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Internal crisis communication and the social construction of emotion: university leaders' sensegiving discourse during the Covid-19 pandemic

Abstract

Purpose – The paper explores university leaders' employee-focused sensegiving discourse during the Covid-19 health crisis. The aim is to reveal how leadership sensegiving narratives construct emotion in the rhetor-audience relationship.

Design/methodology/approach – A social constructionist, sensemaking approach centres on the meaning-making discourse of university leaders. Using Rhetorical Discourse Analysis (RDA), the study analysed 67 emails sent to staff during a three-month period at the start of the global pandemic. RDA helps to reveal how university leaders help employees make sense of changing realities.

Findings – Three core narratives: organisational competence and resilience; empathy, reassurance and recognition; and community and location reveal a multi-layered understanding of leadership sensegiving discourse in which emotion intersects with material and temporal sensemaking dimensions. In supporting a process of organisational identification and belonging, these core narratives help to mitigate audience dissonance driven by the antenarrative of uncertainty.

Research limitations/implications – An interpretivist approach was used to analyse qualitative data from two UK universities. While focused on internal communication, the employee perspective was not examined. Nevertheless, this paper extends the human dimension of internal crisis communication, building on constructionist approaches that are concerned with emotion and sensegiving.

Originality/value – This paper expands the domain of internal crisis communication. It integrates the social construction of emotion and sensemaking with the underexplored material and temporal dimensions in internal crisis communication, and applies RDA.

1.Introduction

This paper explores university leaders' employee-focused sensegiving discourse during the Covid-19 health crisis. Crises embody ambiguity and complexity with often a struggle for organisations to gain control and return to stability (Coombs and Holladay, 2014). Increasingly, crises are characterised by multi-organisational actors (Frandsen and Johansen, 2010) with contradictory information including between experts and knowledge insecurity (Liu *et al.,* 2016). These characteristics are illustrated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Organisational leaders have to make sense of crises and engage in effective internal communication (Frandsen and Johansen, 2011; Heide and Simonsson, 2015) through sensegiving narratives to support employees with their own sensemaking endeavours. Such narratives help to build employee trust, commitment and identification.

The literature on sensemaking has had significant impact in organisational studies (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015), and there is growing scholarship exploring its role in corporate communication (Heide and Simonsson, 2015). Yet there are still underexplored research areas, in particular using the lens of emotion (Maitlis *et al.*, 2013; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015) to explore leadership sensegiving discourse in crisis situations and to extend understanding of sensegiving as future-orientated sensemaking (Gephart *et al.,* 2010).

Our paper contributes to knowledge in three ways. First, it expands the domain of internal crisis communication and sensemaking by revealing how emotion constructs leadership sensegiving discourse. Second, we argue that emotion during a crisis is optimally explored in relation to context, specifically the materially and temporally relevant situations that the audience experiences, which we illustrate from three core narratives. Third, we bring to the fore the notion of antenarratives or 'unfinalised' narratives (Boje, 2008) that continuously challenge the three core narratives, requiring sense to be re-framed as events unfold. An emotion and meaning-making constructionist perspective picks up Heide and Simonsson's (2015) challenge to re-orientate research away from rationalist approaches to understand the complexity of internal crisis communication.

This paper analyses texts using Rhetorical Discourse Analysis (RDA) (Andrus, 2020). RDA identifies the rhetorical means used by rhetors (i.e. university leaders) to help employees understand changing and uncertain institutional realities. The use of RDA supports the rhetorical (text-based) tradition identified in internal crisis communication scholarship (Frandsen and Johansen, 2010), while also recognising the impact of context on emotion and meaning-making (Cornelissen *et al.*, 2014) helping to reveal sensegiving discourse.

This paper begins by exploring relevant scholarship before identifying two research questions that explore how the rhetor-audience relationship is constructed. From there we explain the study design followed by research findings with emotion discussed in three core narratives. We conclude by showing how these leadership sensegiving narratives construct the rhetor-audience relationship.

2. Literature review

2.1. Internal crisis communication

Crisis communication literature emphasises communication with external stakeholders and the type of communication necessary to protect organisational reputation (Heide and Simonsson, 2015). Scholars (e.g. Frandsen and Johansen, 2011) suggest the need to understand better the internal perspective of crisis communication to reveal specific characteristics and differing needs of employees compared to external stakeholders. It is also noted (Falkheimer and Heide, 2006; Heide and Simonsson, 2015; Zhao *et al.,* 2017) that scholarship exploring crises has privileged a functionalist perspective paying attention to linear planning models (Coombs and Holladay, 2014) focusing on employee actions as part of prevention and recovery. Yet Heide and Simonsson (2015) stress the complexity and human dimension of crises pointing to tension and fluidity as situations evolve, necessitating flexibility and improvisation in crisis management and communication to support organisational resilience (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2007). A social

constructionist lens (Heide and Simonsson, 2015) views communication as integral to crisis management with discourses as dynamic, contextual and processual phenomena that continuously reproduce the organisation.

