

Sensegiving and Sensebreaking via Emotion Cycles and Emotional Buffering: How Collective Communication Creates Order in the Courtroom

Management Communication Quarterly

1–28

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DOI: 10.1177/0893318915581647

mcq.sagepub.com



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Abstract

Municipal courtroom employees face a variety of positive and negative emotional interactions, especially when defendants are encountering the criminal justice system for the first time. Based on qualitative data from participant observation and informal and formal interviews, this study analyzes how emotion cycles between judges and bailiffs help provide sensegiving and sensebreaking cues to defendants and observers in the courtroom. The heart of the analysis explores the routines and previous enacted environments of the courtroom, and the emotional buffering role of bailiffs—who we call intermediary actors—and names three types of emotion cycles: (a) the positive complementary emotion cycle, (b) the negative compensatory emotion cycle, and (c) the negative complementary emotion cycle. Theoretical implications include extensions of emotion cycle research through the use of participant observation data, the role of emotional buffering among three or more actors, and the impact of sensegiving and sensebreaking cues on organizational visitors.

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Keywords

emotional buffers, emotion cycles, sensegiving, sensebreaking

You must absolutely not let the first defendant act out without checking them because defendants in that setting [the courtroom] are like a room full of elementary children that take cues from you and from each other.

—Judge Darson

In the face of uncertainty and ambiguity, people engage in sensemaking, or “efforts to create order and make retrospective sense of what occur[ed]” (Weick, 1993, p. 635). Organizational sensemaking unfolds through interaction and communication of both rational and emotional experiences and has been studied in a variety of contexts, such as aircraft carrier organizations (Weick & Roberts, 1993), fire disasters (Weick, 1993), Amway distribution centers (Pratt, 2000), and through stakeholders and leader experiences (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis, 2005). In addition, researchers have examined how leaders redefine situations in organizations and give sense to others through sensegiving (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991), break down others’ meaning through sensebreaking (Pratt, 2000), create sense through humor (Lynch, 2009; Tracy, Myers, & Scott, 2006), and manage rationality, emotionality, and sensemaking (Dougherty & Drumheller, 2006).

When people experience interruptions in their regular routine or changes in their environment, they often display emotions such as anger, surprise, fear, and relief as part of their sensemaking. Emotion—whether in the form of emotional contagion, emotional labor, or emotion cycles—influences other actors and subsequent attempts at sensemaking (Dougherty & Drumheller, 2006; Weick, 1995). Emotion cycles are important to this study because they highlight the interactional process of emotion transfer among multiple organizational actors (Hareli & Rafaeli, 2008). Sensegiving and sensebreaking are group-level processes and therefore, to study how emotion interacts with these processes, it is necessary to employ a framework that addresses group-level emotion such as emotion cycles.

Originally, we intended to examine the relationship among emotion cycles, sensegiving, and sensebreaking. However, as we analyzed the data, we noticed the importance of the intermediary employee role in the emotion cycle. This emergent concept, which we refer to as emotional buffering, helped clarify the interactional process of emotion cycles in relation to sensegiving and

sensebreaking and explain how one organizational actor can buffer emotion between two or among more organizational actors.

We analyzed emotion cycles, sensegiving, and sensebreaking as they manifest among judges, bailiffs,¹ and defendants in a municipal courtroom setting. Examining judges, bailiffs, and defendants, as their emotions cycle through the courtroom, provides insight into the challenges that courtroom employees encounter in efficiently “processing” defendants while providing high-quality services. Such a study also extends current research on sensegiving, sensebreaking, and emotion cycles.

Sensegiving, Sensebreaking, and Emotion Cycles

The workplace environment can be complex, chaotic, and emotional. Here we introduce sensegiving and sensebreaking to help explain workplace complexity, and review work on emotional contagion, emotion cycles, and other employee emotional roles.

Organizational Sensegiving and Sensebreaking

When something ambiguous or uncertain happens during organizing, employees often respond by sensemaking (Weick, 1995, 2001). Courtroom sensemaking is a social process, (Maitlis, 2005) due to the collective action of numerous employees, and a never-ending, ongoing phenomenon, in which organizational members make sense of ambiguous and uncertain situations through the extraction of emotional and environmental cues. Sensegiving and sensebreaking are two processes closely related to sensemaking.

Sensegiving happens when organizational members attempt to influence other actor’s meaning making “towards a preferred redefinition of organizational reality” (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991, p. 441). For organizational actors to give (new, better, or more desired) sense, it is sometimes necessary to break the (old, worse, or less desired) sense. This is called sensebreaking, and involves the “destruction or breaking down of meaning” (Pratt, 2000, p. 464). Sensegiving and sensebreaking have been studied in contexts such as symphony orchestras (Maitlis, 2005), Amway distribution centers (Pratt, 2000), and academic environments (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Gioia & Thomas, 1996). Most of the extant research has been focused on those who are giving or breaking sense (e.g., the leader, stakeholder, or middle manager), citing numerous ways that high-power employees provide sensegiving and sensebreaking cues. For example, leaders engage in sensegiving through creating hypothetical scenarios, values, and labels (Bartunek, Krim, Necochea, & Humphries, 1999; Corley & Gioia, 2004; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991) and

middle managers through promoting issues and communicating ideals (Balogun, 2003; Smith, Plowman, & Duchon, 2010). A study of Amway distributors found that power holders provided sensebreaking cues by making employees feel like their current identities were lacking and that they needed to strive and dream for more (Pratt, 2000). In this study, we extend this research by analyzing how such cues also unfold with organizational visitors or defendants here.

Sensegiving and sensebreaking often manifest during emotional experiences (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). Negatively activated emotions may restrict organizational members' sensemaking ability, and actors who are better at bracketing strong emotional experiences are more successful at sensegiving (Walsh & Bartunek, 2011). These findings suggest that organizational members who are better at compartmentalizing upset and angry emotional outbursts by others may be more successful at giving sense. Furthermore, organizational change can create intense emotional experiences that influence sensegiving and sensebreaking (Bartunek, Rousseau, Rudolph, & DePalma, 2006). Courtrooms are constantly changing as new actors enter and leave the organizing process—of value to exploring the role of emotional displays in delivering sensegiving and sensebreaking cues.

