 2005), non-participant observation (Yanow, Ybema and Van Hulst, 2012), document studies (Cifor and Gilliland, 2016) and shadowing (Czarniawska, 2008, 2007) over a 12-month period, I aimed above all, however, to provide detailed accounts of various aspects of leadership in Danish educational institutions (Ybema et al., 2009).

As Rhodes (2014) has argued, ethnographic work can be conducted from two very different points of departure. On the one hand, a positivist or empiricist approach seeks to represent a reality found out in the field (see Watson, 2012 for a critique of this approach), whereas a constructivist or interpretive approach strives to acknowledge that data is not just out-there ready to be collected and reported, but is rather constructed and interpreted in particular ways as part of the complex encounter between researcher and field. This paper is founded on the latter. Although it is tempting to assume that the researcher out in the field with her sharp eyes and mind can determine the true reality of organisations, such an assumption seems naïve in the face of the representation crisis that grew out of the humanities in the 1980s and 1990s (Clifford, 1983). The knower and the known are not independent, but rather inseparable, ever interacting and influencing each other (Rhodes, 2014, p. 320; Lather, 2001), and the ethnographic craft is one of searching for, composing and producing new meaning. To craft a particular analytical story in this paper, I have sought to refrain from trying to represent my data collection in its entirety, instead zooming in on one particular organisational moment. For me, ethnography is an approach that emphasises the significance of rich moments of felt experience (Symon and Cassell, 2012; Orr, 2014), and lets the researcher use her ability to be surprised by what she sees or hears, even if for only a minor and fleeting occurrence (Kociatkiewicz and Kostera, 1999; Pors, 2016; Emerson, 2009; Fujii, 2015). In the analyses that follow, I first depict the main policy foci in place in the studied setting, and then concentrate on a single conversation occurring at a specific management seminar. The choice of this particular moment is made with reference to my theoretical interest in how the complexities of policy transformations are felt and lived in embodied and affective registers. The choice was made by going back and forth between empirical impressions and field notes, on the one hand, and theoretical interests, on the other (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2000, p. 249–250). I thus chose this moment for its richness in terms of my theoretical interest in the affective aspects of meaning-making. I claim neither that my analyses and conclusions represent the



management conditions for these particular leaders as such, nor that my findings constitute a general account of how these leaders navigate and make sense of these conditions.

The fact that the researcher can use a broader sensory apparatus, including bodily sensations, in ethnographic work, should be unsurprising, for being open to the sensible-aesthetic knowledge one might obtain from a presence in the field is part and parcel of most ethnographic traditions (Strati, 2007; see also Hindmarsh & Pilnick, 2007; Yakhlef, 2010). However, the researcher having a theoretical and analytical interest in affect comes to rely even more heavily on her own capacity and willingness to allow experienced affective tensions to resonate and become noticed, even if the persons she is studying do not have a clear language for what transpired (Gherardi, 2019). This study builds on current efforts to develop new methodologies sensitive to the affective atmospheres and intensities a researcher might encounter when present in the field, what some scholars have termed “embodied fieldwork” (Bøhling, 2015), “affective methodologies” (Knudsen and Stage, 2015; Blackman, 2015; Staunæs and Kofoed, 2007) or “affective ethnography” (Gherardi, 2019). These traditions have informed how, when writing field notes or narrating my analysis, I focus on the ways affective atmospheres (Anderson, 2009) emerge as well as affect and move bodies in the studied setting (see Bøhling’s, 2015, discussions on how to generate fieldnotes that are more attentive to affective qualities). My approach has been to zoom in on one affective outburst and then follow how it resonated across bodies in the room. I am particularly interested in how words, sentences, affective intensities and felt tensions were entangled in the meaning-making processes unfolding in the studied conversation (Wetherell, 2012; Fotaki et al., 2017), as well as in how affective atmosphere can produce changes in the capacity to act.

The ethnographic tradition found in public administration strongly focuses on humans (e.g. Bevir and Rhodes, 2003, 2006). According to Bevir and Rhodes (2003; see also Rhodes, 2014), the ethnographer should not concentrate on practices or actions, but on how people make sense of them and of the beliefs and preferences of others. Rhodes (2014, 320) paraphrases Geertz (1973, p. 9) to describe ethnography as the researcher’s construction of people’s constructions of their own actions and doings. According to the theoretical approach to affect used in this paper, affect is what inhabits and flows on the margins of what people can verbalise. Thus, my study could also contribute to the ethnographic tradition found in public administration. In my account of what happened at the management seminar, I go beyond an interest in the beliefs and preferences of the people I studied, although these are also subjects of interest. Rather, I