Crisis research primarily falls into either the rhetorical (text-focused) or strategic (context-focused) tradition. The rhetorical addresses what and how an organisation communicates, while the strategic looks at the where, when and to whom it is beneficial to communicate (Frandsen and Johansen, 2010). For example, emotion related objectives increase identification with the organisation creating a sense of belonging (Mazzei and Ravazzani, 2015). An enactment perspective (Weick, 1993) that gives primacy to people, feelings and context, recognises that crises disrupt sensemaking processes. We argue the sensemaking perspective can deepen understanding of crises communication by synthesising rhetorical and context-focused research approaches. For this study, context relates to the complex discourse of the government and Universities UK in responding to the crisis, as well as the situations experienced by university employees.

2.2. Discursive internal crisis communication leadership

It is a leader's role to make sense of crises and to develop meaning for others with leadership communication increasingly seen as meaning-centred (Fairhurst, and Connaughton, 2014) that gives priority to discourse and language use. Discourse reflects the notion of how leadership is enacted, influenced by context and events (Fairhurst and Connaughton, 2014). Consequently, discursive leadership scholarship explores how discourse, stories and narratives contribute to meaning-making (Balogun and Johnson, 2005). Discursive leadership processes embed identification and argumentation. Employee identification is characterised by how employees link emotionally and cognitively to the organisation (Yue *et al.*, 2020). Argumentation may involve creating common ground between rhetor and audience through the use of evocative and figurative language (Cheney, 1983). Cornelissen (2012) emphasises the role of metaphors as

pervasive in sensemaking and emotionally charged (Smollan, 2014), providing insight to how people feel and engage with change.

2.3. Sensemaking and sensegiving

Although the origins of the sensemaking concept lie with Weick (1993), there is no agreed definition. An emerging consensus is that sensemaking is about people negotiating meaning and seeking plausibility to understand ambiguous and confusing events (Weick *et al.,* 2005; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Brown *et al.*, 2015). A breakdown, or 'collapse' of sensemaking leads to disorientation, confusion and anxiety (Weick,1993), while successful sensemaking restores cognitive order (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015). The sensemaking enactment process has a retrospective and linear orientation; consequently sensemaking processes have been studied in various crisis situations (e.g. Cornelissen *et al.*, 2014; Kalkman, 2020).

Sensegiving, the role of directing and influencing meaning-making by others (Gioia *et al.*, 1994), has a future, or 'prospective', orientation. Here, the organisational actor (e.g. a CEO), having made sense of a change situation, communicates the 'new sense of the organisation to stakeholders' (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015, p. S24). Consequently, future-orientated sensemaking processes (Gephart *et al.*, 2010) embed temporal and rhetorical dimensions that contribute to institutional legitimation. While noting criticisms of the sensemaking/sensegiving dichotomy, particularly in reinforcing a linear, or transmission, view of communication (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015; Logemann *et al.,* 2019); we use the term *sensegiving* in this paper to refer to university leaders' employee-focused discourse as re-interpretations of their own sensemaking endeavours, drawn from macro and micro contexts (Frandsen and Johansen, 2010) in relation to the Covid-19 health pandemic.

2.4. Emotion and employee sensemaking contexts

While initially overlooked in the sensemaking literature, emotion is increasingly recognised as influencing sensemaking efforts during organisational change and crisis (Maitlis *et al.,* 2013; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015). Studies of emotion in organisational crises have identified the extreme states and reactions of anger, fear, shame, depression and shock felt by employees, both individually and collectively (e.g. Ayoko *et al.*, 2017). Emotion affects interactions with others, impacting on collective sensemaking (Cornelissen *et al.*, 2014). During organisational change, for example, the process of 'emotional contagion' can lead to groups adopting a dominant affective state (e.g. anger), which may require leadership to actively manage emotion through an 'emotion-sensitive' leadership style (Steigenberger, 2015).

While recognising that emotion as a psycho-biological construct is experienced both individually and collectively, in response to 'trigger' events (Maitlis *et al.*, 2013), we adopt the view that emotion is socially constructed through institutional discourse (Moisander *et al.*, 2016), specifically leaders' symbolic evocation of emotion that helps to order 'thoughts, feelings and events' (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1995, p. 111). Institutional emotions may be categorised as *moral* (pride, shame and moral concern) that 'reflect normative assessments and legitimacy judgments', and *affective ties*, which are 'positive or negative bonds and commitments that actors have towards people, places, ideas, and things' (Moisander *et al.*, 2016, p. 966).

Negative emotions arising from 'trigger events' prompt the need for sensemaking through discursive means to shape interpretations of those events (Maitlis *et al.,* 2013). In shaping interpretations, leaders engage in emotional labour, defined as how 'leaders use emotional displays to influence their followers' (Humphrey *et al.*, 2008, p. 155). For example, showing empathy with those affected is recognised as an important leadership skill in times of crises (Seeger 2006; König *et al.*, 2020). Certain emotion 'triggers' can be more powerful than others, pointing to hope-related discourse as important in change situations (Steigenberger, 2015). Identification-related discourse may affirm affective bonds that employees have towards the organisation and reinstate its wider legitimacy.

Lastly, the material and temporal dimensions of sensemaking are under-explored in scholarship (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2020), yet given that these two dimensions contextualise both the lived experience of university leaders and employees during a crisis, we focus our paper on how leadership discourse constructs emotion in material and temporal contexts .

