

The interplay of sensegiving and sensemaking: Politics of ideology at a Japanese retailer in Hong Kong

Abstract

Purpose – This study explores the politics of ideology in the process of sensegiving and sensemaking at a Japanese retailer in Hong Kong. Studies on power and politics are scarce despite their key role in understanding the factors behind the conflict between the management’s policy legitimization (sensegiving) and employees’ policy interpretation (sensemaking). By using the three dimensions proposed in the critical sensemaking approach (discourse, rules, and contexts), this paper explores the complex mechanism of power and politics in sensemaking and sensegiving.

Design/methodology/approach – Using 15 months of participant observation as a salesperson, this paper discusses how the Japan-centric customer service philosophy (dominant discourse), customer service policies and practices (organizational rules), and asymmetric power structure between the Japanese global headquarters and Hong Kong subsidiaries (formative contexts) are presented and perpetuated through the sensegiving–sensemaking process.

Findings – Dominant discourse was observed in the management’s sensegiving, which placed the Japanese style of customer service over others. This ethnocentric dominant discourse informed the creation of customer service policies, although the realization of the discourse was determined by the employees’ conflicting interpretations of the organizational rules. As a formative context, an asymmetric power structure was present that positioned the Hong Kong subsidiary as subservient to the global headquarters in Japan. This shows that the political process of sensegiving and sensemaking deeply implicates the dominant discourse, organizational rules, and power structure as central forces that determine the level of perpetuating ideology.

Originality – This research illustrates the wider implications of power and politics in sensegiving–sensemaking studies and provides a complex picture of ethnocentric management.

Keywords: sensegiving, sensemaking, politics, ideology, discourse, power

Introduction

The interplay between sensegiving and sensemaking has been extensively discussed in organization studies (Philip, 2011; Schildt, Mantere and Cornelissen, 2020). Sensegiving, the process of constructing an appropriate definition of policy and ensuring that messages have been successfully delivered to employees, is particularly important when a company wants to ensure that its corporate values and missions are shared in overseas subsidiaries (Geppert, Becker-Ritterspach and Mudambi, 2016; Kawai and Chung, 2019). That said, it has been outlined that facilitating productive sensegiving–sensemaking is not straightforward. Kezar (2013) argues that simply providing opportunities for sensemaking or sensegiving to happen is not enough to ensure progress on change; sensemaking and sensegiving need to be embedded with a strategic plan. “Ideology”, a

macro level of discourse that explores hidden power relations (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000), plays a significant role in providing logical guidelines and blueprints for policy interpretation and management practices for an organization (Briscoe, Chin and Hambrick, 2014). However, this is not a one-way process since there are multiple interactions going back and forth between the management and the employees (Degn, 2015; Filstad, 2014). Sensemaking, an idea expanded on by Weick (1995), is how people ascribe meaning to their behaviors and collectively construct a system of meaning to understand the world (Maitlis, 2005). Scholars have pointed out that Weick's work underestimates the impact of power and political struggles in this process (Mills, Thurlow and Mills, 2010); this led to the development of the critical sensemaking approach, which examines three dimensions: dominant discourse, organizational rules, and formative contexts. This approach allows us to better assert the importance of incorporating power and politics into analyses (Thurlow and Mills, 2009). Despite the increasing number of studies on critical sensemaking, there are calls for more studies to further understand power and sensemaking in organizations (Hilde, 2013; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015).

Through an exploration of the three dimensions proposed in the critical sensemaking approach (discourse, rules, and contexts), this paper illustrates the politics of ideology in determining the outcome of sensemaking and sensegiving. To do so, this paper uses participant observation at a Hong Kong subsidiary of the Japanese fashion retailer Ichi (pseudonym), renowned for offering affordable casual wear and becoming a global company. This paper addresses two research questions: *What three dimensions shaped the sensegiving and sensemaking of the employees at Ichi? What is the relationship between corporate ideology and the three dimensions?* Using a critical sensemaking approach (Mills, Thurlow and Mills, 2010), this paper identifies and discusses the three dimensions and examines how they interact with each other and with ideology in the process of sensegiving–sensemaking. Ethnography and thematic data analysis were used to ascertain the hidden politics of ideology and deepen our understanding of sensegiving–sensemaking.