Despite this connection between emotion and sensegiving/sensebreaking, most research has centered on the cognitive aspects of sensegiving/sensebreaking rather than on the emotional aspects. Exceptions have been concerned with emotional arousal or valence. For example, most recent research has found that sensegivers should first emotionally arouse the individuals receiving the cues and then connect that arousal with the intended meaning-making message (Vuori & Virtaharju, 2012). Weick (2006) argued that sensegiving imbued with emotion may be better at triggering action. Missing from the literature, however, is an exploration of how emotional displays from various organizational actors collectively affect and create the sensegiving and sensebreaking processes.

In summary, sensegiving and sensebreaking work when actors are effective communicators, when specific routines are present in the organization, and when there are gaps in organizational sensemaking processes (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007). Moreover, sensegiving and sensebreaking are most likely to manifest during chaotic experiences and in contexts that are highly emotional (Weick et al., 2005). The courtroom specifically is a highly formalized and often emotionally charged environment where there are frequent perceived gaps in understanding between employees (e.g., judges and bailiffs) and organizational visitors (e.g., defendants and observers). Fast and efficient cues from employees regarding appropriate and inappropriate behavior may help organizational visitors understand the bureaucratic

organizing processes of court—and these cues are evidenced by and created through emotion cycles.

Emotional Contagion, Emotional Roles, and Emotion Cycles

In the municipal courtroom, defendants, bailiffs, and judges show emotion in relation to a wide range of experiences and decisions (Anleu & Mack, 2005), and these emotional expressions affect organizing processes. First, emotions can be contagious and spread from one to the next in a process of emotional contagion (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1993). People naturally mimic or synchronize their facial expressions, voices, postures, and movements to those around them. These adopted nonverbal behaviors, in turn, affect (and provide feedback to) cognitive emotional experience. Thus, organizational actors feel (or “catch”) what those around them are emotionally displaying. Second, there are emotional roles that employees play; some people would give emotional service to others, referred to as “toxin handlers” (Frost and Robinson, 1999) or organizational “shock absorbers . . . who absorb and resist forces that could disrupt the comfort of the client” (Thornton & Novak, 2010, pp. 442-443). For example, a middle manager may handle a superior’s anger or abuse, so that a subordinate is not crushed by it (Frost, 2007) or deal with a client’s personal pain or trauma. Toxin handlers are also peace builders and counselors, who engage in listening empathetically or preventing pain behind the scene (Frost & Robinson, 1999), or other similar tasks. Third, there are studies on emotion management—for example, emergency communication call-takers managing their own emotion as well as the emotion of citizens during 911 emergency call interactions (Schuler & Sypher, 2000; Tracy & Tracy, 1998). But we know little about how the emotional expressions of different types of employees *collectively* influence one another and how cycles of emotion among three or more people might play a role in providing sensegiving/sensebreaking cues to organizational visitors and observers. With interest in how emotional displays are not only “caught” or “managed,” but also how they cycle among and between multiple actors, we examined Hareli and Rafaeli’s (2008) theoretical proposition of “emotion cycles.” Emotion cycles explain how one actor’s emotional display can influence the emotion, thoughts, and behavior of other actors, and how this influenced emotional reaction can, in turn, impact a third party. “[E]motion operates in cycles that can involve multiple people in a process of reciprocal influence” (Hareli & Rafaeli, 2008, p. 36). The emotion cycle concept is helpful for framing the current study as it suggests that, in the case of municipal courtrooms, the way emotion is expressed among judges, bailiffs, defendants,

and observers can influence courtroom dynamics and potentially affect future courtroom behavior.

Emotion cycling is especially useful to our analysis because, in contrast to emotional contagion, we are interested in how emotional displays affect others whether or not others “catch” or are “infected by” the same emotion. We are also interested in how emotional displays play a collective role as others react to, amplify, or ignore emotions—processes referred to as emotional interpretation and drawing inferences. Our research extends the theorizing about emotion cycles by Hareli and Rafaeli (2008) through exploring how these cycles actually unfold in situ. Such a study may help reveal how employees work together to construct cycles that potentially cue employees and visitors into how to make meaning in that context.

In sum, past theorizing suggests that emotion cycles “evoke a process of sensemaking; members of an organization make sense of and interpret the emotions of other people which influences their own emotions and behaviors as well as processes and outcomes of the involved organizational dyads, groups, and teams” (Hareli & Rafaeli, 2008, pp. 37-38). In this study, we empirically examine issues of emotion cycles and sensegiving/sensebreaking through participant observation data in the courtroom. The research question below guided our research:

Research Question 1: How do different types of emotion cycles facilitate sensegiving and sensebreaking of organizational visitors and employees?

Method

In this study, we focus on external emotional displays as observed in courtroom interactions. Although some researchers might view emotional expression as qualitatively different from emotional feeling, we view these two things as overlapping rather than distinct. The focus on external communication and expression differs from past sensegiving and sensebreaking research that has relied heavily on the use of popular press articles and oral histories (Walsh & Bartunek, 2011), recounts of natural disasters (Weick, 1993; Whiteman & Cooper, 2011), surveys (Bartunek et al., 2006), diary methods (Balogun, 2003), and interviews (Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Humphreys, Ucbasaran, & Lockett, 2012; McNulty & Pettigrew, 1999; Sharma & Good, 2013). With several notable exceptions that included participant observation or ethnography (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007; Whiteman & Cooper, 2011), the research on sensebreaking and sensegiving has primarily relied on actors' recollections of events.

The current study, with its focus on participant observation data, highlights real-time tactics of employees and visitors as they intersect with emotional expression in practice. Organizational sensegiving, sensebreaking, and emotional displays occur through the subtle and small moments during organizing just as much as they do from the large and obvious moments (Weick et al., 2005; Whiteman & Cooper, 2011). “[S]mall moments can have large consequences” (Weick et al., 2005, p. 410) and small everyday actions, such as tone of voice or specific facial expressions used by actors, can have an impact on sensemaking.

Description of Research

The data presented in this study emerged from 150 research hours of qualitative interviewing and participant observation (107 hr observation, about 19 hr formal and 24 hr informal interviews) gathered over the course of 13 months resulting in 441 single-spaced typewritten pages of data.

The sites of research included two municipal courts, *Equitas* and *Curia*,² located in two cities in a large southwestern state in the United States. Municipal courts handle cases which include traffic violations, misdemeanors, small-claims cases, pretrial hearings, domestic violence cases, assaults, and other civil and criminal misdemeanors. In such cases, many defendants are encountering the court for the first time and their initial hearing, or arraignment, is only for declaring a plea (rather than telling their whole story). Defendants in municipal courtrooms are most often not represented by attorneys.