2.5. Materiality

A material perspective of sensemaking 'asserts that organizational activities are located in space, aided by buildings and technologies, and engaged in place-making activities' (Bakke and Bean, 2006, p. 53). The acceptance or rejection of sensegiving discourse by employees may be based on the material cues of location, gestures and objects that mediate individual sensemaking processes (Cornelissen *et al.*, 2014). Home working and a reliance on technology, enforced by Covid-19, pose particular challenges for employee interpretation and narration (Bakke and Bean, 2006) as individuals experience a highly disrupted relationship with the material setting of work. Here, the social context of sensemaking deemed as critical (Kalkman, 2020) is interrupted: employee interactions are mediated by remote working, technology, time and space.

2.6. Temporality

The temporal perspective of sensemaking is traditionally (i.e. according to Weick, 1995) retrospective, where 'time past, through the backward glance, [...] takes centre stage' (Dawson and Sykes, 2019, p. 98). Recent scholarship, however, has focused on the sensemaking process as future-orientated and iterative, moving backwards and forwards (Corley and Gioia, 2011); less sequential and more cyclical (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Kalkman*,* 2020)*.*

Organisational sensemaking highlights the leader's skill in constructing sensegiving *frames* and *narratives* during transformational change (Logemann *et al.*, 2019) and crises (Cornelissen, 2012). As Cornelissen *et al.,* (2014) argue, frames in sensemaking act as

guides that direct inferences, define situations and connect to the environment. As the process of inclusion, exclusion and emphasis, framing allows some aspects of reality to become more salient than others (Entman, 1993). If the framing of an event is inaccurate or inflexible, especially if situations are unstable and unprecedented, then sensemaking falters, so frames need to evolve and sense re-made (Corley and Gioia, 2004; Cornelissen *et al.*, 2014). Therefore, sensegiving needs to be adaptive (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010). Such adaptability requires 'heightened attention' (Kalkman, 2020) to changing environmental cues and sensitivity to operational issues (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2007).

Narrative is the 'symbolic actions – words and/or deeds – that have a sequence and meaning for those who live, create, or interpret them' and must demonstrate rationality and fidelity (Fisher, 1984, p.2), connecting to the audience belief system (Kent, 2015). A temporal perspective in a crisis highlights how different 'temporal modes' impact on the construction of a story and its relationship to the audience. Dawson and Sykes (2019) present four temporal modes of storytelling in sensemaking. First, 'traditional', linear, or retrospective sensemaking emphasises coherent 'finalised' stories with a beginning, a middle and an end in line with Gabriel's (2000) view of narrative. Stories provide meaning to complex events, helping to reduce uncertainty and ambiguity. Recognising the 'master plots' (Kent, 2015) used in organisational storytelling, especially in a crisis (e.g. sacrifice), further elaborates a temporal understanding of sensemaking.

Second, non-linear and 'unfinalised' organisational narratives, or *antenarratives* (Boje, 2008) are open to changing events and unstable situations. While antenarratives offer opportunities to consider future scenarios as events unfold, they are also emotionally unsettling. A third mode of storytelling is 'present continuity-based' that 'enables a sense of continuity between what is happening, what happened in the past and what may happen in the future' (Dawson and Sykes, 2019, p. 107). The emphasis here is on fostering a 'collective sense of belonging' that draws on nostalgia and core values, especially at times when there is anxiety and uncertainty about the future. A fourth mode

of temporal storytelling, 'present change-based stories', comprises a mix of optimism about the benefits of a change and pessimism on its negative implications (Dawson and Sykes, 2019). All four modes of storytelling may be relevant in the light of Covid-19.

Viewed from an emotion perspective, we postulate that leadership sensegiving discourse which reflects the changed materiality of employees' lives and work situations, and constructs frames and narratives within temporal modes that are sensitive and adaptive to unfolding events, support identification with the organisation, and a sense of collective belonging and legitimacy. From this we pose two research questions.

Research Questions

1. How is the rhetor-audience relationship constructed in the employee-focused sensegiving narratives of university leaders during the first 12 weeks of the Covid-19 crisis?
2. How does emotion intersect with material and temporal dimensions in sensegiving narratives?

3. Study Design

Our paper is guided by a social constructionist ontology whereby crises are understood not as discrete events that are controlled and planned for, but as perceptual phenomena linked to disorientation (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010). Academic routines and teaching cycles are well-established and the marketisation of UK higher education makes it subject to intense political scrutiny (Schulze-Cleven *et al.*, 2017). This backdrop provides an opportunity to explore leadership sensegiving discourse in a highly disorientated and complex setting.

3.1. Rhetorical Discourse Analysis (RDA)

RDA was used to reveal the discursively constructed rhetor-audience relationship focusing on leadership sensegiving. The 'audience' are the employees of two UK

universities. The purpose of gathering data from two universities is to reveal shared and divergent patterns of leadership sensegiving discourse at a time of crisis.

