9 No negative vibes

Organizational fun as a practice of social control

Virve Peteri

It is quite possible, then, that my employer fully expects me to respond to his bantering in a like manner, and considers my failure to do so a form of negligence. This is, as I say, a matter which has given me much concern. But I must say this business of bantering is not a duty I feel I can ever discharge with enthusiasm. It is all very well, in these changing times, to adapt one's work to take duties not traditionally within one's realm; but bantering is of another dimension altogether. For one thing, how would one know for sure that at any given moment a response of the bantering sort is truly what is expected? One need hardly dwell on the catastrophic possibility of uttering a bantering remark only to discover it wholly inappropriate.

(Kazuo Ishiguro: *The Remains of the Day*, p.16)

I never thought that during my ethnographic journey in the 2010s in two organizations carrying out big organizational changes I would identify so strongly with an old English butler from the 1950s. A butler struggling to understand how to respond to his new lord of the manor. The new lord masters the making of playful small talk, and the old butler struggles to follow this new form of social interaction. There is something oddly recognizable here. My informants discussed how they felt there was something puzzling about the organizational change seeking to promote 'fun culture' in the workplace. Although the directors would tell the employees that the changes would bring more fun into the workplace and free them from their offices, they still felt, at times, less liberated and more awkward. Occasionally, I was also perplexed by the strangeness of some situations which were described as liberating for the employees. What was creating this uneasiness?

This chapter is an attempt to make sense of those aforementioned experiences. I am interested in analysing what kind of assemblages of bodies, materials and spaces the organizational fun culture promotes, and, through ethnographic documentation, the contrary and complex meanings or 'ideological dilemmas' (Billig, 1988) this fun culture and its assemblages may produce. The ideological dilemmas perspective underlines the idea that ideologies, whether they are philosophical, political or everyday notions, comprise contrary themes. Thus, the different elements of an assemblage may construct and promote contradictory and inconsistent tendencies. Assemblage thinking emphasizes the intertwined nature of spatiality and power, because it examines why certain orders emerge in specific

ways, and how these orders shape socio-materiality and spaces. The perspective underlines that assemblages are always productive. They produce new behaviours, new expressions, new actors and realities (Müller, 2015).

The ethnographic data for this study was gathered from two workplaces that have adopted an activity-based office model. An activity-based office most commonly includes an open-plan office space, meeting rooms and a few separate spaces for work requiring more concentration. An activity-based office rests on the idea that people do not have their own workstation but can choose a fitting workstation depending on their mood and work tasks and even change their place several times a day, when they move on to a new activity. The central idea behind the activity-based office is that productivity will increase through the stimulation of interaction, mobility and communication (Appel-Meulenbroek et al., 2011).

The emphasis on fun, happiness and emotions in general has, from the beginning, been central to the development of the activity-based office concept, although, in the official strategies and documents, it is considered to be more about rational calculations between different work activities. Less than ten years ago, Microsoft launched new business premises in Finland. At first, these premises were called 'Meeting Spaces'. Later, the office was reconceptualised and renamed as an 'activity-based office'. The idea was that these new premises would eventually evolve into a global office concept, a paradigm for innovative office design. Instead of fixed workstations, the workplace consisted of different spaces of encounter, with a variety of ambiance alternatives such as 'beach', 'inspiration', 'nature', 'home' or 'bistro'. These spaces were presented as places where employees, objects and information move effortlessly, without hierarchies, limits or unnecessary controls. The idea was that employees would identify their task and mood for the day in the morning and choose the space that best fitted their state of mind and jobs. I argue that this kind of office design establishes a form of a 'therapeutic space', which mixes rationality and emotionality by creating subjects who are encouraged to act like 'one-man businesses', private entrepreneurs who consider their tasks rationally meanwhile always reflecting on their current mood or emotion. The workers may choose to match their mood with the atmosphere of a certain space, but, nevertheless, they are *forced to choose*, and the chosen space directs the way they may move, communicate and feel. The office produces subjects whose duty is to start each day by contemplating which ambiance is pleasant and suitable for them that day.

The chapter is organized as follows. Firstly, I will explore the existing research and cultural analysis on fun and playfulness in organizations and discuss my empirical and theoretical contribution to the subject. Secondly, I will present my data and the methodology utilized in the chapter. Thirdly, I will analyse the data and finally, discuss my findings.

Offices as therapeutic spaces

In his *Manifesto For a Ludic Century*, Eric Zimmerman (2015) notes that 'In the last few decades, information has taken a playful turn', and this change will require new skills, as it is not enough to 'understand systems in an analytic sense.

We must also learn to be playful in them'. Zimmerman writes mostly about digital games but broadens his scope as he suggests that the playful turn is also intertwined with how we work, communicate, socialize and love. He firmly connects playfulness with the ability to be innovative and creative.