This research starts with a discussion of the first dimension, dominant discourse, by examining the sensegiving of the Japanese global headquarters that emphasized Japan-centric customer service policy, which reveals the ethnocentric sentiment in policy creation. The second dimension, organizational rules, was examined through the employees' sensemaking as well as their responses to the company's customer service policies. An analysis of the policies unveiled hidden cultural codes that were unfamiliar to the local employees and often resulted in their interpretations conflicting with those of the Japanese global headquarters. The term "cultural codes" here refers to the rules of etiquette that are better known to corporate members who understand Japanese culture. For example, what is considered a good smile for a salesperson could be interpreted differently by local employees due to diverse cultural practices. Such conflicting interpretations reflect unsuccessful sensegiving by the managers because they were unable to deliver messages in the way the company expected. The third dimension discusses formative contexts, from the perspective of an asymmetric power structure between the Japanese global headquarters and Hong Kong subsidiary. This research argues that three dimensions (dominant discourse, organizational rules, and an asymmetric power structure) facilitate the perpetuation of ideology; however, the extent of perpetuation is largely influenced by employees' diverse interpretations of the policies. This paper highlights the authoritarian management style of the Japanese global headquarters, silencing local as well as Japanese expatriates who refused to obey the policies blindly and questioned the management.

This paper seeks to contribute to the literature on sensegiving and sensemaking in organization studies by demonstrating the importance of using a critical sensemaking approach to deepen the understanding of the political process in sensegiving–sensemaking. It tries to attend more closely to the politics of ideology through how three dimensions (dominant discourse, organizational rules, and formative contexts) are interrelated, works towards disseminating ideology, and outlines which discriminatory practices are observed. It aims to present the complex mechanism of ethnocentricity in organization, which was at the center of Ichi’s political activities. It contributes to the sensegiving–sensemaking literature with the insight that dominant discourse, organizational rules, and formative contexts are central forces in deciding the process of ideology dissemination. This is contrary to mainstream approaches, which often see organization as a rational entity and affirm the positive role of sensegiving in organizational change as a management strategy facilitating the delivery of messages (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991); this paper offers a complex mechanism of emotions in the sensegiving process. Moreover, through the analysis of ideology, this paper shows that an ethnocentric ideology that places Japanese practices over others does not always empower the Japanese ethnic group over others as mainstream studies claim (Kopp, 1994; Froese *et al.*, 2020), but their voices could be marginalized due to their work being placed at the periphery (i.e. Japanese expatriates working in the Hong Kong subsidiary).

In the next section, I will first discuss major streams of research on sensegiving–sensemaking that impacted the decision for this study to focus on power and politics. I will then address the methodological approach and present key findings in the process of ideology justification and the response from the locals centered around the customer service practice. This paper concludes by illustrating its implications for scholarship on the interplay between sensegiving and sensemaking.

Sensegiving, sensemaking, and politics of ideology

The interplay of sensegiving–sensemaking

Sensegiving and sensemaking both entail how ‘sense’ or meaning is constructed, distributed, and interpreted by different stakeholders, which contribute to a better understanding of an organization (Gray, Bougon, and Donnellon, 1985). As Smerek (2011) puts it, sensegiving can be considered as the ‘action’ of how the management delivers meaning, such as change initiatives, while sensemaking can be considered as ‘thought’ wherein the message recipients interpret the meaning or the initiatives of the management. Sensegiving is a way to make sense of the meaning or practice of persuasion (Austen, 2016; Bartunek *et al.*, 1999) and build a shared purpose within an organization (Morgan *et al.*, 1983). It is an attempt to ‘influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others toward a preferred redefinition of organizational reality’ (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991, p. 442). Sensemaking contributes to a better understanding of how individuals enact and reproduce meaning (Mills and Mills, 2017). It is a ‘process through which people work to understand issues or events that are novel, ambiguous, confusing, or in some other way violate expectations’ and illustrates that sensemaking occurs when there is a gap between what people expect and what they face in reality (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014, p. 57).