According to Andrus (2020), RDA synthesises strands of discourse analysis (the functional use of language), and rhetorical analysis (focusing on the rhetor-audience relationship and the how and why discourses are used to affect beliefs). Our study builds on the rhetorical (text-based) study of crisis communication linked to a contextual understanding (Frandsen and Johansen, 2010), allowing fresh insights into future orientated sensemaking as a form of rhetoric (Gephart *et al.*, 2010) and discursive approaches (Fairhurst, 2017).

3.2 Data Analysis

We analysed 67 emails from two UK university vice chancellors (principals) sent to staff between 16th March and 5th June 2020. The involvement of two researchers meant that the process of applying RDA was continuously checked: in qualitative analysis, having more than one analyst/interpreter of data generally ensures better quality outcomes (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

We gained permission to use this data through formal ethics channels. Data was anonymised for the purpose of this paper. The period of study was chosen because it encompasses the start of Covid-19 restrictions until the university sector published its *Principles and considerations: emerging from lockdown* (Universities UK, 3 June 2020). It therefore reflects the key period when UK universities had to implement rapid changes to the final weeks of teaching and assessment.

The 67 emails were split 20 (U2) and 47 (U1) reflecting the preference of the principal at U1 for frequent shorter communication. There is no agreed RDA approach (Andrus, 2020), therefore the process began by each researcher separately reviewing one university email data set and independently allocating codes to discourse themes as they emerged (narrative) and then to frames and other rhetorical means (metaphors, stories, argumentation). Initial narrative codes moved to first order then second order organising

themes that both researchers subsequently shared and analysed. We endeavoured to be reflexive, creating and challenging different interpretations of the empirical data (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009).

Narrative formulation and rhetorical means for the three core narratives identified in this study are illustrated in section 4. Although the study did not commence with a predetermined coding framework it was theoretically informed by the literature as a reflexive, iterative process. It draws on the importance of emotional triggers and context to sensemaking suggested by Maitlis *et al.*, (2013) and the discursive processes of sensemaking (Cornelissen, 2012) that emphasise metaphors, framing and narrative. The diagram at Figure 1 outlines the study design process.

Figure 1: Overview of study design drawing on discursive sensemaking, context and emotion

There were 117 (U1) and 205 (U2) coded references reduced to 21 and 28 coded categories respectively to help reveal the detail in the qualitative data.

4. Findings and Discussion

The findings reveal three core narrative patterns: competence and resilience; empathy, reassurance and recognition; and community and location. Each narrative is explored in turn and begins with a table illustrating narrative formation that includes an example of the process of rhetorical interpretation (F= framing; M= metaphor; A= argumentation; LS= little living story) and connection to emotion. A detailed discussion then follows.

4.1. Competence and resilience

Table 1: Example of narrative formation: competence and resilience

The competence and resilience narrative links to business continuity of the university, claiming sound judgement, skill and adaptability in tackling the impact of the pandemic. It reflects codes associated with embedding government and sector advice, maintaining the operations of the university and health and safety of students and staff. Here texts reflected logical arguments and factual information dissemination; yet university competence and resilience within the context of urgent change involved emotional narratives that re-framed online teaching as the 'new normal'. Such re-framing contributes to legitimising the university in a new form echoing the present continuity-based temporal mode (Dawson and Sykes, 2019).

'Supporting students' to 'safeguard our livelihoods'

> *Colleagues are reaching out to our students still on campus and in private accommodation, and front-line key workers continue to support these students 24/7, which is hugely valued and appreciated (U2, 9 April)*

> *These principles are our bedrock, and underpin all that we believe in as a university, an employer, and as a member of our [local] community. (U1, 1 April)*

The university is continuously framed as having a shared moral identity that is committed to supporting students to learn and progress. There is a clear narrative of moral concern (Moisander *et al.*, 2016) for the health and wellbeing of students. Based on their competence in supporting students, 'colleagues' 'reaching out' are re-framed as 'front-line key workers' (U2, 9 April; U1, 23 March), echoing the national discourse of skilled workers performing essential roles (Department of Education, 19 March 2020). At U1 (1 April), the university's moral obligations and responsibilities to students and staff are codified in a set of principles, framed as 'bedrock', evoking stability and integrity, which 'underpin all that we believe in'; an attempt to build common ground through the espousal of shared values (Cheney, 1983).

Every University in the land faces the same issues as us. But what has been uplifting is the way in which these universities, who are used to competing, are now coming together to share experiences, develop best practice and foster common approaches to dealing with some very difficult challenges. (U1, 14 April)

At the earlier part of the national 'lockdown' period, the universities sector is framed as collaborating in a shared mission. Here, the 'every university in the land' narrative (U1,14 April) opens as an 'uplifting' story of collaborative endeavour, evoking Kent's (2015, p.486) suggestion of a master plot, a quest taken together, and Boje (2008) role of living stories.

At the end of lockdown, however, the narrative shifts to future realities. These include: mapping new ways of working, the role of technology, the safe re-opening of the campus, and financial challenges. By June, the financial challenges are particularly stark, prompting U1 (2 June) to report: 'there is little direct [government] support forthcoming. We must therefore make our own plans'. Here the discourse shifts to a more nuanced institutional narrative on the impact of Covid-19, drawing attention to individual university survival in a highly competitive market (Schulze-Cleven *et al.*, 2017).