In a somewhat similar vein, in recent decades, the positive psychology movement has highlighted the need to show more interest in studying the positive and playful aspects of human life (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). The psychological theory by Csikszentmihalyi which emphasizes the notion of flow has been highly influential. Positive psychologists suggest that working life can be organized around playfulness, thus, creating new innovations and value by stimulating employees' imagination and adding more fun into working life. For example, Glynn and Webster (1992) have identified a need for more in-depth study of adult playfulness to understand its role in the workplace. Positive psychologists suggest that play and associated positive emotions augment individuals' intellectual and other personal and social resources (Barnett, 2007; Fredrickson, 1998; Fredrickson et al., 2000), which, at the very least, implies that fostering positive emotions at the workplace might generate more innovative employees. Since the 1980s, management gurus have emphasized that adopting a fun culture at the workplace will promote a playful and pleasurable atmosphere, which will produce more productive and dedicated employees. Interestingly, the idea of organizational fun has gone a long way considering the usually short life cycle of management and business trends (Fleming, 2005). Redman and Mathews (2002) maintain that there is even a 'well-developed "fun industry" offering would-be funsters with advice, workshops and consultancy on making work more fun', which shows that the business of creating fun is a truly serious business (see Fleming, 2005: 288).

However, organizational fun cultures are not static but in constant flux as are the organizations themselves. Fun cultures have existed even before the fun industry, in the form of joking and workplace humour. Power and resistance have been part of fun culture even before the more official fun cultures emerged. Sexual harassment in the form of innuendo, jokes, so-called 'girl calendars' and unwanted touching are ancient forms of 'fun culture' that have traditionally suppressed women (Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999). Moreover, the present organizational fun culture may reproduce and reformulate novel forms of control and subjectivities.

The reproduction and reformulation of control and subjectivities is linked with what can be called soft capitalism. The rhetoric of soft capitalism is concerned with playfulness, beauty and emotions (Chugh & Hancock, 2009: 465). This rhetoric identifies that the success of an organization lies in the narratives and creativity rather than with rationality, technologies and cost-benefit calculations even though its practices have a strong utilitarian dimension, and it is basically an attempt, as Heelas (2002: 81–82) notes, to instrumentalize these soft values for economic ends (see also Costea et al., 2005; Peteri, 2017). Furthermore, one form of soft capitalism is to promote new kinds of office environments that materialize and demonstrate the new flexible organization usually by trying to activate emotions and to maximize social interaction and mobility to produce innovations

(Thrift, 2005: 33–45). Kantola (2014: 9–11) calls this ‘enthusiastic individualism’ where playful informality and personal passion have become the new normative emotions of soft capitalism.

The literature concerning soft capitalism has some important resonances with the work of Boltanski and Chiapello (2007) on the new spirit of capitalism and Illouz’s (2007, 2008) work on emotional capitalism. All of these emphasize the role of social critique and academic research on reinventing capitalism and organizational cultures. The solution to improving working conditions and removing faceless bureaucracy and the ‘men in grey flannel suits’ is, according to Boltanski and Chiapello, to produce organizations that are more flexible, innovative and mobile. The new spirit expects employees to manage themselves meanwhile their companies can offer them self-help resources. The activity-based office model can be regarded as a form of ‘therapeutic space’ (Gorman, 2017a, 2017b) and ‘organized self-help’ that offers material elements inviting happier employees and producing networking opportunities, mobility and playfulness to promote innovations. This involves recognizing space as an active agent that is capable of transforming and shaping our experiences and emotions. This connects with the therapeutic call to maintain positive thoughts about oneself and the co-workers and to keep up positive energy and enthusiastic mentality. Thus, the therapeutic ethos makes emotions central to self-work (Illouz, 2008) and enhances organizational control by controlling and directing employees’ emotions.

Soft capitalism draws its ideas and legitimation from a number of sources. Its themes and vocabularies have become an important part of both the business world and academia. In a similar manner, as demonstrated previously, the culture of fun is not outside academia. In fact, its central mechanism is to ‘playfully’ mix and adopt ideas from a variety of sources: academic literature, popular self-help books, TV series, business media and tabloids. Even though some research has more or less accepted playfulness and happiness as the key elements of innovative organizational life, there is also plenty of research that raises more critical questions and analyses the fun culture and playfulness as providing a means for managerial control (e.g., Alexandersson & Kalonaityte, 2018; Baldry & Hallier, 2010; Costea et al., 2005; Fleming, 2005). Play is part of a wider turn to subjectivity (Costea et al., 2005), and thus, it is important to analyse what it adds to contemporary subjectivity.