seek to tune into what I experienced as an affective charging of the room. I want to emphasise that this does not mean that I take affect or atmosphere to be things out there. Moreover, just as I do not see ethnography as a method capable of representing an objective truth out there (Rhodes, 2014), neither do I see accounts of affect as resulting from a research process that involves producing something more like a story than an account of a fact. As Lisa Blackman (2015, p. 4) has argued, studies of affect should not be a “method that proves or provides evidence for what affect is”. Affect is not assumed to be an entity that can be captured as an it or a thing, but instead refers to ‘entangled processes, which are not simply seen’ (Blackman, 2015, p. 40). My point of departure is that ethnography is a research practice acknowledging that all elements – what is documented and the theoretical concepts used for such documentation, the researcher and the people studied – all influence each other (Gherardi, 2019).

### **Complexities in the policy landscape**

The local leaders I studied each manage an educational organisation with 7–16 staff members and around 80–120 children (aged 11–16) who come there after school 3 or 4 days a week. In the late 1980s, reforms decentralised the children and youth sector of Danish welfare society, for which reason these leaders came to be described as both administrators and leaders (Sørensen, 2000; Pors, 2011). They are positioned in a political and administrative hierarchy in which they are requested to implement the policies set by national and local politicians. At the same time, however, they are hired as leaders of independent welfare institutions and given responsibility for budgets, pedagogical aims and personnel management (Andersen and Pors, 2016). As such, their management and leadership conditions are shaped by tensions between different governing logics, with some tasks and role descriptions resembling those known from a classical bureaucracy (Weber, 1994, 1978; du Gay, 2000) and others being inspired by new public management (NPM) (Andersen and Pors, 2017).

Moreover, the leaders studied are also situated in tensions between the particular pedagogical sub-profession in which they were trained and new pressures to step into roles as managers and leaders in the local government. The leaders’ professional background is shaped by a particular pedagogical sub-profession traditionally focused on the wellbeing and inclusion of vulnerable children and young people, and on creating communities and possibilities for participation and democratic involvement. Today, however, these leaders find themselves in a policy setting characterised by a belief that more and better management will improve the quality and

effectiveness of education (Blackmore and Thomson, 2004). For the last decade or so, policy documents have depicted the trope of education as having an inefficient culture of professional equality in which managers do not sufficiently perform as managers (Danish Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 83; OECD, 2008; Local Government, Denmark, 2005, 2008, 2009, p. 9, 2010b, p. 6, see also Sløk, 2012). This has put all the leaders studied under pressure to transform themselves such that they more strongly emphasise managerial subjectivity and performance. A positivistic management approach highlighting evidence-based or 'data-driven' management characterises this policy focus on better management (Gunter, 2004; Ratner and Gad, 2019). As Ratner and Ruppert (2019) have argued, this means that managers of educational organisations are expected to enable themselves to see and know by using data and thus detaching and distancing themselves from their everyday experiences and instead learning from the 'evidence' (see also Learmonth and Harding, 2006). Thus, the individuals studied are situated in tensions between the pedagogical profession in which they were trained and new pressures to perform as managers themselves, for example, by internalising the idea that they can attain a privileged vision of their organisation by seeing it from the disembodied perspective of numbers and graphs. Moreover, because of recent organisational changes emphasising better management, two of the leaders studied had recently gone from being at the same level of the organisational hierarchy to being appointed district managers. As a group of colleagues, the leaders have thus been divided and positioned differently in relationship to each other in the administrative echelons.

Finally, the very meaning of the institutions for which the studied leaders hold responsibility is currently being challenged and negotiated. An ambitious and comprehensive school reform (Danish Ministry of Education, 2013) has gradually been implemented since 2014, thus leading the purpose and existence of these educational organisations to be recast. On the one hand, their work is valued in new ways, as the reform emphasises untraditional teaching (outside the classroom) and aims to foster new learning processes in settings external to the school, such as after-school care (Danish Ministry of Education, 2013). On the other hand, the reform threatens the existence of such institutions, for they have become seen less as a value in themselves and more as a means to a richer and more coherent school day (Danish Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 3). Consequently, their value has been challenged, and they therefore need to prove their worth as partners and collaborators of the school (Larsen, 2018). Financial resources have been moved from these institutions to the schools so that schools can buy services like pedagogical assistance during the school day or various collaborative teaching projects from them (Local

Government, Denmark, 2020, p. 22). This new and closer relationship to the school has also meant that a policy focus on children's educational performance has challenged these institutions' traditional pedagogical focus on wellbeing (LGDK, 2010a). In an Australian context, Blackmore and Sachs (2012, p. 2) have described a similar policy focus as a radical change of the sociopsychic and political economies of education, a change that has made educational work a site of tensions, paradoxes and dilemmas. On an everyday basis, educational organisations, their leaders and employees face the dilemma of prioritising performance in relation to curriculum goals or pursuing other and broader educational ambitions such as personal growth, physical education, ecological literacy, democratic competencies and more. (Wyn et al., 2014, p. 9).

