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To cite this article: Humera Manzoor, Manuela Nocker & Ilaria Boncori (2022): The performativity and politics of emotions in NHS boards, Culture and Organization, DOI: [10.1080/14759551.2022.2105337](https://doi.org/10.1080/14759551.2022.2105337)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14759551.2022.2105337>



Published online: 29 Jul 2022.



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The performativity and politics of emotions in NHS boards

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ABSTRACT

This paper highlights the performative value and political power of emotions in public sector board governance. We explore how board members display, manage and (re)negotiate emotions both purposefully and unconsciously through interactions in a UK National Health Service (NHS) Foundation Trust. This topic is investigated through an ethnonarrative approach and a performative perspective to understand the role and value of emotions in this particular organizational setting. Our data, captured through interviews and participant observations, highlight the inherent performative and political nature of emotions established through ritualized practice, impromptu displays, emotion norms, and power dynamics. We also highlight the purposeful instigation and manipulation of emotions to pursue individual or collective agendas. This paper thus contributes to both performance theory and the study of emotions management in organizations by exploring how the politics of emotions and emotion norms are experienced as valuable resources in the context of public board governance.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 9 March 2019

Accepted 15 July 2022

KEYWORDS

Emotions norms; board governance; performance theory; ethnonarrative; NHS

Introduction

The National Health Service (NHS) was founded in the UK in 1948 following reforms implemented after the Second World War. Remarkably innovative at the time, the new service established by the Health Minister, Aneurin Bevan, aimed to be comprehensive, universal and free at the point of delivery. The UK NHS includes NHS England, NHS Scotland, NHS Wales, and Health and Social Care in Northern Ireland – which are operating independently and are politically accountable to the relevant government. In April 2004, the first NHS Foundation Trusts were set up with a business-like governance structure consisting of boards of directors and boards of governors. The aim was to minimize governmental influence and to involve local organizations and communities to make the Trusts more responsive to their needs. The board of directors exercises all the powers on behalf of the Trusts and provides strategic leadership and direction to the Trusts. They set organizational values and culture and supervise the work of executive directors. The board of governors represents the interests of the public and holds non-executive directors accountable for the Trust performance. They can appoint and/or remove the chairperson and the non-executive directors. Also, they can approve the appointment of the chief executive director by the chairperson and other non-executive directors. The different roles, power, and status of the two boards create a dynamic political and emotional environment within and beyond the boardroom.

Although board meetings can be seen as bureaucratic and disembodied events, this study highlights the value and dynamics of the use of emotions in this organizational context. The ‘affective

revolution' in organizational studies has significantly advanced our conceptual understanding of emotions at work (Ashkanasy and Dorris 2017). Research on the management of emotion has investigated emotions dynamics and the use of specific emotions in challenging organizational settings (see Patient, Lawrence, and Maitlis 2003; Sims 2005; Vince 2006; Sloan and Oliver 2013; Nguyen and Janssens 2019), and explored emotions as a mechanism of control or action in the workplace (Fineman 1993; Lindebaum 2017; Wijaya and Heugens 2017; Ruebottom and Auster 2018; Crawford and Dacin 2020). Hochschild's (1983) seminal work on emotion management contributed significantly to changing the perspective on emotions – from being an irrational and marginal by-product of organizing, to becoming an integral aspect of the everyday life in organizations (Perrone and Vickers 2004). Fewer studies emphasize the role of emotions in shaping proactive behaviours that influence interpersonal encounters and decision-making (Liu et al. 2006).

Over the years, two different, but related, research streams have enhanced our understanding of emotion management: one concentrates on emotional experiences (i.e. inner emotional states/subjective feelings and their antecedents and consequences) and the other on emotional expressions/displays (i.e. the communication function in social interactions) (Fisher and Ashkanasy 2000; Liu et al. 2006). Whilst research to date has largely focussed on the management of inner emotional experiences, in this study, we bring together Goffman's performance theory and Hochschild's theory to focus on emotion displays. We highlight how emotions can be seen as performative and political, illustrated through the context of board meetings. We are interested in how emotional responses can be used to shift agendas and instigate change, which has been previously studied, for instance, in relation to protecting the self from abusive organizations (Perrone and Vickers 2004); regulating leader-subordinate relationships (Glasø et al. 2006); inducing compliance (Rafaeli and Sutton 1991); pushing agendas during negotiations (Overbeck, Neale, and Govan 2010), and compelling people to adhere to emotion norms (Peralta, Saldanha, and Lopes 2020). However, there is still a paucity of research investigating the role and value of emotion as influential and powerful tools for control and resistance in a highly political context, as addressed in this study.

Despite the recent surge in the study of emotions, the definition of emotions remains disputed due to the inherent tensions and contradictions between various theoretical lenses and subjects of inquiry. For example, the physiological/organismic perspective locates emotions in human physiology and describes them as inherent. On the other hand, the social constructionist approach followed in this study considers social and cultural contexts as fundamental in making sense of emotions (Hochschild 1979; Lupton 1998). Echoing conversations in this journal, we understand emotions as informed by psychoanalytic and social constructionist approaches (Ulus and Gabriel 2018; Brewis 2021), whereby unconscious processes influence emotional dynamics alongside cognitive processing (Fein and Isaacson 2009) both at the individual and group level, and are also influenced by social, cultural, and discursive practices. In this paper, we espouse existing definitions posing that whilst feelings are experienced consciously (Bericat 2016), emotions can manifest either consciously or unconsciously (Prinz 2005). We understand emotions as relational, intersubjective, and requiring a social and environmental context for 'meaning-making' of situations and related emotional experiences that further (re)shape interactions and relationships (Bolton 2005; Fineman 2000, 2006; Lupton 1998; Tiedens 2004). Through this lens, emotions become an organizational and cultural phenomenon shaped by emotion norms that emerge from social contexts and power dynamics (Hochschild 1979; Ulus and Gabriel 2018). Subsequently, we argue that emotions in boards are both 'performed' – as per Goffman's (1959) theatrical metaphor – and 'done' with a purpose with regards to board governance, irrespective of whether they are intentionally deployed or activated unconsciously. The use of emotions can thus be considered political because these are entrenched in dynamics of power, hierarchy, dominant and resisting discourses. In line with our theoretical framework, we follow Goffman's definition of power as 'situated within the practicalities of what people do' and 'as mundane matter of everyday relationships between ends, on the one hand, and ways and means, on the other' (Jenkins 2008, 59). The aim of power in this context is

to ‘exercise intended and effective influence’ on others to achieve personal and organizational goals (Wrong 1995, 4), often through manipulation, persuasion, and negotiation.

