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**SENSING THE ROOM: THE ROLE OF ATMOSPHERE IN COLLECTIVE
SENSEMAKING**

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on video recordings, interviews, and first-hand observations of a strategic project team at an electronic bank, we explore the role of atmosphere in collective sensemaking. By analyzing collective entanglements of bodily tonality and interaction, we show how distinctive atmospheres in strategy-making workshops are closely associated with different sensemaking styles that shape not only how, but also what sense is constructed. Our findings show that in group settings, participants' immanent sensing of atmospheric dynamics serves as an affective and affecting background that enables and constrains collective sensemaking in relation to an issue. We also find that atmosphere can shift as dissonant moments accumulate and reach an atmospheric tipping point that enables a change in the group's sensemaking style. These dissonant moments manifest as subtle changes in one or more participants' bodily orientation, speech content, or vocal characteristics. The concept of atmosphere enables us to extend emotions research in sensemaking and strategic management by offering a better understanding of the role of embodied affect in collective sensemaking beyond individually felt corporeal experience.

INTRODUCTION

The union meeting was held at Le Carteret, a huge brasserie on Place du Terminus, which referred, I think, to the old station just opposite, abandoned and already partly invaded by weeds. In terms of catering, Le Carteret mostly offered pizza. I arrived quite late, I'd missed the speeches, but there were still about a hundred farmers sitting around the tables, most of them drinking beers or glasses of white wine. They weren't talking much—there was nothing cheerful about the atmosphere of the meeting—and gave me suspicious looks when I went towards the table where Aymeric was sitting with Frank and three other men who, like him, had sad and reasonable faces ...

"Sorry for bothering you ..." I said, trying to adopt a light tone. Aymeric looked at me uneasily.

"Not at all, not at all ..." said Frank, who looked even wearier, even more crestfallen than last time.

"Have you decided on a course of action?" I don't know what led me to ask the question—I didn't want to know the answer.

"We're working on it, we're working on it ..." Then Frank gave me a strange look from below, a little hostile but above all incredibly sad, even desperate; he was talking to me as if from the other side of an abyss, and I started to feel properly embarrassed; I had no business among them, I wasn't one of them, I couldn't be, I didn't lead the same life as they did—my life was hardly brilliant but it wasn't the same—and that was that. I quickly took my leave, I'd stayed for no more than five minutes, but I think when I left I had already understood that this time things could turn really ugly.

Excerpt from *Serotonin* by Michel Houellebecq (2019: 156)

All meetings have palpable atmospheres that can only truly be sensed by those present.

Finding the right words to describe this sense is much more difficult. The best approximation we have is literature and poetry, as in the above excerpt from Houellebecq's *Serotonin*. This literary example vividly captures how atmosphere inexplicably hits us when we walk into a room and bodies encounter each other (Fotaki, Kenny, & Vachhani, 2017). Yet, despite our everyday familiarity with notions such as "reading the room," a presentation "falling flat," or an "awkward" office exchange, organization researchers have only recently begun to study atmosphere in earnest (Julmi, 2017).

Closely following in the footsteps of the influential German philosopher Gernot Böhme, most recent work has approached atmospheres as spatio-material aesthetic phenomena that can be purposefully designed, yet cannot be fully controlled (e.g., De Molli, Mengis, & van Marrewijk, 2020; Jørgensen & Holt, 2019; Michels & Steyaert, 2017). Atmosphere's role in fostering creative, collaborative spaces and practices is also beginning to be explored (Bell & Vachhani,

2020; Leclair, 2022; Schiemer, Schüßler, & Theel, 2022). Indeed, over many decades, a global workspace design industry has helped institutionalize the belief that spatio-material atmosphere can significantly impact productivity and generativity at work.

However, even though the Houellebecq (2019) example is thick with atmospheric qualities, it is surprisingly light on material-aesthetic detail. Other than the brasserie being huge, we learn almost nothing about it, except that the name of the street it is on refers to a different building that serves as a metaphor for the farmers' plight: abandoned and already partly overtaken by weeds, "Place du Terminus." Instead, most of the atmospheric texture is found in Houellebecq's vivid descriptions of the ways the farmers physically embody this plight through glancing looks (suspicious, uneasy, weary, a little hostile, incredibly sad, desperate) and their withdrawn comportment (not talking much, talking as if from the other side of an abyss) that reflect and manifest the atmosphere.

In this paper we zoom in on this particular aspect, arguing that atmospheres cannot be adequately grasped without paying close attention to both the specific practice world (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2020), such as the lived concerns of French farmers in the example above, *and* the uniquely situated nature of the multimodal interactions through which local atmospheres manifest, such as a stranger walking into a high stakes union meeting. We are specifically interested in exploring the role of atmosphere in sensemaking about strategy, because this enables us to significantly advance the closely related literatures on emotions in sensemaking (see Maitlis, Vogus, & Lawrence, 2013; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015) and strategic management (see Brundin, Liu, & Cyron, 2022). The tendency across these literatures to treat sensemaking as an episodic process has limited consideration of the role of emotions to either triggering sensemaking episodes and/or their efficacy in reducing equivocality. Although this primary focus

has increasingly been expanded to examining embodiment (e.g. de Rond, Holeman, & Howard-Grenville, 2019; Meziani & Cabantous, 2020), it is unclear whether and how the affects involved in embodied processes shape collective sensemaking processes between interacting participants.

Drawing on extensive observational, video, and interview data collected throughout the lifecycle of a strategic project at an electronic bank, we identify four collective sensemaking styles and show how the distinctive atmosphere associated with each matters not only for *how*, but also for *what* sense is made. We also show how a workshop's atmosphere and associated sensemaking style can shift through the accumulation of what we refer to as “dissonant moments”—brief instances in which the bodily tonality and interactions between participants, evidenced in their facial expressions, body positions, movements, vocal characteristics, and/or speech content, diverges from the dominant atmosphere. These findings lead us to inductively theorize atmosphere as a possibility space for sensemaking that can make certain ways of interpreting an issue more likely than others.

In addition to this primary contribution, we extend the literatures on sensemaking, strategy-as-practice, and atmospheres. First, we contribute to emotions research in sensemaking by arguing that our focus on sensemaking styles and their atmospheres offers a deeper understanding of the role of affect in collective sensemaking processes. Second, we contribute to the strategy-as-practice literature by arguing that the specific sensemaking style affectively afforded by atmosphere is a critical precursor to any strategically relevant sense that is made in strategy-making workshops. Finally, we extend atmosphere research by drawing attention to the transient affective qualities of materiality and the role of non-material elements such as the normativity (e.g., norms of professionalism) and teleoaffectivity (e.g., the importance of a pending deadline) of sensemaking practices in co-producing atmosphere.

SENSEMAKING, STRATEGY, AND EMOTIONS

Sensemaking is central to strategy-making as a complex, ambiguous, and open-ended process in which new issues continually emerge that need to be understood and acted upon throughout the organization (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2017). “Sensemaking” refers to “the process through which people work to understand issues or events that are novel, ambiguous, [or] confusing” (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014: 57). Although much of the literature on sensemaking has focused on its cognitive and discursive dimensions (Vaara & Whittle, 2022), the importance of emotions has been repeatedly highlighted (Brown, Colville, & Pye, 2015; Weick, 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). Given the centrality of sensemaking processes to strategy, it is not surprising that strategy scholars have also increasingly focused on this emotional dimension (Brundin et al., 2022). Sensemaking, strategy, and emotions are closely tied, as “processes of sensemaking deeply implicate emotions” (Mikkelsen & Wåhlin, 2020: 557) and “emotion has a major bearing on strategic management processes and outcomes” (Brundin et al., 2022: 1).

Across the strategy and sensemaking literatures, the role of emotions has typically been conceptualized as either a “trigger” for sensemaking and/or as a factor that shapes its cognitive orientation. For example, Maitlis et al. (2013) proposed that individuals are more likely to engage in sensemaking when events trigger emotions with a negative valence (see also Dougherty & Drumheller, 2006), and that the emotional valence experienced *during* sensemaking affects the extent to which it is generative/creative or integrative/analytical in nature (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). Liu and Maitlis (2014) showed how the dynamics of different emotional displays among team members were closely paired with different approaches to strategizing. Emotions can affect both the number of feasible and original strategic ideas that

managers generate (Delgado-García & De La Fuente-Sabaté, 2010; Treffers, Klarner, & Huy, 2020) as well as the likelihood that existing beliefs are revised or new strategies are adopted (Døjbak Håkonsson, Eskildsen, Argote, Mønster, Burton, & Obel, 2016).

Both literatures have also increasingly paid attention to embodiment. For example, in sensemaking research, de Rond et al. (2019) theorized the sentient, sedimented, situated, and suffering body as the “who” that is enacting sense. Meziani and Cabantous (2020) explored how film crews make “bodily sense” of their situations by physically enacting their intuitions. In strategy research, the turn to embodiment has been more outwardly oriented. For example, Balogun, Best, and Lê (2015) showed how the talk, actions, and gestures of museum tour guides interact with those of their audiences in realizing the strategic aims of museums to engage, entertain, and educate their patrons. Others, such as Jarzabkowski, Burke, and Spee (2015) showed how the interplay between bodies, speech, and materials constructs different spaces in which actors do different types of strategy work, while Paroutis, Franco, and Papadopoulos (2015) explored how managers used their bodies to control interpretations of a strategy tool.

Challenges in Sensemaking and Strategy Research Focused on Emotions

Despite (and perhaps partly due to) these significant advances, two notable challenges have emerged in this body of research.

Conceptual confusion. First, the recent shift from considering discrete emotions towards exploring embodiment has accentuated a lack of conceptual clarity. As authors across the sensemaking and strategy literatures note, the terms “emotion” and/or “affect” have been used interchangeably, often as poorly defined umbrella constructs that refer to a broad range of affective phenomena, including discrete (social) emotions, dispositional traits, moods, and/or corporeal bodily sensations (Brundin et al., 2022; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015). In contrast, research in organizational psychology has more clearly differentiated “emotion” as a relatively

brief and salient affective reaction to persons or events (e.g., anger, fear), from “mood” as a more enduring affective state that lacks a clear target object (e.g., gloomy, cheerful), and “affect” as a broader label that includes both (Barsade & Gibson, 2007; Bartel & Saavedra, 2000). This definitional distinction not only increases conceptual clarity, but also points to mood as an affective phenomenon that remains relatively under-studied in sensemaking and strategy research. This gap is surprising, as Bartel and Saavedra (2000: 1999) argued that collective moods are “filters through which work groups perceive and enact their tasks and are intimately linked to members’ abilities to appraise and interpret actions and events” (see also Ashton-James & Ashkanasy, 2008; George & Jones, 2001).

Despite its merits, the disadvantage of defining affect as exclusively comprising emotions and mood is that this excludes other categories of affect that have recently been highlighted as important for thought and action. These can include types of corporeal experience not captured by mood, such as what De Rond, Lok, and Marrison (2022: 894) referred to as the “feeling of being,” such as “slightly lost,” “stared at,” or “in control” (see Ratcliffe, 2020). While affect thus exceeds the sum-total of psychological definitions of emotion and mood, exploration of this broader understanding of affect in sensemaking processes, beyond individually felt corporeal experience, is still lacking.

Episodic vs. immanent sensemaking. A second important challenge relates to the tendency across both the sensemaking and strategy literatures to treat sensemaking as episodic rather than continuous, and to focus on outcomes rather than the processes that make it possible. Despite Weick (2012) conceptualizing sensemaking as “ongoing,” it has more commonly been treated as an episodic process that is aimed at reducing the equivocality triggered by novelty, ambiguity, and/or confusion (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). This tendency

naturally limits consideration of the role of affect to either triggering sensemaking episodes and/or their efficacy in reducing equivocality. Recent theoretical contributions have challenged some of the assumptions underlying this episodic approach by proposing a notion of sensemaking that is rooted in a Heideggerian phenomenological process ontology of “immanence” (Holt & Cornelissen, 2014; Introna, 2019; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015, 2020). From this theoretical perspective, sensemaking automatically and continuously unfolds in the living present as people make sense of their experiences “on the go” through their embodied absorption in ongoing activity (Guiette & Vandenbempt, 2016). As Sandberg and Tsoukas (2020: 25) explained, sensemaking occurs not only in “episodes when ongoing activities have been interrupted but is immanent in absorbed coping.” Sensemaking is thus an *ongoing* mode of interaction experienced by actors as a flow of skillful activity through their embodied immanent sense of the situation (Dreyfus & Wrathall, 2002).

