

# **Frozen by threat or motivated to move? Emotionally charged horizons of opportunities in development work of universities**

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## **Abstract**

*How do emotions function in the development work and change attempts of universities? This article investigates the emotional dimensions of development of higher education and how emotions relate to the conditions of academic work, and the university as a forum for those initiatives. Building theories from affective cultural studies, the article drafts and explores the concept of 'emotionally charged horizon of opportunity'. This concept defines emotions as relational, culturally situated social forces connected with relationships, collective mentalities and belief systems, which the article explores by example of two cases: a national attempt to renew a degree structure on a disciplinary level, and a departmental initiative of development of the academic unit. Taking a discourse analytic approach with the focus on emotions, the analysis comprises two major findings. First, affectivity was present in the practices of development work, in the hierarchies of power, group relations and identities of the academic culture. Second, the actors' expectations about the future, the emotional judgments attached to these expectations, and the position of the actors were crucial for the development process.*

*Keywords: affective practice; change; development work; emotions; universities*

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## **Introduction**

How do emotions influence everyday life of the university and the attempts to change, develop or improve the practices of the institution? Recent, evolving theoretic understanding of emotions and affectivity as social and relational dimensions of social life in organisations (Fotaki, Kenny, & Vachhani, 2017; Zietsma et al., 2019; Ahmed, 2004; Wetherell, 2012) provides new, promising tools

for conceptualising development work and change in universities. This article explores the ways in which emotions function in the practices of development work and university as a forum for this work, by answering the following research questions:

- How are the emotionally charged horizons of opportunities constructed in development work?
- How do the affective practices regulate and modify the development work at the university?

As part of the exploration, I craft the concept of ‘emotionally charged horizons of opportunities’ and continuously discuss its usefulness of as a conceptual tool for understanding the ways in which emotional discourse becomes constructed and how emotions influence the dynamics of change and development at the university. The empirical focus is on development work as attempts to change, influence, and modify the structures and contents of the university education and the conditions for academics’ work.

Emotional reactions are often seen as irrational, or as an obstacle to implementation of change initiative, rather than fundamental forces modifying social conditions or as sources of information that can be valuable for the actors. According to recent research, however, affects are present everywhere in organisations—they influence the motivation of people, political behaviour, decision-making, and leadership practices (Fotaki et al., 2017). Emotions in organisations are connected to the social practices and hierarchies of particular contexts. With the metaphors of Zietsma et al. (2019), emotions act both as ‘fuel’, motivating people’s behaviour, as ‘glue’, by connecting people to social groups, arrangements, and issues of the different kinds, and as a ‘rust’ that stalls and slows down change, because attachments of the actors might lead to defensiveness in change situations.

Universities are full of emotions, positive and negative. Intimacy and emotionality as positive experiences are present in everyday work (Kelly, 2015). For example, enthusiasm, commitment, humour, and enthusiasm are emotions attached to learning experiences by students (Moore & Kuol, 2007). Academic writing has been described as love—as embodied, sensuous, emotional, and identity-related activity (Kiriakos & Tienari, 2018). Besides joy, love, and positive encounters with colleagues, the everyday life at the university also produces and creates more complex and conflicted experiences of ‘stress, overload, insomnia, anxiety, shame, aggression, hurt and guilt’, just to quote a few mentioned by Gill (2016, p. 40). Often these darker shades of the academy are associated with the

changes experienced as unwanted and constant, top-down led development initiatives. This is especially outspoken in relation to the increased marketisation and managerialism in the university (e.g., Slaughter & Leslie, 1997) and the combination of managerialism, professional commitment, and competition in academic work (Gill, 2016). This tendency makes development work—the empirical focus of this article—itsself a very emotionally charged topic.

In the article, I approach such emotional reactions as not only private, personal, or psychological, but connected with the particular social contexts and the practices in organisations, institutions, and societies. I base my theoretical argumentation on an understanding of affectivity as social, relational, embodied and physiological element of the social life, assumption shared and promoted especially by affective cultural studies (Hemmings, 2005; Koivunen, 2010; Seigworth & Gregg, 2010). Often, in cultural studies the conceptual distinction between ‘affect’ or ‘affectivity’ and ‘emotion’ has been made: While the ‘affect’ is often understood as physical and biological force or element, ‘emotion’ has been defined as its cultural and socially constructed definition or element (for more detailed discussion on different definitions, see Seigworth & Gregg, 2010; Koivunen, 2010). Sometimes these terms are used as synonyms (e.g., Ahmed, 2004 uses term ‘emotion’). For this study, I have chosen to use the terms ‘affect’ and ‘affectivity’ as umbrella terms to describe the affective dimension of social life (Fuchs, 2013). The concept of ‘emotions’ is used to explore the judgemental (Fuchs, 2013) and relational (Ahmed, 2004) qualities of affectivity in further detail. Finally, I employ the concept of ‘affective practice’ (Wetherell, 2012) to thematise the performative, creative dimension of affectivity in social practice.