We focused primarily on arraignments as they offer the most frequent number of interactions among group members. In an arraignment, judges and bailiffs first see those charged with the crime—defendants—after charges have been filed against them. Defendants arrive at the court on a specified date during normal business hours, check in, and are assigned to a courtroom where they wait to see a judge. The arraignment courtroom usually includes, at any given time, one judge, one bailiff, and between 10 and 50 defendants waiting to have their cases processed. The interactions between the judge and defendants usually last between 1 and 5 min and the defendants waiting can hear and see the interactions happening before their turn.

Equitas and Curia municipal courthouses. *Equitas* is a small municipal court with six full-time judges located in a suburban town. It provides orders of protection and injunctions against harassment and addresses criminal misdemeanors, including civil traffic violations and petty offenses. The court files an average of about 15,000 cases a year or about 1,100 per month.³ *Curia* is

one of the busiest municipal courts in the United States, processing an average of 350,000 cases a year, including up to 80,000 criminal cases. Curia employs 26 full-time judges and hearing officers.

Background and Development of Emergent Research Question 2

The first author became interested in courtroom communication because of family background; her father was a criminal defense attorney and is now a part-time judge, which helped facilitate access. During the first 6 months of observation, the first author entered the field with the guiding question “How do judges manage courtroom arraignments?” At that time, she conducted 12 interviews—with judges only—and observed courtroom arraignments for about 30 hr, which was used in another study of judges’ uses of emotion (Scarduzio, 2011).

Following this period of observation, the first author revisited the data and noted that ambiguity and the emotionality of the courtroom provided opportunities for sensegiving and sensemaking to occur. When she reentered the field, these theories served as sensitizing concepts (Tracy, 2013) to help narrow the study focus, and that is when we began paying attention to emotion cycles, sensegiving, and sensebreaking. During observation, it became clear that the intermediary role of the bailiff played an important part in the emotion cycle process. We realized that it would be important to name this role and discuss the types of responses that the emotional buffer employed during emotion cycles. At that time, a second research question was developed:

Research Question 2: How do bailiffs serve as emotional buffers between judges and defendants?

Data Collection

The study included three main sources of data—participant observation, informal ethnographic interviews, and formal audio-recorded interviews, covering 37 male and 41 female employees in total. There were 38 White, 34 Latino/a, 5 Black, and 1 Asian American; 27 judges, 23 bailiffs, and 28 other positions (e.g., lawyer, police officer, interpreter); 46 Curia and 32 Equitas employees. All participants were assigned or selected their own pseudonyms. We obtained institutional review board (IRB) approval to interview the courtroom employees and observe/take notes on public interactions that included defendants and onlooking gallery members, and not interviews or interactions with defendants beyond the public courtroom observations.

Participant observation. In over 107 hr of observation, the first author followed a detailed plan, primarily focusing on issues related to sensegiving and sensebreaking. Field notes were transcribed within 48 hr of observation and resulted in a total of 212 single-spaced pages of typed data.

Interviews. Interviews employed in this study included (a) informal/ethnographic interviews and (b) semi-structured respondent interviews (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). During 24 informal or ethnographic interviews, *not* recorded, the first author asked spontaneous and clarifying questions in the field about the courtrooms, judges, and bailiffs that were observed. In addition, the first author conducted 26 semi-structured interviews that were audio-recorded, transcribed, and followed a formal interview guide. She asked questions such as “Can you tell me about a time you became upset in the courtroom?” “What is the most challenging part of being a judge/bailiff?” and “Tell me about a typical day at work.” The interviews, with six bailiffs and 16 judges (4 of them twice), took place in the judges’ chambers, coffee shops, restaurants, and over the phone.

Data Analysis

Our data analysis entailed a multiple-stage iterative process that cycled between examining and collecting data in the field and reading relevant theoretical literature on the topics of interest (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Tracy, 2013). First, we immersed ourselves in the data, reading, fact checking, and re-reading all of the collected field notes and interview transcripts. We asked ourselves “what is happening here” (Charmaz, 2001, p. 337) in regard to our sensitizing concepts of sensegiving, sensebreaking, and emotion cycles and regularly dialogued about emergent findings. Second, we examined the data line by line, created first-level descriptive codes, and developed a codebook listing each code, a description, and an example.

During the second stage of analysis, we engaged in focused secondary cycle coding (Saldaña, 2013) and looked for patterns within and among first-level codes and created second-level analytic codes that tied more specifically to theoretical concepts such as sensegiving or emotional buffers. For example, we developed a second-level code called “sensegiving” to mark examples when judges provided cues about meaning making to defendants. For this and other theoretical codes, we engaged in a third stage of analysis, which involved writing analytic memos (Charmaz, 2001) that connected the category with emergent contributions. In the fourth and final stage of analysis, the interview data and field notes were imported into NVivo qualitative data analysis software, which eased organization and efficient retrieval of a range of relevant data to support the emerging analysis.

Results

In what follows, we illustrate how several different actors or groups of people—judges, bailiffs, and defendants—interact to shape emotions and the collective contextual environment through their communication and expressions. We make the case that emotional expressions from judges and bailiffs serve as sensegiving and sensebreaking cues to defendants as they stand before the judge and as they wait and watch from the gallery. Our findings unfold as follows. First, we describe the routines and the enacted environment of the courtroom—providing the necessary context that sets up the analyses of data related to our two research questions. Second, we examine how bailiffs serve as emotional buffers during the sensegiving and sensebreaking process. Third, we examine how three different types of emotion cycles manifest in the courtroom with varying impacts on sensegiving and sensebreaking.

We developed specific terminology for key actors in the emotion cycle process. We use the term *initiating actor* to describe the judge, the formal agent in the scene who typically starts the emotion cycle. We use the term *intermediary actor* to describe the bailiff who also provides sensegiving and sensebreaking cues by amplifying, deflecting, or mirroring emotional displays from the *initiating actor*. We use the term *receiving actor* to refer to the defendant in front of the judge, the person being the directed recipient of emotional displays and sensegiving/sensebreaking cues. Finally, we use the term *observers* to describe any other actors watching the emotion cycle process—such as the gallery of defendants watching the case in front of them. We acknowledge that these roles are fluid, reciprocal, and quickly changing (e.g., judges can become *receiving actors* and defendants *initiating actors*)—something which we return to in the conclusion.