Treating immanent sensemaking as the “background” for more deliberate and episodic types of sensemaking (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2020) can broaden understanding of the role of affect. Specifically, proponents of the Heideggerian approach have drawn attention to the concept of *Stimmung*, often translated as “mood,” but with a different connotation than in organizational psychology. The key idea is that at any particular moment, people actively experience the world through corporeal affective attunement, or *Stimmung*, which acts as an “affective lens, affecting how we are affected” (Ahmed, 2014: 14). Yet, despite acknowledging that *Stimmung* is not a private inner psychological state (Introna, 2019), the nascent literature on immanent sensemaking continues to focus primarily on the role of individual affective experience in sensemaking that also characterizes the traditional episodic/deliberate approach. This is particularly evident in the prevalent use of singular rather than plural pronouns when referring to

“the sensemaker” in the illustrative examples that are typically deployed, e.g., a firefighter (Introna, 2019), an expert pilot (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2020), etc. Although most everyday sensemaking in organizations is collective (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014), it remains unclear whether and how the affect involved in individually oriented immanent sensemaking informs collective sensemaking by people in interaction.

Moreover, the introduction of new concepts such as *Stimmung* and its common translation into “mood” risks exacerbating the conceptual confusion that has characterized research on the role of emotions in sensemaking and strategy processes. To help overcome these challenges, we need a conceptual vocabulary that is congruent with the Heideggerian ontology of immanent sensemaking, applies to people in interaction, and can be differentiated from existing concepts such as *Stimmung* and collective mood. Recent work by German phenomenological philosopher Jan Slaby and colleagues offers a conceptual approach that meets these criteria, opening new avenues for exploring the role of affect in sensemaking and strategy. What is uniquely generative about Slaby’s work is that it integrates practice theory with cultural affect theory, enabling a holistic phenomenological approach to affect that can be tied to the practice theory methods that Sandberg and Tsoukas (2020) recommended for studying immanent sensemaking.

Slaby’s Relational Affect and Atmospheres

Relational affect. Drawing on cultural affect theory (Massumi, 1996; Sedgwick, 2003), Slaby (2019b: 61) theorized *relational affect* as “a dynamic forceful processuality that traverses in and between bodies of various kinds, not yet consolidated into clearly bounded and thus nameable sequences.” Hence, affect is not from the outset sorted into a sequence of discrete emotions (e.g., fear, anger, shame) or moods (e.g., cheerful, gloomy, excited) as individual feeling states that can be collectively shared to varying degrees. Rather, it is conceptualized as: (a) “pre-personal,” in the Heideggerian sense of existing prior to conscious individual experience in a situation, and

as such, even prior to the individual subject (Slaby & Wüschner, 2014); (b) ontologically “relational,” as it is realized in a distributed manner between interacting persons and their sociomaterial environment “whose potentialities and tendencies are thereby continuously modulated in mutual interplay” (Slaby, Mühlhoff, & Wüschner, 2019: 31); (c) “transpersonal,” in that “being affected, what we feel is not fully ‘our own’ but from the outset part of a relational tangle that exceeds our individual reach” (Slaby, 2019b: 72); and (d) fundamentally “active,” in that affective episodes “unfold *in the act*—they are not felt responses to prior and independent reactions or actions nor clearly separate causal entities or events prior to our actions, but *acted-out engagements with the world*” (Slaby & Wüschner, 2014: 212; italics added). Hence, relational affect does not refer to individual feeling states, but to affective interactions in scenes of “animated mutuality, ... an enthralling interplay of gaze, gesture, posture, movement rhythm, tone and pitch of voice, through which an immersive sphere of relatedness is established and then jointly lived-through” (Slaby, 2019b: 63).

Atmosphere. Even though these spheres of affective relationality are performatively open-ended, they are channeled and modulated by and through the specific social domain of practice—or “practice world” (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2020)—in which a scene unfolds. For example, the practice world of “the office” includes, among many other things: specific cubicle and desk layouts that shape workflow; architecture that makes certain casual interactions or forms of teamwork more likely while effectively ruling out others; and modes of conduct, styles, and demeanors such as “professionalism” that are normatively associated with work. These arrangements construct “mattering maps” (Slaby et al., 2019), constellations of affective affordances that invite, animate, and regulate shared ways-of-being in a given practice world. For example, De Rond et al. (2022) showed how the social media-enabled world of pedophile

hunters is lived through distinctive ways-of-being that affectively structure how and why they become involved in concrete confrontations with suspected predators in phenomenally specific ways. The material and discursive arrangements of such worlds thus present “prepared occasions” (Slaby et al., 2019) for the dynamic unfolding of relational affect in concrete situations. They constitute the “organizing plane upon which affect unfolds as a densely situated, complexly orchestrated relational dynamic” (Slaby, 2019b: 76).

Taken together, dynamic scenes of “animated mutuality” and practice-world arrangements form a multimodal sphere of relatedness, a tangibly sensed “we-space” with a conspicuous affective quality (see Slaby, 2019b: 63). Slaby (2020) referred to this shared experiential field in concrete social situations as “atmosphere”—a sphere of affective intensity inherent in a situational encounter that structures and enables certain modes of affective relatedness while making other modes less likely (see also Anderson & Ash, 2015; Reckwitz, 2016):

Atmospheres are manifest as tangible, forceful, qualitative “presences” in experiential space—what grips us, long before we might grasp it, if we ever do. They encircle subjects of experience, “filling up” their respective corporeal milieu, the ambiance of a sensing being. Atmospheres are what we mean when we sense and say that “there is something in the air”—or rather, they are the ambient air itself insofar as it is situationally charged with an energetic texture. Accordingly, atmospheres impress themselves—in a holistic manner, in a range between tender and forceful—upon an adequately attuned sensibility (Slaby, 2020: 274)

Rather than being merely passively experienced as, for example, the “feel” of a room of interacting people, Slaby theorized atmospheres as intrinsically agentic and meaningful, “buzzing with forces and tendencies and charged with meaning” (Slaby, 2019b: 63) and thus “subtly yet pervasively set[ting] the tone for our being and being-together” (Slaby, 2020: 275).

The concept of atmosphere has recently attracted considerable attention in organization research. For example, Michels and Steyaert (2017: 79) showed how the atmosphere of a music festival manifested “through a series of encounters between various bodies and their specific affective capacities,” which created situated tensions between the atmosphere’s intended design

and its actual emergence. De Molli et al. (2020) similarly showed how the particular atmosphere of a film festival was created through practices of “aestheticizing” the populated space, and Marsh and Śliwa (2022) examined atmosphere as a “spatio-material assemblage” that became a force for public resistance. These contributions have significantly extended the understanding of affect in organizations by showing how materiality and atmospheric dynamics are closely tied. Slaby and colleagues’ theoretical work helps take the study of atmospheres beyond this primary focus by highlighting the importance of two additional dimensions: (a) dynamic scenes of “animated mutuality,” and (b) the practice world arrangements through which such scenes are channeled and modulated. These constitutive dimensions of atmosphere are likely of particular importance for collective sensemaking, as research has shown how sensemaking processes are mediated through both dynamic bodily interactions (e.g. Meziani & Cabantous, 2020; Patriotta & Spedale, 2009) and the tools and norms that form an integral part of practice arrangements (Kaplan, 2011; Knight, Paroutis, & Heracleous, 2018).

In sum, if sensemaking is “immanent in absorbed coping” (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2020) and most organizational sensemaking is collective (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014), especially in relation to strategy (e.g. Liu & Maitlis, 2014), then we need to explore the role of immanent sensemaking in collective sensemaking practice. What does it look like, and how might it affect more deliberate forms of sensemaking? Furthermore, if immanent sensemaking is inherently affective, as it centrally involves corporeal “attunement” in (inter)action (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2020), and atmospheres impress themselves on people’s “attuned sensibility” (Slaby, 2020), then we need to explore how these affective dimensions are related in sensemaking processes. We therefore ask: How is atmosphere implicated in processes of collective (immanent) sensemaking and to what effect(s)? In other words, rather than studying atmospheres as aesthetic spatio-

material arrangements that enable and constrain affective experiences in organizations in general, we explore the role of atmosphere in sensemaking practice to advance emotions research in strategy and sensemaking.

RESEARCH SETTING AND METHODOLOGY

Research Setting

To examine atmospheres and sensemaking from a practice perspective, we collected real-time process data over an 18-month period from workshops conducted with E-Bank managers and consultants that formed a critical part of a strategy program codenamed “Longreach” at an electronic bank in Australia (E-Bank). Longreach involved the development of a major new digital product that provided E-Bank’s customers with AI-informed “nudge” technologies to guardrail their spending and saving behaviors and help them achieve their financial goals. The wider strategic importance of this technology was that digital banks were becoming a new force in retail banking in the mid-2010s as customers rapidly shifted away from cash and physical bank branches toward cards and electronic bank accounts. Aiming to be “a fintech with a banking license” (CEO interview), E-Bank’s CEO sought to aggressively attract new customers by providing superior digital products and services. The long-term aim was to make the technology developed in Longreach the “portal of first choice” for customers within the wider banking sector (CEO interview). By “owning” customers’ spending and saving habits (CEO interview), E-Bank would be able to direct customers more easily toward the profitable parts of the banking value chain—namely, home lending, personal credit, and wealth management.

Longreach was led by , the Head of Digital Banking, who reported to the CEO. Other team members included Ben, the Lead Product Manager, Julian, the Lead Project Manager, and two consultants, Cynthia and Penny, who contributed market insight and focused on customer

engagement (all names are pseudonyms). This team organized workshops every one to two months between June 2016 and December 2017, serving as the strategy program’s “control board” (Interview). These workshops, which generally lasted between 1 and 3 hours, were intended to bring together all streams of work to consolidate the direction of the design and build of a new app, and oversee progress toward major project milestones set by the CEO. Key strategic decisions were “on the line” in these workshops because even seemingly minor decisions about the app’s features would impact the bank’s ability to achieve its strategic objectives. As such, we consider the workshops a key part of the strategy making process at the bank (Jarzabkowski & Seidl, 2008; Seidl & Guérard, 2015), and refer to them as “strategy-making workshops” for this reason. An event history is presented in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Data Collection

The study of atmospheres poses a significant epistemological challenge because they are seemingly vague, ephemeral and diffuse, yet simultaneously have effects (e.g., they can evoke particular feeling states) and are effects (e.g., they can be changed through concrete actions or events) (Anderson & Ash, 2015). To address this challenge, we collected data from multiple sources in a way that combines and extends prior work. Given our specific interest in exploring how bodily interactions in a specific practice world co-produce atmosphere as a dynamic affective context for sensemaking, we drew on three data sources in our analysis: (a) direct observations and first-hand affective impressions by the first author who was physically present in the workshops; (b) video recordings of the workshops; and (c) post-workshop interviews. These data sources are summarized in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

Direct observations and first-hand affective impressions. Direct observations afforded the most immediate access to the atmospheric dynamics of the workshops. Close observations of sensemaking processes and first-hand affective impressions of what it felt like to be in the room were contemporaneously recorded in fieldnotes. The first author and a research assistant also leveraged opportunities to capture informal conversations about the program and E-Bank in the office, break room, and corridors to gain a better understanding of the nature of the participants' practice world beyond the workshop meetings. We also observed other operational and design meetings involving some of the E-Bank team members for the purposes of enhancing our contextual understanding of Longreach.

When studying atmospheres, it is important to “immersively inhabit the affective quality of encounters” (Leclair, 2022: 5), drawing on the researcher’s own affective-embodied experience to learn about the experiential world of others through a combination of description and speculation (Anderson & Ash, 2015; Michels, 2015). Bartel and Saveedra (2000) showed how it is possible even for untrained observers to sense collective affect in group interactions by paying close attention to visible facial, vocal, and postural cues. Micro-ethnographic observation methods are also considered the most suitable for generating real-time process data concerning how sensemaking is accomplished, especially when taking an emic approach (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2020), as we do here. There are some limitations to a researcher’s ability to approximate others’ affective lived experiences, especially when the researcher does not actively participate in the practices being studied, and time in the field is relatively limited compared to ethnographic approaches that seek a more comprehensive understanding of a particular lifeworld (e.g. De Rond et al., 2022). We argue that first-hand observations are necessary and appropriate,

but not sufficient, for tracing the situated and unique patterning of relational affects in a specific place and time (Slaby, 2019a). Thus, we augmented this important data source with video recordings and interviews.