The interplay between sensegiving and sensemaking has been considered both an individual and relational process, constituting continuous cycles in which they affect each other (Maitlis, 2005). Sensegiving occurs through normalization (Fairclough, 2001); however, it is not simply a one-way hierarchical process but an interactive process wherein recipients are permitted to enact a different interpretation from what the company expects and resist efforts from the top management (Sonenshein, 2010). The responses

from the recipients vary, and resistance comes not only from an individual level but is also determined by the organizational context (George and Jones, 2001). To better understand the process of the sensegiving–sensemaking process, Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) identified a four-stage process to illustrate its close relationship: envisioning (sensemaking), signaling (sensegiving), revisioning (sensemaking), and energizing (sensegiving). This process has been explored with reference to encouraging people to engage more with the change initiative (Rouleau and Balogun, 2011), identity change (Corley and Gioia, 2004), and the ‘being and learning’ of sensegivers (Smerek, 2011).

Ideology, power and politics in sensegiving–sensemaking

Within the sensegiving–sensemaking literature, there is a lack of focus on power and politics (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014). Studies that do not explore ideology, power, and politics tend to presume that members of organizations are working collaboratively to achieve the same goal (Mikkelsen *et al.*, 2020). This paper looks at the politics of ideology, which is a way to legitimize the use of power and policy (Maclean *et al.*, 2014), and its influence on the sensegiving–sensemaking process.

One stream of studies addresses the role of ideology, discourse, and politics in the top management’s sensemaking. Maclean and others (2014) examined how the historical narrative has played a role in facilitating ideological sensemaking by top managers at Procter & Gamble. They analyzed how executives reinterpret the past and author the future without disturbing the historical narrative while using interpellation to ensure ideological consistency over time. Vaara, Kleymann, and Seristö (2004) illustrate how nationalism has been a dominant discourse and ideology in airline alliances based on critical discourse analysis. They argue that strategies are not fixed concepts but are discursive constructions created in complex ongoing sensemaking processes. Another stream of studies underlines the importance of analyzing politics and power in the sensemaking of organizational members who receive the messages. Pratt (2000) used the ideological fortress as a metaphor for understanding the politics in sensemaking and managerial control. Their research examined how an organization maintains control of its members by abdicating control to a higher (divine) power using an ideology fortress that people who oppose it find impervious to attack. Mikkelsen and Wåhlin (2020) analyzed the influence of power and politics on the sensemaking process and identified the dominant, hidden, and forbidden sensemaking of diversity management. They identified who has power over sensemaking and how sensemaking in return creates a power structure.

Scholars have long debated the asymmetric power relations between Japan and its overseas subsidiaries and how the interplay of sensegiving–sensemaking played a role in it. Hong, Snell, and Mak (2016) discussed how local employees in Chinese subsidiaries of Japanese multinational companies used political sensegiving to gain their status as a ‘core’ group in the knowledge assimilation process. Many studies have highlighted an ethnocentric management style at the Japanese headquarters, as indicated through their sensegiving practices (Beamish and Inkpen, 1999; Iwashita, 2016); others have argued that the management practices did not contribute to the ‘Japanization’ of the workforce, based on examining employees’ sensemaking (Hong *et al.*, 2006). Adding to these studies, this paper illustrates the complex picture of ethnocentrism in sensegiving–sensemaking because ethnocentric ideology can result in marginalizing the voices of the dominant ethnic group (i.e. Japanese) if they work in a place positioned at the periphery (i.e. Japanese expatriates working in Hong Kong).