The ethnographic data

I gathered data from two workplaces (in 2010 and 2014). One is a public organization with more than 2,500 members of staff and the other a private enterprise employing over 7,000 people. The work in these organizations could be characterized as knowledge work as it involves managing and organizing information and producing knowledge in different forms. During my ethnography, I also visited four other organizations that have adopted the activity-based office model. As I went to give talks in open seminars, I met people who invited me to visit their workplaces so that they could show me their new office premises and share their

experiences on moving to an activity-based office. These visits are not included in the primary data, but certainly have deepened my analysis, as I have been able to discuss my findings with people who have first-hand experience of the activity-based office model.

The organizations in my data had already adopted the activity-based office model. Although the official strategies concerning the activity-based office do not mention fun culture or playfulness, all the organizations I visited included elements that can be identified as promoting the culture of fun. This might be interpreted as a signal that the elements of fun, at least at the moment, in themselves signify or mark the ‘new’ in office decoration and spatial design, so much so that they have to be included in official strategies without a reference to them. The material has been obtained through interviews, observations, discussions and the gathering of documents. The documents include, for example, the *Proposed Government Premises Strategy* (2014) and the *Government’s Decision in Principle on Premises Strategy* (2014) as well as different research reports and brochures on the activity-based office model (e.g., Haapamäki et al., 2011; Nenonen et al., 2012; Nenonen & Niemi, 2013; Sandberg, 2012). I have also collected newspaper and magazine articles that deal with activity-based offices.

The material has been anonymized by changing the names of the workers and removing information that risks identifying the organizations. Workers who could have been compromised by the research have had the opportunity to check the text and make comments on it before publication. Furthermore, some examples of the organizations’ interiors presented in the analysis have been edited. For example, if I describe a wallpaper, its details and theme may have been changed to resemble the original while not being identical with it. However, there are plenty of examples that I could easily use because equivalent elements could be found in all of the organizations I visited and also in the media texts.

During my fieldwork, I enjoyed rereading Lefebvre’s *The Production of Space*. Lefebvre writes about ‘representations of space’, that refer to existing ways of conceptualizing spaces. These representations are produced and implemented by architects, political decision-makers, officials, planners and engineers. Lefebvre also mentions ‘social engineers’ (Lefebvre, 2015: 38), who would today include consultants, interior designers, and ‘change managers’ hired to execute pre-planned organizational changes. Lefebvre suggests that analysing representations of space is a specific form of critique, equivalent to literary critique, a critique of space that recognizes dominant representations of space and shows how space is not just a frame or background for action. Human agency, social practices and spatial arrangements are intertwined so closely that they cannot really be understood as separate entities. Each can be understood through the other, as Foucault (2003: 372) notes. According to Lefebvre, a critique of space or ‘spatial imagination’ has to start with a *lived space*, the embodied users’ experiences of power, tensions and resistance working with and through space (Soja, 1996: 68). These conceptualizations seemed to speak directly about the experiences I had when talking with the employees at their newly decorated office spaces, and they made me realize that I could not just do research on them, but I had to also do it *for* them.

In the private sector, many office employees have moved from their own workrooms to open-plan offices where they ‘hot-desk’ or use shared workstations. A working lounge, office hoteling and hub-type spaces are also becoming more common. It seems that a spatial shift is taking place in office settings in general. In Finland, *Proposed Government Premises Strategy* (2014) expresses that all ministries, government agencies and departments will be transformed into activity-based offices by 2020. Many private enterprises have already adopted the same model. Thus, my article is a critique of a certain kind of hegemonic space that is officially recognized and accepted by the Finnish government, even though its first adaptations were found in private companies.

My ethnographic field notes and the critique of space based on them may come at times close to absurd drama or even tragicomedy. Every so often, the fun culture itself might seem like a joke. According to Cate Watson (2015), before modernity put the emphasis on rationality, laughter and humour were actually seen as having a deep philosophical meaning. The absurd and the irrational were considered as inherent parts of human existence and thus humour had an essential role in revealing something that rational means could not. During my fieldwork, there were quite a few occasions where the employees and I laughed at the changes. You could say that we were constructing a hidden form of fun culture, resisting the official one with the employees’ own take on fun. After all, finding humour in difficult situations can sometimes be a liberating force (Mulkay, 1988), and at its best, it provides a means for challenging the status quo and makes people feel more at ease (Nilsen, 1994).

The spatiality of fun

In the data, officially created ‘fun culture’ is evident in the way offices incorporate playful elements: shared spaces may include board games or a PlayStation. Also, shared areas may have Fatboy beanbags or similar floor-level seating. One of the organizations I studied had seating that resembles huge Lego blocks. The furniture in both organizations was bright coloured. The more traditional chairs in the open office areas echoed hotel lobby furniture. This type of furniture promotes mobility among the employees: puts them on the move, ready to encounter others (Peteri, 2017).