Video data. We video recorded 12 workshops which we analyzed repeatedly, both in real-time and at half-speed. Video data are now extensively used in qualitative research to study interactional dynamics (Gylfe, Franck, LeBaron, & Mantere, 2016; LeBaron, Jarzabkowski, Pratt, & Fetzer, 2018), including in research on atmospheres (Michels & Steyaert, 2017). Given that we are video-recorded in so many settings in our day-to-day lives, the effects of video recording on participants is considered small, if not negligible (see LeBaron et al., 2018). One of its unique advantages is the ability for researchers to “return to the scene” and conduct fine-grained analysis by replaying the video, which is impossible with data gathered through observation or interviews alone (LeBaron et al., 2018). This was vital for our analysis, given that examining the role of affect in sensemaking demands attention to “the fine-grained detail of socially and materially situated interactions” (de Rond et al., 2019: 1966), and “we cannot be sure of the character of [an] atmosphere before registering its effects in what bodies do” (Anderson & Ash, 2015: 40). Although first-hand observations and affective impressions in real-time can be useful for developing an overall holistic sense of atmosphere, the role of interacting bodies in co-producing it can only really be studied when interaction sequences can be slowed down to a point where subtle bodily adjustments become more noticeable. The video data also enabled others on the research team to augment the first author’s first-hand sensing of atmosphere by noticing things that escaped his attention when he was in the room.

Interviews. In addition to real-time process data, we conducted eight rounds of interviews with each of the three E-Bank managers, and two consultants who were involved for the duration

of Longreach. These were conducted within two days after each workshop, typically lasted 30 minutes, and were audio-recorded and transcribed. Interviewees were asked to reflect on their experiences during the workshops, including how they felt at different points in time, as well as on their emergent understandings of strategic implications.

Our aim in asking participants to describe their feelings during the workshop was not to aggregate these self-reports to measure collective affect, as is common in group mood research (e.g., Bartel & Saveedra, 2000). Atmospheres do not require each person to be in a similar affective state to be experientially palpable and exert their effects (Anderson & Ash, 2015). This is one important reason why atmosphere is not equivalent to concepts such as group mood or group affective tone. Indeed, it is possible to be affected by an atmosphere without necessarily being fully seized by it. For example, as Hasse (2019) explained, someone witnessing a funeral procession may not be forcefully moved to a state of mourning themselves, but would still be affected by it, such as by experiencing a feeling of compassion.¹ This feeling can be revealing of the atmosphere sensed without necessarily directly reflecting it. Thus, we used self-described feelings as *indirect* indicators of atmosphere. Feeling questions also enabled informants to try and explain *why* they felt the way they did. This offered insights into both the affective process history of specific interaction sequences, i.e., how they thought their feeling states were linked to what happened previously, as well the teleoaffectivity of what they were doing, i.e., how their feelings related to what they considered to be important. Overall, the combination of these data sources and the ability to zoom in on embodied interactions made our data collection process unique, and enabled the novel analytical approaches we now describe.

¹ What exactly this feeling is depends on the way the person's characteristic affective framing—the existential imprint of their individual being—combines with the situation to give rise to their specific corporeal attunement in the moment, or *Stimmung* (Slaby, 2020).

Data Analysis

We conducted our analysis in four stages. First, the first author revisited his fieldnotes, the video recordings, and the interview transcripts to apply open codes to salient atmospheres in the room for each workshop by drawing on the aforementioned innate human ability to sense the affective quality of interactions in the room in an intuitive, holistic manner (Anderson & Ash, 2015; Bartel & Saavedra, 2000). One of the main challenges he quickly encountered was that the workshops appeared to be constituted by multiple atmospheres with blurry and overlapping boundaries that seemed to be in near continuous transition. He therefore decided to ask a coauthor with no direct exposure to the workshops to view and code the video recordings to identify whether and at which moments in each workshop he assigned similar holistic atmospheric codes. In discussing this first attempt to gauge atmospheric dynamics, we found ourselves intuitively reverting to metaphors in music, weather, light, and sound to characterize atmospheric flows and gradations of affective intensity. As explained by Anderson and Ash (2015), the naming of atmospheres is challenging not only because they are intrinsically dynamic and affectively complex, or “layered,” but also because they have an indeterminate, ambiguous status that exceeds any singular adjective used to describe them. In grappling with this issue, we decided to address it in two ways: (a) by bracketing episodes within each workshop with significant overlaps between open codes suggesting that a distinctive atmosphere was temporarily dominant and could be identified; and (b) by using multi-nominal labels to describe these dominant atmospheres rather than singular adjectives (Anderson & Ash, 2015).

Second, we followed Sandberg and Tsoukas’s (2011) recommendation for studying the constitutive components of a relational whole by zooming in on instances in which the relational whole temporarily breaks down (see also, Lok & de Rond, 2013). This led us to focus on the periods in the workshops immediately prior to and after the episodes where we had bracketed off

distinctive atmospheres as temporarily dominant. We asked ourselves what happened in the room to have produced atmospheric shifts and noticed that changes in the affective qualities of postures, facial expressions, tones of voice, and movements appeared particularly important. We also noticed that many of the adjectives we used to describe the dominant atmospheres in stage 1 of our analysis related to aspects of bodily comportment in interaction (e.g., “calm,” “tense,” “respectful,” “excited”). We therefore decided to slow down the video replays and write thick descriptions of the affective qualities of bodily interactions on a second-by-second basis for each of the bracketed episodes, including the periods immediately leading up to and following them.

In these descriptions, we noticed that some of our codes for what we began calling the affective “tonality” of interacting participants showed significant overlap with the facial, vocal, and postural indicators in Bartel and Saveedra’s (2000) study of “work group mood.” This gave us a clearer affective vocabulary for differentiating between the collective tonality of the participants during each of the bracketed dominant atmosphere episodes. We therefore decided to recode these episodes as “relaxed-calm,” “tense-sharp,” “tentative-serious,” and “excited-buoyant.” However, this process also made us realize that collective mood indicators did not sufficiently encapsulate the affective qualities of how the participants were actively moving and speaking in relation to each other—that is, how they were *inter*-acting rather than passively manifesting a particular tonality that could be read through their facial, vocal, and postural expressions in isolation. Indeed, many of our codes describing the affective quality of interactions did not fit Bartel and Saveedra’s (2020) scheme because they more actively described participants’ affective comportment in relation to each other, e.g., being “respectful,” “argumentative,” or “curious” *towards* each other.

We realized that this second dimension, which we called *interaction*, was also an important indicator of atmosphere, and noticed that during periods in which a distinctive atmosphere was dominant, it was deeply entangled with the first dimension to the point where they were impossible to separate in practice, especially in real-time. We therefore combined the two dimensions in our descriptors of the dominant atmospheres, as shown in Table 3, with the first word pairing referring to “tonality” as a collective mood component of atmosphere and the second referring to “interaction” as a more active and relational inter-corporeal component. To avoid reducing atmospheres to this entanglement of tonality and interaction, we rounded out our analysis of dominant atmospheres by producing a rich description of participants’ broader practice world (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2020; Slaby, 2019a, 2019b). This included the atmospheric qualities and affordances of the physical space of the workshops, as well as other important elements, such as the affectively charged norms and values that the participants enacted and manifested throughout their involvement in the project.

Insert Table 3 about here

In the third stage, we focused our analysis on the relationship between atmospheres and sensemaking. We noticed significant differences between episodes in which different atmospheres were temporarily dominant, not only in terms of *how*, but also *what* was being said. For example, as shown in Table 4, language use was tentative and explorative when the dominant atmosphere was pensive-serious/tentative-curious, compared to the argumentative, oppositional language that characterized the tense-sharp/argumentative-dismissive atmosphere. Interaction patterns were also different in terms of the pacing and distribution of turn-taking, and perhaps most importantly, the interpretation process in relation to the issues the team was

deliberating unfolded differently and produced different sensemaking outcomes. We decided to refer to these distinctive combinations of (a) entanglements of tonality and interaction, (b) language use, and (c) interaction patterns that shape the nature and outcome of the interpretation process as “sensemaking styles” (see Table 4).

Insert Table 4 about here

Fourth, we revisited our analysis of atmosphere shifts in stage two to examine more closely the relationship between the entanglement of tonality and interaction and changes in sensemaking styles. Whereas our analysis in stage two helped us develop a general sense of the importance of tonality and interaction in shifting or sustaining atmosphere, in this fourth step we took a more fine-grained approach to discerning distinctive entanglement patterns prior to shifts. Our attention was drawn to the importance of what we called “dissonant moments” in tonality and interaction i.e., brief instances in which the affective quality of one or more participants’ facial expressions (e.g., raised eyebrow), body positions or movements (e.g., leaning forward), vocal characteristics (e.g., inflection) and/or speech content (e.g., “Oh, ...”) diverged from those that co-produced a particular atmosphere. These moments were “dissonant” because they manifested some of the “bits and pieces” (Anderson & Ash, 2015) of other, alternative atmospheres.

Our systematic recoding for such dissonant moments in interaction and tonality revealed distinctive patterns: (a) a series of dissonant moments could either accumulate to shift the atmosphere and related sensemaking style, or (b) the atmospheric turbulence they caused could be temporarily ignored in favor of maintaining the team’s existing sensemaking style. Figure 1 and Table 5 show that these patterns were evident across our data corpus irrespective of the

particular atmosphere or sensemaking style in the moment. By capturing the total aggregated minutes that each atmosphere was dominant in each workshop, Figure 1 shows how in most workshops all four dominant atmospheres manifested at some point. Table 5 shows that these aggregated minutes consisted of multiple episodes, most of which were immediately preceded by a grouping of dissonant moments. It also shows that in each workshop there were multiple instances where such groupings of dissonant moments subsided and did not immediately lead to a shift in atmosphere and associated sensemaking style.. In our findings, we illustrate these process patterns in fine-grained detail by zooming in on a paradigmatic workshop.

Insert Figure 1 and Table 5 about here

FINDINGS

We zoom in on vignettes from a paradigmatic workshop (workshop 11) to explain how atmospheres enable and constrain different possibilities for collective sensemaking. We show how participants' bodily tonality and interaction—which are co-constitutive of atmosphere—surface specific sensemaking styles that not only manifest *how* a particular issue is made sense of, but also *what* possible interpretations and/or solutions are considered. We explore this relationship between atmosphere and sensemaking by illustrating: (a) how a collective sensemaking style persists despite moments of dissonant bodily tonality and/or interaction that temporarily reveal the possibility of alternative interpretations of an issue; and (b) how a collective sensemaking style changes after dissonant moments accumulate to a tipping point that shifts the dominant atmosphere. We trace these patterns across multiple sequential vignettes within the paradigmatic workshop to evidence the dynamics and patterns we found across our wider data set. Further evidence of the atmospheres and concatenate sensemaking styles appears

in Tables 3, 4 and 5, and Figure 1. One sensemaking style (creating) and one dominant atmosphere (excited-buoyant/enthusiastic-affirmative) are not included in the vignettes below because they did not manifest in this specific workshop; however, evidence of these can be found in the tables and figure. Focusing on one specific workshop enables us to achieve greater illustrative depth and clarity in explicating the two main process patterns that are key to our findings.

Fine Weather: Consolidating in a Relaxed-Calm/Respectful-Affirmative Atmosphere

Our analysis of this episode shows how relaxed-calm bodily tonality and respectful-affirmative interactions constitute a distinctive atmosphere that facilitates a consolidating sensemaking style.

Vignette. The project to develop a new spending app for E-Bank’s retail account holders is fast approaching its final phase. It’s late in the afternoon and Patrick, the project manager, has called a meeting to update the team on the project’s status and to work through any outstanding issues in the product’s design. They meet in their work area, which looks a bit like a lounge room with its comfortable white sofas angled towards a large TV screen on the wall. The walls are filled with artifacts representing 18 months of hard work—Post-it notes, butcher’s paper, and graphs from previous working sessions—exuding a familiar, intimate sense that this is *their* space. Life-size cardboard cutouts of happy customers adorn the floor space, serving as ubiquitous reminders of the project’s ultimate objective: to develop a cutting-edge spending app that will give new millennial customers “what they need.” The bright, busy walls of the lounge area contrast with the stark white walls of the open-plan office area connected to it, which is set up with the usual desks and computer screens, sparsely occupied this late in the day (see Table 6,

Image 1). The team's ²relaxed, casual demeanor affirms that they are used to putting in longer hours than those who normally populate the rows of desks. They don't seem to mind, viewing it as a sign of their professionalism and commitment to Longreach's success. As Cynthia reflected in an interview: "I still see huge value in what [Longreach] is trying to achieve and how it is trying to shake up the banking category. I think there is a really powerful thought in what [we're] trying to do and I believe in it." It all adds to the team's sense that their work is not only different and innovative—something "fresh"—but also something of great strategic importance. Hence, the nature of their workspace and their sense of professionalism and commitment are important elements of their practice world, distinguishing them from the rest of the bank.