Severe change thus characterises the studied setting. However, change is not only a fact in the studied field but also a normative ideal. As scholars have shown, the imperative that the 'normal' or the 'traditional' constitutes a limitation for children's successful learning processes currently permeates Danish education policies and should be replaced by new cross-organisational and inter-professional collaborations (Bjerg and Staunæs, 2018; Pors and Ratner, 2017; Pors, 2016; Bergmann and Plotnikof, 2018). As international scholars have also noted, current welfare policies tend to make flexibility and adaptability unquestioned goals in themselves and values that exceed specific policy aims (Newman, 2005a, 2005b; Yeatman and Costea, 2018). New forms of organising, flexible partnerships and open-ended collaborations between diverse actors are all seen as means of bringing out new, as yet unknown, possibilities (Pors, 2018; Andersen and Pors, 2016). In the case of the leaders studied, this means that they are expected to identify and bring out these unknown possibilities, not by receiving extra funding or resources, but by engaging their organisations in processes of rethinking, reshaping and reorganising employees, organisations and collaborations (for a similar analysis see Costea, Amiridis and Crump, 2012; Costea, Crump and Amiridis, 2007). As the empirical analysis below will show, in the local government studied, a key imperative was that leaders should be eager to change their organisations and be optimistic about the uncertain outcome of new cross-organisational and inter-professional collaboration.

### **Leadership development and wet eyes**

The seminar that I report on below was part of an ongoing leadership development programme. On this occasion, the group of leaders met to present the status of their individual developments to the rest of the group. The consultant also individually interviewed the leaders in front of the

group, asking each of them about their “defensive routines”. Defensive routines are an established conceptual framework available from a wide variety of sources, including consultancies, online resources and professional literature.<sup>1</sup> Defensive routines are often defined as organisational actors’ psychological patterns that cause them to project failures and problems to a trope outside their own agency and thus to fail to do the self-work that could lead to change (e.g. Elgaard et al., 2011, p. 358ff). This interviewing was intended to help the leaders individually investigate and reflect on how certain defensive routines could hinder development and change in their organisations. One by one, the leaders presented their current work to renew their organisations and reflected on the questions posed by the consultant. They all reiterated the current policy focus on renewing how they work with children and young people and on needing to collaborate more closely with the school on curriculum goals. However, at one point in the exchanges, it became Mary’s turn to be interviewed about her defensive routines. She is the local leader of a youth organisation called The Polar Bear. She began by recalling a situation in which she admitted to having felt very defensive:

I had these local politicians and people from the central administration visiting me. And they said: “Yes, we know that you and the Polar Bear are well known for your social pedagogic work. But honestly, isn’t it about time that you become known for something else? Shouldn’t you do something different and new? Perhaps, it’s time to make a new vision for the Polar Bear.”

All of a sudden, Mary burst into tears and appeared unable to stop them. As an observer, I felt a palpable anxiety in the room and an uncertainty about how the conversation would proceed. However, before anyone said anything, Mary managed to continue:

And I just stand there and look at the children around me. They are real polar bear children. [For Mary that means vulnerable children.] What is to become of them, if we are to make a new vision and transform the organisation into something more fashionable?

Mary continued by apologising profusely about her emotional and tearful outburst. At first, the room went quiet. No one seemed to really know how to relate to her distress or to the interference from a crying body. However, after a little while, a leader sitting at the other end of the table broke the silence to tell a story of how Mary had helped him on numerous

occasions. His body was clearly affectively touched by the moment. I saw his eyes brim with tears. He told the other leaders around the table about how, when he was first hired and trying to settle into his new managerial position, Mary had called him every week to ask how he was doing. In fact, once, after one of these conversations, she had even driven up to visit him because she was concerned about his wellbeing. Another leader told a similar story, his voice trembling. He ended by saying:

Mary is our barometer, our thermometer. She feels it. In situations where you, Mary, feel something, we should all pay close attention.

Another leader said:

When I look at you now, you have this big red heart that lights up your bright white polar bear body. You are the polar bear mother with all of the cubs under your protection.