Most research in these streams tends to look at sensegiving and sensemaking individually, treating them as separate activities rather than incorporating their

intersection, which does not provide a holistic institutionalization process from the creation to the interpretation of messages. This paper examines the interaction between sensegiving and sensemaking because the sensegiving–sensemaking process is a relational and continuous cycle and not simply a set of individual practices (Maitlis, 2005). To do so, this paper uses a critical sensemaking approach, which enables us to further explore how some voices are heard by the management and how mainstream discourses are normalized (Paludi and Mills, 2013). By doing so, we could more extensively explore the reasons behind the policies decoupling from practice and the impact of the politics of ideology on sensegiving–sensemaking.

Critical sensemaking approach

Inspired by Weick's (1995) influential publication, the critical sensemaking approach addresses Weick's lack of consideration of power in the sensemaking process (Aromaa *et al.*, 2019). Critical sensemaking considers the notion of formative contexts (Unger, 2004), organizational rules (Mills and Murgatroyd, 1991), and discourse (Foucault, 1979). Formative contexts refer to a broader social context and a context of power that influence individual sensemaking, while organizational rules include formal (corporate policies) or informal (the way things get done) rules (Thurlow and Mills 2009, pp. 463-464). Discourse involves 'seeing historically how effects of truth are produced within discourses which in themselves are neither true nor false' (Foucault and Gordon, 1980, p. 118). The notion of discourse enables us to understand why some rules are legitimized (Mills and Mills, 2004). Thurlow (2010) posited that formative contexts and rules stem from and are created through discourse while the dominant discourse in formative contexts has a limiting effect on organizational rules and individual sensemaking.

Studies based on a critical sensemaking approach have explored how the three dimensions (formative contexts, organizational rules, and discourse) affect sensemaking. They illustrate the importance of language in producing and maintaining a discourse of change (Thurlow, 2010), the need for institutional support to move management initiatives forward that emphasizes power and discourse (Moilanen *et al.*, 2018), the impact of power relations in understanding the role of emotional rules in innovation (Aromaa *et al.*, 2019), and hidden discourses and unequal policies (Hilde, 2013; Paludi and Mills, 2013).

Many critical sensemaking studies have focused largely on how these dimensions influenced sensemaking, but discussions on the relationship between the three dimensions need to be further developed to provide a holistic understanding of the political process of sensegiving–sensemaking. To do so, this paper first discusses the three dimensions: the treatment of Japanese customer service practices as standard (dominant discourse), customer service policies and practices (organizational rules), and the asymmetric power structure between the Japanese global headquarters and Hong Kong subsidiary (formative contexts). It then explores their interrelationships and relation to ideology in the sensegiving–sensemaking process.

Methodology

This paper uses an ethnographic methodology to examine the politics of ideology in the interplay between sensegiving and sensemaking. This methodology values relativism, the belief that the nature of the world depends on how the individual views and experiences it (Lincoln, Lynham and Guba, 2011). Therefore, this study presents not only what people said and did in the workplace, which is often discussed in discourse analysis studies, but also presents *how* the text is produced and *why* it is used in specific contexts (Papen, 2018). Using documentation analysis and participant observation, this paper presents data

from a Hong Kong retail shop of a Japanese company gathered during 15 months of participant observation starting in 2009. While corporate documents provide written information on the process of ideology creation, participant observations give insights into otherwise hidden politics and power structures (Moeran, 2013), and such in-depth engagement with the organization helps reveal the unwritten values and beliefs that often constitute the core part of ideology in an organization (Turnbull, 2001).

The company, Ichi, is renowned for transforming into a global company; concomitantly, they insisted on the importance of using the Japanese style of customer service. The majority of the employees in the Hong Kong subsidiary were locally born and raised in Hong Kong and were in their early 20s to 40s, although there were some Japanese expatriates sent from the Japanese global headquarters to Hong Kong during the author's fieldwork to re-educate local employees on the Japanese style of customer service. The author was assigned the role of a salesperson, working eight hours a day, five days a week at several retail shops. This paper focuses on the author's fieldwork in one of the stores located on the east side of Hong Kong whose main clientele is middle-class local customers. Data were gathered from observation and quotations from employees are all from conversations during the observations. Ethical approval for the research was obtained from the university and accepted by the company. The company notified relevant employees of the purpose of the author's fieldwork and their potential influence on their work. The author had to question her objectivity and analyze data using an outsider's perspective rather than an insider's perspective, because the ethnographic method has a risk of analyses being biased due to the influence of the researcher-researched relationship (Roller and Lavrakas, 2015). When disputes between front-line workers and managers occurred on the shop floor, the author made sense of these events not only through interactions with those she was closer to and knew better – frontline workers – but also by attempting to reconstruct the perspectives of management and their views so that she could understand the logic behind the observed phenomena and gain a holistic view of their causes.