Insert Table 6 about here

Earlier in the day, Patrick had met with the CEO who reiterated how much she has riding on Longreach's success and gave a specific deadline for the product launch, which had previously been unclear. The team does not yet know this, and the meeting opens with the usual relaxed-calm/respectful-affirmative atmosphere as they share updates from the last month and build a shared understanding of the implications of new developments. Patrick has taken the swivel chair and sits calmly at the front of the room, his laptop resting on a stool next to him. Although his slightly elevated chair and his position at the front of the room beside the screen help manifest Patrick's leadership status, the group's close positioning in an intimate circle and their relaxed, jovial tonality (see Table 6, Image 2) emanate a sense of togetherness and informality.

Cynthia uses a bright and positive tone of voice and has a still, open posture (*relaxed-calm tonality*), smiling warmly at Patrick and leaning toward him in a friendly way (*respectful-affirmative interaction*) whilst Penny, Julian, and Ben are still getting settled: "And what have you been working on since we last spoke?"

Patrick, adopting a cheerful tone and smiling, sitting in a relaxed posture (*relaxed-calm tonality*), with his eyes solely focused on Cynthia despite others' movements (*respectful-affirmative interaction*): "We've been working through the customer insights and lining up changes inside the product."

Cynthia, adopting a surprised but complimentary tone and facial expression that implies "How impressive!" (*respectful-affirmative interaction*): "And you've done all that since we last met?!"

Patrick, in a casual, upbeat tone (*relaxed-calm tonality*) that affirms Cynthia's congratulatory comment without appearing boastful (*respectful-affirmative interaction*): "Yes. I can't believe how fast it has gone!"

Cynthia, continuing to use a bright, positive tone (*relaxed-calm tonality*), which suggests that her follow-up question is a positive, constructive query aimed at clarifying the current status (*respectful-affirmative interaction*) rather than criticism: "And is it all up to date on the platform?"

Patrick, affirming in a relaxed, confident style that all the work has been well documented and that the team can consider it complete: "Sure is."

Penny reinforces the upbeat tone of the exchange (*relaxed-calm tonality*) while signaling that she has been listening and understands what Patrick has accomplished (*respectful-affirmative interaction*): "That's great!"

Interpretive analysis. Although this brief mundane exchange may not resemble typical episodes in the sensemaking literature, it represents a *style* of sensemaking: the "consolidating" of a shared understanding of an issue's current status and its implications through a relaxed-calm/affirmative-respectful atmosphere (see Table 4). Rather than *responding* to information or events that are interpreted as ambiguous or confusing, this collective sensemaking style was oriented at *pre-empting the possibility* of such ambiguity/confusion by ensuring that everyone was "on the same page," or "singing from the same hymn book." In the above example, Patrick's answer to Cynthia's initial question includes important new information: he had been "lining up changes inside the product" (the app) based on "working through the customer insights." To avoid any ambiguity surrounding the implications of Patrick's update from a documentation perspective, Cynthia prompted him to confirm that it was "all up to date on the platform."

The relaxed-calm/respectful-affirmative atmosphere they created through their collective bodily tonality and interaction enabled this consolidating style of sensemaking that was prevalent

across Longreach's strategy-making workshops, as illustrated in Figure 1. This sensemaking style facilitated the open exchange of relevant information and contributed to an immanent sense of things being "under control." In a field note, the embedded researcher confirmed that it felt "calm" at this point in the meeting. Patrick later reflected in an interview that he thought the team "worked very well together" by ensuring that everyone remained well-informed.

A Bolt from the Blue: Consolidating through Atmospheric Turbulence

Our analysis of this episode reveals the first instance of maintaining a sensemaking style (in this case, consolidating) despite temporary atmospheric turbulence caused by moments of dissonant tonality and interaction. We show how the effortful maintaining of the collective entanglement of tonality and interaction prevented explicit consideration of an alternative interpretation, thereby enabling the team to maintain the dominant relaxed-calm/respectful-affirmative atmosphere.

Vignette. About five minutes into the meeting, Patrick is initiating a change in the topic of conversation by leaning forward and pausing (see Table 6, Image 3). He assumes a more serious, tighter demeanor and speaks in a hushed tone to make a surprise announcement: the CEO has set the product launch date.

Patrick, in a matter of fact, deeper tone that is still calm but betrays some unease (*dissonant tonality*): "Yeah, that's the date..."

Cynthia jolts forward, eyes wide and eyebrows raised as she lets out a surprised "Yeahhh?" She laughs and quickly looks around, appearing to check what others think (*dissonant tonality; dissonant interaction*). On the surface, her clarification question and laughter match the dominant sensemaking style and atmosphere, but her astonished expression and jolting movements indicate that she may be anticipating problems.

Patrick finishes his sentence while awkwardly chuckling to maintain his relaxed-calm, yet now slightly strained, tonality: "... next month." He briefly looks down, averting Cynthia's surprised gaze and slightly slumps his shoulders as if to imply, "Yeah! I know, crazy, right?!" thus revealing either a degree of discomfort about needing to reveal bad news to the team and/or his own apprehension about the deadline (*dissonant tonality*).

Penny maintains her relaxed-calm comportment by uttering a more neutral, matter of fact affirmative, "Yeah..." and taking a sip from a mug, yet stiffly leaning back (*dissonant*

tonality), literally distancing herself somewhat from Patrick and momentarily hiding her face behind her mug (*dissonant interaction*).

Ben (as Patrick is chuckling and briefly looking down) responds with a drawn out “Reeaally??” adopting a surprised tone and facial expression that almost feels exaggerated. He continues smiling as he quickly alters his posture from an exact copy of Patrick (leaning forward, elbows on knees, fingers folded underneath chin) to placing his hands on the sofa to lift himself up (almost like a little “jump”). He leans back into the sofa, then also chuckles and briefly looks down whilst scratching his head with his left hand as if to say “Wow...!” (*dissonant tonality; dissonant interaction*).

Patrick, turning directly to Ben, smiling with raised eyebrows and slightly nodding, utters an affirmative drawn out, “Oh yeah...” in a lower tone, appearing to imply “It’s a challenge, but we can handle it; no need to panic.” He utters “Oh yeah...” a second time, but more to himself, shifting in his seat and sitting more upright while rubbing his legs somewhat uncomfortably (*dissonant tonality*).

Julian, who witnessed these eight seconds of dissonant body language, remains in a more open and relaxed position, but rubs his hands as a possible sign of sensing the tension in the air (*dissonant tonality*). He quickly interjects, “It should be alright?” in an affirmative and confident rather than questioning tone.

Cynthia briefly glances at Julian on her right as if to ask, “Yeah, right??” but her facial expression betrays a lack of confidence (*dissonant tonality*).

Patrick, adopting an affirmative, confident, and deeper tone, says “It should be good,” but continues rubbing his legs and looking away (*dissonant tonality*). He sits more upright as if to gather himself, followed by a more staccato repeat—“It ... should ... be ... good”—that feels like he is trying to convince himself as much as the others. He takes a deep breath and changes the topic.

Following this brief episode of atmospheric turbulence, the team quickly restores the dominant relaxed-calm/respectful-affirmative atmosphere which enables them to continue their consolidating sensemaking style for the next 25 minutes.

Interpretive analysis. This exchange only lasted 11 seconds and nobody explicitly questioned whether the new deadline might cause problems. Atmospheric dissonance was evident only in brief moments of strained tonality and interaction. Thus, it can be argued that the consolidating sensemaking style was never really disrupted. Utterances such as “Yeahhh?” “Really?” and “It should be alright?” can be read as aligned with the consolidating style of asking clarification questions (see Table 4). Patrick’s confirmation of the timing (“next month”) and reassurance (“Yeah ... It should be good”) helped consolidate a shared understanding that the deadline would

not cause problems. Likewise, everyone maintained their smiling facial expressions and relaxed body postures (albeit somewhat strained/forced), which matched the dominant atmosphere associated with the consolidating sensemaking style.

However, the dissonant corporeal manner in which these questions were uttered and answered displayed an immanent collective sense that the tight deadline posed a significant challenge, potentially even causing problems. Fully expressed, this could have propelled the team to adopt an alternative sensemaking style, as it did in many other instances when the team encountered uncertainty. Yet, in this instance, the dominant relaxed-calm/respectful-affirmative atmosphere proved “sticky,” with individual team members straining to maintain their relaxed-calm composure against the inner turmoil that some of their tonality and movements betrayed. As a result, they literally ended up talking themselves into the shared understanding that “it should be good” despite their bodies manifesting the possibility of an alternative understanding. As in the previous example, when Patrick signaled that “everything is under control” due to their hard, diligent work, the team strove to remain calm. In a later interview, Cynthia said she was “really impressed by how calm everyone is” given the impending deadline. In other words, dissonant moments raised the possibility of an alternative interpretation to “it should be good,” but participants’ effortful straining to maintain the entanglement of the relaxed-calm tonality and respectful-affirmative interactions helped maintain the dominant atmosphere, allowing the team to continue to employ a consolidating style of sensemaking.

Cyclic Weather: From Consolidating to Considering and Back Again

This episode shows that as the dominant atmosphere shifts (in this case, toward pensive-serious/tentative-curious; see Table 3), so does the associated collective sensemaking style (toward considering; see Table 4). Whereas the previous vignette showed how the consolidating sensemaking style and its concatenate atmosphere prevented the team from explicitly

considering that the newly announced deadline could cause problems, here we show that a shift in the dominant atmosphere can enable deeper and more careful exploration of an issue. The frequency of these kinds of shifts across our workshops can be seen in Table 5.

Vignette. A few minutes later, Patrick proposes that the team should use the meeting to “talk a bit through the proposition, share the prototype, interfaces, what it looks like in its current guise ... because we have got to get cracking on building it ... Is that cool?” He projects the prototype landing page on the screen, immediately attracting everyone’s gaze. The room goes still as he slowly scrolls down to allow everyone time to study it. Cynthia is leaning completely forward with her hands around her ankles, almost as if she wants to crawl into the screen to fully absorb its content, slightly nodding and uttering in a hushed voice as if talking to herself (Table 4, image 4): “Yeah ... that’s nice ... Yeah ... that’s good ... That’s clean.” Ben wryly comments, “Is that a thing now? Emojis in copy?” Others answer lightly but seriously, “Yeah... it’s a thing” to confirm that it is normal and not problematic. They continue in this relaxed-calm but more concentrated manner for about half an hour, smoothly agreeing on various rewording suggestions and on the need to include something to help customers select the savings target that is right for them. Patrick diligently writes these on pink Post-it notes that he systematically sticks on the whiteboard behind him to tangibly represent his commitments. He then points to a specific tracking graph on the screen and casually asks, “Does this make sense?” In response, Penny asks a clarification question that is much more challenging to address. The issue concerns the app being designed to track a person’s spending in relation to their savings goals, but not adequately differentiating between regular expenses that are fixed (e.g., rent, utility bills) vis-à-vis discretionary expenditure that the user could more easily cut back on if necessary:

Penny, speaking slowly and deliberately as if she is thinking out loud, directing her question at Patrick with a serious, concentrated facial expression while demonstrating emphasis by

pointing an open hand at the screen (*pensive-serious tonality; tentative-curious interaction*): “So, when I then ‘spend something’ ... and it’s meant to actually be coming out of my ‘fixed amount’ ... how will the app know that?”

Patrick, speaking slowly and thoughtfully, slightly swiveling in his chair and tilting his head and eyes diagonally upwards, appearing to indicate that he is thinking about the question (*pensive-serious tonality*): “Hmmm ...” as if to say, “Good question” (*tentative-curious interaction*). “At the moment, it doesn’t ...”

Penny further clarifies her concern after Ben indicates that he is not clear on why this would be a problem: “Because the confusion will be like, say, my rent comes out and then it says I’ve overspent by \$570 ... And I’m like, ‘Crap, that’s actually my rent.’”

Patrick acknowledges what Penny is trying to say by nodding his head in agreement while slowly uttering in a deep serious tone, “Yeah ... Yeah...,” thus appearing to indicate that the issue Penny raised is worth serious consideration (*pensive-serious tonality; tentative-curious interaction*).

Ben tentatively attempts to help the team visualize what would happen in that scenario, but keeps getting stuck. He adopts a slow and deep tone, regularly moving his eyes up diagonally, suggesting that he is thinking out loud (*pensive-serious tonality*). He is sitting in a wide-open position while moving his hands slowly and gently as he speaks (*tentative-curious interaction*) when he realizes he can’t seem to formulate a coherent answer: “So at the end of the month ... there would just be a recharge, so it would be like ... uhmm ... You overssp... You overspent ... uhhmm.”