The article explores this theoretical framing in relation to two cases of development work: a national, Bologna process driven attempt to renew the degree structure on a disciplinary level, and a departmental initiative to develop an academic unit. The data consist of interviews conducted with key actors of both development cases. The interviews represent the actors’ experiences of the development work that they were leading. These data were analysed by applying a discourse analytic approach, which was guided by the theories of affectivity and emotions to lay out the analytical threads.

In the following section, I will introduce the theoretical perspective on affectivity and emotions in further detail and outline how they led me to construct the concept of ‘emotionally charged horizon of opportunity’.

## **Theoretical perspective**

This article aims to draft, develop and explore the usefulness of the concept of *emotionally charged horizons of opportunity* as a vehicle for analysing the emotional dimension in attempts of change and development work in a university environment. My goal has been to create and draft the concept, which is able to reach and touch the emotional of the discursive and to explain the importance of the emotional in social life and development work.

Ontologically, the concept of emotionally charged horizons of opportunity is based on assumptions on the discursive and the affective as elements of social life (on discursive/semantic as a dimension of the social, see Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000; Fairclough, 2003; on definitions for affectivity, see Koivunen, 2010; Wetherell, 2012). This means that I understand discourse as a vivid and productive element of social in which the ways of using language have a purpose not only to describe and recall the past events, but also to participate in creating the discourse and the social practice further (Bacchi & Bonham, 2014; Fairclough, 2003). Epistemologically, my approach is based on assumption of knowledge creation and meaning-making—academic research and beliefs of the university organisation among the others—as discursive, positioned and socially constructed, and based on shared understandings of the experienced reality (cf. Foucault, 1971). Within the concept emotionally charged horizon of opportunity, ‘the horizon of opportunity’ is understood as a discursive, positioned construction, constructed in certain social (and affective) practices (cf. Fairclough, 2003 on discourse).

To some extent, theoretic formulation of knowledge on affects and emotions as social entities still lacks the terminological clarity and there are several competing theorists and schools of thought on the field (for good overview, see Wetherell, 2012). Theorizations on affects, and affectivity are often referred to as a ‘paradigm shift’ or ‘material turn’ within the social sciences, particularly in cultural studies, and especially in relation to discursive approaches and with the aim of emphasizing the more material, biological and physical nature of the socio-biological life (Hemmings 2005; Koivunen, 2010; Seigworth & Gregg, 2010; Wetherell, 2012). Theorising of emotions as organisational, social entities, and emotions in work has also a long tradition in social sciences, for instance in the organisations and management studies (e.g., Hochschild, 1979 on emotional work; Ashkanasy, 2003; Fineman, 2000 on emotions in organisations). These schools of thought have been evolved as parallel, but separate tracks (e.g., cross-referencing is not common, for one exception, see Gherardi, 2017 on relation of affective turn to practice turn). Evolving nature of the theoretical, conceptual development has its

impact on the use of concepts and ways researchers see the relationship of concepts to each other.

Affectivity, in this study, becomes explored through the discursive representation and data. The criticism towards discursive approaches by affect theorists has had its impact also on this study. I am aware of this critique, but due to the purpose of the article, I have chosen to use the work by theorists, who find discursive and affective as complementary and interlinking dimensions of the social, not as exclusive to each other.

### *Dimensions of emotions and affective practices*

The purpose of this article has not been to make a theoretic synthesis of the work by other theorists but to use some of their ideas to create an analytical and conceptual tool for a further analysis. To bring together the evaluative, personal dimension of emotion, and emotion as a defining quality of relationships between the actors and issues, contextualised and constructed in certain time and place, I use thoughts from three theorists: phenomenologist Thomas Fuchs (2013), Sara Ahmed (2004, 2010), who represents the tradition of cultural studies, and discourse analyst, social psychologist Margaret Wetherell (2012). Fuchs and Ahmed share the understanding of ‘emotion’ as a relational and social force. For Fuchs, emotions are relational and intentional. His focus is on the biological, and emotions are seen as a personal tool for judging and valuing situations, issues or objects—assumption I have borrowed for this conceptual development. From Ahmed, I have employed the relational understanding of emotion as a social element which has the power to define the relationships, hierarchies, and assumptions between different social groups (2014).

The quality of a relationship is truly different depending on whether there is fear, love, or anger present. To that end, the concept of ‘affective practices’ by Wetherell (2012) has therefore helped me contextualize and focus on the affectivity of everyday practices of development work and of the higher education institution. She roots the affect in social practice, which has provided me with a tool for identifying the affective as a product of practice, as well as the essential, productive and dynamic element of it.

To Fuchs (2013), emotions are affective responses to events, including bodily changes and motivation to a certain kind of behaviour. Emotions are relational and intentional; they relate the subjects, objects, events, and situations to each other. The intentionality has an element of evaluating a certain situation or object in relation to the person. Through emotions, a person becomes aware of what is important, valuable, worthwhile, or attractive to him or her. Biologically speaking, emotions result from the circular interaction between the environment

and the bodily resonance of the subject, be it in the form of sensations, postures, gestures, or movement tendencies (Fuchs, 2013).