This paper uses abductive reasoning (Van Maanen *et al.*, 2017) as a way to make sense of the politics of ideology. Participant observations were recorded on a daily basis in the form of fieldnotes (diary) and were carefully studied for recurring themes. Diary entries were originally written in Chinese or Japanese depending on the participants being Cantonese or Japanese while the corporate documents gathered were written in Chinese. After identifying relevant data, the author translated them into English, and back translation was conducted to verify that the meaning was unchanged. Thematic data analysis using three-stage coding analysis (Soehardjojo and Delbridge, 2022) was used to identify the patterns and themes across an extensive number of fieldnotes. Data analysis started with the examination and organizing of fieldnotes to create codes relevant to the three dimensions: dominant discourse, organizational rules, and formative contexts (see Table 1). The second step was to identify the relevant themes to the three dimensions (e.g. what is the dominant discourse presented at the company?). This was not a singular process but involved numerous reflections and the reorganization of data. The final step was to analyze the new findings of the relationships between the three dimensions and ideology as a new factor.

Table 1. Data analysis process

Dimension	1st Phase: Data	2nd Phase: Theme	3rd Phase: Analysis
Dominant discourse (sensegiving)	Company's conceptualization of its successes and failures	Creation of Japan-centric ideology	Dominant discourse <i>confirm</i> and <i>perpetuate</i> ideology
Organizational rules (sensemaking)	Practice and interpretation of customer service policy	Conflicting interpretation due to hidden cultural codes	Organizational rules <i>delay</i> or <i>facilitate</i> dissemination of dominant discourse
Formative contexts (sensemaking)	Relationship between HQ and HK subsidiary	Asymmetric power structure between the HQ and HK subsidiary	Formative contexts <i>support</i> dominant discourse

By looking at both written and unwritten rules, this research considers not only the rational logic behind the top management's messages (sensegiving) but also the emotional aspect of the employees' interpretations (sensemaking). The ethnographic method demonstrates a new factor (ideology) that influences the outcome of the sensegiving–sensemaking interplay as well as examining the logic behind ethnocentric management. This adds to the previous sensegiving–sensemaking literature (Aromaa *et al.*, 2019; Moilanen *et al.*, 2018) by conducting a critical analysis of the political and emotional factors in organization. In addition to these, this approach allows us to examine what messages have been delivered and as well as the political intentions behind these messages. This study indicates that the politics of ideology were highly influential, which has been overlooked in previous literature.

Politics of ideology at a Japanese retailer in Hong Kong

This section starts with how the sensegiving practice by the company's Japanese global headquarters helped build the dominant discourse that positions the Japanese style of customer service as the global standard and aims to disseminate it across its overseas subsidiaries. It then moves to a discussion of the organizational rules such as the customer service manual, promotion criteria, and performance monitoring system, which the company used to institutionalize the Japanese style of customer service management. These rules were expected to facilitate the realization of dominant discourse; however, this was interrupted by employees who found these rules to be hard to understand due to the embedded hidden cultural codes representing behaviors better known to corporate members with an understanding of Japanese culture. Finally, this paper discusses an asymmetric power structure wherein local employees were placed at the periphery with a limited voice, in contrast to their colleagues at the Japanese global headquarters, positioned at the center.