In practice, activity-based offices consist mainly of open-plan spaces without partition screens. In both organizations, big plants were used to provide visual obstruction. Strikingly, bright green was a prominent colour in the decor. In meeting rooms, photographic wallpaper depicting images of a jungle, space ship or motor racing signals playfulness and offers a visual illusion of being in another place or dimension. The office fun culture is also evident in the new names given to different departments. The departments still have doors and walls, albeit made of glass, and the names of specific departments are still on display on the doors. The font is playful, colourful and cartoonish. Often the name does not clearly reveal the function of the department, and it is impossible to discern any single logic from which the names were derived. One name reminded me of a

specific children's fairy tale, another name resembled a management consultancy buzzword and a third one seemed to refer to a certain state of mind.

I met up with Anne first thing in the morning, as she knew the managers would not be in and would not see us talking. We went to see the chill-out area. The area reminded me of my child's day care, with similar kinds of bright colours, big cushions and board games. Anne noted that nowadays it was very difficult to try to concentrate at work, as the chill-out area was right in the middle of the office space, and the young guys were often playing PlayStation games and being very loud. Some people had complained about the noise, but the managers had said that you either live with it or you leave. She told me that she and a few of her older colleagues had once suggested that they would arrange a lecture and conversations on some topic in the chill-out area. One of the bosses had said that the space is not meant for that kind of activity. (Field notes, September 2010)

While talking with Anne I noticed a laminated poster on the wall of the chill-out area. It stated: 'Everybody is Welcome here. Everybody Belongs'. The message was written in English making me wonder how welcome non-English speaking people were. Anne and her older colleagues did not feel welcome (although that had nothing to do with their language skills). The material assemblages associated with 'playbour' clearly influence how inviting different employees find the workplace. The ideal subject for these spaces seems to be a young man of a certain type. The new materials and furniture in the open-space areas are attractive for youthful bodies that can actually sit down as well as get up again from the Lego blocks or Fatboy beanbags. Wearing a dress or a top with a low neckline also make it trickier to lounge and properly relax on these beanbags. The material assemblages derive artefacts from worlds that are traditionally associated with masculinity (e.g., car racing or PlayStation games). Although emotional expression and aesthetics have traditionally been associated with femininity, they are now perceived as new resources for everyone in the workplace (Adkins, 2005; Swan, 2008). Thus, the new organizational fun culture might appear feminine with its emphasis on aesthetics and expressions of emotions. Instead, however, it may reproduce the old hierarchies in novel ways. Work cultures emphasizing informality often end up creating a 'laddish culture' (Gill, 2002) without any explicitly stated criteria why the aesthetic staging derives ideas from the world of motor racing rather than from the world of pony stables. This is not clear-cut, of course, as there were, for example, a few women who expressed that they enjoyed PlayStation games, but not at work, not at this chill-out area. It shows that it is not about who likes ponies and who likes PlayStation games, but rather of the assemblage of bodies, materials, spaces and staging.

In the official strategy (*Proposed Government Premises Strategy*, 2014), the activity-based office is introduced as a flexible environment for different kinds of tasks and people, bearing in mind, for example, ageing workers and increasing multiculturalism. The central idea behind the activity-based office is choosing a

workstation and working area according to current mood and the activity at hand. In the morning, employees find a desk where they can work, and quite often they have to do so again after a meeting or lunch break. Employees seem keen to find a workstation near their closest colleagues, rather than trying to figure out which workstation would fit their activities best. They appear to choose intentionally or unintentionally ignoring the basic premise of the activity-based office.

Some workers described how, over time, they started ‘deliberately’ forgetting their things on certain desks, even though the directors tried to prevent this and even removed the stuff. In time, this ‘misbehaviour’ (Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999) developed into tacit knowledge about which workstation ‘really’ belonged to whom. Officially, nobody had assigned workstations, but unofficially every employee knew where their colleagues preferred to sit and work. In the other organization, the directors discussed the possibility to use an electronic system to monitor how often employees used a certain workstation. If an employee tried to use the same workstation more than twice a week, the workstation would not allow it. This electronic control would break conventional habits and force people to spend time with people they would not deliberately choose to sit next to. This spatial design seems to imply that innovations are born when unfamiliar people get close to each other, not through historical connections.

The organization of a space is conceived as activity-oriented, rather than taking into account historically developed skills and relationships in the workplace. The organization takes into account emotions, but only the fleeting ones such as moods and feelings, but ignores or even tries to remove more stable and long-term emotions of loyalty, friendship and solidarity between the employees. In both organizations, the directors encouraged staff to destroy all the ‘old stuff’ (papers, folders, books, etc.) and adopt a new line of thinking, which meant working mostly without paper and print media. However, in both organizations, several members of staff took those things home or to their summer cottages without informing the employer. Now that the archived work documents and books have been moved to domestic settings, a large proportion of the employees’ competence and work-related information has moved off the company’s premises. When I talked to the employees, they justified this by saying that the things were not just any old stuff but a very concrete part of their expertise. It seemed evident that they had interpreted the request to get rid of ‘old stuff’ as a signal that historical understanding of work processes was not appreciated anymore. The documents consist of information on how their special expertise has developed over time and what the expertise includes. Thus, the new office design seems to reject historical knowledge, materials, relationships and developments.