As cultural constructions, Ahmed understands emotions as being continually constructed and given meaning through social practices. Her focus is on how emotions are produced, what they produce, and their functioning within social practices. According to Ahmed (2004), emotions such as hate, love or fear work effectively in the social practices and discourses constructing and defining the borderlines between groups of people, and attaching others together and social positions of a different kinds. Emotions construct social subjects and objects. Ahmed notes that ‘emotions shape what bodies can do’ (Ahmed, 2004, p. 4); subjects are understood to be socially bound in certain relationships and reactions by emotions. Emotions are the element which connect a person to other beings and places and give value to the issues experienced.

The concept of affective practice by Wetherell (2012) contextualizes emotions as a medium for personal evaluating of the situation and emotions as dynamic elements in cultural categorizations. For Wetherell (2012), the affect needs to be located not only in actual bodies, but also in the social actors, and in the processes of communicating and collective meaning-making. Compared to Ahmed, whose focus Wetherell sees being rather on social phenomena, where emotion is a circulating force, she draws attention to productive, constructing power of affective-discursive practices in, e.g., situations of hate (Wetherell, 2012, p. 159). Affects are embedded in social practice, and part of it, and that focus on the situated practice helps us to see how emotions become connected to certain subjects, habits, and patterns in communities. In the context of higher education institutions, I understand the organisational and institutional hierarchies, belief systems, shared practices, and their legitimations as well as the common understanding on the logics and motives of the system, as being valued and moved by emotions.

#### *Emotionally charged horizons of opportunities*

Fuchs (2013) connects emotions to the potential for movement. Through felt emotions, the person evaluates the situation, whether it is safe or unsafe, attractive, or repulsive, or useful to move or not, related to one’s goal (Fuchs, 2013). Therefore, emotional reaction to events, issues and other people can be interpreted as an embodied and cognitive process of evaluating the potential of a certain future — whether it will be wise to move or not towards currently. The construction of the present conditions and envisioned futures are interlocked with the generation of expectations and are related to emotional commitment and values. In this creation of potential futures, the discursive, imaginary, and cognitive element as a form of

collective and individual meaning-making and its relationship to affect is essential (cf. Wetherell, 2012).

The reactions to expected change are related to the anticipated future, and how the change is expected to take place. The expectations about the situation and the related state of the feeling, have an impact on the actual emotion taking place (Ahmed, 2010). Ahmed explains the role of emotion (happiness, as an example) and its relationship to expectation: 'to think the genealogy of expectation is to think about promises and how they point us somewhere, which is "the where" from we expect so much' (Ahmed, 2010, p. 41). Ahmed furthermore argues that 'happiness is promised through proximity to certain objects' (Ahmed, 2010, p. 41). Objects are the metaphor for not only physical or material things, but also for imaginaries of what might lead us into a better future, including the attachment to certain values and practices. Ludema, Wilmot and Srivastava (1997) argue that hoping for the better is critical to a positive construction of the future, and to actual future change.

According to the cultural approach, interpretations of emotional reactions are culturally constructed but vary from one person to another. People's early experiences of emotions frame their reactions in later life (Gorton, 2007). Experiencing, expressing, and interpreting emotions are all also processes connected with specific contexts, and the habits, practices, and ideals, regulated by social practices, and glued by emotionally loaded attitudes and values (Ahmed, 2004; Gorton, 2007). Context-specific cultural traditions, and behavioural patterns related to expressing emotions also differ, and often these ways of social ordering become visible during times of crisis, contradictory events, or loss (Harding & Pribram, 2002). Koschut (2018), in turn, argues how the status and identities of actors are socio-emotionally underpinned in the social construction of power structures, emotions, being the outcome of appraisal of those positioned, past experiences, and future expectations.

Based on these theoretical considerations, I employ the concept of emotionally charged horizons of opportunities to describe the ways in which the potential change is imagined taking place, and the implications the changes are assumed to cause. As such, emotionally charged horizons of opportunities can be interpreted as affective-discursive constructions, which are produced in the affective practices of the organisation. In the context of my analysis, the interest is on the ways in which these emotionally charged horizons of opportunities function, and how they are constructed and contextualized in the relationships and hierarchies in situations of intended change and development within the universities.

## **Universities, change, and emotions**

Layered logics and practices, contradictory commitments and strong professional identities create the emotional dynamics, which regulate and influence in opportunities and obstacles for development. Before I introduce my research design, I will therefore briefly introduce some organizational aspects which are typical for the research-intensive university and give a few examples on reactions for change initiatives in universities.

### *Universities as a forum of commitment, conflicting forces, and principles*

Universities, with their national variations, are complex and multi-layered entities with competing logics of organising and decision making (Bleiklie & Kogan, 2007). The universities have been described as loosely coupled organisations, with the relatively weak control of the academic work, as the opposite to institutions with more tightly governed structures and practices of institutional—often managerial—control (e.g., Meyer, 2002). However, based on everyday experience on academic work and development initiatives, tensions of the different kind seem to exist between different groups of actors within the university. Often strong emotional attachments define the relationships and assumptions among the people, the remark which has motivated my conceptual development.