Discourse: Creating dominant discourse through sensegiving

The Japanese retailer Ichi's failures and successes in expanding overseas have contributed to the formation of a dominant discourse that largely values Japanese branding and practices. Being born immediately after the second world war, the founder of the company has always had a dream to expand their business beyond Japan. After its establishment in the 1980s, the company's first attempt to do so was in China, where the company did not have a smooth business operation and after years of effort was not able to gain profit. When the top management was trying to find a way to understand why the operations failed in China, the manager in charge of the China operation pointed out that the company should have promoted more of its Japanese branding rather than localizing it. At that time, the company was selling cheaper and lower-quality clothing, considering the lower income of Chinese customers. The company at that time was still struggling to identify which direction the company should follow to succeed in the global market.

The top management in Japan decided to make Hong Kong a trial to test the potential of Japanese branding in early 2000. The manager who was assigned to direct the operation in Hong Kong insisted on using everything Japanese, including the price tag, washing labels, and posters, even though most of the local customers and employees were not able to read Japanese. The intention behind using the same products as those sold in Japan is not only to maximize the potential of Japanese branding but also to borrow the Ichi's high brand recognition gained through word of mouth by local tourists who had previously brought Ichi products back from Japan as gifts. The huge popularity of Ichi in Hong Kong from its first day of opening has proven the potential of Japanese branding, and this successful experience has given the company a direction for its international strategy.

After this success, as the global headquarters, the head office in Japan declared its plan to implement the same practice for its overseas strategy with minor local adjustments. This echoes the studies that suggest that global organizations use an integrative or hybrid approach to international management (Gupta and Govindarajan, 2000). After a few successful attempts in the Asian market, the company then started to promote the idea of transforming into a global company by becoming 'one.' This is not a rare practice in a global company that has a unified philosophy and various policies that align with it (Taylor, Beechler and Napier, 1996). Rather than examining if and how this policy works in the local market, this paper aims to unveil how the 'one' equates to 'Japanese practice' rather than being inclusive of diverse customer service practices across cultures.

The company translated the customer service manual they developed in Japan into various languages, with some minor modifications. For example, in most of the countries that the company operates in, bowing is not required; however, fundamental requirements such as smiling and being polite in a certain way remain the same. These requirements are universally valued; that said, the way and the situations in which the company required employees to smile were standardized and the languages they were allowed to use was fixed, which was not necessarily "common sense" for the locals. I will further explore these issues in the next section, which discusses organizational rules. The promotional system allocating customer service performance as a definite requirement for promotion has been implemented in overseas markets almost identically to the implementation in Japan. The monitoring system was mainly overseen by the Japanese global headquarters using mystery shoppers to ensure a consistent standard between Japan and overseas subsidiaries. The mystery shoppers were permitted to record practices in any store, and their reports were unquestionable and were sent directly to the Japanese global headquarters.

The company more tightly controls and monitors creating 'one' shop floor in Hong Kong, especially after the local stores gained low customer service evaluations from top management. There were ten shops at that time, and each shop recruited between 15 and 40 full-time employees. Hong Kong has been regarded as a special place since it was the first overseas market to earn high profit and popularity from the outset of opening. However, this reputation was called into question when the Japanese top management revisited the Hong Kong operation a few years after its first entry into the market. Executives saw unexpressive employees looking towards shelves rather than customers; their voices were uncheerful, and the shop floor was untidy. The conclusion Japanese senior managers had was that although the sales growth was promising, the Hong Kong subsidiary's lack of a Japanese style of service (i.e. certain ways of smiling and being polite) had negatively influenced the brand image and its potential sales growth. In other words, Japanese executives believed that the recreation of Japanese customer service would be a push factor for the region to increase sales and attract local consumers. This

led to stronger pressure on the local head office to achieve the Japanese standard, more frequent checkups by mystery shoppers, and the positioning of customer service as an even more important promotional criterion. These changes have greatly influenced the customer service management in Hong Kong, which was also an ‘organizational shock’ (Mills, Thurlow, and Mills, 2010) for the local employees who experienced a loss of place in the organization.