Penny, gently nodding at Ben, while tilting her head towards him in an open and curious way and pointing at the screen with a serious concentrated expression on her face: “What I am saying is so ... okay ... each day that number adjusts, right? ... On any given day, if a bulk payment comes out, how is it going to know that ...” (*pensive-serious tonality; tentative-curious interaction*).

Patrick, briefly tilting his head back and looking up at the ceiling (*pensive-serious tonality*), spontaneously speaks over Penny without this appearing as a dissonant interruption as he affirms her point (*tentative-curious interaction*): “Oh yeah, it’s going to smash your daily spend.”

Penny, looking over from Patrick to Ben and nodding her head: “Yeah, it’s going to smash my daily spend... unless it knows that ...”

Cynthia chips in with a tentative, slow and deliberative suggestion now that the team appears to agree that this is a serious concern: “Could you go back and re ... adjust it yourself?” (*tentative-curious interaction*).

The team continues to go back and forth, considering this issue and slowly concluding that users may need to put up with this problem because it cannot be addressed easily at this point.

Julian, who has been considering the entire exchange in a pose similar to Rodin’s statue “The Thinker” (*pensive-serious tonality*), suggests that they may need to explain it to users if they cannot fix it. Patrick responds, “Yeah, it’s a good point actually, to explain that,” as he uncaps

his marker to write down the sixth “to do” for the whiteboard. Deeply engaged in this considering style of sensemaking, the team slowly explores options for such an explanation, using tentative language such as, “I guess that ...” and “Maybe it’s...” As a more concrete sense of this pragmatic workaround slowly emerges, some smiles begin to return and the atmosphere becomes lighter, more relaxed-calm again, with the team re-embracing the consolidating style until they encounter another issue that seems to require more careful consideration, as sensed through the re-emergence of more pensive-serious tonality and tentative-curious interactions.

Interpretive analysis. In context, the shift in dominant atmosphere in this vignette can be attributed to Patrick’s initial framing of the meeting as an open invitation to play “devil’s advocate” in relation to the app’s prototype. Early on, Penny asked: “Patrick, do you want the pedantic stuff?” He definitively responded: “Go as pedantic as possible ... because we are in pedantic mode right now.” This invitation prompted the team to engage in a more deliberate form of sensemaking by questioning the prototype on the screen. As long as questions and suggestions were relatively easy to address through clarification and/or by agreeing on straightforward solutions to small issues, the dominant atmosphere remained relaxed-calm/respectful-affirmative. However, whenever more challenging questions were raised, the atmosphere temporarily shifted to pensive-serious/tentative-curious, enabling a change in sensemaking style back to considering. Patrick’s question “Does this make sense?” triggered this back and forth dynamic by prompting a shift in the affective quality of collective tonality and interaction.

The considering sensemaking style involved exploring whether an issue was a significant problem or not by more precisely defining it and carefully considering tentative solutions. When everyone was clear on the nature of the problem and its significance, their pensive-serious

tonality and tentative-curious interactions enabled them to carefully consider several avenues for possible solutions until they landed on a workable, if not ideal solution. The team's collective tenacity and serious demeanor as they engaged with problems for prolonged periods of time until workable solutions emerged revealed a deep collective investment in the app. Early on, Patrick jokingly said: "I keep telling people to call it [the app] Patrick. Ha-ha. But no one will do that. If I can't name my firstborn Patrick Junior, then ... this is it. This is my baby."

A Storm Rolls in and Lingers: Clashing in a Tense-Sharp/Argumentative-Dismissive Atmosphere

Our analysis of this episode further illustrates the two main patterns of atmospheric dynamics across our dataset: (a) maintaining a sensemaking style despite moments of dissonance in tonality and interaction; and (b) atmosphere and concatenate sensemaking style shifting when dissonance accumulates to a tipping point. We show that this pattern can repeat itself after a new dominant atmosphere has taken hold.

Vignette. Around one hour into the meeting, the physical and mental tolls of considering possible solutions to a series of tricky issues are beginning to show as yawns become increasingly frequent, and the first moments of atmospheric dissonance manifest. The team has been discussing whether and how the app should enable users to set multiple, overlapping savings goals to work towards, and Penny makes a tentative suggestion to include a button for an additional savings goal underneath the main one. Instead of following the slow, tentative pace of the considering sensemaking style and waiting a moment to think through Penny's suggestion, Ben half-interrupts her (*dissonant interaction*). Adopting an assertive, louder tone, he says, "That starts to get a bit convoluted because ..." and confidently provides a lengthy explanation for why Penny's idea is not good (*dissonant tonality; dissonant interaction*). Penny's facial expression briefly stiffens and she shifts in her seat (*dissonant tonality*), but the moment passes and the team

quickly readopts the considering sensemaking style. This is evident in Penny prefacing her next suggestion with, “Well, I guess you could...” and Patrick responding with “Yeah ... Yeah ... Well ... I guess you could ...,” while looking up at the ceiling with a pensive facial expression as he considers Penny’s suggestion.

Just a few minutes later, however, as the team revisits the issue of incorporating multiple savings goals, Patrick, Ben, and Penny yawn almost simultaneously, and Ben again half-interrupts Penny to challenge her idea (*dissonant interaction*) of “concurrent savings buckets.” Lifting his eyebrows in a knowing, challenging manner (*dissonant tonality*), he says, “Yeah ... but how do you fill the two buckets?” This time, Penny raises her volume and tone slightly in response and points at the screen for emphasis as she begins to explain how it could work (*dissonant tonality and interaction*). Everyone goes quiet for a second as they ponder Penny’s answer, and Penny tightens her posture as she shoots Cynthia an uncertain look as if to solicit her support (*tense-sharp tonality*). Ben articulates another objection in the form of a question that again sounds like a dismissal (*tense-sharp tonality; argumentative-dismissive interaction*): “But what if I don’t start saving for my next goal in like another two months?” After pausing a moment to let his objection land, he confidently explains how and why he believes this would cause problems, moving his hands as if he is teaching rather than tentatively exploring possibilities (*argumentative-dismissive interaction*). Penny again responds in kind, further sharpening her inflection and using a jarring tone as if to imply, “That doesn’t make sense!” (*argumentative-dismissive interaction*).

Penny: “But what happens when the first goal finishes anyway?!” Her finger jabs at the screen in an accusatory manner, and Patrick responds viscerally and disjunctively to her bodily comportment by immediately looking at where she is pointing (*tense-sharp tonality; argumentative-dismissive interaction*).

Ben confidently responds, “Yeah so it drops down back to \$550,” as if Penny didn’t hear him the first time and the answer is obvious (*argumentative-dismissive interaction*).

Penny follows with a quick curt “Yep,” which signals she heard him the first time but doesn’t think it makes sense (*tense-sharp tonality*).

Ben argues that temporarily overlapping savings goals should somehow be smoothed instead of simply aggregated, quickly gesturing with his hands (*tense-sharp tonality; argumentative-dismissive interaction*).

Penny interrupts with a dismissive tone and her arm pointed toward Ben: “But you CAAN’T smooth that ... !” (*tense-sharp tonality; argumentative-dismissive interaction*.) “...I think that’s the whole point!” She explains why and says “... it’s NEVER going to be able to be smoothed ...” Ben’s stiffened gaze remains locked onto Penny (*tense-sharp tonality*) when he jolts up in his seat to change his body position to more squarely face off with her (*tense-sharp tonality; argumentative-dismissive interaction*).

As the others fall completely quiet and still in an oppressive silence (*tense tonality*), Penny and Ben remain locked in this back and forth even when a vacuum cleaner in the hallway becomes so loud that Patrick must get up and shut the door. When he returns, Julian uses the brief lull to raise a different question: “What happens in the app when the customer gets ahead of their savings target due to an unexpected windfall?” Even though this question does not directly relate to the previous discussion and is offered in an open, calm way (*dissonant tonality and interaction*), it fails to relieve the dominant tense-sharp/argumentative-dismissive atmosphere centered around Penny and Ben. Ben uses a sharp tone, talking over Patrick who was trying to formulate an answer: “Do we recalculate ‘safe-to-spend’ [the app’s indicator for the amount a customer can spend without jeopardizing their savings target]?” He stares straight at Patrick with an almost accusatory facial expression (*tense-sharp tonality; argumentative-dismissive interaction*). Patrick answers using a slow, pensive tone: “No ... we don’t ...” Ben quickly counters, dropping his tone at the end of the statement to emphasize the problem: “So then they’ll save way too much money for their goal” (*tense-sharp tonality; argumentative-dismissive interaction*). The speed of this counter suggests that this conclusion had been drawn before he asked the question. Penny immediately jumps in: “Which is GOOD because ... [inaudible as Patrick and Cynthia at the same time also express their agreement with Penny in opposition to

Ben] ... Isn't that what we are trying to encourage?" (*tense-sharp tonality; argumentative-dismissive interaction*).

After Patrick shows signs of reconsidering his earlier quick dismissal of one of Ben's points, Penny argues that it should be up to the customers themselves to decide what to do when they are over their savings target and Cynthia and Julian respond by nodding in agreement. Ben counters again, this time "recruiting" Cynthia and Julian to his side by agreeing that at a minimum, customers should be made aware of the need to decide on something. This tense, oppositional pattern continues to the point where Penny gets up and stands next to the screen for emphasis (see Table 6, Image 5). Ben points towards the screen as if shooting daggers in return before Penny collapses in her seat in a heap of dismissive frustration.

Interpretive analysis. This episode shows how dissonant moments can quickly congeal over time to shift the atmosphere, and in turn, the team's sensemaking style, in this case to what we call *clashing*. Table 5 shows how this pattern was prevalent across all workshops, and that the atmosphere rarely shifted unless it was immediately preceded by dissonant moments. Similar to the episode around the deadline announcement, initially the team seemed to ignore moments of dissonant tonality despite clearly "registering" (and thus immanently sensing) them, as evident from their tonality. This allowed them to temporarily maintain the considering style of sensemaking, despite moments of atmospheric dissonance. However, possibly fueled by tiredness predisposing them to increased irritability and impatience, dissonant moments accumulated to the point where they could no longer be ignored, shifting the dominant atmosphere towards argumentative-dismissive interactions with a tense-sharp tonality. This engendered a change to a clashing sensemaking style characterized by a shift from curious-tentative language (e.g., "maybe," "I guess") towards argumentative-dismissive language (e.g.,

“but,” “no,” “can’t,” “never”) (see Table 4). As a result, the team only considered two mutually exclusive interpretations: (a) the identified problems (i.e., the app not handling multiple savings goals and people potentially exceeding their savings targets) are big and have non-obvious solutions (atmospherically centered around Ben), or (b) they are relatively trivial issues with straightforward solutions and the team should move on (atmospherically centered around Penny). The whole team fell into this oppositional pattern of interpretation, affectively drawn in to take sides.

Notably, the pattern continued even after Julian intervened by changing the topic in a dissonant, calmer tone. In other words, as Penny and Ben physically locked in on each other, creating a gravitational force that shifted the dominant atmosphere, the team could not consider alternatives to their mutually exclusive positions across multiple issues as long as the tense-sharp/argumentative-dismissive atmosphere remained dominant. Penny explained in her post-meeting interview that she was agitated because she felt that Ben was unnecessarily stalling progress: “Ben didn’t really understand what I was trying to say.” In other words, the argument was as much about the value of spending time on the issue as it was about addressing it. This suggests that the teleoaffectivity of “making progress” (especially immediately following the announcement of a tight deadline) played an important role in undermining the patient intercorporeal comportment necessary to maintain the considering sensemaking style.

DISCUSSION

In strategy-making workshops, the flow of practical activity that has been the primary focus of research on immanent sensemaking is the deliberate collective sensemaking process. This is because participants are explicitly tasked with making sense of new and/or ambiguous information, problems, opportunities, etc. In other words, the very purpose of strategy-making

workshops is to make sense of something, and this deliberate sensemaking is therefore its primary activity (Jarzabkowski & Seidl, 2008; Liu & Maitlis, 2014). This differentiates them from examples typically used to explicate individual immanent sensemaking processes associated with practical tasks, such as filling a ball mill (Ribeiro, 2017) or assisting with intubation (Hindmarsh & Pilnick, 2007), where immanent sensing of the movements, indicators, sounds, or “feel” of machines, instruments, tools, and/or other bodies facilitates task completion. This raises the question what immanent sensemaking involves in strategy-making workshops where the activity is not a practical individual task, but collective sensemaking itself.

Theorizing the Nature of Immanent Sensemaking in Strategy-Making Workshops

Our findings suggest that in strategy-making workshops, people immanently sense and affectively adjust “on the go” to the atmospheric dynamics that envelop the deliberate collective sensemaking process. This immanent corporeal sensing and adjusting is visible in *affected* and *affecting* bodily tonality and interaction which entangle to co-produce and shift atmospheres. That is, bodily tonality and interaction are both medium and outcome of the atmospheric dynamics that workshop participants immanently sense.