Not all universities will be impacted to the same extent or in the same way. [university name] starts from a good financial position, with some headroom that enables us to make robust, evidence-based decisions about the future. But no institution will be untouched by Covid-19, and the potential impact for us could be considerable. (U2, 1 May)

It is important we work together now to support our students, maintain our competitive position, and safeguard our livelihoods. (U1, 18 May)

The reference to 'not all universities will be impacted the same' and 'good financial position' attempts to reassure that the university is better placed than others (returning to pre-Covid competitive discourse), yet primes the audience for difficulties ahead (U2, 1 May). This priming is further demonstrated in the second university narrative (U1, 18 May) in which the discourse of 'competitive position' reflects urgency and vulnerability against an alternative 'enemy': the market, evoking identification through antithesis (Cheney, 1983); and urging collective effort to work together. The emotionally charged 'safeguard our livelihoods', however, raises anxiety for personal security.

Technology as an opportunity

The material relationship between technology and users took on greater significance during the period of study, triggering the need for sensemaking processes (Bakke and Bean, 2006). The urgent adoption of new technology including online platforms for teaching, learning, and assessment purposes was a prominent narrative in the U2 leadership discourse.

> *As we move into the last three weeks of planned teaching for most, I urge colleagues to embrace the new technology on offer, so that we can continue to deliver the best quality of teaching that we can. (U2, 24 April)*

Here, the urgency of the move to online teaching where academic staff are pressed to 'embrace' the 'new technology' hints at possible rejection of sensegiving (Cornelissen *et al.*, 2014), thereby constructing the online environment as the means to continuity 'to deliver the best quality teaching'.

> *It is important to remember that blended learning is not new to us. In recent years we have made a significant investment [...] to deliver a high-quality offer. We now have the opportunity to accelerate this development, to create an outstanding on-campus and online blended learning experience. (U2, 5 June)*

After the lockdown period, however, the audience is reassured that blended learning is 'not new to us' (U2, 5 June). Furthermore, the 'acceleration' of 'significant' technology investment is framed as an 'opportunity', implying that it is the means to future competitive success. This illustrates the evolving sub-narrative reflecting present continuity-based temporal mode (Dawson and Sykes, 2019).

4.2. Empathy, reassurance and recognition

Table 2:   Example of narrative formation: empathy, reassurance and recognition

Empathy and reassurance narratives embedded immediate concern for staff experiencing significant disruption to their lives, the new circumstances of working from home, and dealing with new routines. Recognition incorporated numerous instances of thanking employees for their individual contributions and for 'stepping up' to new responsibilities in supporting students.

Empathy: understanding anxiety

Showing empathy with those affected in a crisis is recognised as good organisational practice (Seeger, 2006) as well as a desirable leadership trait (König *et al*., 2020). The emotional labour of leadership (Humphrey *et al*., 2008) is most visible in empathic discourse which constructs the crisis as a shared experience.

> *These are difficult times for us all. The spread of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic is creating a whole series of difficult issues which our community has never faced before. (U1, 16 March)*

The narrative of 'difficult' times and 'difficult' issues (U1, 16 March) evokes a shared feeling of disruption from the immediate pre-lockdown period. Coupled with 'community' the audience is primed to come together in response to a threat that it has 'never faced

before'. As we later discuss, 'community' is a significant emotive trope, differently framed over time: in the above illustration, 'community' is ambiguous and could refer to the university, the local community or wider society.

> *Yesterday the Prime Minister announced a significant shift in the UK's fight against the spread of Covid-19. These unprecedented measures will undoubtedly have left us anxious, not just for ourselves but also for our family, friends and colleagues. (U2, 24 March)*

Explicit empathy with the audience's feelings of anxiety as a result of 'unprecedented measures' (i.e. a national lockdown) is illustrated above. The collective 'we': 'our family, friends and colleagues' (U2, 24 March) builds common ground through affective bonds (Moisander *et al.,* 2016). In revealing shared anxieties, the rhetor shows empathy, placing themselves in the audience's shoes. However, in crisis situations, feelings of anxiety may hinder the audience's sensemaking efforts to pick up important cues (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010). Therefore, recognising the audience's anxieties may not be enough to reduce negative feelings in sensegiving (Steigenberger, 2015) as it may further reinforce the antenarrative of uncertainty.

Working from home

> *Colleagues have been telling me that they are all getting used to the new and unfamiliar routine of working from home and juggling a new way of working with more intense family interactions. (U1, 30 March)*

With employees no longer exposed to familiar material cues of location (Cornelissen *et al.*, 2014), namely, campus and classroom, the narrative of U1 (30 March) identifies the 'unfamiliar routine' of working from home by referring to personal interactions 'colleagues have been telling me'. Again, affective ties are reinforced with the audience (Moisander *et al.*, 2016). The metaphor of 'juggling' between different roles and settings merged into one (i.e. the home) constructs the audience as negotiating unfamiliarity: involuntarily

confined to the domestic space while managing emotions both work-related as well as 'intense' family interactions (U1, 30 March).