Individual academics' commitment to their disciplines and theoretical perspectives tends to be very strong (Becher & Trowler, 2001). This strong emotional attachment to the academic disciplines might cause conflicts between actors who represent different disciplines and theoretic traditions, for example, in interdisciplinary work (Salmela & Mäki, 2017). Tensions between the administrators and the academic staff are also common since research and teaching staff are often committed to disciplines and an idea of academic freedom, while administrative staff often identify with the university as an organisation (Stensaker, 2018). Even if the academic leadership in universities is highly collegial and shared, the holders of academic management positions sometimes have contradictory feelings, especially in a relatively equal and informal culture of the Nordic universities (McGrath, Roxå, & Bolander Laksov, 2019). Furthermore, the role of research as part of one's work at a university institution and one's academic qualifications have an impact on the ways emotions become interlinked with the identity and agency of actors in the university (Ursin et al., 2020).

Previous research has argued that in legitimation of decision-making, the professional power, democratic decision-making, bureaucratic control, and managerial/market mechanisms as operational logics tend to operate similarly and form the layers of governance in university organisations (Bleiklie & Kogan, 2007;

Clark, 1998; on the Finnish system which forms the context for this study, see Rinne & Koivula, 2005; Räsänen, 2005; Simola, 2009). Professional power and logics of organising are often defined as the collegial power of the actors to decide their code of conduct, criteria for good work, education for the newcomers, and conditions for work (Abbott, 1988). In the university, this is especially attached to power of leading academics, such as professors (e.g., Simola, 2009). This logic is still alive in many universities, for instance in the form of collegium of all tenured professors as one of the main decision-making bodies. Democratic, collegial decision making, which in practice means student and staff representation in decision-making bodies, has its origins on the democratic wave of youth in the late 60s and early 70s (Bleiklie & Kogan, 2007). The bureaucratic logic of organizing is, at an institutional level, connected to the dependency of publicly funded universities on the will of state decision-making and policy. Managerial or market logic is the newest one in the palette, often labelled as a form of neoliberal governance, the rise of entrepreneurial universities (Clark, 1998), or academic capitalism (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). One could say, in the heart of professional logic, there is the belief in one's own skill and will to make decisions on one's work and its conditions (Abbott, 1988). The managerial logic is operating on the opposite idea, where the actors need to be guided, controlled, and praised based on their performance, with criteria for good work set on top. A metaphor for the professional academic could perhaps be an artist, and for the one working under managerial control, a factory worker.

However, these logics and practices often blur. For example, Gill (2016) shows how the managerial and professional ethics and practices together create a burdensome situation, where academics become victims of both professional, embodied self-discipline because of commitment to one's work, and managerial control.

#### *Emotions in change processes and development work*

During the processes of organisational change, intense emotional reactions often arise and have an impact on the outcome of the work (for example, Dasborough, Lamb, & Suseno, 2015). Development work is often assumed to shift the practices, ideas and beliefs of the institution (Filander, 2002). Development work also often entails the explicitly affective dimension, with the purpose to move, to act, enable change, make a difference and to create emotional bonds, commitments, and motivation in an organisation, and to maintain a certain atmosphere or state of feeling (cf. Hardt, 1999). Change initiatives and development work in organisations also often face strong resistance, and cause strong, negative emotions and withdrawal (Contu, 2008; Kiefer, 2005).

In a context in which academics' commitment to their work tends to be high, the expected change might cause excessive and even existential feelings of threat to their professional identity and existence. Change processes, especially when led by non-academics or directed at university from above might cause insecurity, overload, and instability among the staff, because the identity formations, being fundamentally affective judgments, take place in those institutional practices (Gregg, 2010). For instance, the policy-driven development initiatives can be interpreted as a threat to the academic identity, leaving no space for one's own decisions and academic autonomy. This might result in the lack of involvement of the academics (Gumport, 2001; Teichler, 2011).

The positions of the actors impact the emotions felt, and their ways of valuing situations of change. In their study, Dasborough et al. (2015) argue that the perception of merging of higher education institutions varies depending on the level of seniority, access to information on the situation, and the status of employment (tenured/untentured). By the academic faculty, the merger was seen as being either a promising opportunity (senior staff, tenured), a threat (more junior, untentured staff), or something inevitable. Positive emotions attached to change situations were hope and joy, and the negative ones were fear, anger and sadness (Dasborough et al., 2015).

Despite an increasing body of knowledge on emotions in organisations in general, and in universities and higher education in particular, or the role of emotions in change situations, the role of emotions within the development work and in university organisation is an understudied field. Development work, as a phenomenon and the empirical focus of the article, consists of intentional attempts to change the current situation and influence in emotional dimension, as well the actual practices, in one way or another. Development initiatives, and developers, also face the current cultural contexts, with the emotional and social dynamics of their own. My assumption is that the emotional dimensions of development work and its context, in this case, the university as a forum for development, become more visible in the situations of intended change.

### **Research design**

The research design has been informed by the following questions:

- RQ1: How are the emotionally charged horizons of opportunities constructed in development work?

- RQ2: How do the affective practices regulate and modify the development work at the university?