This study, we contend, adds depth to the understanding of both emotions management and board dynamics, helping us to address what James and Arroba (2005) call the unfamiliar ‘beneath-the-surface’ life of organizations. It reveals the way emotions are political, and how emotion norms are created, resisted, and contested to defy power and to gain space in boards. This is achieved through the integration of two theoretical perspectives – performance theory (Goffman 1959), and emotion management theory (Hochschild 1979). Hence, we address two main questions: how are emotions managed and performed in board meetings? How are emotions used purposefully or unconsciously on boards to achieve desired objectives?

Our research contributes to explorations of the value and role of emotions in boards, which is still an underdeveloped topic in the study of public governance. We explore this with a focus on understanding how emotions are displayed and managed between two groups of board members with different hierarchical levels, agendas, and competences. We draw from performance theory and data in the context of NHS boards in the UK to argue that emotions are performative and political at the individual and group level and have a ‘doing aspect’ irrespective of whether they are intentional or unconscious.

This paper is structured as follows: it begins by exploring emotions as a performance enacted within boards, and it then outlines the methodological perspectives and methods followed in this research to capture and analyse emotions. Following some contextual background on NHS Foundation Trust boards, our chosen theoretical frameworks of Goffman’s (1959) performance theory and Hochschild’s (1979) emotion management theory inform our analysis and the presentation of our findings. Performance analysis was the main tool employed to reveal the unspoken and taken-for-grantedness nature of the politics of emotions involved in board interactions. Part 1 of our findings shows the way powerful actors set emotion norms in boards, whilst part 2 shows where organizational actors display various emotions to either maintain or resist the dominant emotion norms. The three ‘acts’ in part 2 show how emotions are used as mechanisms of influence to resist or reinforce norms, either individually or collectively. Finally, we discuss the role and value of performing emotions in board settings, together with the political character of emotional displays, before drawing our conclusions.

Emotions as ‘performance’ in professional settings

Contemporary research on emotions in boards shows that emotions play a key role in understanding processual, relational, and behavioural aspects of boardroom governance and that emotions are natural and important attributes of the inner context of the board itself (e.g. Bezemer, Nicholson, and Pugliese 2014; Brundin and Nordqvist 2008; Machold and Farquhar 2013; Pugliese, Nicholson, and Bezemer 2015; Samra-Fredericks 2000, 2003, 2004). A few studies suggest that board members use emotions rhetorically to influence strategic processes (Samra-Fredericks 2004), but the performatory role of emotions and its political value in boards have yet to be fully explored, even though the use of emotions as a lens to study board processes can offer richer insights about interactional board dynamics and related social relationships (Samra-Fredericks 2000; Brundin and Nordqvist 2008).

Little is known regarding inner board dynamics of public sector boards and the emotions produced therein (Ferlie, Ashburner, and Fitzgerald 1995; Peck 1995; Veronesi and Keasey 2010). In particular, processes related to participants’ sense-making regarding board roles, the sharing of power and influence, and the way board members collectively work together as groups have often been overlooked in research on public and NHS boards (Ferlie et al. 1996; Veronesi and Keasey 2010). Existing research on the boardroom focuses on investigating the impact of various broadly defined ‘factors’ – such as new public management on board effectiveness and performance (e.g. Ferlie, Ashburner, and Fitzgerald 1995, 1996; Prybil 2006). Traditional research on public boards is more

prescriptive in nature as it suggests *what boards should do* to increase performance and effectiveness (e.g. Cornforth 2003; Farrell 2005), rather than concentrating on the understanding of *how boards work*.

Boards can be understood as socio-organizational spaces due to multiple interactions of various actors involved in the governance process and where emotional performances are enacted both within and outside their formal boundaries (Huse 2009). Space is important in considering power and politics in organization as the inter-relationship between physical and social space can be a marker of how power is acquired, displayed, and enacted by individuals interacting in a shared space – in this case, the boardroom meetings. This is in line with Goffman's (1959) view in which the world is a stage inhabited by social actors who perform a role as part of their daily lives, like actors on stage in a theatre. Contrary to theatrical performance, actors in real life are often weary of their public-facing emotional performances; this is to avoid the display of 'inappropriate' emotions, repercussions or even failure since the stakes of failed performance are much higher in socio-organizational life than in theatrical performances (Höpfel and Linstead 1997). Drawing on Bolton (2005) to explore how feeling rules guide emotions management, Brewis (2021) highlights the important interaction between personal and publicly displayed emotions. Dramaturgical theory (Goffman 1959) introduces the concept of a 'frontstage' and a 'backstage' in various lived contexts. The frontstage is the public space where actors perform emotions – often following a script – when 'acting' in public board meetings; the backstage, however, is a private space away from the public eye where the actors can vent and entertain certain emotions not allowed on the front stage. Actors can relax, even rehearse, or think about their performances while in the backstage (Bergman Blix 2014), but emotions are not necessarily relegated there – emotion norms define 'how much' and 'to whom' emotions should be revealed irrespective of the actor's positioning (Fineman 1993). This emotion management in the backstage echoes the notion of 'emotional dirty work' (see Höpfel 1992; Fraher 2017; Mikkelsen 2021) done in contrast to the performative 'charade' of the professional facade (Fraher 2017, 131), whereby emotions that are deemed inappropriate or dangerous are carried out in non-public facing spaces. In highlighting the invisible politics of emotion rather than focussing on felt emotions, our findings explore the emotion dynamics displayed and managed in the boardroom. These emotion displays can be in line or in contrast with contextual emotion norms; intentional or unplanned; spontaneously or unconsciously displayed.