> *As we spend our working days online it is tempting to imagine what we left behind as a corporate Marie Celeste, with everything left unchanged, exactly as it was on 18 March. But of course colleagues […] have been onsite every day making sure our buildings and systems are safe, secure and functional. And our two major capital projects have continued apace. (U1, 1 June)*

The narrative of physical spaces 'left behind' (U1, 1 June) reminds the audience that while the buildings may be imagined as frozen in time, 'a corporate Marie Celeste', they are part of the present; populated daily by colleagues who are responsible for keeping 'buildings' and 'systems' running. Further, the audience's attention is drawn to new buildings: 'two major capital projects' that 'have continued apace', hinting at a future return to normal operations, as well as constructing images of new, unifying symbols of identity. The 'present continuity-based' narrative of past, present and future (Dawson and Sykes, 2019) illustrates reassurance and hope in changed circumstances (Steigenberger, 2015). The unifying symbol (Cheney, 1983) of the built environment recognises the role of 'material anchoring' that ground cognitions and emotions (Cornelissen *et al.,* 2014) helping individual sensemaking processes.

'Stepping up': recognition of individual contribution

> *Already colleagues are stepping up to volunteer outside their usual areas of work [...] nearly 20 colleagues, who are keen to contribute to keeping our University running, have volunteered to move over to front-line services. (U2, 18 March)*

'Colleagues' (university staff) are regularly thanked for 'stepping up' (U2, 18 March); going beyond their usual responsibilities, thus earning recognition for their individual

contributions (Cheney, 1983). Here the plot of 'sacrifice' (Kent, 2015) is invoked as staff roles are re-framed as 'front-line' services .

> *All 72 of our final year student nursing cohort are joining the NHS workforce six months early. They will take up roles in hospitals across [the region] to help in the national fight against Covid-19. Their dedication to their calling, and their personal courage is humbling and deeply moving. (U1, 8 April)*

Implied sacrifice, in this example of student nurses dedicated 'to their calling', invokes the metaphor of wartime service. Here, the rhetor presents his own emotional response to the students prematurely joining the National Health Service (NHS) workforce as 'humbling and deeply moving'. The framing of the pandemic as a common enemy by the UK prime minister (Johnson, 17 March) is thus mirrored in university sensemaking narratives.

4.3. Community and location

Table 3:   Example of narrative formation: community and location

The narrative of 'community' quickly evolved from that of a concern and care for staff and students and pride in working collectively, to a concern with the institution's wider community. Here, the university is defined by its role as part of a network of other institutions within the geographical location. This shifting narrative builds on sector-wide discourse following Universities UK (the representative body of UK universities) statements outlining the importance of universities to economic recovery and the need for government funding (Universities UK, 10 and 24 April).

University as regional player

> *I talked about our role as an anchor institution both in and for our city. I have shared wonderful examples of us encouraging business growth through purchasing, making our buildings and facilities available to the NHS, and examples of the way*

our research and teaching make a profound difference to people, organisations
and communities. (U1, 22 May)

Here, the university is talked of as an 'anchor' institution', (U1, 22 May); a frequently used metaphor, with the rhetor implying an earned past role, 'the way our research and teaching make a profound difference', while talking about its present purpose, 'making our buildings and facilities available to the NHS'; thereby framing the university as a key regional player. In this 'present continuity-based' narrative (Dawson and Sykes, 2019), the university draws on its past and present regional existence to project a significant future role in supporting regional recovery.

...it is important to be aware of the important role that we are playing as a civic
University [...] and we are already being asked by our city partners how we can help
drive recovery and economic regeneration of the region as lockdown lifts and,
ultimately, the crisis passes. (U2, 24 April)

The institutional framing of U1 as a community of place, already poised to support 'business growth', is mirrored in the second narrative of a 'civic' university'. Here, 'civic' refers to a past successful relationship with other civic (or city) partners to help drive 'regeneration of the region as lockdown lifts' (U2, 24 April).

Both illustrations legitimise the university's role in 'making a difference' to its respective region, offering a vision of hope (Steinberger, 2015) for its future survival. Thus, the framing of the university community as 'place' becomes a unifying symbol (Cheney, 1983) reinforcing affective bonds (Moisander *et al.*, 2016) and a wider sense of community identity and belonging based on shared effort.

5. Conclusions, contribution and limitations

We use the term *sensegiving* in this paper to refer to university leaders' employee-focused discourse as re-interpretations of their own sensemaking endeavours in relation to the Covid-19 health pandemic. Specifically we addressed two questions.

Addressing RQ1, the rhetor-audience relationship is constructed through the use of three core narratives: competence and resilience; empathy, reassurance and recognition; and community and location. Shared leadership narratives reinforce identity (Cheney, 1983) and belonging (Mazzei and Ravazzani, 2015). These narratives consistently challenge the antenarrative (Boje, 2008) of uncertainty and insecurity, characteristic of modern-day crises (Liu *et al.,* 2016). We suggest these narratives act as processual or ephemeral focal points against the dissonance of the antenarrative.