Across the questions runs a focus on affective practices in the context of development work and a critical-explorative approach to the usefulness of the concept of emotionally charged horizons of opportunity. The questions have been explored through an analysis of two cases on development work with the aim of considering, changing and modifying current practices (see Table 1). In the first case (Case 1, to be referred as *Development of academic unit*), the target of the development work was to open the discussion on the future development within the academic unit. This initiative did not have the direct connection to policy reforms either institutionally or nationally, and it was initiated by the leaders of the unit. In the second case (Case 2, to be referred as *Disciplinary degree reform*), the main target was to nationally reform the degree structures and harmonize the contents of the degree in academic discipline on a national basis. This process related to the Bologna process two-cycle degree reform in 2005. Both cases had structural and strategic purposes, and the aim of the collegial action.

Table 1: Description of cases

	Scope	Target of the development work	Participants	Outcome	Interviewee's relationship to case
<b>Case 1: Development of academic unit</b>	Local, department wide	To facilitate discussion on the future of academic unit	Academics from the unit, external facilitators	Stagnated situation	University lecturer responsible for pedagogic development
<b>Case 2: Disciplinary degree reform</b>	National, university and discipline wide	To renew the degrees to match the Bologna requirements nationally	Leading academics of the discipline from different universities	Successful change	One of leading professors

The two cases have been selected with the aim of providing different windows (c.f. Merriam, 1998 on case studies) for exploring the ways emotions, emotionally charged envisioned futures (as horizons of opportunities) and affective practices function in the academic environment.

The data consist of interviews conducted with the key actor of each initiative. Interview data represent the leading actors' experiences of the development work they were leading. During the period that the initiatives ran, the developer who was responsible for the academic unit development (Case 1) worked

as a university lecturer with the responsibility for the pedagogic development. Her academic background was from other discipline. The person who led the disciplinary degree reform (Case 2) was one of the leading professors of the field. Both interviewees were female.

The cases were chosen by the interviewees as examples of challenges and successes in the development work. Each person was interviewed once. Each of the two interviews lasted around one and a half hours, and the discussions were structured based on the factors of the initiatives: namely time, space, actors, targets, and tools of the initiative. Post-it notes and flip charts were used as a tool for reflecting and mind-mapping the cases. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interviews selected for this analysis were part of my larger set of data collection on development work at the university.

The analysis is limited by the number of cases. Only two persons were interviewed and hence the perspectives from one person represents the entire case in my analysis. The function of the empirical data and qualitative analysis has been to motivate and illustrate the conceptual development, with no aim to provide generalisations on role of emotions and affectivity at university settings. The two cases were rich in emotional expressions, and as such, they will provide interesting examples for conceptual development and exploration. In the interviews, emotions were not specifically in focus, but their significance became visible during the discussions and in the process of the analysis, awakening my curiosity and leading my work towards drafting the concept of ‘emotionally charged horizon of opportunity’. The informants recalled the emotions present in the past situations, using metaphoric language like ‘bunkers’ or ‘war’ while describing the obstacles they faced, and the tone of their speech changed depending on the emotion. They described their own feelings during the processes and reflected their experiences of the other participants’ feelings. While doing the analysis, I found the mentions of an external threat especially interesting, because the experienced threat was an element present in both case situations, but the processes evolved in different directions.

To clarify the roles of different actors, I will use terms in the following ways: ‘Developers’ refer to key actors leading the development work/initiative. The interviewed key actors are referred ‘Interviewee 1 and Interviewee 2, while the focus will be on their personal statements and speech. ‘Actors’ are the persons influenced by the initiatives and change attempts, including the leaders. Some actors are, especially in Case 1, are referred to as ‘participants’, when there seems to be clear distinction between the groups of people involved in development work. Partly, my use of terms is based on choices made by interviewees (e.g., reference to ‘participants’ vs. actors when talking about the ‘other’ actors).

For the data analysis, I adapted a discourse analytical approach (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000) with a focus on emotions and affective practices. Analysis of the research data was abductive and consisted of three rounds of analysis where I was moving between the theory and the data. I began the process of analysis during the interviews since I asked the developers to discuss the initiatives based on the factors, I assumed to define the conditions for the initiative. These factors were time, space, the people involved, the targets of the project, and the tools and methods used. The second round of analysis included a more detailed analysis of these factors and their interlinking aspects. The final round of analysis consisted of the analysis of emotional speech (especially how the informants talked about the threat), the affectivity of the practices of the development work, and the affective practices of the higher education institutions. No specific focus was put on my own reactions or affects during the processes of interviewing and analysing the data (c.f. Gherardi et al., 2019), even though recalling feelings of interviewing situations was indeed quite easy.

I will answer my research questions (RQ1 and RQ2) in two sections *Threat as an affective and discursive construction* and *Affective practices of the development work and the university*. Both sections begin with the findings from the empirical analysis of the case initiatives, while the focus will be on interviewees' experiences. Throughout the analysis, the two cases have been contrasted with each other. The case analysis will be followed by a discussion in which I discuss the findings to existing research on universities and development work and seek to think through the concepts that I have presented and developed in this article.