This recursive relationship is evident in moments of dissonance—brief instances in which the affective quality of tonality and interaction diverge from those that co-produce a particular atmosphere. Our findings show how such dissonant moments are often immediately “registered” or “sensed” by others in the form of subtle adjustments in their own bodily tonality and interaction. For example, in our case, even though team members were able to maintain the relaxed-calm/respectful-affirmative atmosphere following a tight deadline announcement by convincing themselves that “it should be good,” subtle changes in the affective quality of their bodily tonality and interaction revealed that they immanently sensed atmospheric dissonance. Importantly, these visible corporeal adjustments further amplified the atmospheric dissonance,

thus manifesting the immanent sense of collective surprise and anxiety in the room as an atmospheric undercurrent. Rather than arriving instantly and wholly formed, forms of relational affect such as surprise and anxiety emerge collectively as rapid changes and reciprocal adjustments in tonality and interaction amplify each other.

We therefore argue that the dynamic entanglement of tonality and interactions are an important medium through which atmosphere is collectively produced and experienced. Rather than immanently sensing what to *do* through non-verbal cues provided by, for example, the sound of a ball mill (Ribeiro, 2017) or the movements of an anesthetist (Hindmarsh & Pilnick, 2007), our findings suggest that immanent sensemaking in deliberate collective sensemaking practice involves sensing what to *feel* through corporeal absorption in the atmospheric dynamics of collective bodily tonality and interaction. This builds on Griffero (2019: 35) and his theorizing of atmosphere as a “tool for feeling” that provides “a solid structure to ... affective states [otherwise] destined to remain much more indeterminate.” Our analysis suggests that this process of affective “solidification” involves the continuous corporeal monitoring of, and adjusting to, collective bodily tonality and interaction which produce and shift atmosphere. In sum, immanent sensemaking in situations such as strategy-making workshops, where the flow of activity is oriented toward deliberate collective sensemaking, involves the corporeal sensing of, and adjusting to, atmospheric dynamics—or “sensing the room.”

How Atmosphere Affects Collective Sensemaking

Our findings suggest that atmosphere *enables* and *constrains* collective sensemaking by giving rise to distinctive sensemaking styles. While recent research has noted that sensemaking styles differ, these differences have typically been tied to individual leaders (e.g. Crayne & Medeiros, 2021; Watts, Steele, & Mumford, 2019). By contrast, we conceptualize sensemaking styles as collectively manifested within specific combinations of (a) entanglements of bodily

tonality and interaction, (b) language use, and (c) interaction patterns that can shape how an issue is likely to be framed and interpreted, thereby producing different sensemaking outcomes (see Table 4). In other words, immanent sensemaking of atmospheric dynamics is implicated in deliberate sensemaking by giving rise to distinctive collective sensemaking styles that shape not only *how* but also *what* sense is likely to be constructed.

The *enabling* role of atmosphere in collective sensemaking is evident in the different meanings that workshop participants attach to questions and answers, depending on the specific atmosphere in which they are uttered and received. In our case, when the atmosphere was relaxed-calm/respectful-affirmative, questions and answers were generally perceived as constructive contributions aimed at consolidating a shared understanding of the current situation and next steps. However, when a shift in atmosphere surfaced a clashing sensemaking style, questions and answers were generally perceived as argumentative dismissals of the opposing side's interpretation. Thus, atmospheres can shape possibilities for sensemaking by enabling specific understandings of the meanings of questions and answers that go *beyond* their manifest, literal linguistic content. Our findings suggest that this matters for sensemaking outcomes because the different sensemaking styles enabled by atmosphere make certain ways of framing and interpreting an issue more likely than others. For example, whereas the considering sensemaking style enables the development of tentative solutions to an agreed problem, the clashing sensemaking style and associated atmosphere is more likely to lead to the gradual entrenching of two mutually exclusive interpretations (see Table 4). Our conceptualization of sensemaking style as collective and enabled by atmosphere thus makes an important link from atmosphere to sensemaking outcomes, extending existing studies that have shown how bodily

enactments including non-verbal expressions can shape sensemaking (e.g., Meziani & Cabantous, 2020; Patriotta & Spedale, 2009).

Atmospheric dynamics not only enable, but also can *constrain* the collective sensemaking process. First, our findings show how atmospheres and their associated sensemaking styles tend to persist, informing specific ways of interpreting issues until the atmosphere shifts. For example, in our case, after a tense-sharp/argumentative-dismissive atmosphere had become dominant, the clashing sensemaking style was maintained even when the focal issue changed (e.g., Julian changed the topic after a brief lull in the clashing episode involving Ben and Penny). This emphasis on the self-perpetuating nature of atmospheres differs from existing research that considers work group moods to be a more or less stable characteristic of a group (see Bartel & Saveedra, 2000) that depends on members' initial interactions (e.g., Patriotta & Spedale, 2009). Instead, we argue that it is atmosphere and its related sensemaking style that can be “sticky” and constrain sensemaking, without this atmosphere necessarily being characteristic of the group. Second, we have shown how the team's sensemaking style only changed *after* a series of dissonant moments accumulated beyond a tipping point to shift the atmosphere. Hence, the link between variations in affective displays and the different sensemaking styles they enable and constrain may be less direct than previous research on the link between emotional displays and strategizing has implied (see Liu & Maitlis, 2014). Our analysis suggests that the atmospheric “undercurrent” that is created through an accumulation of dissonant moments needs to reach a certain threshold of affective intensity before collective sensemaking style shifts, and, with it, the typical way in which workshop participants interpret the issue at hand.

This is not to say that sensemaking style is wholly determined by atmosphere, because our findings also show how dissonance in bodily tonality and interaction can arise at any moment,

temporarily opening the *possibility* to establish an alternative affective context for sensemaking, and with it, the possibility for different sensemaking outcomes. Thus, atmosphere can be understood as a “possibility space” (Griffero, 2019)—a delimited set of experiential possibilities in the environment (Slaby, 2020)—for sensemaking. In other words, “by organizing the sense of all that we will see or hear” (Dufrenne, 1953: 450) atmospheres can make certain ways of interpreting the issue at hand more likely than others. Hence, when considering the role of atmosphere in sensemaking, we can rephrase Weick’s dictum, originally coined by novelist E. M. Forster, “How do I know what I think until I see what I say?” as follows: “How *can* we know what *we* think until we *feel* what is immanent?”, with this feeling arising through the dynamic collective entanglement of bodily tonality and interactions.

Implications for Sensemaking Research

Our conceptual framework elicits the entangled dynamics of bodily tonality and interactions through which atmosphere is co-produced and experienced, and the way these dynamics enable and constrain a collective sensemaking style until moments of atmospheric dissonance accumulate to a tipping point that shifts the atmosphere. This conceptual framework enables us to contribute to two streams in sensemaking research.

Immanent sensemaking. First, we extend recent theoretical advances that have drawn on Heideggerian existential phenomenology to theorize immanent sensemaking as “the most basic and common of all types” (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2020: 23) that makes more deliberate, conscious types of sensemaking possible (Introna, 2019). This approach lacks clarity on the relationship between immanent and deliberate collective sensemaking, at least partially because of its primary emphasis on the way individual sensemakers phenomenologically relate to their tools and surroundings in and through embodied practical action. Building from this primary focus, Sandberg and Tsoukas (2015) “escalation model” indicates that individuals shift “back

and forth” (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2020: 8) between immanent and more deliberate types of sensemaking. However, this iterative dynamic implies a temporary replacement of immanent sensemaking, despite the authors’ theorizing deliberate sensemaking as occurring “on the *background of ongoing* immanent sensemaking” (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2020: 24, italics added). In sum, even though the importance of immanent sensemaking is increasingly acknowledged in the sensemaking literature, theorization of the relationship between immanent and deliberate sensemaking, as well as the role of affect in this relationship, remains underdeveloped, especially in relation to collective sensemaking processes.

Our conceptual framework elaborates this relationship by foregrounding the importance of atmospheric dynamics for deliberate collective sensemaking processes. We suggest that the immanent sensing of atmosphere is a continuous affective and affecting background process that can enable and constrain more deliberate collective sensemaking processes, rather than shifting “back and forth” depending on whether the flow of practical activity is interrupted beyond the scope of what an individual’s body schema has come to anticipate (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2020). This is not to say that participants cannot become consciously aware of the atmospheric dynamics they are contributing to and engage in more deliberate forms of sensemaking in relation to atmosphere itself as a basis for initiating more conscious efforts to try and influence it. Rather, we suggest that the atmospheric processes we have identified run parallel to, and in the background of, whatever tasks people may be performing.

These insights extend research that has shown that co-presence is *in itself* an occasion for sensemaking because face-to-face interactions endogenously create meaning ambiguity (Patriotta & Spedale, 2009), and that inter-corporeal sensing and (re-)acting are critical for producing sense in these situations (Cunliffe & Coupland, 2012; Hindmarsh & Pilnick, 2007; Meziani &

Cabantous, 2020). Specifically, we deepen understanding of how bodily (inter)actions “bring forth meaning” by suggesting that this is not just because it is through their bodies that people intuitively sense and refine meaning in the bodily actions of others (Meziani & Cabantous, 2020: 1407). What *also* happens in this process is that the interacting bodies create a palpable atmosphere that affects what type of sense they are likely to produce in relation to the particular issue at hand. Indeed, we argue that what Patriotta and Spedale (2009:1227) referred to as “interaction orders”, defined as “sticky patterns of interaction that can affect the development and outcomes of group sensemaking,” *are* atmospheres. Atmospheres have this effect on collective sensemaking because any articulated sense about a particular issue at hand has already been shaped by the immanent sensing of atmosphere (see Introna, 2019). Thus, our study provides a conceptual and methodological apparatus for elaborating the consequentiality of this important affective dimension of sensemaking in future research across other settings.

In future research, it will be useful to more systematically explore the longitudinal effects of the atmospheric dynamics in specific meetings on both groups and individual participants. Although research in both organizational psychology (e.g. Bartel & Saavedra, 2000) and sensemaking (e.g. Patriotta & Spedale, 2009) has suggested that collective affect can become characteristic of a particular group and “set the tone” for future interactions, it remains unclear how this may be related to some of the atmospheric dynamics explored in this study. In future research, it also may be fruitful to consider whether and how atmospheres and their related sensemaking styles can shift as a partial result of shifts in the nature of the issues that a team typically encounters over the lifetime of a particular project.

Sensemaking and emotional valence. Second, we extend sensemaking research that has linked the emotional valence experienced during sensemaking to the extent to which it is

generative/creative vs. integrative/analytical in nature (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010; Maitlis et al., 2013; Stein, 2004). In this dualistic distinction, positive emotions spur generative sensemaking processes and allow for divergent and novel cues and frames to be constructed, whereas negative emotions spur integrative sensemaking processes that force a choice between consistency or inconsistency with prior accounts (Maitlis et al., 2013). An atmosphere lens enables a more fine-grained and nuanced understanding of the role of emotions during the sensemaking process beyond valence considerations.

Specifically, we suggest that sensemaking involves an affective moment-to-moment entanglement of interaction and tonality that is co-constitutive of the atmosphere in which sensemaking processes unfold. Our findings show how the specific sensemaking style this affords can affectively charge sensemaking processes in phenomenally specific ways that matter for how and what sense is made. Whereas *creating* involves a generative style that is organized around affirming and extending ideas (“yes, and”), *considering* is more tentative and pensive, involving an immanent but still open-ended evaluative element (“maybe”). In other words, these two sensemaking styles are generative in different ways. Moreover, even though the emotional valence of the former (creating) is clearly positive, considering is less easily characterized in terms of emotional valence, as its atmosphere is tinged with a tentativeness that can sometimes feel belabored and anxious (Vazard, 2022).

Similarly, *consolidating* is clearly integrative, as participants seek to summarize a shared understanding as a basis for drawing out its logical implications (“we know X, therefore ...”). Yet, its atmosphere is not negatively valenced. Indeed, Russell (1980) considered calmness to be positively valenced in his well-known circumplex model of affect. Finally, *clashing* may appear *disintegrative* in that the self-reinforcing nature of its negatively charged atmosphere can make

consensus less likely, at least temporarily. Yet, the clashing style can also be considered integrative because it reduces the many possible ways of interpreting an issue to an affectively forced choice between two mutually exclusive alternatives (“either-or”).