The Routines of the Courtroom and Previous Enacted Environments

According to judges and bailiffs, many defendants come into municipal court arraignments without a clear understanding of how the process works. They attribute this confusion, in part, to the fact that many defendants have never been in the courtroom. As Judge Fortune suggests, “the vast majority of the cases we have are first offenses.” Approximately 75% of court cases include first-time offenders (Equitas Municipal Courthouse Fiscal Report, n.d.). Also, most of the defendants in municipal courts and arraignments are not represented by attorneys. Bailiff Leslie stated, “You have a lot of people in here not represented, a lot of them come in here very confused.” For example,

the first author observed many defendants who had no idea how to answer when asked what they would plead and appeared scared that if they pled guilty, they would be immediately taken to jail. In such cases, even when the judge assured defendants they would not go to jail, they were still hesitant—as evidenced by their talk, questions for clarification, requests for assistance, and bewildered nonverbal expressions.

Whereas defendants treated the courtroom experience as something odd and new, municipal court judges regularly compared their work with “factory work,” “being an air traffic controller,” and “groundhog’s day every day.” Judge Darson, in her description of arraignments, stated, “It’s like an assembly line. Processing the widget.” Judge Ryne elaborated,

Especially this type of court, this is the principal’s office for grownups . . . They are people who can’t comply with society’s rules. In school you might have somebody getting in a fight with another kid, or running through the hallway, or not getting to class on time. Well these are the same types of rules. These are people who can’t comply with rules.

In short, the courtroom context is very different for defendants than it is for bailiffs and judges. Arraignments are chaotic and confusing for defendants and boring and routine for courtroom employees.

Judges and bailiffs also reported pressure to be respectful of defendants even though they sometimes view the latter as rule-breaking children, as in “I just start out with the idea that every individual is worthy of respect. And if somebody is disrespectful I don’t need to get down to their level” (Judge Fortune). What’s more, courtroom employees face organizational expectations that they should process cases quickly and efficiently and regularly engage in behavior that will swiftly help defendants get the “correct” sense in the courtroom. As they do so, judges must manage the huge-power differential between themselves and defendants so as to affect interaction in positive rather than distracting ways; judges are aware of their coercive and reward power in the courtroom and how it affects interaction. Judge Darson describes it this way, “They’ve got robe-it is. They put a robe on and they think they’re god. You know the power goes to their head. They’ve lost control.”

Judges’ and bailiffs’ beliefs about defendants and structural norms affect sensemaking (Gephart & Topal, 2009), sensegiving (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007), and sensebreaking (Pratt, 2000). Learning how judges and bailiffs theorize and frame their work lays the groundwork for examining how emotional displays interact with, frame, and provide sensegiving/sensebreaking cues to defendants.

The Emotion Work of Intermediary Actors

Bailiffs face the emotional work of managing negative and positive reactions of defendants, as they deal with and react to judges' emotional displays. A field note excerpt illustrates,

As Bailiff Louise turns to leave, a defendant quickly approaches her and says, "We are supposed to talk to the prosecutor." Bailiff Louise responds, "Well, you will talk to the judge and he will tell you what to do." The man huffs and walks back to his seat. As he does, he mumbles, "I can tell they really are a lot of help here."

In this example, Bailiff Louise must manage her nonverbal and verbal emotional display appropriately in response to a defendant complaining about a situation outside of her control. Bailiff Louise and other bailiffs usually perform care and respect during these interactions—serving as a buffer or filter between the upset defendant and the judge. However, our findings suggest that bailiffs' work goes beyond absorbing (see Thornton & Novak, 2010) or just handling toxin (Frost & Robinson, 1999). These intermediary actors also often amplify and/or modify the initial emotional displays of the initiating actor (e.g., judge) in ways that create sensegiving and sensebreaking messages.

An observation at the Curia court illustrates a situation where the bailiff mediates an interaction between the judge and a defendant—and along the way, manages, buffers, and amplifies emotion as it cycles among the various parties:

A female defendant asks the judge to dismiss her charges and quash the warrant because she was in jail when she was supposed to appear in court. The judge and the defendant banter back and forth and the judge will not accept the defendant's requests. She sighs, turns around, and stomps to her seat in the front row. As the judge leaves the courtroom, he turns to Bailiff Penelope and says, "You may have to check on her [paperwork]." After he leaves, Bailiff Penelope walks over to the woman and asks for her paperwork. The woman shakes her head in disagreement and pointing to her paperwork, insists, "But these are different charges and have nothing to do with why I am here today." Bailiff Penelope sits down next to the defendant and states, "It doesn't matter ma'am. The judge still needs the paperwork from your previous charges in order to make an informed decision. I understand this is confusing for you."

This situation reveals the emotional and sensegiving tasks of the intermediary actor, Bailiff Penelope. The defendant first displayed frustration and anger with the judge, and subsequently, displayed similar emotions toward

the bailiff. Bailiff Penelope has no control over either the judge's behavior or the defendant's response. This leaves the bailiff with the job of *diffusing* the reaction and remaining calm. In essence, Penelope must enhance the sense-giving message that "you must give us your former paperwork" but do so in a way that is more verbally immediate, slow, and patient than the abrupt request from the judge. In this case, Bailiff Penelope *compensates* for the judge's behavior through a neutral emotional display.

Bailiffs often work with defendants who are upset about a judge's decision. In contrast to the previous example, in the following case, Bailiff Michelle acts as a disciplinarian toward a defiant and misbehaving defendant.

As the defendant walked back to his seat, he raised his middle finger, flipping off the judge, so that his friends seated in the "audience" could see him even if the judge could not. His friends snickered and laughed. The defendant sat down and moved his right index finger across his throat in a slitting motion. Suddenly, Bailiff Michelle noticed his behavior and glared at him, "That's enough. You know better than that."

The work of bailiffs is uniquely challenging because they have to observe emotional displays by both actors, interpret those emotional displays, and respond with situationally appropriate emotional displays of their own that help provide sensegiving and sensebreaking cues to receiving actors and observers. Yet, they have little control over the original triggers (e.g., judge's actions) that cause such emotional responses.

Bailiffs are also expected to laugh at judges' jokes and demonstrate emotional displays that amplify a judge's initial use of humor. Doing so reveals the influence of power relationships in the scene. Bailiff Tim explained, "The judge I work with makes a lot of jokes, some that are inappropriate, and I feel like I should laugh even if I don't want to." During field observations, the first author witnessed many interactions where bailiffs laughed at what she perceived to be inappropriate jokes by judges. For example, Judge Black told a defendant to exit the courtroom, go left, and walk to the prosecutor's office. In response, the defendant exited the courtroom and walked to the right. The judge laughed and stated loudly, "He walked the wrong way," and in response, Bailiff Louise laughed as well. In this example and others, bailiffs' emotional work serves to *complement* the emotion cycle process and to help it appear as if the judge's behavior is "right" or acceptable. Data revealed that bailiffs applauded and amplified judges' behavior even in cases when they felt doing so was inappropriate—something that underscores the bailiff's lower status in the scene. Similar to Hochschild's (2003) research on status and emotion work (something she terms the "socio-political hill"), these findings reveal

how the employee's status level interacts with and influences the emotional expressions and expectations in the courtroom.