### **Threat as an affective and discursive construction**

#### *Making sense of threatful situation*

Interviewee 1: The process started with a major event; all members of the academic staff were present. Later we [developers] got to know that there had been many internal contradictions and conflicts in the department. It was because of those internal contradictions that the event had been set up. There had been a threat that the whole unit might be merged with another department, and there was pressure to do something. I had a feeling that I lacked the tools to make anything work for those people. I was present at the first session, I hadn't decided on anything [related to initiative], I was simply told to be there with them. I entered the hall and everyone was

looking at me angrily, with all their body language and gestures. The starting point was a deadlock, I could not have been able to move it by any means. (Quote from Case 1: Development of the academic unit)

Interviewee 2: Faced with this threat, a lot of networking started to emerge within our discipline. We shared the anxiety and worry and thus organised a lot of common meetings. During that time, in 2003–2005, I was the one leading the discipline-based assessment and development project, which was one way to play for more time [for negotiations with the Ministry]. Otherwise, without a project, there would have been a real threat of a wipe out of the whole discipline. There was a lot of pressure and criticism [from the Ministry] on the need for bigger savings. However, the result was that academics had to work together. (Quote from Case 2: Disciplinary degree reform)

In both quotes, the interviewees described the external threat experienced by the central actors—themselves and others present in the situation. As a discursive, emotionally valued construction, the threat was understood as resulting from an external force, which was assumed to endanger the future existence of the community. However, the case situations resulted in reactions of a different kind. In the first case (development of the academic unit), the felt threat turned into resistance and stagnation, while in the second case (disciplinary degree reform), the actors were able to modify the threatening situation and act accordingly.

In the first case, Interviewee 1 recalled how fear and anger as emotions were present from the beginning of the initiative, which in the end, passed without any change. The reactions from the participants were resistance, not only in words but also in gestures and other types of body language. According to the Interviewee 1, there was no clearly articulated need for the initiative. However, there had been rumours about re-structuring the department. The participants' expectations to the re-structuring activities and their outcomes were negative. They were assuming something destabilizing was about to arrive, which was compared to the more or less satisfying current situation:

Interviewee 1: The feeling of something not currently working was missing here, so the participants did not have an idea that something needed to be fixed. They were hiding in the corners of their bunkers; they were completely and deeply inside there. Not reacting or responding to anything. The threat was seen as too big, but I think it had something to do with the

initiative for the development as such. (Case 1: Development of the academic unit)

Interviewee 1, while reporting on her experience in Case 1, rhetorically separated herself from the other participants. The use of nouns such as ‘they’ and ‘us’ gives a hint about the lack of feeling of involvement from the developer’s side. She also saw her position as one of the outsiders, compared with the staff employed by the unit in which the actual project was taking place. The metaphor of a bunker represents the need to hide and secure oneself against an external threat and the defensive attitude of the participants.

In the second case, with the scope of national, disciplinary-wide development, the external threat had a different functioning in the process (see quote from Interviewee 2 in previous section). The fear of the discipline losing its status and budget cuts to be made by the state forced otherwise competing academic leaders to collaborate. In this initiative, the actors were the discipline’s leading academics. The situation forced them to act together, without returning to passive-aggressive resistance present in another example. The threat was present, but the actors had the power to act. Also, they felt there was a tangible need for the change: budget cuts and the potential loss of the academic status. A feeling of involvement was conjointly produced because the experience of the external threat was big enough to require the participants to collaborate. As a result, because of the conflicted and tense situation in the field, the main actors were seeking ways to involve as many people and decision-making bodies as possible in the process.

#### *Emotion as a positioned judgment of the situation*

In the development of the academic unit (Case 1), the actors, who evaluated the current situation better than the potentially threatening future resulting from the change initiative, refused to act. In this situation, according to Interviewee 1, the change attempt was directed at participants outside their own community, and the clear motive for action was missing, or at least not communicated to the actors. Based on existing practices the potential future seemed positive enough, thus there was no need for the change. The resistance to reform shows how the expectations about the future, and the affects attached to that vision, can be crucial for the development process. According to Fuchs (2013), the potentiality of movement, the emotions experienced, and vision of the future are interlinked. He explains how emotions are the medium for humans to value the situation and the potential actions related to the potential outcomes. If one perceives the potential situation as being unsafe or otherwise uninviting, they will not move.

Based on the understanding of emotions as a tool for personal valuing and sense-making by Fuchs (2013), the power of not moving and acting, which can create delays in a process, can be interpreted as an intentional, rational. In the disciplinary degree reform (case 2), the feelings of pressure and threat led to different outcomes than in Case 1. Interviewee 2 explained how the threat of financial cuts and the decreased status of the discipline led to collaboration between the otherwise quarrelsome leading academics of the field at that time. The risk of losing the existing status was felt, as well as the need for action. The situation was interpreted, perhaps not appealing as such, but as something to modify by the actors and their networks. The envisioned future was experienced and constructed as an opportunity to change things for the better.