The ideological dilemmas of play and work

Huizinga (1980) observes fun and pure play in his book *Homo Ludens* as ‘one of the main bases of civilization’. Huizinga defines play as a voluntary activity. If play is artificially generated or people are ordered to play, it is no longer play. It is just ‘a forcible imitation’ of play (Huizinga, 1980: 5–7). Here, I might

add, lies one of the most obvious ideological dilemmas of generating fun and playfulness in work organizations. According to Huizinga, play is a free activity that cannot be tamed. Thus, it cannot be turned into business. This does not mean that it cannot inspire attempts to capitalize play and fun (Alexandersson & Kalonaityte, 2018).

While the playful office aims to enrich a certain leisure mentality, it simultaneously decreases spaces where one can concentrate in peace. Thus, the concept of increasing open-space areas promotes the idea that concentration is an individually created state of mind. Although playful offices aim to make people more mobile and social, they also mean that people must be able to find an intensely peaceful place inside their heads so that they rarely need quiet spaces for working.

We were having coffee together. Seven employees and I. Someone suggested we go to a meeting room to talk more privately. The actual coffee room was an open space next to the working area, so you could not really have a private conversation there. Once we had settled, the employees started to reminisce about a meeting where the directors of the company had presented ‘six theses’ which the whole organization was supposed to agree on and commit to. One of the theses was ‘no negative vibes’. One director explained that this slogan was from a reality TV show. According to the director’s story, one of the stars of that show had confessed that there was just too much relationship drama in her life, and she wanted ‘no more negative vibes’. We had a laugh. After a while, one of the employees exclaimed, ‘this activity-based office thing is like an ideology!’ Several of the workers murmured approvingly or laughed and an older man added that it actually reminded him of his youth; of the Maoism in the seventies. You just had to obey and not question the ideology in any way. The employees agreed that the directors seemed more thin-skinned about this organizational change than of any previous ones. (Field notes, June 2014)

One form of play is the way the managers adopt and mix ideas and slogans from very different sources; TV shows, self-help books, academic literature and tabloids. *No negative vibes* was adopted from a reality TV show and its emerging new star who had already gained some notorious fame for her colourful private life. Rejecting criticism from the employees by adopting this slogan and turning it into one of the theses produces a dilemma for the employees. The aforementioned thesis is disguised as humour, but the employees are expected to obey the rule all the same. Any criticism is regarded as breaking the rule, but also as a sign that the employee lacks a sense of humour. You disregard the central idea of having fun if you do not ‘play’ along and obey the joke.

Playfulness is linked with the idea of wellness and specifically with happiness and the ethos of self-work; keeping oneself happy at work is a new duty for employees (Costea et al., 2005). Although the traditional boundaries between play and work are modified, they are not reinvented. While the employees need

to work on their proper ‘jobs’ and on their positive selves, they also have to be productive and obey the managers, in this case, by offering *no negative vibes*.

We sat down in the colourful entrance hall area with the manager. We sat on two blocks that reminded me of jigsaw puzzle pieces. The manager stated that the new organizational change meant that the organization was now a story-telling organization, ‘a narrative organization’, she emphasized with pride in her voice. She explained that this was actually only the beginning of a bigger change. There is no need to inform the employees yet, she pointed out to me. I was bewildered that she told me, an outsider she had only known for a few days, about the upcoming change. I asked how the employees experienced these on-going changes. She sighed and admitted that it was not easy. She explained that people are so old-fashioned, and it is not easy giving up your personal workstation and room. She shared with me a story of a female worker who wanted to keep a picture of her dog on her desk. She imitated their conversation about the employee having to give up the picture and her having to tell the person that nobody in that department had their own workstation and thus, no one could keep their things on the desks. Her voice – when she was imitating herself – was like that of a parent when talking to a toddler. She portrayed the employee and her wishes and motivations as childish. I thought that the story was probably not a real story but rather an exaggeration that tried to emphasize a certain point or an ideal story to demonstrate something. After the story, she told me that the next step would be an authentic nomadic organization, which would complete the plans to increase the mobility and interaction of employees. She told me that she imagined this change as the bound of a giant tiger. (Field notes, September 2014)

The organizational change can also be experienced as exciting and liberating, especially for a manager. From a management viewpoint, the change seems to offer opportunities to take pleasure in experiencing a ‘paradigm change’, the excitement of creating a new organizational culture. In addition, management has the information on how the processes will proceed, which makes it easier to enjoy the change without anxieties. While I talked to the manager, she repeatedly referred to the organizational change as ‘the bound of a tiger’. Only afterwards, I realized that she had most likely adopted the metaphor from a self-help book on organizational changes (Manka, 2010). The book introduces the metaphor of ‘the bound of a tiger’, which refers to a change that ‘demands creating structures that prevent routines and make room for free interaction’ and demands an understanding that ‘we are prisoners of the past and thus blinded’ (Manka, 2010: 283). The book is based on the idea that the past has nothing to teach us – it is just ‘bureaucratic skeletons in the closet’ (Manka, 2010: 280) – and that organizations must embrace radical changes.