As described in the examples above, bailiffs assist judges' sensegiving/sensebreaking processes by emotionally smoothing over situations that defendants find difficult. Furthermore, bailiffs listen to defendants' problems, suppress their own negative responses, and treat defendants with respect. We found that bailiffs, as intermediary actors of the emotion cycle process and as emotional buffers, expressed and demonstrated two primary emotional displays/responses: complementary and compensatory. The *complementary emotional response* occurred when bailiffs emotionally reinforced a similar emotional display to the judge. For example, in some situations, when a judge expressed anger, bailiffs complemented the judge's emotion by expressing a similar emotion such as anger or frustration. We also saw complementary emotional responses in cases, for example, when a judge expressed humor and the bailiff complemented or even amplified the emotion by laughing or nonverbally expressing amusement. Data also evidenced situations in which the bailiff showed a different emotional display than the judge. We call this a *compensatory emotional response*. These displays involved expression of emotion that counterbalanced, made up for, or compensated for the judge's emotional display. For example, after judges displayed anger and irritation, bailiffs sometimes expressed compassion, kindness, or even neutrality to the defendant.

In considering these processes, we identified a key organizational emotion role—that of the emotional buffer. Bailiffs must simultaneously amplify judge's displays, manage their own emotions, and help ease the emotions of the defendants. "Double-faced emotion management," or managing of one's emotions in an attempt to manage others (Tracy & Tracy, 1998), is common in a number of professions in which employees interact with clients who are emotional themselves (as might be the case of 911 call-takers, paramedics, or firefighters). In this study, we see that bailiffs not only engaged in double-faced emotion management, but went beyond this dyadic work to serve as emotional buffers as they dealt with and reacted to emotional expression of two or more key actors. In this case, the defendant, the judge, and sometimes the audience of observers.

Three Types of Emotion Cycles

Noticing this emotional buffer role raises the question of patterns in terms of *when* or *why* the intermediary actor (e.g., the bailiff) would be more likely to *complement* versus *compensate* for the emotion of the initiating actor (e.g., the judge). In secondary rounds of analyzing the data, we found that the bailiff's

buffering emotional response had very much to do with the emotional displays of the receiving actor (e.g., the defendant) and observers (e.g., the onlooking or third-party defendants). Namely, we found that the emotions shown by the intermediary actor appeared to be connected to whether the recipients showed *defiance* or *deference* to the initiating actor's initial positive or negative emotional display. We explain below three types of emotion cycles: (a) the positive complementary emotion cycle, (b) the negative compensatory emotion cycle, and (c) the negative complementary emotion cycle.

Positive complementary emotion cycle. The positive complementary emotion cycle begins when the initiating actor (in this case, the judge) sends a sensegiving and/or sensebreaking message using a positive emotional display such as humor, compassion, or praise. Next, the receiving actor (in this case, the defendant) responds with a deferential emotional response. The intermediary actor (in this case, the bailiff) observes the interaction and *complements* the initiating actor with another positive emotional display toward the receiving actor. Meanwhile, the observers watch the entire emotion cycle, and as an effect, are given a sensegiving/sensebreaking message, and may respond either verbally or nonverbally.

Here is an example of a positive complementary emotion cycle from the Equitas court:

A defendant's name is called and she walks up to the bench. Judge Suarez smiles, and says, "Oh, somebody with good news. You got your license back and you are smiling." Surprisingly, the judge requests to all assembled in the courtroom, "Let's all give a round of applause for the girl who got her license back." Everyone claps loudly, including Bailiff Louise and the defendants in the audience. As the girl shuffles to her left with a sheepish smile, Bailiff Louise, says, "Way to go," loud enough for everyone in the courtroom to hear.

In this example, we see a positive complementary cycle of emotion. Judge Suarez gives a public declaration of praise in such a way that the receiving actor is rewarded verbally and nonverbally, so that observers witness this interaction and are asked to participate. Judge Suarez's communication also pinpoints specific behaviors that are valued in this organization (e.g., abiding by the laws) and his comments underline a value that, when people obey the law, they get rewarded, both materially and relationally. Per his request and nonverbal expressions, the entire group of observers and the intermediary actor (Bailiff Louise) participate by clapping, smiling, and cycling positive emotion throughout the courtroom back to the receiving actor.

This is more than contagion. Rather, we see this as an empirical demonstration of Hareli and Rafaeli's (2008) emotion cycles—a process that

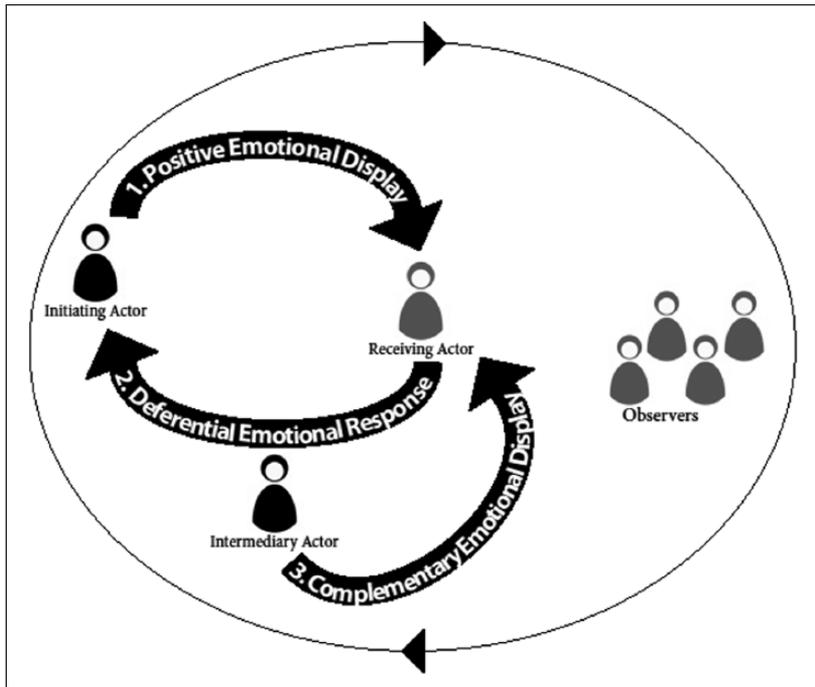


Figure 1. Positive complementary emotion cycle.

includes action, interpretation, and response. The receiving actor (defendant) demonstrates that she is pleased, embarrassed, and slightly confused by the judge's praise. Upon noting this response, Bailiff Louise engages in a similar positive emotional display to the judge by providing the verbal compliment "way to go." Bailiff Louise's response to the defendant reinforces and complements the judge's praise—helping to clarify and provide an additional sensegiving message that obeying the law is appropriate and positive.