Again, Mary made several apologies for breaking down in tears. Then, another leader said:

The problem is that the local government doesn't want what we want. It's difficult to sustain one's dream, when we're always so close to being shut down. I just got some new information about my organisation during lunch. And it kind of destroyed my dream. I dream of a different kind of educational activities.

Yet another leader said in a voice expressing both energy and a hint of anger:

Come on. In reality, we have a great deal of influence here. This isn't a job where we were ever thanked for all the extra hours or all the sleepless nights. We have stamina. If not, we wouldn't be here. Hannah (chief executive in the local government) once said to me: "You have to be loyal to me if I'm going to be your boss." But you know what? I'll be loyal as soon as she shows me a good reason to be loyal.

Mary said:

Listen, we can only make a change if we stand together. If they succeed with this new management hierarchy, then one organisation is pitted against the other.

A leader said:

If this new division has only been invented to install a hierarchical difference between us, then it has no value.

Another added:

What do they want with this new division between us? We have no use for it. We have even sat around this very table and had discussions about distribution of power in the new hierarchy. What's up with that?

A third continued:

We might get in trouble, but that's no reason for us not to make decisions together. It's not up to them. We still have quite a lot of room to manoeuvre.

Mary said:

It's so damn important for young people to have one place in their everyday life where they are not constantly hit over the head with 'performance, performance, performance'. What do young people want? Maybe they just want a place to be? The local government wants to hire more student counsellors. That's no solution. We can be the solution by simply being there for them. Giving them a place to be. Someone to look up to.

### **Analysis**

This excerpt from a seminar begins with Mary's telling a story about a visit to her organisation from politicians and chief executives from the local government. Mary chose the story to illustrate a situation where she felt defensive and unable to adapt to new ideas and developmental possibilities. However, in telling the story, Mary starts crying and is unable to stop for a while. Initially, the other leaders are unsure how to relate to this interruption from a

crying body. However, this affective impulse soon appears to touch another leader. With tears in his own eyes, he reacts to Mary's tears by remembering her persistent care for him. Slowly, the intense atmosphere also seems to affect other leaders in the room. One leader describes Mary as a barometer of sorts, someone that can speak to the others about important and possibly threatening changes. The conversation continues, with Mary's anxiety and fear resonating with a leader who over lunch had received some bad news about his organisation's future. He addresses the affects, now shared in the room, as expressing the political tension between the desires of politicians and bureaucrats and the pedagogical values of the leaders present. Another leader reacts to the intense atmosphere by giving some energetic, anger-tinged encouragement about not surrendering to but going up against the local government decisions. Responding to this energy, yet another leader urges a resistance to political and bureaucratic decisions, drawing attention to how the leaders have accepted the introduction of a new hierarchy to divide them. A new reading of the political and organisational situation emerges from all these comments and statements – a reading that seems to emphasise the possibilities of leaders' pedagogical, organisational and political action.

Zooming in on this excerpt from a management seminar enables one to analyse how meaning-making processes can unfold in an everyday setting. As described, the seminar was aimed to develop individual managers into leaders capable of performing as change agents in their organisations. However, as the excerpt shows, myriad other meaning-making processes unfold just beneath the surface of this rather simple policy narrative about the need for public managers to develop their own management skills and thus to transform their organisations, in this way meeting new demands, innovating new ideas on performance and forming new collaborations. Although the literature on local meaning-making often focuses on how meaning-making unfolds in linguistic registers, this excerpt shows how affective intensities also seem to have impacted and informed these leaders' meaning-making. As I understand affects to be elusive and indeterminate, I am reluctant to make unequivocal assertions about any causal or semi-causal relations between the tears, how other leaders felt and were affected by the tears and how the conversation and discursive meaning-making unfolded. Instead, I suggest a more modest claim that focusing attention on affective tensions and intensities may help tease out nuances concerning the ways meaning-making unfolds and sometimes takes unexpected twists and turns in local settings.

*Shifts in meaning-making*



As described, an imperative of change often characterises the policy landscape in which these (and many other) public leaders work. The leaders studied were expected to work on themselves to become better change agents, capable of transforming their organisations from an ‘old’ mode of operating, where after-school pedagogy had value in and of itself, to a “new” mode where such pedagogical work serves to support educational goals within and outside of the school day. However, although leaders faced such expectations, when Mary cried and the room became suddenly affectively charged, they began questioning and discussing the rarely challenged value of change and transformations. By allowing themselves to connect to and feel each other’s concerns, these leaders started questioning their own situation and the role they played in it.