Emotion is revealed through the rhetorical means of framing, argumentation, little living stories and metaphor used to align the rhetor and audience. Two frames consistently dominate (a) staff 'stepping up'; changing to adopt new ways of teaching and supporting students and (b) legitimation of the university as a regional hub, partner and collaborator. Argumentation draws on common ground techniques (Cheney, 1983), through the amplification of shared institutional values, concern for staff and student well-being and recognition of individual contributions. Framing and argumentation is supported by the use of 'little stories' (Boje 2008) acting as unifying symbols, for example, in framing employees as key workers and heroes. The emotionally-charged metaphor of 'fight' is also used to reinforce and recognise the challenges of living and working in the 'new normal'. These findings suggest leadership sensegiving discourse as on-going emotional labour (Humphrey *et al.*, 2008).

In response to RQ2, emotional narratives are shaped by the temporal and material realities of the lived experiences of employees; embedding notions of rationality and fidelity necessary to traditional narratives (Fisher, 1985; Kent, 2015). Emotion is visible where narratives: show concern with the well-being of students and staff living and

learning in different spaces and timeframes; recognise the anxiety and apprehension of staff in using technology and the challenges of working from home; and re-imagine the fractured university community as united around place. These narratives frequently evidence present continuity-based storytelling (Dawson and Sykes, 2019) fostering a collective sense of belonging to address anxiety and uncertainty. As such, the university community is continuously re-legitimised in line with future-orientated sensemaking (Gephart *et al.*, 2010) through the articulation of shared values, expertise and regional contribution, reflecting discourse as processual, continuously reproducing the organisation (Heide and Simonsson, 2015). Therefore, sensegiving discourse is a process of interpretation and oscillation between macro events and micro experiences.

The discursive pattern of the three shared core narratives arose from being part of a distinct, public sector of 'modern' universities, with similar vocational orientations and a shared moral concern for student wellbeing and achievement. At the beginning of lockdown U1 and U2 reflected the discourse of government, Public Health England, and bodies representing universities, with an emphasis on working together to meet the challenges of the pandemic. However, when government commitment to university funding started to look uncertain, institutional discourse turned to securing financial independence and future survival, priming employees to possible difficulties ahead. At university 2, leadership 'legitimating' discourse (Gephart *et al.*, 2010) emphasised collective expertise with online learning technology, building the narrative of competence and resilience to changing circumstances, drawing on past expertise; re-framing technology as an opportunity for survival linked to a present continuity based temporal mode (Dawson and Sykes, 2019). The legitimating discourse of university 1, while frequently drawing on past and current achievements, emphasised frequent 'little living stories' (Boje 2008) reflecting the daily, moment-to-moment often mundane interactions (Brown *et al.*, 2015) to build narratives of individual expertise and contribution and collective community impact.

Our paper contributes to knowledge in three ways.

First, it expands the domain of internal crisis communication as social constructionism and sensemaking (Heide and Simonsson, 2015) by revealing emotion and improvisation in leadership sensegiving discourse. An emotion lens enables greater insight into how language as a major component of meaning-making contributes to this under-researched yet important area of sensemaking during crises (Maitlis *et al.,* 2013; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015). Improvisation as it relates to meaning-making and discourse is revealed through the framing and re-framing of 'trigger' events (Maitlis *et al.,* 2013) reflecting the processual nature of crises.

Second, we argue that the social construction of emotion during a crisis is optimally explored in relation to context, specifically the materially and temporally relevant (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2020) situations experienced by both rhetor and audience. In this paper, crisis is understood as a disorientating phenomenon (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010) which enforced a commonly shared experience of disruption to working locations, timeframes and social bonds. In this it challenges the separation of text and context-based approaches to studying crises.

Third, we bring to the fore the notion of antenarratives or 'unfinalised' narratives (Boje, 2008). The antenarrative of uncertainty and speculation requires sense to be continuously 're-made', or re-framed (Cornelissen *et al.,* 2014)), as events unfold, necessitating the use of legitimating discourse (Gephart *et al.*, 2010). Sense constantly re-made reflects a messy, non-linear, process view of reality (Nayak and Chia, 2011) and emotion, extending the human dimension of internal crisis communication (Heide and Simonsson, 2015; Zhao *et al.*, 2017).

From a practical perspective, this paper shows emotionally sensitive leadership discourse in internal crisis communication. We suggest this type of sensegiving acknowledges the antenarrative: the 'unfinalised' story of modern crises, characterised by uncertainty. Leaders who are mindful of different audience contexts in their communication are visible and empathic within evolving circumstances. Finally, leaders should consider rebalancing

rational communication by placing greater emphasis on emotion and language use in establishing human connection in times of crises.

Our study has several limitations. First, it is an analysis of leadership sensegiving discourse during a crisis. Our study does not explore how employees make sense of the crisis which would have revealed multiple interpretations of leadership crisis communication. Second, this is a qualitative study and although we were mindful of our subjectivity as members of university communities, and deployed extensive reflexivity (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009), the findings from two UK universities cannot be generalised to the wider sector. Consequently, more research is required to explore the social construction of emotion in crises.