Hence, we suggest that it is necessary to move away from the extant dualistic understanding of the link between emotional valence and sensemaking’s generative or integrative orientation. A focus on how sensemaking styles are enabled and constrained by atmosphere can offer a more nuanced and phenomenally specific understanding of the different ways in which sensemaking can be generative or integrative. As such, the concept of atmosphere holds the potential to open important new avenues for research on affective sensemaking styles and their effects.

Implications for Strategy-as-Practice Research

Our study of the role of atmosphere in sensemaking also elaborates the affective dynamics through which strategy emerges as a situated and collective undertaking (Chia & Holt, 2023; Rouleau & Cloutier, 2022), thereby making a fundamental contribution to reinvigorating the strategy-as-practice (SAP) agenda (Jarzabkowski, Kavas, & Krull, 2021). SAP scholars (Jarzabkowski, Balogun, & Seidl, 2007; Knight et al., 2018; Vaara & Whittington, 2012) often draw from the definition of practice as a routinized type of behavior that consists of several interconnected elements: “forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, ‘things’ and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge” (Reckwitz, 2012: 249). Yet, as many recent critiques note (Jarzabkowski et al., 2021; Rouleau & Cloutier, 2022; Wenzel & Knight, Forthcoming), few SAP studies have been able to elucidate how these multimodal elements are interconnected in the everyday organizational practices that shape strategy-making. SAP scholars are thus exhorted to reveal the pre-reflective, unseeable “doings” involved in collective strategy-making and to explain their implications.

Our study of the role of atmosphere in strategy-making workshops addresses these calls by zooming in on the importance of immanent sensing of collective bodily tonality and interaction in producing strategically relevant sensemaking outcomes (Wenzel & Knight, Forthcoming). Thus, we identify an important “tool-in-use” not previously acknowledged in strategy research (Jarzabkowski & Kaplan, 2015) that is consistent with the situated nature of “practices-in-use” (Jarzabkowski, 2004): namely, bodies-in-use as dynamic “tools of and for feeling” that shape sensemaking possibilities in relation to strategic issues. This “tool-in-use” involves entangled tonality and interactions that both recursively construct the atmosphere and feed back into the possibilities for sense made in relation to this use. As such, bodies-in-use and the atmosphere they co-constitute are not tools that people consciously use as “aids” or signifiers of meaning (e.g. Gylfe et al., 2016), but rather “solidify” the affective experience through which sense is constructed.

This approach to bodies-in-use as a kind of strategy “tool” through which affect becomes collectively realized and able to shape sensemaking, allows us to extend conceptualizations of the body in strategy-as-practice research. To date, bodies and emotions in strategy-making have been studied predominantly as affective displays to be recognized and made sense of by others (Brundin et al., 2022; Liu & Maitlis, 2014; Vuori & Huy, 2020), and therefore, to be regulated or responded to by skillful managers to shape strategic outcomes (e.g., Vuori & Huy, 2020). For example, embodied gestures are used to claim strategy-making spaces (Jarzabkowski & Kaplan, 2015), control others’ interpretations (Paroutis et al., 2015), and guide external audiences’ reactions (Gylfe et al., 2016). In much of this research, including studies of strategy workshops and meetings comparable to ours (Hodgkinson, Whittington, Johnson, & Schwarz, 2006; Jarzabkowski & Seidl, 2008), bodies and emotions are treated as inputs that provoke and respond

to cues for sensemaking that lead to particular strategy outcomes (Liu & Maitlis, 2014; Treffers et al., 2020; Vuori & Huy, 2020)—that is, bodies are framed as tools of interpretation. By contrast, our conceptual framework shows that atmosphere is not a set of cues to be controlled or responded to, but an enabling and constraining affective background manifested moment-to-moment through bodies-in-use within rapidly changing entanglements of tonality and interaction. Critically, this dynamic background affects—in both the causal and emotional sense of the word—any sense made. Thus, our approach shifts attention from strategic sensemaking to how atmosphere, through bodily interactions and tonality, shapes the *possibilities* for sensemaking and thus, strategy-making.

Implications for Atmosphere Research

Finally, our conceptual framework, which elicits the entangled inter-corporeal dynamics involved in producing atmosphere and explains how they shift, has important methodological and theoretical implications for the burgeoning stream of research on atmosphere in organizations (Julmi, 2017). Much of this research has focused on the spatial-material dimension of atmosphere, “attending to the force of matter in organizational life and the affective relations and intensities that flow from this” (Bell & Vachhani, 2020: 681). This has included discussing the role (and limits) of aesthetic spatial engineering in producing atmospheres (e.g., De Molli et al., 2020; Jørgensen & Holt, 2019) and the conceptualization of materiality as intrinsically atmospheric (Leclair, 2022).

Although this work offers important insights into the relationship between materiality and affect, our findings shed light on the role of bodily tonality and interaction in co-producing atmospheres. Slaby (2019a: 63) referred to this process as “animated mutuality”—the interplay of gaze, gesture, posture, movement rhythm, tone, and pitch of voice through which an immersive sphere of relatedness is established and then jointly lived-through. Our findings

suggest that this element of atmosphere is important because it is through dissonant moments in embodied encounters that atmospheres can begin to shift. We extend research that has pointed to the tension between material design and the indeterminacy of atmospheres (Michels & Steyaert, 2017) by elaborating why and how bodily interactions contribute to this indeterminacy. We suggest that even the most sophisticated aesthetic design techniques can be rendered ineffectual, at least temporarily, by the processuality of atmospheres, as the slightest moment of drifting tonality and interaction can sow the seeds for atmospheric shifts. For example, the very same comfortable sofa that invited a relaxed posture and contributed to the team's sense of participating in something special and innovative suddenly felt awkwardly dissonant when interactions became tense. Thus, our findings contribute to a better understanding of the challenges involved in "engineering" atmospheres by drawing attention to the transient affective qualities of materiality.

Our framework for conceptualizing atmosphere also highlights the importance of the specific social domain of practice—or practice world (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2020)—that channels and modulates the scenes of animated mutuality through which atmosphere emerges and shifts. This practice world includes not only the specific material design features that afford particular affective experiences in a setting, which has been the primary focus of atmosphere research in organizations to date, but also the conduct, styles and demeanors that normatively apply to this setting, as well as its purpose or "telos." Our findings suggest that these practice world elements can have an important effect on atmospheric dynamics, too. For example, in our case, norms of "professionalism" clearly applied to all interactions, orienting affective displays towards cool, serious, and respectful restraint even when tensions manifested. The combination of perceived importance, visibility and time pressure imposed by E-Bank's senior management added an

affective weight of seriousness to everything the project team did. The team's teleoaffective commitment to "making progress" in order to "deliver a high-quality app before the deadline" also likely fueled some of the clashing episodes we observed, because an important part of the frustration on display was driven by the sense that the team was being held back, unable to progress towards the objective as quickly as they desired.

This suggests that the normative and teleoaffective dimensions of practice (see Schatzki, 1997; Schatzki, 2002) likely play an important role in atmospheric dynamics in addition to materiality. Exploring this role more deeply and systematically is therefore an important area for future research. An important methodological consideration in such research will be the limits of relying primarily on video data to study the role of affect, which cannot be gauged from visible displays of bodily tonality and interaction in a relatively straightforward way. Recent work (de Rond et al., 2019; De Rond et al., 2022) has shown that phenomenological ethnography—which highlights the importance of the researcher's own subjective bodily experiences when studying the phenomenology of practice performances—can offer complementary methodological tools through which the study of atmosphere may be advanced

Scholars could also deploy our methodological approach in future research to study the relationship between atmosphere and authority, which has recently been reconceptualized as a "practical, relational, and situated performance" in which relations between actors and actants—including material objects and artifacts at hand—are foregrounded and backgrounded "to shape the situation and steer collective action" (Bourgoin, Bencherki, & Faraj, 2020: 1134). Building on these insights, recent work has begun to explore the affective and material qualities of performing authority (Mukherjee & Thomas, 2023). Relatedly, Massumi has suggested that this process involves a skill of drawing bodies into atmospheres that are conducive to certain

possibilities over others Massumi (2009). Specifically, he has emphasized that authority is played out through “affective tonality,” or the ability to “attune bodies” by eliciting “cuts” or “microshocks” that affect them. Our analytic approach, which focuses on the entanglement of tonality and interaction and the role of dissonant moments in reconfiguring these entanglements, would lend itself well to studying authority through this atmospheric lens. While authority was not the focus of our analysis, others might examine whether some people have a disproportionate effect on the collective tonality and interaction at different times, in effect authoritatively “setting the tone” for others. Whether this is a skill that can be learned and consciously deployed, to what effect, and how it relates to formal authority are important open questions through which the study of atmosphere in organizations can be advanced further.

CONCLUSION

Griffero (2019) pointed out that a sunny day can increase the melancholy of a funeral and the beauty of a landscape can be resented precisely because it is felt as beautiful. Hence, atmospheres must be understood in relation to both the specific practice world and the moment-to-moment bodily interactions that bring them to life (Slaby, 2019b). Although the affinities between the turn to practice and the turn to affect have been repeatedly acknowledged in both social theory (Reckwitz, 2012; Wetherell, 2012) and organization research (e.g., Bell & Vachhani, 2020; Gherardi, Murgia, Bellè, Miele, & Carreri, 2019) attempts at cross-fertilization are nascent. As a result, our understanding of the phenomenology of practice remains quite limited (De Rond et al., 2022). Our study shows how this understanding may be advanced by paying closer attention to the “mundane corporeality” (Strati, 2007: 66) of sensemaking in workshops and meetings. Doing so can reveal how even the most ordinary and uneventful

interactions in everyday organizational life are infused with a wondrously rich affectivity, the composition and effects of which we have yet to grasp more fully.

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TABLE 1

Timeline of Key Events

Date	Event History
November 2015	E-Bank's CEO approves the digital strategy
February 2016	Longreach program formed, team members selected, Patrick identified as leader
March 2016	Pre-existing research compiled (e.g., customer analysis, E-Bank strategy documents)
June 2016	Longreach team members convene to discuss strategic problems
July 2016	Customer interviews and market research conducted by various members
September 2016	Initial hypothesis around spending focus presented by Ben
October 2016	Contestation around direction, including wealth management, consumer credit, savings
November 2016	Commitment to a hybrid savings-spending app
December 2016	Budget support and approval from E-Bank's CEO to further develop app prototype
January 2017	First prototype app developed and presented at Longreach workshop
February 2017	App is challenged in relation to savings-spending balance
April 2017	Significant revisions and more advanced version of app developed
May 2017	Customer testing on app
June 2017	Feedback discussed in Longreach workshop
July 2017	Marketing collateral and distribution strategy presented to Longreach team
August 2017	Fully functioning prototype presented to Longreach team
September 2017	Approval from E-Bank's CEO to launch app by Christmas
November 2017	Validation, stress testing, and IT requirements completed on app
December 2017	App soft launched in market

TABLE 2
Data Corpus and Use in the Analysis

Source	Type of data	Description	Use in the analysis
Observations	<i>Strategy-making workshops:</i> Video data of interactions between managers and consultants <i>Operational meetings:</i> Audio recordings of operational meetings within E-Bank <i>Design meetings:</i> Audio recordings of app design meetings	12 strategy-making workshops (26 hours) 26 operational meetings (14 hours) 15 design meetings (10 hours)	<i>Video data:</i> Map the body-talk-material interactions <i>Operational and design meeting transcripts:</i> Follow how strategy is implemented based on the workshops
Interviews	<i>Interviews:</i> Semi-structured interviews with managers and consultants on how strategy-making workshops unfolded	8 CEO interviews 8 serial interviews with 3 E-Bank managers (24 interviews) 8 serial interviews with 2 E-Bank consultants (16 interviews)	<i>Interviews:</i> Understand evolving interpretations of the strategy and communication challenges experienced in the workshops
Other supporting data	<i>Computer programs:</i> Digital prototypes with comments, Trello boards with notes, design plans <i>Photographs:</i> Photographs of whiteboard drawings, and Post-it note groupings <i>Handouts:</i> Paper copies of app, summary documents of strategy	244 instances of screenshots illustrating the prototype, strategy planning, or design process 156 photos 18 physical handouts	<i>Computer programs:</i> Original and changed representations of strategy <i>Photographs:</i> Changes to the configuration of materials as a result of discourse-body interactions <i>Handouts:</i> Representation of strategy prompting discussion