As described, the technique of interviewing people about their defensive routines is explicitly designed to contain and delimit affects and thus make them objects of individual reflection and self-work. Any affect that might emerge during such an interview is meant to be captured as something related to and understandable as a psychological mechanism internal to the individual rather than related to some external situation. As such, the technique is meant to capture and contain affect as a particular psychological inclination that belongs to a person instead of, say, to something social or political. However, the other leaders in the room did not further isolate Mary’s tears as something belonging to her and that she must therefore self-manage and self-improve, instead becoming affectively touched by her tears. All the bodies in the room came to understand Mary’s tears and affective outcry as an important sign of political pressures and as a possibility for thinking differently about pedagogical, organisational and political realities and actions. Indeed, in spite of the individualising technique of interviewing the leaders one by one, the competition between them and a recently installed hierarchy, the other leaders appeared to have little need to use Mary’s outburst to affirm their own managerial identity or superiority in relation to each other. Instead, the other leaders reacted by connecting themselves affectively, allowing the anxieties and tensions in the room to resonate through their bodies. In this process, a shared feeling of interdependency between the leaders seemed to emerge. They began to relate to the politics of the transformations in which they found themselves, wondering about the risks that current political landscapes pose to young people. Although no one specified any decisions or actions, as the conversation unfolded, a growing sense of the importance of thinking critically about current policy ambitions nonetheless emerged, as did their possible future consequences for young people. While the leaders set out to be highly engaged in the self-work of becoming better managers, Mary’s tears and the other

leaders affective connection to them engendered a new conversation – one that gave the leaders an urge – if only implicit – to stand together and counter current tendencies in the policy landscape.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have set out to analyse how meaning-making on the ground unfolds in affective and embodied as well as linguistic registers. Drawing on recent theory development under the heading of *the affective turn*, I studied a management seminar where, in embodied and affective registers, a group of local leaders came to shift their assessment of the policy landscape in which they work and to share a set of concerns about current political pressures on children and young people. I hope that this study can provide insight into the embodied and affective aspects of local leadership. In contrast to a leadership literature in which, as Hansen et al. have put it, corporeality is an ‘unwanted and unwelcome guest’ (Hansen et al., 2007, p. 553; see also Ford et al., 2017, p. 1554), the empirical material from this study shows how this so-called unwanted guest informs meaning-making processes. Inspired by Daniel Goleman and others, some scholars of public leadership (e.g. Newman et al., 2009) have approached the concepts of emotion and affect as a particular skill public leaders need to learn. However, I have taken a less instrumental position to affect, thus attending to the messy and ungovernable aspects of how affective intensities or atmospheres sometimes inform local meaning-making.

I have depicted a perhaps rather familiar policy landscape consisting of diverse imperatives about constant change (Newman, 2005a, 2005b; Andersen, 2013; Andersen and Pors, 2017), evidence-based management (Learmonth and Harding, 2006) and managerialist ideas of more-for-less (Yeatman and Costea, 2018). Situated in such a landscape, local leaders are expected to be positive about the uncertain outcomes of policy goals, to understand their organisations through numbers and other forms of ‘evidence’ and to work to identify and harvest as yet unknown resources in people and organisational processes. Using my ethnographic narrative, I have sought to zoom in on how myriad meaning-making processes lie just beneath these elite narratives (Orr and Vince, 2009; Orr and Bennett, 2017), thus serving to transgress distinctions between the corporeal, affective and linguistic as well as between the individual and the collective. I have shown how, in spite of the individualising technique involving the consultancy concept of defensive routines, the room became affectively charged in a manner that made the leaders experience, feel and think more collectively. Moreover, in a policy setting where evidence-based or data-driven management is gaining increasing power, the analysis

might elucidate what it means for a local leader to allow herself to dwell in the messy midst of everyday life instead of seeking detachment, distance and vision via numbers and graphs.

Building on a theory of decentered governance that emphasises bottom-up approaches and recognises the contingency of governance processes (Bevir, 2013, p. 24), I have sought to draw attention not only to the diverse and competing narratives and webs of beliefs (Bevir, 2013, p. 27) that shape public leadership, but also to the way leadership is an embodied and lived practice. Joining current efforts (Fotaki and Hyde, 2015; Ford et al., 2017; Fotaki, 2014) to chisel away at the dominance of ‘disembodied, over-cognitived and pseudo-rational approaches’ (Pullen and Vachhani, 2013, p. 318) to leadership, I have theoretically and analytically focused on affect in an effort to illuminate the role of intensities and embodiment in the struggle of leaders on the ground to make sense of policy transformations.

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<sup>i</sup> See for example <https://thesystemsthinker.com/overcoming-defensive-routines-in-the-workplace/> or <http://integralleadershipreview.com/5231-leadership-coaching-tip-organizationalchallenges-in-leadership-defensive-routines/>