The culture of fun and its material and narrative assemblages promote the idea that employees will regain their inner child. However, there is a thin line between childlike behaviour and the *right kind* of childlike behaviour. In both

organizations, the management told stories of employees wanting to keep their personal things. The punchline of these stories was that the employees were 'endearing' in their desire to 'mark' their own place with a photo of a loved one or with piles of paper. In these stories, the managers always mentioned that the piles of papers were *old* and sometimes even dusty. The tone of the stories was ironical. The employees seemed to have infantile wishes and no genuine understanding of 'the real world'. The employees were like aboriginals who have to 'mark' their territory. The management would start the stories by stating that they understood that change was difficult. Thus, the moral of these stories is that change is fundamentally not about office spaces, but really about people and their need to change.

By interpreting stories as potentially exaggerated, I do not mean that the managers were telling 'untrue' stories. Real life events do not organize themselves neatly in a narrative form. Thus, stories are something told, not just a description of how something was lived. In everyday life, we use stories to make sense of the world, as instruments to highlight something or create new information (Carr, 1986). For example, the aforementioned stories could be interpreted as an attempt to invite me to take part in a playful conversation. Hyperbole is sometimes a means to create playful talk or introduce a play frame. In spite of my view on the narrative, which dispels the difference between real and fictive elements in talk, I have to point out the ideological nature of the stories.

By sheer chance or not, the principal characters in these stories were all women. As noted before, the new organizational fun culture might appear feminine with its emphasis on aesthetics and emotions. Instead, however, it may reproduce the old hierarchies in novel ways. Those who revealed that they did not feel comfortable with the organizational fun culture were both men and women. However, the new emotional culture still reproduces stories where the women are the ones constructed as overemotional and even hysterical. As Swan (2008) suggests, men can increase their cultural capital at work by adopting feminized emotional performances in ways that are not possible for women.

Considering the stories told by the managers, women's position in the culture of fun might also be more fragile. The aforementioned stories may carry on and make use of the old idea that women do not really know how to have fun. Fun often involves humour and jokes (Fine & Corte, 2017), which are highly gendered by nature. For example, recent research has shown that cultural ideas of humour or 'talk as play' are based more on a male norm about what is considered funny. Typically, in social situations, men have preferred more formulaic joking and women share funny stories of their everyday life to create solidarity (Coates, 2007). Thus, it is more difficult for women to increase their cultural capital by expressing emotions, and with regards to the organizational fun culture, they seem to be in a bigger danger of coming across as humourless or even killjoys (see also Gill, 2016). More formulaic joking is a safer technique when the spatial and material order encourages people to mingle with new people. Sharing stories of your everyday life often demands a certain kind of familiarity with the people the stories are shared with.

Furthermore, the previous passage from the field notes is a good illustration of the ‘linguistic turn’ of the business community (Thrift, 2005). The manager uses metaphors like ‘narrative organization’ and ‘nomadic organization’, which are familiar also from academic texts. Ironically, the manager describes their organization as a story-telling organization in a context where she tells me not to share a piece of information with the employees. Soon afterwards, she shares a story of a woman who wishes to keep a picture of her dog on her desk. A story that I interpreted as potentially not true but rather a narrative that tries to make a point more visible by exaggerating certain features. These narratives allow the managers to exaggerate some features to the point of absurdity. The stories of the pictures of loved ones and ridiculously old, dusty and heavy piles of paper construct the women employees as infantile and the situations as somehow hilarious, yet in conflict with the new culture of fun.

The office premises in both organizations included a lot of open space and many glass walls, and that made some employees more reluctant to talk to me. ‘If I criticize the new order, I’ll get the chop,’ commented one employee with whom I ended up talking in a storeroom among old furniture and partition screens. In this shadowy room, we were able to talk peacefully in a safe place. Thus, sometimes, the ‘hidden injuries’ (Sennett, 1972) were very concretely hidden, but taking part in the research was clearly an effort to preserve some sense of dignity. Many of those who took part highlighted that it was important for their story to be told.