Dasborough et al. (2015) have reported how reactions of academics differed from each other while facing the organisational merger of their organisational assets and positions. The more tenured, permanent position holders saw the change attempts potentially more positive, in contrast to the ones with temporary contracts, in more insecure positions, who experienced a forthcoming change more threatening. In the two case initiatives of this study, there were significant differences in social positions and access to power and decision-making of the actors. In Case 1, the key actors were grassroots academics, teachers, and researchers in different stages of their academic career. While there were rumours about the need for change, the potential change was interpreted as negative, perhaps causing the fear of losing one's own position in a system if moving forward with the initiative. In the second case, the disciplinary degree reform (Case 2), the key actors had both the professional and institutional power to exert an impact on the system and the outcome. They also used the collaborative approach, involving activities to create a shared understanding of the initiative. The initiative, as well as the group of actors, got funding from the government, as well as the legitimation for their use of power. This corresponds to Meyerson and Tompkins' (2007) point that successful internal development work in universities often requires the multidimensional position of the central actors, who then need to have the capacity to draw resources from different sources.

In both cases, the legitimated agency of the developers, and the agency given to them by the other participants, had their impact on the situation. In Case 1, the developers who facilitated the action in the academic unit initiative were academics from a different discipline to one of the participants. The developers, introduced to the local academics as 'saviours and experts' who have come to 'fix us', were reported to cause irritation and anger. The local staff felt unheard, and the developers saw themselves being positioned as the 'agents of the management'. In

Case 2, the disciplinary degree reform, the key actors were the leading professors of the discipline, holding the power to take the required action.

The externally set political and financial conditions for higher education, for the disciplines as well as for the reforms, were mentioned both cases as enablers of and obstacles to the action. In Case 2, the actors were able to overcome the competitiveness of the academic culture and personal conflicts as the result of the commonly felt pressure by the state and the external threat of funding cuts and loss of status of the discipline. The initiative was connected to the wider, politically driven degree reform resulting from the implementation of the Bologna process. The disciplinary process functioned as a resource for the national legislative preparation work, and the funding for the reform itself was secured by the national government.

### **Affective practices of the development work and the university**

#### *Affectivity in the practices of development work*

According to interviewees, attempts by the developers to create a positive attitude were present, especially in Case 2 (disciplinary degree reform), in which the outcome of the threat was a collaboration amongst the key actors. Collaborative environment was created using seminars, sharing information, and collectively defining the targets and the vision of the initiative. The integration of the hierarchical and parallel, informal and formal, decision-making bodies and networks was described as crucial. According to Interviewee 2, the key actors wanted to involve the various groups of people in the process.

Interviewee 2: We were thinking about how to involve as many actors as possible in the process so that there would be this level of administration, disciplinary decision-making, central administration, and the faculties. Of course, there were also many networks that crossed the university institutions. For example, the network of deans, [who shared] many of the concerns [raised during the process], which were not specific for this particular academic subject. We were trying to involve all possible actors who might have an impact on the potential success, so it would penetrate the activities at all levels. (Case 2: Disciplinary degree reform)

Feelings of being heard and welcomed were important, along with the opportunity to use one's own academic competence in the process. Integration and involvement were described as listening to the 'grassroots' of the academy, as well as inviting

representatives from different stakeholder groups to participate in the planning. In this initiative, the participants were able to turn the internally conflicting relationships and contradictions into collaborative action.

According to the experiences of the interviewee, as an example of the negatively charged development work, the actors in Case 1 (the development of the academic unit initiative) lacked shared goals and reason for the process. This is seen in that resistance was interpreted as a reaction to the situation where the participants did not see or understand the need for change, or where the actual need simply did not exist at all.

Interviewee 1: It was a typical reaction by the leaders to the contradictory situation to solve the situation somehow. --- The agency, the feeling of being part of the situation, was completely lacking [from the participants]. It was awful. (Case 1: Development of the academic unit)

In this case, the threat was separating the developers, who felt as though they were externals, and the participants, who were representing the academic unit. The developers were asked to help the academics to define the goals and explore the situation, but they lacked the legitimate power to act given to them by the participants. The participants were forced to be present. The reason for the activity seemed to be unclear to all. Issues were also hidden under the surface—contradictions and conflicts, which the developer assumed to be the main reason for the launch of the initiative in the first place. In the end, the process did not move on, instead it ‘resulted in the creation of some reports’, and resistance within the community. Interviewee 1 recalled the feelings of herself, when the resistance was present in a situation. Resistance was explained by Interviewee 1 as anger and fear of the participants, visible as gestures, voices, and the body language of the participants. The status quo seemed to be a rational reaction to a situation in which the goals were not defined, the participants felt insecure and did not trust the external developers.

#### *Affective practices of the university*

Affects can modify and move the practices of the culture, and emotions influence the processes of producing different social categories, hierarchies, and boundaries between the people (Ahmed, 2004; Koschut, 2018; Wetherell, 2012). In challenging situations of the two cases, especially when the negative emotions were present, the assumed disciplinary, professional, and ideological or political differences, referred to as ‘bunkers’ became visible.

The functioning of emotions as a 'glue' in social differentiation and groupings (Ahmed, 2004) became visible in the first case, while Interviewee 1 reported how she felt she could not have been able to move the situation:

Interviewee 1: I entered the hall, and everyone was looking at me angrily, with all their body language and gestures. The starting point was a deadlock, I could not have been able to move it by any means. (Case 1: Development of the academic unit).