Emotion norms are, in fact, 'feeling rules' (Hochschild 1979) or 'traffic rules of interactions' (Goffman 1967) that govern our emotion displays. Often unspoken and implicit, emotion norms define the appropriateness of emotions and determine which emotions are dysfunctional or 'good practice' (Fineman 1993; Ostell 1996). Hence, emotion norms act as a 'script' that provides social or organizational guidelines for appropriate emotional displays in a specific setting (Bolton 2005). Emotion norms work in line with 'framing rules' – the way 'individuals ascribe definitions or meanings to situations' – as the (re)definition of a situation alters emotion norms (Hochschild 1979, 566). Framing rules tend to shape feelings, emotional displays and interaction rules (Ashforth and Saks 2002), both at the individual and group level. Thus, different framing rules lead to the creation of different emotion norms which are managed and negotiated amongst individuals (consciously or unconsciously) to gain legitimacy and acceptance of performed emotions (Bolton 2005). Further, emotion norms can act as control mechanisms (Martin, Knopoff, and Beckman 1998), and become discriminatory when used to privilege or marginalize individuals with different levels of power (Wingfield 2014), insiders and outsiders (Ulus and Gabriel 2018). Consequently, individuals can also use 'inappropriate' emotions that are outside of the dominant norms to resist the powerful (Hochschild 1979). On the other hand, powerful actors may encourage or coerce conformity by imposing sanctions to compel individuals to follow their emotion norms (Bolton 2005). Actors may elicit or suppress emotions to achieve their socio-political goals, thus highlighting the political nature of emotions (Jarvis, Goodrick, and Hudson 2019). Hence, power dynamics inherently created due to contested and/or discriminatory emotion norms allow individuals to use emotions 'as mechanisms of interpersonal influence' (Liu et al. 2006, 161) or as forms of resistance (Yilmaz

2013). As such, emotions can be used in response to planned or unplanned circumstances to influence others, legitimize positions, and achieve personal or organizational goals (Peralta, Sal-danha, and Lopes 2020). We pose that this is also relevant to board meetings where emotions are performed and managed in different spaces both as a result of plans and as more spontaneous responses. Here organizational actors use various emotions to keep the definition of the situation intact (i.e. framing rules) (Scheibe and Barrett 2017) and may not be consciously aware of their purposeful use of emotions (Clark 1990). Emotional displays can therefore be seen as embodied individual performances linked to impression management, sensitive to social hierarchies and inequalities (Schwalbe 1993).

Emotions are embedded in social, organizational, and situational norms, also known as the 'social framework', with a strategic role (Hochschild 1979; Shott 1979; Fineman 2004; Bergman Blix 2015). In line with dramaturgical understandings, people in the 'frontstage' must perform appropriate emotions set by the dominant group, follow the given normative rules of the context, and avoid any deviant acts. Such embodied and discursively accomplished performances of emotions can be viewed as a learned skill that is used at different hierarchical levels to persuade, shift, pursue or achieve desired agendas, which could be either hidden or apparent. Hence, a successful performance of emotions in board settings is judged on whether the social/organizational 'actors' can cast their influence on the audience and ultimately achieve their objectives, and not on the actual truth of the emotions on display.

Accessing and analysing emotions in boardrooms

Emotions are difficult to study as they are 'elusive-private, intangible, transient, unmanageable, and even "unknowable"', often concealed and disguised, and existing 'beyond (but also part of) reason and consciousness' (Sturdy 2003, 81–82). Methodological debates on capturing, measuring, and understanding emotions in social contexts show that the study of emotions has often been a challenge for researchers (Olson, Godbold, and Patulny 2014), and particularly in difficult settings, such as boards, that tend to be of a confidential or political nature. Observations of the natural occurrences and events expressed through participants' interactions, words, recollections, writings, body language or other symbols of feeling and emotions are considered the best method to study emotions in a situated relational context (Fineman 2006).

This study used a combination of ethnography and interview narratives/stories, also known as 'the ethnonarrative approach', to explore the nuances of this topic in more depth. The use of multiple methods is helpful in understanding situated emotions in natural settings (Bellocchi 2015). Ethnography helps to access emotions through observations in context as they happen over time and space, often without being made explicit (Sturdy 2003; Boudens 2005; Fineman 2006; Hansen 2006; Nugent and Abolafia 2007; Kleres 2010). In our study, interviews proved challenging to arrange with members of the board of directors due to their busy schedule, whereas governors were more available to liaise with. Additional informal conversations conducted before and after the board meetings with the directors and governors proved to be particularly helpful, both in understanding the context and in interpreting the data, as the first author's understanding of the actors' emotions could be further clarified. Gaining access to boardroom meetings was the most difficult part of the data collection for this study as board members viewed emotions as 'irrelevant' within their professional context – the strategic value and political power of emotions were not acknowledged by board members who were hesitant to discuss their emotions, as these were perceived as private in nature, not pertaining to their professional persona, and somewhat of a weakness. The first author attended several public meetings of various NHS Foundation Trusts with their chairpersons, before selecting a specific Trust for this study. This choice was of a practical nature and based on access. General permission to conduct this study did not grant access to board members themselves, which had to be (re)negotiated every time (Thomas 1993), but became relatively easier over time as mutual trust was established and strengthened.

Three sets of data were gathered over a period of six months: information gained through participant observation (seven board of directors meetings, three board of governors public meetings, and two private board of directors meetings); 22 in-depth interviews conducted with directors and governors; and secondary textual data in the form of board meeting agendas and minutes. Data were investigated separately first, and then together in various rounds of coding, with preliminary analysis conducted iteratively on all data (no data set was privileged in the analysis as a holistic approach was taken to the interdependency of our data sets). Field notes were taken during the board meetings as audio-recording was not permitted due to confidentiality issues, and also because the chairperson feared that it would compromise discussions in the board meetings. Attention was paid to emotions expressed in single words, sentences, metaphors, figurative language and prosody (i.e. the rhythm, stress and intonation of speech and other para-verbal aspects that involves characteristics of voice, speech, emphasis, speed and vocal style, and so forth) along with embodiment (including gazes, eye contact, body posture and tone of voice) to understand the in-the-moment emotion in context, and to avoid the generation of different meanings and interpretations (Fineman 2004; Kleres 2010; Bellocchi 2015). Meaning-making with regards to emotions was given particular attention as researchers and respondents may have different interpretations with regards to emotional displays since emotions are nuanced, highly contextual and subjective (Bellocchi 2015). Given the importance for researchers to be reflexive throughout this process, the first author shared her understandings with participants during informal conversations post-observations, and also in formal or follow-up interviews, to seek confirmation and to problematize emotional displays.

Twenty-two in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted for this study: conversations were held twice (at the start and later in the data collection) with five directors and six governors. Interviews lasted from 40 to 60 minutes, were tape-recorded and immediately transcribed. Most of the interviews with the governors were undertaken in cafés, whereas interviews with directors were conducted in their offices. The second set of interviews was particularly helpful in sharing our preliminary findings with board members and fostering further elaborations of their emotional experiences in relation to specific situations and interactions.