TABLE 3
Four Dominant Atmospheres

Dominant atmosphere	Tonality	Interaction	Illustrative data
Relaxed-calm/ respectful- affirmative	Relaxed-calm <i>Facial:</i> rested, eased, friendly expression; frequent smiling <i>Vocal:</i> positive tone; cheerful tone; measured speed of speech <i>Postural:</i> still posture; relaxed shoulders, e.g., leaning back on the sofa	Respectful-affirmative <i>Bodily interactions:</i> nodding; gently turning toward other participants; slow and controlled movements; reciprocal movements <i>Verbal interactions:</i> acknowledging statements (“Yes, that’s a good point;” “OK, so we agree that we will...”); gestures that support the verbal statements (e.g., circular arm movements, pointing).	<i>Fieldnotes:</i> The atmosphere feels “pleasant,” like comfortable weather on a fine, still, sunny day. Interactions feel predictable, “measured,” and “moderately paced” (Fieldnotes, Workshop 1). <i>Interview data:</i> “The meeting felt like it proceeded in slow paced cycles” (Ben, Workshop 1); “We started slow as a way to build trust and make things feel very relaxed” (Patrick, Workshop 1).
Tense-sharp/ argumentative- dismissive	Tense-sharp <i>Facial:</i> frowning; blinking with focused eyes; strained, frustrated expression <i>Vocal:</i> irritated tone; louder voice; staccato expression <i>Postural:</i> tight shoulders; nervous habits, e.g., rubbing hands together	Argumentative-dismissive <i>Bodily interactions:</i> strong pointing; oppositional positioning of participants’ bodies; standing over others; standing up in interactions; gestures that indicate tension like wiping hands on trousers <i>Verbal interactions:</i> contradicting one another (“No, but;” “I don’t think that would work because”); interrupting and talking over one another	<i>Fieldnotes:</i> The atmosphere feels like a thick storm, with a sense of shock and fear. It feels “unstable.” “Ben seems to be playing the contrarian and making things difficult for the participants” (Fieldnotes, Workshop 2). <i>Interview data:</i> “I got a little frustrated when we couldn’t move on from [a particular feature on the app]” (Julian, Workshop 3); “Things got a little tense, for sure” (Penny, Workshop 5).
Pensive-serious/ tentative-curious	Pensive-serious <i>Facial:</i> raising eyebrow; rubbing eyes; focused, concentrated expression <i>Vocal:</i> reflective tone; querying tone; pauses <i>Postural:</i> head tilted to ceiling; leaning forward in an open, engaged posture	Tentative-curious <i>Bodily interactions:</i> Leaning on elbow in a thinking posture; eye and head movements that point diagonally up to indicate thinking; slow movements; deliberately looking beyond participants to avoid eye contact <i>Verbal interactions:</i> statements that slow or stall progression in the conversation (“I wonder what customers would say if we told them that...?” “That’s an interesting idea, and I wonder if...”); open questions that are not answered	<i>Fieldnotes:</i> The atmosphere feels like a fog: there is a sense of “uncertainty” around how things will resolve themselves (Fieldnotes, Workshop 2). Interactions feel tentative without being tense. <i>Interview data:</i> “[That moment in the workshop] was more of an opportunity to kind of sit back and reflect and maybe even just go off on a tangent somewhere else” (Patrick, Workshop 4).
Excited-buoyant/ enthusiastic- affirmative	Excited-buoyant <i>Facial:</i> wide-eyed; open-faced <i>Vocal:</i> laughing; fast speech; louder voice <i>Postural:</i> standing; active hand gestures; use of artifacts; sudden hand movements	Enthusiastic-affirmative <i>Bodily interactions:</i> energetic hand movements; using artifacts to build on and illustrate what is being said <i>Verbal interactions:</i> building on other statements; finishing others’ statements (“Yes, and;” “That’s a good one, let’s put that up there”); amplifying and emphasizing another person’s statement	<i>Fieldnotes:</i> The atmosphere feels energizing and exciting. There is a “sense of momentum” as ideas seem to “jump off the wall.” Interactions feels like they are “buzzing” and on edge (Fieldnotes, Workshop 3). <i>Interview data:</i> “It was really fun. Ideas were just streaming out all over the place” (Cynthia, Workshop 2); “I would say it was very engaged. People were feeling energized” (Julian, Workshop 2).

TABLE 4
Types of Sensemaking Styles

Sensemaking style (dominant atmosphere)	Definition	Illustrative example of language use	Typical interaction pattern	Illustrative example of sensemaking style	Typical outcome
Consolidating (Relaxed-calm/ respectful- affirmative)	Clarifying interpretations and ideas through affirmative factual language	"So, just to confirm ..." "Has X been completed?" "So, do we agree that ... ?"	Sequential, moderately paced Q&A pattern between dyads	<i>Context: Participants are learning about an important part of the business</i> Patrick: So that's the [loan] origination team's scope and approach for the next 12 months. (<i>Pointing to picture on wall. Looks at each consultant, seeking their acknowledgement</i>) Penny: Do you give yourself time limits on how long you work on phases [of a project]...? (<i>Nodding, raising hand to verify what he sees on the board</i>) Patrick: Yes, we have different phases. (<i>Nodding back</i>)	Shared understanding of current status and next steps
Considering (Pensive-serious/ tentative-curious)	Searching for interpretations and ideas through tentative explorative language	"Maybe when you ..." "Perhaps what we could do is..." "I guess ..."	Distributed, slow-paced cycles of (re)interpretations and suggestions	Patrick: What can we add around notification and reinforcement [on the app interface]? (<i>Looking into the distance; long pause</i>) Ben: The summary [of your spending]? (<i>Long pause</i>) How you went? Cynthia: How you track it? (<i>Offering an alternative phrase, but also looking away</i>) Patrick: "Do you want to reset your goals," maybe? (<i>Offering another phrase</i>) Penny: Maybe when you send the summary at the end of the week you can just change it [the goal] easily here. Doesn't have to be a prompt or separate notification, its more—(<i>Drifting off mid-thought</i>) Cynthia: (<i>After a pause</i>) Quite an intellectual challenge. Patrick: Yeah. (<i>Speaking and turning around slowly</i>)	Tentative understanding of a provisional solution to an issue that is collectively interpreted as significant
Clashing (Tense-sharp/ argumentative- dismissive)	Entrenching interpretations and ideas through argumentative oppositional language	"No..." "But..." "Can't..." "Never"	Repetitive, increasingly fast-paced back and forth pattern between two camps	Ben: What am I going to do if I get to my savings goal early? (<i>Speaking in a critical tone</i>) Penny: You can choose what you do with it: you can either spend it, or save it. Ben: But what do I do with it? (<i>Sounding irritated as if Penny has missed the point</i>) Penny: You will be in front of the racehorse. So, you make the decision as the saver. (<i>Responding sharply, indicating she understands the point</i>) Julian: Then we need something that says: "You have reached your goal!" Ben: But what if I have \$500, and I don't want to put it toward my E-Bank savings account. What if I just want to keep it in the [cash management] account? Penny: It only ruins your racehorse, but not your goal. Ben: But then that's problematic. I'm happy to save toward my holiday. But if I say, "Don't add to my holiday," what do I do with it? What do we do with that person? (<i>More emphatic now as he reiterates his point</i>)	Apparent choice between two mutually exclusive interpretations
Creating (Excited-buoyant/ enthusiastic- affirmative)	Building on interpretations and ideas through affirmative cumulative language	"Yes, agreed, and we could also ..." "Good idea! And ..." "Uh-huh, and what that means is ..."	Distributed, fast-paced exchange of agreements and new ideas	<i>Context: Participants have been asked to identify research tasks to diagnose E-Bank's main customer problems</i> Ben: We did a lot of competitive and comparative inquiry of hard data, but in terms of contextual interviews, enquiries and understanding how people spend money during the week... Cynthia: (<i>Interjecting</i>) And their devices... Ben: ... Right...and what kind of connectivity and engagement they have with various kind of touchpoints like you were saying before—like bank accounts—we <i>don't</i> have a fantastic handle on that at the moment. ... But in terms of getting that contextual experiential kind of word of mouth—"don't tell me, show me"—that we could do more of [through this project]. Patrick: Mmm, that's a good one actually. (<i>Nodding and looking at the whiteboard as Ben turns around to document this suggestion</i>) Ben: So, is that like social engagement research? Patrick: Yes, let's put that one on there.	Shared understanding around positive possibilities and potential

FIGURE 1
The Prevalence of Dominant Atmospheres across Workshops

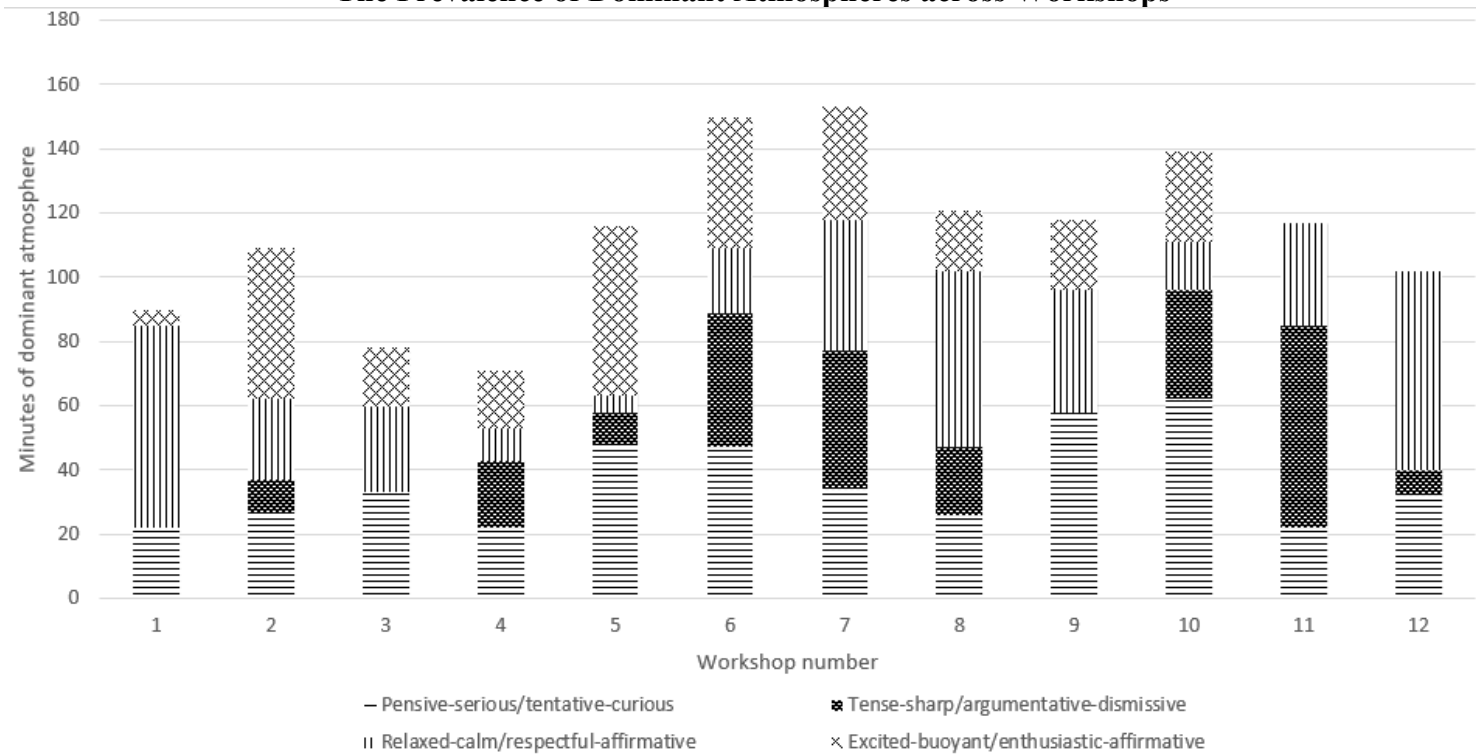


TABLE 5
Dissonant Moment Patterns Across Workshops

Workshop number	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Number of atmosphere shifts	5	9	6	4	8	11	8	4	7	6	10	5
Groupings of dissonant moments leading to shifts	5	8	6	4	8	10	8	4	6	6	10	5
Groupings of dissonant moments subsiding	4	9	7	5	8	12	6	4	6	5	10	6

TABLE 6
Visual Illustrative Evidence from Representative Examples



Image 1. Office layout approximates a lounge room



Image 2. Patrick on the right-hand-side slightly elevated above the couch



Image 3. Patrick leans forward from his swivel chair and changes topic.



Image 4. Cynthia leans forward as Patrick presents on the screen

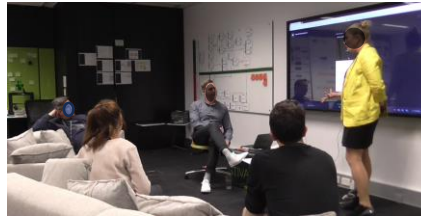


Image 5. Penny stands up next to the screen in a moment of frustration