Judges and bailiffs offered praise and encouragement not only in specific instances, such as when defendants acquired new driver's licenses, but also when they generally communicated about getting their lives back on track.

We provide a visual representation of a positive complementary emotional cycle in Figure 1.

Negative compensatory emotion cycle. The negative compensatory emotion cycle begins when the initiating actor provides a sensegiving or sensebreaking message that incorporates a negative emotional display. When an

initiating actor displayed anger, frustration, or irritation, we found that the receiving actor often responded with a deferential display of regret, embarrassment, or respect. When the receiving actor responded deferentially, we found that the intermediary actor (the bailiff) counterbalanced or compensated for the initiating actor's negative emotional display through a positive emotional display of compassion or helpfulness. Meanwhile, the observers typically demonstrated neutral emotional displays.

We call this the negative compensatory emotion cycle, which emerged in connection to defendant "bad behavior" and judges communicating sense-breaking cues. Judges and bailiffs provided sensebreaking messages when defendants' behavior did not align with court expectations. These sensebreaking interactions, as we illustrate below, were more than just disciplining the defendant. Rather, this process functioned to break down the current arrangement of defendant thinking, so it might be remade in a way that fits the situation at hand:

The judge says to the defendant in an exasperated tone of voice, "Why were [your children] not in a car seat? That is unacceptable. You don't want to kill or hurt your kids. Did you see the guy in here earlier? He was in an accident going 10 miles per hour and his face was all scratched up. I am going to impose a 25 dollar fine because you need to be taught a lesson." The defendant looks on and says softly, "I didn't know I had to [use a car seat]." The judge continues, closing with, "Okay [Bailiff] Tammy might snarl at you a little bit for not having her in a car seat too. Just step to your left." The now frightened looking defendant crosses over to Bailiff Tammy, who notices her contrite expression. Bailiff Tammy raises her eyebrows, smiles, and nods as she steps over.

The judge in this example uses this defendant's mistake as an occasion to lecture her about the importance of using a car seat. The judge displays frustration, after which the receiving actor displays embarrassment and shock, but remains respectful. In turn, the intermediary actor, Bailiff Tammy, expresses care and/or pleasantness back to the receiving actor through the smile. The judge still punishes the defendant despite her claim that she did not know she legally had to use a car seat—a sensebreaking cue for observers watching who may have believed that ignorance is justification for breaking the law.

Interestingly, rather than amplifying the judge's frustration, the intermediary actor (Bailiff Tammy), instead, smiles, counterbalancing and compensating for the judge's negative emotional display. In this case, we see that when scolded, the defendant demonstrated embarrassment rather than defiance, and this show of humility is followed by a show of warm feelings from the bailiff. This negative compensatory emotion cycle essentially communicates

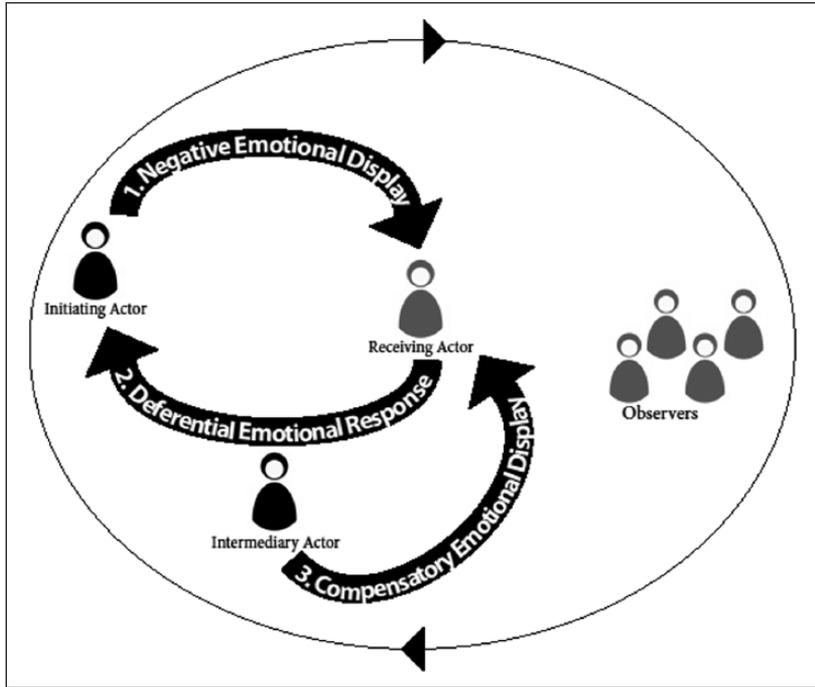


Figure 2. Negative compensatory emotion cycle.

to the observers that if they demonstrate deference, they will be rewarded with positive and warm emotions by the intermediary actor. We offer a visual representation of a negative compensatory emotion cycle in Figure 2.

Negative complementary emotion cycle. Our data revealed that some defendants/receiving actors displayed confusion, anger, frustration, and defiance in response to the negative or disciplining messages from the judge/initiating actor. When the receiving actor responded in this way, the intermediary actor complemented the initiating actor with another negative emotional display. It was almost as if the intermediary actor was saying, “You obviously didn’t get the judge’s point, so I’m going to show you again.”

For example, the observation below highlights the way Judge Berry demonstrates an emotional display of frustration. The emotional display provides a sensebreaking message to a defendant who is behind in paying a fine, and must “show cause” for his delinquency:

Judge Berry asks, “Why didn’t you pay your fine?” The defendant explains that he is unemployed and has three kids to take care of all by himself. The judge states that the financial enforcement department will not put him on a payment plan if he is not working. The defendant, who is still confused, justifies his unemployment by claiming he has no one to watch his kids. Judge Berry, sighs loudly, and says, “That is not a good excuse. You are ordered to pay 110 dollars. Talk to financial enforcement and the bailiff will call you in a minute.” The defendant appears unconvinced, shaking his head in exasperation, appearing bewildered as to why unemployment is not a “suitable” excuse for non-payment. Bailiff Adam rolls his eyes toward the defendant in such a way that those in the courtroom see him.