Secondary data (board minutes and agendas) were helpful in creating some background understanding of the issues at hand before board meetings; however, these texts did not provide the 'situated experience' of emergent emotions and board dynamics (Ng and De Cock 1992; Heemskerk, Heemskerk, and Wats 2017). The way emotions are performed – the way an individual performs/acts or seeks to perform/act as defined by Goffman (1959) through tone of voice, pitch, body language and so on – can only be appropriately explored through ethnographic methods which enable the researcher to observe and experience situated emotions in board meetings.

Our data generated two types of narratives: the stories co-constructed collectively in the form of a joint dialogue during board meetings by board members, and the individual stories explored through interviews and conversations. In line with our theoretical framework, Riessman's (2008) performance/dialogic analysis has been used here to analyse data since it grasps the 'doing' aspect of performance. Riessman (2008) describes dialogic/performance analysis as a broad and varied interpretive approach with elements of both thematic and structural analysis. 'It considers both content and the speaker/audience relationship in context by asking "who" an utterance may be directed to, "when" and "why", that is, for what purposes?' (Riessman 2008, 105). This was particularly helpful in understanding the performance of emotions as it takes different features of the story into consideration:

actors allowed on stage in an oral narrative (e.g. characters and their positioning within a story, including narrator/protagonist); settings (the conditions of performance and setting of the story performed); the enactment of dialogue between characters (reported speech); and audience response (the listener[s] who interpret the drama as it unfolds, and the interpreter in later reading[s]). (Riessman 2005, 708)

Performance/dialogic analysis, which we adopted for this study, relies on an iterative process that requires (re)reading the entire data set several times, keeping in mind the scenes, acts, performances and purposes within the narratives. Our participants shared their own versions of the same core narrative during the interviews, and the same issue (i.e. concerns regarding cleaning standards) was repeatedly discussed in the board of governors meetings, and as an agenda point in the board of directors meetings. This process of developing a core narrative is referred to as ‘combining the data’ by Emden (1998), whereby data are concentrated or crystallized in such a way that meanings are preserved. As a second step in the performance analysis process, alternative narratives were developed through the identification of preliminary plots, subplots, settings, tension points, characters/actors, and emotions, which helped the ‘emplotment’, defined as ‘a process of working with the one or more plots of a story in such a way that the significance of the story is disclosed ... potentially different levels of complexity’ (Emden 1998, 36). Finally, narratives were combined and presented in the form of ‘theatrical acts’ to create a more accessible account of the data that is also in line with our theoretical approach. The ‘acts’ in our findings are sequenced in line with our chronological observations of board meetings. The iterative interrogation of meeting agendas and meeting minutes helped us understand the context of the board meetings observations, whereas the subsequent interviews helped the interpretation of meanings respondents attributed to their emotions and (inter)actions in board settings.

The UK National Health Services boards in action

The establishment of boards in the NHS following a business format is one of the key elements of UK public sector reforms (Peck 1995; Deffenbaugh 1996). This has made the governance structure of NHS Foundation Trusts more complex as several voices are now involved in the process. The governance structure in NHS Foundation Trusts has three different levels: the board of directors, the board of governors, and the community members. Community members elect the board of governors – a large elected group of 25–40 people – who represent various constituencies (i.e. the public, patients, and NHS staff) and then confirm the appointment of the non-executive directors, including a chairperson. The board of directors consists of between nine to 11 members, which include four or five executive directors, four or five non-executive directors, and a non-executive chairperson (Mellet, Marriott, and Harries 1993; cited in Clatworthy, Mellet, and Peel 2000). Hence, the governance structure creates diversity and various relational dynamics within boards.

The number of board meetings held in NHS Foundation Trusts varies, but common procedure involves a board of directors meeting once a month, and a board of governors meeting once every quarter where directors and governors meet. This is in addition to sub-committee meetings that are usually chaired by a non-executive director and involve governors too (Department of Health 2005). The board of directors and board of governors meetings involve both a private and a public session. The first author’s observations of private board of directors meetings show that most board decisions are actually made in the ‘backstage’ of private sessions, and even before, in sub-committee meetings. Agendas are informally discussed behind the scenes, where coalitions are formed, and emotions anticipated or managed. Board meetings held in public resemble a stage where board members perform the meeting as focal actors, whilst the public literally watches the show as an audience. The public is not allowed to participate in these meetings although some chairpersons may give the public a chance to voice their ideas either at the beginning or at the end of the formal board meetings. Governors may attend board of directors public meetings as members of the public, and directors may attend board of governors public meetings in the same capacity.

In the first board of governors meeting observed for this study, the entire discussion revolved around the unsatisfactory hygiene report given to this particular NHS Foundation Trust by the Care Quality Commission (CQC) – an independent regulatory body that monitors the performance of UK hospitals and can warn or even intervene to close down a health service if it is not meeting

standards. Governors blamed the directors for not performing well, and for concealing information from the governors as the final documents were sent to CQC without their knowledge. The initial report was prepared by the Patient Experience and Safety Committee (PESC) and went through other committees and working parties who gave their input. It went back and forth several times until the chairing governor of the PESC submitted the report to the CQC. The chairing governor had resigned shortly after the report was submitted without giving any explanation to their fellow governors as to why consent had not been sought from them before the final submission. The first board of governors meeting resembled a battleground scene (see also Ng and De Cock 1992), where the chairperson and the executive director (who was responsible for maintaining the appropriate cleaning standards) were under fire. The subsequent two board of governors meetings were less intense, as the concerned director, the chairperson and the CEO repeatedly reassured the governors that their concerns were being addressed. Also, the chairperson and the CEO kept on reminding the governors of the limits of their roles, and the appropriate conduct of board meetings. The underlying problem highlighted by the governors was a power struggle aimed at (a) gaining legitimacy for holding directors accountable and (b) highlighting the fact that governors had not been involved in the drafting of reports submitted to the CQC. Governors felt deprived of their power and excluded from the governance process, whereas the chairperson reinforced their position of power and insisted that the report was a tick box exercise that could not be altered.