Conclusions

I do not want to deny the possibility that a fun organizational culture could exist. I am also prepared to entertain the idea that fun could be consciously created and organized. However, as Fleming (2005) notes, the organizational fun culture needs to be rethought in terms of dignity, democracy and respect. The fun culture I encountered reminded me of situations where parents want their children to play with children their children do not particularly want to play with. As a child, I realized that parents thought that play was the same for every child when in fact it meant so many different things for different children. ‘You go and play with them *now*’, my mother insisted when I tried to explain that I do not know how to play with them. I went and sometimes we eventually found a form of play that we understood in a similar fashion, but other times it did not work out. I think the possibility of creating a fun culture for adults would demand recognizing that fun still does not mean the same for everyone. To put it bluntly, one man’s fun culture is another woman’s #metoo campaign. Fun has to do with hierarchies, gender, age, ethnicity, sexuality and social class, and therefore, a uniform and single fun culture is an impossibility. Even in my ethnographic material, different kinds of fun cultures could be identified; those that legitimized and those that tried to resist the official fun culture.

This chapter has aimed to shed light on how new forms of office decoration and spatial planning connect with the therapeutic ethos that has brought emotions to the core of organizational culture. I have considered the activity-based office

model as a form of ‘therapeutic space’ (Gorman, 2017a) and organized self-help (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005) that offers material elements which try to shape happier, more mobile workers ready to network with new people while being more playful and positive. I have shown how the emphasis on positive emotions produces new forms of organizational control. The fun culture encourages subjects to find their ‘inner child’ and to free themselves. This invites the employees to a new landscape where they have to try to recognize and learn what that ‘fun’ actually means. The fun culture infantilizes the employees, and thus, they risk positioning themselves as childish. Once they have embraced their inner child, they have entered a place where they are potentially considered more innovative but have a more fragile position as they no longer have all the chips to gain a place in the adult world.

The new spaces of work may in some ways be more flexible, as promised, but they still produce social relations and power and renew old gender hierarchies (see also Salmenniemi et al. in this book). The fun culture emphasizes aesthetics and emotions, which are traditionally considered as belonging to the feminine sphere. However, the fun itself seems to invite more traditionally masculine fun practices and invites certain kinds of male bodies to enjoy the ‘laid-back’ chill-out areas. The rhetoric in official documents, in media texts and managers’ stories is about increasing the freedom of employees. The freedom means that in the mornings you act like a ‘private entrepreneur’ who is forced to reflect on which space suits your mood best instead of just walking to your own space, to your own desk. This emotional culture invites subjectivities that define fleeting emotions and ambiances as essential to work but underestimate more long-term emotions.

References

- Ackroyd, S. & P. Thompson. 1999. *Organizational Misbehavior*. London: Sage.
- Adkins, L. 2005. The new economy, property and personhood. *Theory, Culture & Society* 22:1, 111–130.
- Alexandersson, A. & V. Kalonaityte. 2018. Playing to dissent: The aesthetics and politics of playful office design. *Organisation Studies*, 39:2–3, 297–317.
- Appel-Meulenbroek, R., Groenen, P. & Janssen, I. 2011. An end-user’s perspective on activity-based office concepts. *Journal of Corporate Real Estate* 13:2, 122–135.
- Baldry, C. & J. Hallier. 2010. Welcome to the house of fun: Work space and social identity. *Economic and Industrial Democracy* 31:1, 150–172.
- Barnett, L. A. 2007. The nature of playfulness in young adults. *Personality and Individual Differences* 43:4, 949–958.
- Billig, M., Condor, S., Edwards, D., Gane, M., Middleton, D., & Radley, A. 1988. *Ideological Dilemmas: A Social Psychology of Everyday Thinking*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Boltanski, L. & E. Chiapello. 2005. The new spirit of capitalism. *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 18:3–4, 161–188.
- Boltanski, L. & Chiapello, E. 2007. *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. London: Verso.
- Carr, D. 1986. Narrative and the real world: An argument for continuity. *History and Theory* 25:2, 117–131.