In this negative complementary emotional cycle, the defendant provides excuses for his delinquency. Judge Berry reprimands the receiving actor by explaining why his excuse is “not good enough”; the judge sighs loudly, and in doing so, communicates frustration. The receiving actor observes the judge’s display of frustration and public reprimand—which essentially constitutes a sensebreaking message that excuses about unemployment are not acceptable in this setting—a fact that frustrates him as evidenced by his facial expressions.

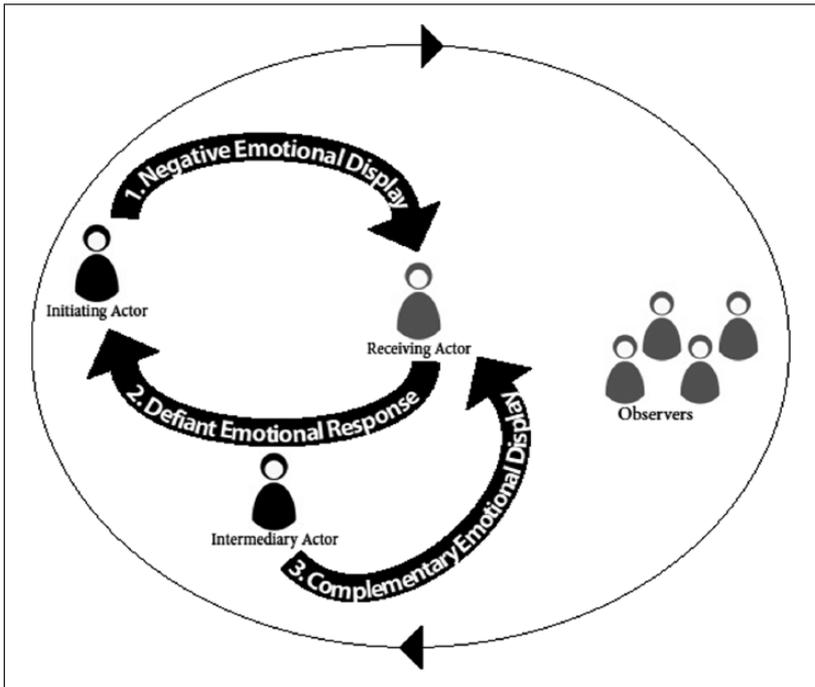


Figure 3. Negative complementary emotion cycle.

Through this interaction, the initiating actor (the judge) also has an opportunity to engage in sensebreaking communication for the observers in regard to what type of excuse to use or whether to use one at all. In the above example, the receiving actor remains defiant after hearing from the judge, and in turn, the intermediary actor (Bailiff Adam) treats him to an additional, complementary, and amplifying emotional display of frustration—with the use of an exaggerated eye roll. Because Bailiff Adam rolled his eyes in such a way that the entire audience saw him, observers were brought into the emotion cycle. Some defendants responded to the eye-roll performance with appreciative smirks or smiles, whereas others seemed to ignore and distance themselves from the exchange. The negative complementary emotion cycle served to communicate to the receiving actor that his excuse would not be tolerated and his fines would not be reduced—breaking down any perception that being unemployed was a good excuse for delinquency. We provide a visual representation of a negative complementary emotion cycle in Figure 3.

Conclusions and Implications

This study of sensegiving, sensebreaking, and emotion cycles has shed light on the collective process of emotional expression among various insider and outsider organizational roles, examined the role of the intermediary emotional buffer, and explored how sensegiving and sensebreaking cues trigger different types of emotion cycles. In regard to the first research question, “How do different types of emotion cycles facilitate sensegiving and sensebreaking of organizational visitors and employees,” our data revealed three different types of emotion cycles. We label these cycles as (a) the positive complementary emotion cycle, (b) the negative compensatory emotion cycle, and (c) the negative complementary emotion cycle.

First, our data suggest that a common emotion cycle is positive and complementary. In this cycle, the initiating actor provides sensegiving or sensebreaking cues using positive emotional displays, the receiving actor provides a deferential response, and the intermediary actor may complement or even amplify this positive emotional display.

Second, our data revealed what we call a negative compensatory emotion cycle. In this cycle, the initiating actor engages in sensegiving or sensebreaking communication using a negative emotional display, the receiving actor responds deferentially, and the intermediary actors compensate for the initiating actor by displaying positive emotion. In such cases, intermediary actors observe that the receiving actor has “learned a lesson” and rather than having to complement or amplify the negative emotional display, can instead

transition to serving as caretakers, expressing positive or compassionate emotion to the receiving actor.

Third, our data suggest a negative complementary emotion cycle, in which the initiating actor provides sensegiving or sensebreaking cues using a negative emotional display, the receiving actor responds defiantly, and the intermediary actor complements or amplifies the original negative emotional display of the initiating actor. This cycle is more complex than simple emotional contagion, because the intermediary's negative emotional display is not just an automatically mirrored or matched emotion. Rather, the cycle includes interpretation, in which the intermediary actor observes the interaction between the initiating actor and the receiving actor, notices that the receiving actor did not get or accept the initiating actor's sensebreaking message, and steps in with an additional negative emotional display. The intermediary actor's message often serves as an exaggeration of the initiating actor's display—something that may help ensure the receiving actor gets the point.

In regard to the second research question, "How do bailiffs serve as emotional buffers between judges and defendants," we found that bailiffs, or intermediary actors must engage in a range of emotion work we call emotional buffering. This emotional buffering work goes beyond work referenced by concepts such as emotional shock absorbers, toxin handlers, and double-faced emotion management. The role of emotional buffer encompasses the range of work necessary to deal with and react to emotional expression as it cycles among multiple other key actors or audiences—in this case, the defendant, the judge (and sometimes), the audience of observers. This buffering work included amplifying judge's emotional displays, providing care and concern after a judge showed negativity to a defendant, managing one's own emotion, and easing the emotions of the defendants.