Against this backdrop, the findings below are divided into two parts: first, we show how emotion norms are set on stage and how board members – specifically the chairperson and the CEO – manage the display of ‘inappropriate’ emotions against the norms they set or intend to maintain; then we present our findings in the form of three performative ‘acts’ corresponding to separate board meetings, showing how emotion norms are challenged by the governors through individual or collective resistance. This is in line with our theoretical dramaturgical approach, to unfold and show, on the one hand, the way emotion norms are performed, constructed and sustained by powerful people, and on the other hand how emotion displays are used by the less powerful actors to challenge the status quo. This is instrumental in revealing the political nature of emotional displays and emotions management in board meetings.

Setting the stage through emotion norms

Our observations and interviews clearly show that emotion norms are set and reinforced by the dominant and most powerful people in boards, with the aim to control the agenda and what are considered inappropriate emotions. This control here is enacted through ritualized practices by the CEO (the organizational head who is responsible for all the operational matter) and the chairperson (who chairs and manages the board meetings and is responsible for leading both the board of directors and the board of governors). Various factors observed during the board meetings highlighted its highly performative practice and standardized symbolic processes: the way meetings are ‘formalized’ and conducted in a specific way with set agendas to include allocated times for all items; the seating arrangements of directors on boards; the presence of various individuals on boards with varying powers and responsibilities; and the language and discourses used during interactions in meetings. Such ritualised practices aim to control emotions and actions that are considered to be ‘inappropriate’ by the powerful group in charge of the board. This is illustrated, for example, in the following narrative by one of the executive directors:

Compared to other committees that I would attend, the [NHS] board is much more formal. You sit in a specific place, your name plate is in front of you, and you have people in the room who cannot speak like you. That’s very unusual. That’s not like any other committee. That’s not like a meeting in your own department, and it isn’t strictly speaking a meeting of equals either, in that there is a chief executive, there is a chairman, there are people with quite defined roles. Now, that doesn’t mean they can’t comment on anything else than they usually do, but they are very conscious that you have a specific responsibility. (John, Executive Director)

This shows that emotion norms are purposefully regulated through various discourses, such as 'professionalism' and 'formality', that compel all actors to follow standardized practices. These regulatory processes limit the expression of emotions and desires with the aim to be (or appear) 'rational' or 'professional' in boards.

Well! I think the emotional life is a little suppressed on the board actually [ironic laughter]. It is more formal than most other things I go to. [Emotion is suppressed] by sticking to your role and by making your thoughts and actions much more considered than they would be in a less formal setting ... It's more serious than most meetings I have been to. Definitely! (Wally, Executive Director).

The regulation of these emotion norms is reflected in the CEO's view, which is made explicit and guides the behaviour of all the actors in the board:

There can't be any emotions. This is business. You have to deal with different people's opinions, disappointments and frustration, and you just have to be professional about it. I think it's important that you are just calm and rational and professional! (Michael, CEO)

We observed that any behaviour going against set emotional norms within the formalized board practices is promptly controlled and rectified by the chairperson and then the CEO. For example, the public meetings often started with the announcement of the chairperson: *'this is a meeting held in public and not a public board meeting. You are not allowed to speak unless asked'*. However, despite these ritualized practices aimed at setting and reinforcing emotion display rules, breaches in emotion norms were often observed in the large board of governors meetings. This, in one instance, led the chairperson to begin the next board meeting by asking governors to 'behave':

This is the meeting held in public and if you are well behaved [looking towards governors who attended the meeting as members of the public] you will be allowed to speak. Raise your hand! (Simon, Chairperson)

Since emotion norms are set and controlled on boards by the dominant group of powerful people, issues pertaining hierarchical tensions and power struggles are significant. Norms set by the directors have to be formally followed by others, but governors often challenge these by displaying 'inappropriate' emotions to highlight or challenge issues at stake. In the board of governors meetings, governors are supposed to be more powerful than directors due to their role in ensuring accountability. However, this hides a power struggle as it might not be the opinion of their counterparts, as while leaving an executive director stated:

Theoretically, they [governors] are superior, but practically they are not [ironic laughter]. (Wally, Executive director)

Similarly, a non-executive director expressed frustrations regarding some of the governors' behaviour in board meetings:

To tell you the truth there is a group of governors who think that they are intellectually superior to another group ... they are not worthy, so that causes challenging behavior ... (Richard, Non-executive director)

The chairperson and the CEO clearly expressed their disapproval regarding any deviant act/emotion, and the chairperson acted as an 'emotion manager' in boards. It was interesting to note that whilst the ritualized practices in board meetings and discourses of rationality suppressed *some* emotions, at the same time they allowed and encouraged *other* emotions to be expressed, thus setting an emotion regime. However, it was made very clear that different rules applied to directors and governors, thus highlighting political tensions. Emotions, such as pride, self-praise, anger, frustration, and irritation, were openly expressed by the directors and went uncontested, whereas the governors were allowed to express pride and self-praise, but not the rest.

In the board of governors meetings, emotions remained more volatile, thus causing more frequent breaches of emotion norms to demonstrate resistance. Throughout the three board of governors meetings, the issue of cleaning standards remained emotive. This was also discussed at length as a key issue in interviews. It was challenging for the chairperson to manage governors over this

matter, which led to the display of ‘inappropriate’ emotions on several occasions, and a ‘battlefield’ was created, as described by the chairperson himself:

There was, in the board of governors, a big heated debate about what submission we did at the last healthcare commission submission ... It’s been rumbling on for quite some time ... and that battle has been going on till today. This is one main issue which is incredibly emotive. (Chairperson)

The battle was in fact rooted in the contested emotion norms set by the directors and disapproved by governors. Each reported interpreting the issue differently – as a routine exercise, and as an exclusion from the governance process. Hence, governors used intense emotions and emotional transgressions to resist against being ignored and marginalized, as illustrated in the following three acts, which follow the performance of board meetings.

Meeting/Act one

Anger and politeness

In the first board of governors meeting, we meet Karon, a public governor who had been a dominant actor in this debate and had played an active role as the governors’ representative. She confirmed how her anger grew gradually and intensified at certain moments. At one point, she vehemently shook her head sideways to express concern and anger for being excluded from the strategy-making processes. The directors were facing difficulties in finding various methods to incorporate the voice of governors as their role had not been appropriately addressed in the NHS regulations. Such ambiguities had created a space for actors to conveniently interpret issues differently to suit their own interests, as observed in the board meetings and later confirmed during interviews with directors and governors. Consequently, ambiguities and multiple interpretations of the same issues led to several contrasting emotions during board meetings. The board environment became tense due to frustration from the governors.