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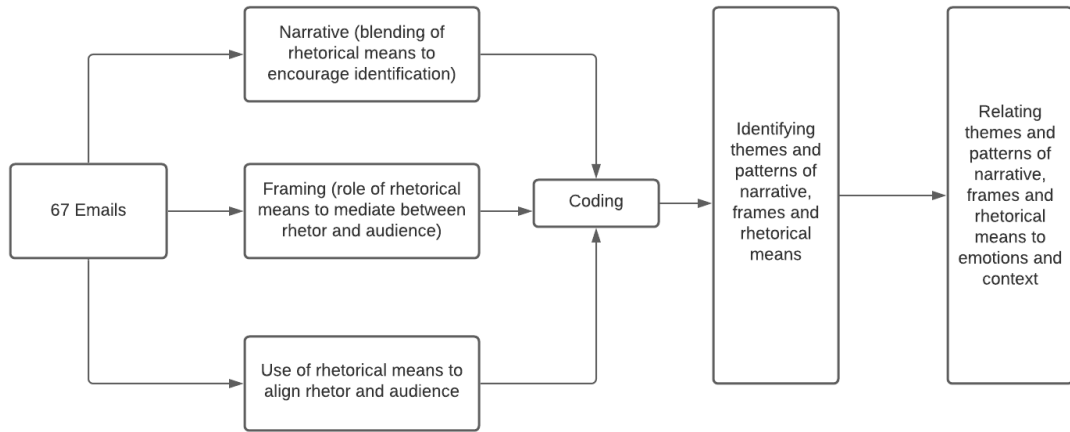
Figure 1: Overview of study design drawing on discursive sensemaking, context and emotion

Narrative: competence and resilience			
Organising themes	**Illustrations/Original Expression**	**Rhetorical means/Framing interpretations**	**Emotional connection**
Supporting students	"(1) looking after the health and wellbeing of colleagues and students, particularly those who are most vulnerable; (2) maintaining essential services so we can minimise disruption an ensure continued provision and progression for our students; and (3) playing a full and active role in helping slow the spread and mitigate the impact of the virus" (U1, 1 April)	F: moral responsibility M: principles or belief system as 'bedrock' A: common ground LS: duty	Evoking moral concern and pride in the university community; reflects traditional linear, retrospective temporal mode
Safeguarding livelihoods	"While it will not be easy, I am in no doubt that together we can face this challenge with confidence and ambition, and empower [...] to emerge a stronger, more innovative university" (U2, 17 May)	F: challenge M: not be easy A: taking positive actions LS: quest/journey	Nurturing a shared belief and redirecting anxiety; reflects present continuity-based temporal mode
Technology as an opportunity	"We are shaping a new normal for teaching, planning for a 'blended' approach with in-person teaching and learning where face-to-face activity is safe and possible, supplemented by a rich array of online teaching and digital resources" (U2, 5 June)	F: opportunity/excitement M: rich array A: common ground LS: transformation	Building confidence in changed material setting; present continuity-based temporal mode

Table 1:   Example of narrative formation: competence and resilience

Narrative: empathy, reassurance and recognition			
Organising themes	**Illustrations/Original Expression**	**Rhetorical means/Framing interpretations**	**Emotional connection**
Recognition	"In several ways, this has been a week like no other…marked a significant shift in the UK's fight against the spread of Covid-19. But it has also been a week in which you have shown tremendous commitment, providing what is possible through hard work and working together in a time of crisis" (U2, 27 March)	F: collective endeavour M: fight A: antithesis: common enemy LS: sacrifice and community	Affirmation of hard work to bring a sense of calm; reflects a linear, retrospective story
Understanding anxiety	"I recognise, that despite a long message, there is still a lot that you may feel is unsaid. Please be assured we are trying to balance short-term imperatives with planning for the longer term, when the longer term is unknown. If this feels complicated, rest assured, it is because it is!" (U1, 18 May)	F: complexity M: it is, because it is! A: concern for individuals LS: shared journey	Understanding and allaying fears; reflects temporal uncertainty and 'unfinalised' story
Working from home	"So pleased be assured that in these exceptionally difficult times I know we are all doing our best. And by working together, that will be good enough' (U1, 24 March)	F: collective endeavour M: working together is 'good enough' A: concern for individuals; transcendent 'we' LS: shared journey	Kindness and compassion recognising anxiety, fear; reflects both linear, retrospective and present continuity-based temporal modes

Table 2:   Example of narrative formation: empathy, reassurance and recognition

Narrative: community and location			
Organising themes	**Illustrations/Original Expression**	**Rhetorical means/Framing interpretations**	**Emotional connection**
University as regional player	"One of the important functions we have in our city is to act as an anchor institution….rooted in its locality, that cascades benefit to the people, organisation and communities with whom it shares the same space" (U1, 29 April)	F: essential, part of something bigger M: anchor A: place as a unifying symbol LS: belonging	Contributing to pride, replacing anxiety with hope; reflecting a present continuity-based temporal mode
	"it is inspiring to see the galvanising of spirit and action in response to the challenges we are facing as a nation, as communities and as individuals. And I am proud to see this same response reflected across the University at all levels, and in the contributions we are making regionally and nationally." (U2, 7 May)	F: essential, part of something bigger M: galvanising of spirit A: praise by others to foster belonging LS: belonging	Friendship, feeling valued, creating a regional bond and purpose; reflecting present continuity-based temporal mode

Table 3:   Example of narrative formation: community and location