Theoretical Implications

Our findings have several important theoretical implications. First, in our data set, sensegiving messages were most often sent through positive emotional displays and triggered positive complementary emotion cycles. For example, this came in the form of a judge praising a defendant who paid his or her fine. However, the display of negative emotion by the initiating actor seemed to coincide more often with the transmission of sensebreaking messages. The finding that sensegiving cues were more common during positive complementary emotion cycles and sensebreaking cues were more common during the negative compensatory and complementary cycles suggests a potential relationship between the type of emotional display (positive or negative) and the effectiveness of sensegiving/sensebreaking cues. Namely,

knowing that positive emotional displays can aid the transmission of sense-giving cues and negative emotional displays can aid the transmission of sensebreaking cues may ultimately help organizational actors provide more effective sensegiving/sensebreaking messages in fast-paced, complex, and chaotic work environments. This may be especially relevant when communicating with organizational visitors.

Second, by explicitly examining the intermediary actor role within the emotion cycle, this study shows how the interaction between organizational actors actually constructs a unique role of *emotional buffer*. The emotional buffer is different from toxin handlers and shock absorbers (who soak up negative emotion) because the role involves emotional interpretation—depending on what the buffer observes about the receiving actor, they do not just absorb, but rather, complement or compensate. Emotional buffers not only serve as intermediaries between initiating and receiving actors but also affect an audience of others. For example, observers who watched bailiffs praise defendants for specific behaviors are privy to a message that they may be rewarded for similar behavior. Likewise, in witnessing a bailiff treat a regretful defendant with compassion, the observers had the opportunity to learn the benefits of performing deference to the judge. In other words, the observers not only hear a singular message emerging from the initiating actor, the receiving actor, or the intermediary actor. Rather, the emotional buffer helps create a sensemaking lesson by assisting the dynamics that emerged at an interactive group level among multiple organizational actors.

Third and finally, this study extends past research on sensegiving and sensebreaking. We found that the emotion cycles of the court provided a shortcut—an efficient way for employees to provide sensegiving/sensebreaking cues to defendants, about courtroom situations or how court works. In this way, sensegiving and sensebreaking can serve as micro-level interactions that cue organizational visitors into macro-level meanings quickly and efficiently. Past research on sensegiving has usually focused on the influence and ability of leaders to give sense during big organizational changes such as corporate spin-offs (Corley & Gioia, 2004). Also, research has shown that, across contexts, anticipation of gaps in sensemaking serve to trigger sensegiving (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007). Our study adds to this literature by showing how sensegiving and sensebreaking cues are enabled through the positive and negative emotional displays of employees. Furthermore, the findings highlight how sensebreaking cues are triggered when organizational visitors hold incorrect assumptions about procedures of the organization.

These findings may be relevant in a range of organizational contexts in which multiple groups of insiders work with organizational visitors. For

example, police and correctional officers often deal with visitors who are unfamiliar with organizational processes. The types of emotion cycles may also apply in other settings such as hospitals, classrooms, and corporate business meetings. For example, emergency room doctors may serve as initiating actors in an emotion cycle, nurses as intermediary actors, patients as receiving actors, and the patient's family/and other visitors constituting observers.

Practical Implications

Practical applications include, first, doing the work of emotional buffering is complex and potentially emotionally draining. The role requires not only managing one's own emotions but also constantly scanning initiating actors, receiving actors, and an audience of others, and making quick choices about how to act depending on whether receiving actors defer to or defy the initiating actor. Employees who consistently work as emotional buffers are likely to experience exhaustion, stress, and in some cases burn-out. Different practices that could support emotional buffers would include providing such employees with a rotating schedule where they work half the day dealing with customers or clients and half the day in the back room completing paperwork or other tasks that require less emotion work. In addition, managers can communicate compassion toward employees who work as emotional buffers by verbally recognizing the stressful aspects of their roles, relating to them through kind words and social support, and (re) acting to burned out employees by offering gratitude for their hard work (Way & Tracy, 2012).

Second, this study highlights the practical importance of courtroom employees paying attention to the emotional expressions they collectively display to defendants. We found that judges and bailiffs largely make their own decisions about how and when they show what emotions, and therefore vary widely in emotional behavior. As the courts must move large numbers of defendants quickly, and we can see in this case how emotion cycles serve as an efficient way to teach appropriate courtroom behavior, it makes sense for judges and bailiffs to better understand the role of their emotions in streamlining courtroom cases. For example, judges and bailiffs could be educated that positive emotional displays are likely to aid sensegiving messages and negative emotional displays could help break the sense of defendants. Through this education, court administrators, judges, and bailiffs may be able to usefully employ emotional displays to shorten processing time. Also, defendants who have to watch interactions among judges, bailiffs, and other defendants before them may not perceive unfair treatment if the employees' emotional behavior is more standardized.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, we explored our research questions using almost exclusively observational data and did not explicitly ask the intent of specific emotional displays in the interview nor did we interview defendants or observers. Future analyses could further examine emotion cycles via interviews that specifically queried participants' intentions and awareness of their emotional behavior. For example, researchers could use a fieldwork elicitation interview approach in which they shared participant observation data and asked participants to reflect on the ways they chose certain communication strategies or emotional displays to influence different groups of observers. It would also be interesting to ask observers about the way they internalize and make meaning from the emotional displays of various organizational actors, and the interactions between the two. This could be in the form of an interview or a laboratory study where research participants are asked to imagine themselves as onlookers, and watch and respond to staged interactions.

Second, this study could be usefully extended by examining the fluid roles of initiating, intermediary, receiving, and observing during emotion cycles. Given the multiple goals of the current study, we were limited in aligning set groups of people with each role—in this case, the judge as initiating, the bailiff as intermediary, the defendant as receiving, and the gallery of others as observers. However, in practice, these roles are fluid—and there are times, for instance, when a defendant or a bailiff could have been seen as the initiating actor. Future research could usefully tease out how changing this vantage affects the way we see how emotion cycles play out.

Despite these limitations, the current study usefully identified the emotional buffer role, and empirically demonstrated Hareli and Rafaeli's (2008) theorized emotion cycles. In doing so, it illustrated three types of emotion cycles—the positive complementary emotion cycle, the negative complementary emotion cycle, and the negative compensatory emotion cycle. Through this research, we see that emotion is not just mimicked or absorbed, but that emotional buffers must make quick decisions about how to react to and display emotion so as to meet collective organizational goals.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Dawn Katz for her help with the three emotion cycle models. Her graphic design expertise allowed us to visually display the findings from the courtroom and we truly appreciate all of the time she spent on them.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. The bailiff and clerk positions were interchangeable in the courtrooms studied. We use the term *bailiff* to refer to individuals in either position.
2. The names of the courthouses have been changed to protect confidentiality.
3. Statistics were obtained from the courthouse fiscal-year workload reports and have been rounded to protect confidentiality.

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