In this specific meeting, held soon after the submission of the CQC report, the governors did not discuss the agenda in an orderly fashion (i.e. agenda items were instead interrupted and taken in a different order). For instance, a staff member, in attendance as a member of the public, interrupted the discussion in the board of governors meeting, which was in fact a breach of procedure. This faux pas, however, gave the chairperson an opportunity to make a remark in a manner that induced laughter among the board members and temporarily defused tension:

Karon (firmly and shaking her head sideways): I am concerned as to whether the viewpoint of the board of governors will be communicated to the board of directors for strategy making.

Chairperson (trying to remain calm): I cannot give answers but can take it to the board of directors ... that is the action.

Karon (with anger, firmly and in loud tone): [There should be] monthly meetings to discuss strategy. I am concerned as to whether the board of governors can give input. Are we going to contribute?

(A member of the public interrupts).

Chairperson (in a polite tone): Not allowed to speak unless asked [chairperson starts laughing and everyone joins in].

Karon (firmly and with anger in a harsh and louder tone): We were very pleased when directors were allowed to participate. We were not informed that the submission [of PEST – Patient Experience and Safety Report] had to be publicised ...

(Silence) [Chairperson and all other actors, including governors, looking at Karon with shock and disapproval].

Chairperson (in a polite tone and trying to control his anger): I am clarifying this issue to take the meeting to a positive note. [and he clarifies ...]

Though several times the instigation of laughter by the chairperson did not (re)define inappropriate situations as a humorous circumstance, he would laugh nonetheless to repair the breaking of emotional norms, and that display would either create fake laughter amongst others or silence them, as shown above. However, this approach proved to be only partially effective when Karon breached the norm with another heightened burst of anger that silenced the entire board, momentarily, to a standstill. The first author shared similar emotions of shock and surprise in this situation as she held her breath to see the repercussions of this emotional transgression. In that instance, most members (including governors) gazed at Karon with anger or disapproval over her 'deviant behaviour' (Shields 2005). Hence, silence became performative too, as it conveyed a strong message of disapproval to Karon over her inappropriate display of strong emotions that had ignored the chairperson's previous 'repair work' through laughter (Murata 2009). Karon used her emotions to signal resistance to the dominant narrative and control over an issue that had been mismanaged. Everyone then looked at the chairperson, who in turn took a brief moment to manage his own emotions and rescued the situation by taking the meeting to a more '*positive note*'. Here, the chairperson used politeness (i.e. humour and a polite tone) to diffuse and manage intense emotions that were in breach of norms and jeopardizing board discussions.

Meeting/Act two

Emotional transgression and corpsing

In the following board of governors meeting, anger and frustration continued to flourish in relation to the same issue of cleaning standards. Tracy, a governor and Karon's ally, initiated the dialogue by expressing her 'considerable anxiety'. The executive director concerned was asked by the chairperson to report to the board. Tracy pulled out of the conversation, but Karon carried her emotions forward to champion her agenda. Despite assurances, Karon was dissatisfied.

Tracy (with anger): I have come across considerable anxiety ... and in particular wards where the toilets are extremely busy ...

Chairperson: Unfortunately [ironic], we have the concerned director here to report.

[James, the executive director, stands up and goes to the middle of the room to report. He explains the situation and agrees that they could increase the number of staff to ensure cleaning standards are maintained].

Chairperson (calmly): Before you go, are there any other comments on matters arising?

[Karon wanted to know the frequency of cleaning, to which the executive director responded].

Karon (firmly and in a loud tone): The reason why I am asking is that I visited the public toilets which were in a disastrous state ... I couldn't use it as many couldn't use it. There was no cleaner and I reported it. I went to another loo which was absolutely disgusting. I think that should be noted in the public arena.

James (calmly and trying to control his anger): I will look into it and report back.

Chairperson: Can we increase the frequency of cleaning?

James (with anger and sarcasm): Perhaps when she went in at that time the toilets were dirty, and it was about time for cleaning.

Chairperson: Oh, oh, oh, oh ... [the Chair became shocked and couldn't utter anything else, and the CEO intervened]

CEO (firmly and looking towards James): I am sorry to disagree. I went to one of the toilets as well ... and the ladies' toilet is not clean. I would personally not go in of course [as he is male] [joint laughter].

Chairperson: if the governors' report [is on substandard cleaning], can we have someone to verify it?

James (calmly): There is a procedure, and we will make sure of this [that the complaint is dealt with].

Chairperson: Now, before you go, are there any other questions?

Karon (firmly): [I] spoke to someone on micro and macro things. I don't believe that [toilets are cleaned] and I followed [dealt with] a cleaner. She was called, and she came [Karon found out that there was only one cleaner for cleaning several toilets in the hospital]. How can this [attempt to ensure cleanliness and cleaning staff] possibly go on with one person?

James (with anger): I assure you that it will be cleaned!

The concerned director expressed his anger, sparked by transgressions from a governor: the emotional words Karon had chosen; the way she had performed her emotions over the issue of cleaning; and her reiteration, despite of the repeated reassurances made by the executive director, for the need of a follow up and corrective measures. His reflections on her 'inappropriate' emotions can be seen in his emotional reply to Karon, which shocked the board and made everyone stare at him with surprise, while the chairperson lost his 'script' for a moment, as he could hardly utter his disapproval, and only express himself in prosody. The director's remark was considered inappropriate by the chairperson and all other actors, including governors, who became restless. The chairperson had to quickly intervene to counteract James's inappropriate remarks and to avoid any further breaches in emotion norms.