The question of legitimated agency and power to define, plan and implement development activities becomes visible in interviewees' speech. In Case 1, the participants separated themselves as a group from the actors they felt to be external experts from a different discipline, (c.f. Salmela & Mäki, 2017) or perhaps representatives of the university management (on difficult positions of academic managers, McGrath et al., 2019). The separating emotion, in relation to externals, was explained and interpreted by the interviewee as anger, which, however, glued the participants together as a group. In the second case, specific focus had been put on making the networks move and active, by involving the different groups of actors in the process.

According to Becher and Trowler (2001), academic identities are strongly rooted to disciplinary cultures and communities. Gregg (2010) explains how identity formations take place in social, affective practices, and how recently those practices in the universities have become more and more competitive. According to Salmela and Mäki (2017), academics' commitment to their disciplines makes interdisciplinary work difficult. The combination of a strong commitment to one's own academic theories and perspectives as source of identity and community, and the increased competition of academics on funding, positions, and fame, make an everyday (development) work at universities very difficult.

Academic criticism of policy reforms, reported by Teichler (2011) and Gumport (2001) may be connected to conflicted principles of professional self-discipline and managerial control. The presence of anger and fear towards the external developers in Case 1 might have been provoked by the presumption of a managerial, top-down attempt to cause change in academic unit.

In the disciplinary degree reform (Case 2), where the financial ground was secured even if temporarily contested, the leading actors were the spokespersons of the academy, who, despite some internal conflicts, did not have similar problems of legacy like the developers in Case 1. Based on the two cases, the core question therefore seems to be about, who has the legacy to act as a developer, and who can

be considered as the ‘key actor’ in the development initiatives—the leaders or the grassroots staff?

## **Conclusions**

The research interest of this paper has been in emotions as social force, with the purpose of understanding the affective realm of universities in cases of change. In outlining how the emotionally charged horizons of opportunities became constructed in the interviewees’ speech on development initiatives, and how the affectivity is present in the practices of development work and the practices of the university, the two cases show how the emotional evaluation of potential futures appears as a rational activity, and how the process depends on the power and position of the actors.

To understand the role of emotions in development work within higher education, I have drawn inspiration from the affective cultural studies area, in which emotions are defined as relational, culturally situated social forces connected to collective mentalities and belief systems (Ahmed, 2004, 2010; Gorton, 2007). Based on basic assumptions on discursive and affective as dimensions of the social life, I have drafted the concept ‘emotionally charged horizon of opportunity’. This concept combines a judgmental, embodied understanding of emotion as a ‘personal compass’, a tool for evaluating the situation their potential to the willingness to move or stay in the current situation (Fuchs, 2013), to definition of emotions as quality of relationship, ‘the glue’, which connect people and define the borderlines, hierarchies, and values in the system (Ahmed, 2004). These definitions of emotions are contextualized to performative and creative understanding of the affect as a dimension of social practice (‘affective practice’ by Wetherell, 2012).

At first, I have asked: *How are the emotionally charged horizons of opportunities constructed in development work* (RQ1). In the study, the emotionally charged horizons of opportunities have been explored as discursive constructions through the analysis of speech of the key actors on development cases. Horizons of opportunities have been interpreted as discursive constructions of potential futures, by which the actors (developers, key actors, participants) predicted the expected change to cause. By comparing the two cases I show how these future projections are positioned, depending on the status, legacy and relationships between different actors. For the positively charged horizons of opportunities present in Case 2, the shared understanding for the need for change seems to be essential. In Case 1, the actors did not have shared idea for the need for development work, and the potential change was interpreted as threatening.

Secondly, I have asked *how the affective practices regulate and modify the development work at the university* (RQ2). To answer this question, I have analysed the affectivity of intentional practices of development work, understood as the activities which were aimed to influence in an output either positively or negatively, to show how the emotions can be influenced and created consciously. I have also explored the affective practices of the university as a context and forum for the development, and how the emotions function in hierarchies, beliefs, and value systems of the university.

Higher education institutions provide a multi-layered and complex forum for the development processes. The commitment to the academic discipline, the ideal of academic freedom, the conflicts between the university administration and management, and the academic hierarchies are the forces that define the emotional dynamics of the context of the development. Exploring the role of emotions through this small qualitative study has enabled me to catch the dynamics of complex development initiatives, particularly, the development of academic unit and disciplinary level, national attempt of a degree reform. The concept of emotionally charged horizon of opportunities has helped me understand the dynamics of the development processes, and the contexts where they operate. The concept has provided a way to connect the ontological assumptions of the discursive and affective as elements of social life together, and to explore emotions as creative, dynamic and social entities, not as something strictly personal or psychological. I wish the concept to be useful for understanding and analysing - often reasonable— reasons for resistance, and to initiate the ways of development where the voices of essential actors could be taken into account. In addition to analysing the problems, knowledge on affects might also be useful while aiming to create more compassionate and equal workplaces (Zietsma et al, 2019).

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