- Chugh, S. & Hancock, P. 2009. Networks of aestheticization: The architecture, artefacts and embodiment of hairdressing salons. *Work, Employment and Society* 23:3, 460–476.
- Coates, J. 2007. Talk in a play frame: More on laughter and intimacy. *Journal of Pragmatics* 39:1, 29–49.
- Costea, B., N. Crump & J. Holm. 2005. Dionysus at work? The ethos of play and the ethos of management. *Culture and Organisation* 11:2, 139–151.
- Ehdotus valtion toimitilastrategiaksi. 2014. Valtion toimitilastrategian päivittämistyöryhmän muistio. [The Proposed Government Premises Strategy] Valtionvarainministeriön julkaisuja, February/2014, <http://vm.fi/documents/10623/307565/Toimitilastrategia+2020/964fa234-3698-4b74-aadf-5c15aa6cdb4d>.
- Fine, G. A. & Corte, U. 2017. Group pleasures: Collaborative commitments, shared narrative, and the sociology of fun. *Sociological theory* 35:1, 64–86.
- Fleming, P. 2005. Workers' playtime? Boundaries and cynicism in a 'culture of fun' program. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* 41:3, 285–303.
- Fredrickson, B. L. 1998. What good are positive emotions? *Review of General Psychology* 2:3, 300–319.
- Fredrickson, B. L., R. A. Mancuso, C. Branigan & M. M. Tugade. 2000. The undoing effect of positive emotions. *Motivation and Emotion* 24:4, 237–258.
- Foucault, M. 2003. Space, knowledge and power. In *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, edited by N. Leach. London: Routledge, 367–380.
- Gill, R. 2002. Cool, creative and egalitarian? Exploring gender in project-based new media work in Euro. *Information, Communication & Society* 5:1, 70–89.
- Gill, R. 2016. Post-postfeminism?: New feminist visibilities in postfeminist times. *Feminist Media Studies* 16:4, 610–630.
- Glynn, M. A. & J. Webster. 1992. The adult playfulness scale: An initial assessment. *Psychological Reports* 71:1, 83–103.
- Gorman, R. 2017a. Smelling therapeutic landscapes: Embodied encounters within spaces of care farming. *Health & Place* 47, 22–28.
- Gorman, R. 2017b. Therapeutic landscapes and non-human animals: The roles and contested positions of animals within care farming assemblages. *Social & Cultural Geography* 18:3, 315–335.
- Haapamäki ym. 2011. Käyttäjälähtöiset tilat. Helsinki: Tekes, December/2011. [User centered spaces] http://www.tekes.fi/globalassets/julkaisut/kayttajalahtoiset_tilat.pdf.
- Heelas, P. 2002. Work ethics, soft capitalism and the turn to life. *Cultural Economy: Cultural Analysis and Commercial Life*, edited by P. Du Gay & M. Pryke. London, England: Sage, 78–96.
- Huizinga, J. 1980. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. London: Routledge and K Paul.
- Illouz, E. 2007. *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Illouz, E. 2008. *Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-Help*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Kantola, A. 2014. Emotional styles of power: Corporation leaders in Finnish business media. *Media, Culture & Society* 36:5, 578–594.
- Lefebvre, H. 2015. *The Production of Space*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Manka, M.-L. 2010. *Tiikerinloikka työniloon ja menestykseen*. Helsinki: Talentum.
- Mulkay, M. J. 1988. *On Humor: Its Nature and Its Place in Modern Society*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

- Müller, M. 2015. Assemblages and actor-networks: Rethinking socio-material power, politics and space. *Geography Compass* 9:1, 27–41.
- Nenonen, S. & O. Niemi. 2013. Tilat ja työympäristö – näkökulmia monitilatoimistoon. [Spaces and workplaces – perspectives on the activity-based office] Rakennustieto. <https://www.rakennustieto.fi/Downloads/RK/RK130302.pdf>.
- Nenonen, S., U. Hyrkkänen, H. Rasila, W. Hongisto, J. Keränen, H. Koskela & E. Sandberg. 2012. Monitilatoimisto. Ohjeita käyttöön ja suunnitteluun. [Activity-based office. User's and designer's manual] http://www.ttl.fi/fi/tutkimus/hankkeet/toti/Documents/monitilatoimiston_suunnitteluohje_toti_03092012.pdf.
- Nilsen, A. P. 1994. In defense of humor. *College English* 56:8, 928–933.
- Peteri, V. 2017. Bad enough ergonomics: A case study of an office chair. *SAGE Open* 7:1, 1–11.
- Redman, T. & B. P. Mathews. 2002. Managing services: Should we be having fun? *Service Industries Journal* 22:3, 51–62.
- Seligman, M. E., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. 2014. Positive psychology: An introduction. *Flow and the Foundations of Positive Psychology*, edited by M. Csikszentmihalyi & R. Larson. Dordrecht: Springer, 279–298.
- Sennett, R. 1972. *The Hidden Injuries of Class*. New York: Alfred A Knopf Inc.
- Soja, E. W. 1996. *Thirdspace. Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
- Swan, E. 2008. 'You make me feel like a woman': Therapeutic cultures and the contagion of femininity. *Gender, Work & Organization* 15:1, 88–107.
- Thrift, N. 2005. *Knowing Capitalism*. London: Sage.
- Valtioneuvoston periaatepäätös valtion toimitilastrategiaksi. 2014. [The Government's Decision in Principle on Premises Strategy] <http://vm.fi/documents/10623/307565/Valtioneuvoston+periaatep%C3%A4%C3%A4t%C3%B6s+valtion+toimitilastrategiaksi/0a92ff49-8d57-43fe-b49a-ae911c98b59d>.
- Watson, C. 2015. A sociologist walks into a bar (and other academic challenges): Towards a methodology of humour. *Sociology* 49:3, 407–421.
- Zimmerman, E. 2015. Manifesto for a ludic century. *The Gameful World: Approaches, Issues, Applications*, edited by S. P. Walz & S. Deterding. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 19–22.