Meeting/Act three

Sarcasm and frustration

The memory of the emotions performed in previous meetings still lingered, although emotions had calmed down. James (executive director) reassured others that he had attended a meeting with the contractors to improve the cleaning standard in the hospital but that the topic had been approached with particular diplomacy as he did not want to damage the relationships between the two parties. Karon complained that she could not hear the report of the executive director as she was sitting at the far end of the room, which was large and without audio-visual facilities or microphones. James asked in an angry tone if he had to repeat everything and looked at the chairperson for approval. The chairperson nodded, and James gave the briefing again, which Karon questioned further regarding the frequency of cleaning. James reassured her that the contractors were going to rectify the matter but then murmured angrily as he walked back towards his seat. Other directors smiled and laughed sarcastically at the murmured comment – which the governors did not hear as the directors sit at a distance as do members of the public. Such sarcastic behaviour is quite common in board of governors meetings as an outcome of frustrations and anger which are usually built up over some time, mainly when governors hold directors accountable. The same director expressed his frustrations regarding governors in an interview:

I mean, one of the things the governors always talk about: it's about food, or cleaning and things like that ... Why, why, why they'd be so fussy? But, ah, that's life you know. You make one happy then another one comes up unhappy. (James, executive director)

Emotion norms were not always contested, as many governors agreed or complied with these norms. For instance, a public governor disapproved of Karon's breach of emotion norms:

I think governors (including Karon and Tracy) have their own nearer to their heart issues and ... they go on and on. (Julia, public governor)

The way transgressing emotions were managed in the meeting shows that the chairperson acted as a 'norm reminder' and 'emotions manager' to sustain emotion norms in boards. The breach of emotion norms in three consecutive board of governors meetings highlighted that some of the governors, including Karon and Tracy, were resisting the emotional protocols (i.e. feeling rules) set by the CEO and supported by other directors. Instead, by displaying anger, they kept on challenging or

contesting these norms that privileged directors and marginalized governors. Karon's performance of anger and frustration was also an outcome of her concerns being ignored regarding the maintenance and improvement of cleaning standards in the hospital. Although the concerned director's privilege allowed him to display anger, his strong remarks towards Karon in act two were deemed inappropriate even for a director, which made the chairperson intervene to manage the situation. Hence, we saw how emotion norms can be shared by competitive groups and also become contested through resistance.

Another political aspect of emotions that became prominent in the three meetings was how board members worked with their emotions in partnership, since they negotiated and imposed desired emotions onto others to push agendas of vested interest. The implicit coalition established among the governors became gradually apparent over the course of the meetings. In the first board of governors, the chairperson was constantly under fire as governors felt excluded and betrayed for not having been involved in governance and decision-making processes. Throughout the meeting, the chairperson justified the directors' actions and decisions over different matters raised. Persistently, Karon and her allies (e.g. Tracy) used anger and frustration to reiterate the issues, often not giving the chairperson a chance to answer. What became apparent in the first two board meetings was the alliance between a group of frustrated governors who kept raising the same issue throughout the board meeting and kept on performing strong emotions that frustrated the chairperson and other governors. As one of the public governors stated:

They support each other whether they are right or wrong. That annoys me ... As soon as one says something, others would say something in support of that person ... Sometimes, I totally disagree with what they are saying, but these people are very vocal. I don't like it. (Linda, public governor)

Hence, the collective and co-managed performance of emotions among the governors was purposive in this exchange, and was performed with the intention of producing a strong impact upon the opposing group of directors, which was mainly aimed at defying power and gaining legitimacy over their involvement in governance and decision-making. Here we see examples of planned and unplanned emotions that performed consciously but also instinctively at the individual and collective level to reinforce or resist power dynamics.

Concluding discussion

This paper contributes to both performance theory and the study of emotions management in organizations by exploring the value and role of emotions understood as performative and political, both at the individual and a collective level. As such, we argue for a re-positioning of the study of emotions in the context of board meetings as central to the understanding of the nuances of power and dynamics in decision-making. Our rich empirical data gathered through participant observations, interviews and secondary textual documents show that emotions are not to be considered merely as a by-product of communication, actions, and interactions, but as an important political locus of control and resistance.

Unlike previous research that concentrates on the role of emotions and agency to achieve ends, this article contributes to the understanding of emotion displays as mechanisms of interpersonal influence. We present this by problematizing the use of emotions in emotional norms, emotional display and emotional management through an ethnonarrative approach, which is enacted both consciously and unconsciously, and implemented in board settings through a frontstage and a backstage, which reveal dynamics of power and strategic decision-making. As such, we understand emotions in the context of board governance not only as political but also as performative and purposeful. That is, we 'do' – and not just feel – emotions to pursue agendas both individually and collectively, but also as unconscious responses to organizational settings. Thus, this paper contributes to the study of the performative and political nature of emotions management by revealing the connection between emotion, power, and governmentality through emotion displays in the context of boards.

This article offers a contribution that brings together both performance theory (which focuses on displayed emotions) and emotion management theory (which addresses both felt and displayed emotions). Firstly, it shows how, in the socio-organizational context of boards, emotional displays are inherently political since emotion is purposive and performative, even when it is not conscious. Secondly, this study reveals the value of performative emotions to assert legitimacy – or enact resistance – towards norms set by dominant groups or powerful people. The conceptualization of the performative and political nature of emotions became possible via the integration of two strands of complimentary yet fragmented literature – Goffman's (1959) performance theory, and Hochschild's (1979) emotion management theory. Though Goffman's work (1959) has not explored emotions systematically – except for shame, embarrassment, and guilt in relation to impression management – his conceptualization of the strategic nature of emotions directed by a cultural script, together with Hochschild's (1979) theory of emotion management, allowed us to develop a more nuanced understanding of the unspoken power dynamics and emotion displays in boards. Indeed, the concepts of 'feeling rules' and 'framing rules' in emotions management theory complemented the shortcomings of dramaturgical theory focussing on conformity in emotion norms and on the repercussions of failed performances. Instead, we uncovered the interaction of conscious and unconscious emotion management, and how these norms are created, used, and contested in a highly political context.

The performative breach of emotion norms is often a matter of concern for the powerful group in boardroom settings as it can jeopardize their performance on the 'board stage', and the achievement of both personal and organizational objectives. Norms around emotions in organizations are sensitive to power dynamics – leaders are expected to limit or control emotion displays, and followers or subordinates are expected to align (Fein and Isaacson 2009; Hibbert et al. 2022). In performance theory, unexpected emotional situations can be explained as 'to corpse' – bringing actors (i.e. in this case, the chairperson) to a state of shock that jeopardizes the entire performance (Höpfel and Linstead 1993). 'In theatrical metaphor, it means that the actor had lost his script, dries, is unable to continue ... freezes on the spot, unable to continue with the 'performance'" (Crawley 2004, 422). In formal meetings, unlike in traditional scripted theatre, situations are emergent for which the actors have not rehearsed (Bergman Blix 2007), like in act two where the chairperson lost his script. Other actors, such as the CEO, improvised narratives around the corpse to sustain the illusion of an effective 'performance' (Höpfel and Linstead 1993). Politeness and laughter were used to defuse inappropriate emotions as an emotional tool for 'repair work' and to ease tensions (Murata 2009; Kangasharju and Nikko 2009; Kleres 2010). This use of emotion aimed at maintaining emotion norms intact (Francis 1994), helped directors to manage 'the corpse' and get out of a thorny situation. 'Corpseing' can then be ignited purposefully and as an act of resistance to stress the importance of a challenge to emotional norms and control. We also saw other emotion displays, such as laughter together with irony and sarcasm, being deployed to reinforce norms and silence resistance, to belittle others and put them back in their place (or space, where they are not allowed to express themselves).

In terms of emotion management, the politics of emotions and their relationship to hierarchy and sources of power became increasingly clear throughout the analysis of data (observations and interviews) which uncovered three key dynamics: powerful or dominant organizational actors (i.e. the directors) take the lead and 'set the stage' for emotion norms (i.e. feeling rules), and use emotions to (re)shape behaviour for all actors; less powerful actors can display both individual and shared emotions as a form of resistance, and to mobilize support against discriminatory emotion norms; all actors (re)negotiate their emotions, power, and social relationships iteratively during board meetings at the individual and collective level through interactions. This illuminates the nuances of how people understand, react to, and reinforce emotion rules in a hierarchical context – as Hochschild (1983, 263) comments, feeling rules are 'shared, albeit often latent'. Therefore, this study highlights the power of emotions as instruments of control and resistance in hierarchical settings, which can be redeployed and acted upon at the individual and group level.

Emotions, rather than being an individual feeling and a by-product of professional exchanges, can be used to create 'collective effervescence and synchronised conduct' (Collins 2004; cited in Bellocchi 2015, 1). In our study, this purposeful collective power was harnessed both to the advantage of group interests and to pursue personal agendas. At times, norms were shared by opponents, like in act two when all actors disapproved of James' inappropriate remarks towards Karon, which if left unmanaged could have further deteriorated the successful outcome of the board. In other examples, emotion management was performed by a director to legitimise their own views, authority, or decision. An important contribution lies in the exposure of the invisible politics of emotions, as displayed emotions can be used to influence and manipulate situations as per agendas of interest. The following, or breaching, of emotion norms can be accidental but can also be purposive in its aim to either accept or defy power.

Secret alliances, backstage interactions, and the use of 'corpsing' all hold a political power. This negotiated and iterative character of emotion display and emotion management further illuminates the power dynamics intrinsic to emotion norms within and between different groups of actors. In this study, the CEO and the chairperson here embodied the role of the powerful actors who decided which and how many emotions could be displayed, when, and by whom (Shields 2005), and which emotions were to be deemed productive or unproductive (Fineman 2004). Decisions around whose emotions are appropriate, and which emotions need to be silenced or ridiculed, are a clear manifestation of power that privileges some and marginalizes others, often leading to a struggle for emotional legitimacy (Hochschild 1979; Shields 2005). Our data exposed how this power asymmetry prompts underprivileged actors to breach emotion norms and instigate the formation of coalitions as forms of resistance. For example, Karon's anger and frustration were shared by other governors and were used to push agendas, hence forming alliances.

Thus, at the heart of these politics of emotions lies the notion of what Jean-Paul Sartre calls '*finalité*' – emotions have a specific purpose (Solomon 1993), whether purposefully or unconsciously deployed. In our study, emotions appeared to be 'co-constructed through dialogue and behaviour' (Shapiro 2002, 78) to form 'emotional partnerships' by engaging actors to participate in emotional meaning-making as they negotiated amongst themselves to create influence (Fineman 2000). Inappropriate emotions became useful to understand and show that 'something is wrong' with the situation or the organization, which is not necessarily about a specific person (Bergman Blix 2007). As Ekman (1980) and Tait (2002) suggest, going against emotional norms can be seen as a form of resistance, as the breaching of display rules has a purpose, perhaps to abolish the old rules and establish new ones. Our findings show that the ability to perform both appropriate and inappropriate emotions helped board members to shift the discussions towards their own interests. This shows how 'emotions speech [is] a form of politics, a technique of micromanagement and a rhetoric of moral persuasion' (Beatty 2013, 419). Through our observations and data collected through interviews, this paper offers an empirical illustration of how emotions may be used instrumentally in boards to achieve objectives (i.e. highlighting issues, prompting involvement by others, reinforcing roles and hierarchies) as 'emotions have a political dimension in that judgments regarding when and how emotion should be felt and shown are interpreted in the interests of regulating the organization and functioning of social groups' (Shields 2005, 3).

On a practical level, our data also suggest that improving procedures and board processes may involve viewing emotions as an 'invisible asset' (Eide 2005) and a 'resource' (Vince 2006; Clancy, Vince, and Gabriel 2012). Despite the self-serving claims to the contrary by the actors involved, the emotion dynamics analysed in this study unveiled the important role of emotions in the management of boards, and proved to be crucial in unearthing and shaping the entanglements between board strategies, individual interests, and power. As such, we conclude that the performance of emotions in board settings has its inherent value, meaning and effects; it can be used purposefully or unconsciously in interpersonal relations (Fineman 2004); it is dependent on power relations within professional settings (Roach Anleu, Bergman, and Mack 2015); it can be serving

personal or organizational objectives; it can be both performative and political, enacted at the individual and collective level.

This research was limited to the specific context of board governance in the NHS. Future research could usefully explore the management and display of emotions in other public health setting, and in different socio-cultural contexts. Also, the difference and/or similarity between the felt and displayed emotions for individuals in a highly political board context could be further explored. Additional investigations on how undesirable and undesired emotions are experienced and purposely managed would be an interesting area of inquiry, also in terms of categories of difference such as gender and class.

This study contributed to performance theory and the study of emotions management in organizations by highlighting the value and key role of emotions displays on boards. We argue that emotions are performative, political and have a 'doing aspect' irrespective of whether they are intentional or unconscious. We also maintain that understanding emotions, far from being a marginal or irrelevant aspect of board meetings, is key in everyday organizational interactions to influence others and achieve objectives. Empirically, we shed light on the complexity around board dynamics through participant observations and qualitative interviews in the NHS context. Our study highlights how the performativity of emotions is related to the understanding and management of hierarchies and emotion norms of a particular setting, thus revealing the link between emotions and unspoken power dynamics in everyday board interactions.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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