The dominant discourse in the creation of a Japanese-style customer service experience in the Hong Kong retail industry is based on the Japanese management believing that good sales come from high-quality customer service, which is characteristic of the Japanese style of service. There was no room for local practices to be included in the global policy because they were not deemed to be good enough, as shown by the earlier example wherein top management evaluated practices in Hong Kong. This discourse has neglected the differences in consumer behavior and expectations. Based on the author’s observation and informal communication with the employees, compared to Japanese consumers, Hong Kong customers pay less attention to the formality of the service. It is often fine for Ichi employees to say ‘bye’ to customers when they are leaving the store, but it is considered impolite to do so in Japan. This discrepancy is because customers are regarded as superior to employees in Japan (Zhu, 2016) and also due to the nature of Ichi’s business, selling affordable casual wear in Hong Kong. Therefore, most local consumers expect a less formal service at Ichi in Hong Kong. This does not mean that there is no formal customer service in Hong Kong but just that in a shop such as Ichi, where the overall shopping experience is conventional and unpretentious, such formal customer service is not considered necessary. However, in the Japanese top-management mindset, this is exactly where the local subsidiary is lacking.

In the process of the management delivering messages (i.e. sensegiving), the company insisted that the Japanese way is superior to others, and local practices were not considered feasible for adding useful experiences to its global strategy. Despite the trend of internationalizing organizations to blend home country practices with local differentiation (Jonsson and Foss, 2011), Ichi has explicitly shown their ethnocentric sentiment in policy and management. The dominant discourse has confirmed and perpetuated the ideology, which has a basis in ethnocentrism and in turn shaped the dominant discourse that emphasizes following the Japanese way. The dominant discourse has largely influenced the formation of organizational rules, and the institutionalization of such a dominant discourse is aimed to be facilitated through implementing organizational rules aided by frequent monitoring and control; however, this may not go as the company wants if the management messages are embedded with cultural codes, which we will explore more in the next section.

Rules: Conflicting interpretation of customer service policy through sensemaking

This section looks at how the implementation and enforcement of formal rules have enacted employee sensemaking and how it influences the dominant discourse. It examines how the local employees have become confused by corporate policy because of the hidden cultural codes of the formal customer service manual. This caused employees to have conflicting interpretations of the customer service manual, which every employee received when they joined the company, and it became an obstacle to disseminating a dominant discourse. The manual explains that the employees need to surpass the expectations of customers with their service to satisfy or please them. Before new employees start their first day of work in the store, they must first attend training at the local head office. New employees watch a video of a Japanese salesperson working in an Ichi store in Japan and discuss what the salesperson did for one day’s work and why.

Rather than listing which practices are necessary, this format aims to allow local employees to discover what good customer service practices are on their own. The training dedicated half a day to new employees practicing the perfect smile. Many employees learned the correct way of behaving as a salesperson with advice from managers in the headquarters and were ready to serve customers in the way the company expected. However, after working in the store, most of them realized that what the head office expected them to do was not often the same as what the managers required them to do because the description in the manual was ambiguous, leading to conflicting interpretations by managers at the stores, which reflects that some sensegivers did not contribute positively to the dissemination of ideology.

An important factor in the manual is the presentation of oneself to the customers, such as smiling. It is important for employees to show their respect explicitly to the customers, which is considered a key feature of the Japanese style of customer service (Ikeda, 2013). The manual explains that employees need to provide a warm welcome by smiling at the customers, and new employees learned to greet in such a way on their first day of training. However, they became confused after working at the store since the requirements of each store manager were different. Some managers required a smile closer to what they learned in the head office, while others diverged far from that. Employees were divided into those who showed resistance to and those who showed agreement with the company's rules. Once, a senior local employee who worked in a store since its opening noted:

Why do we have to smile at the customers? They don't care. They just care if the products are good or not.

A local store manager commented on this from her perspective, saying the following:

I know the company wants us to do this customer service, but actually, the more important thing is the sales and the stock volume.

There were also store managers who believed it was necessary to practice this type of customer service in the store. Another local store manager repeatedly said in the briefing session to the employees:

Do you know how low we got for evaluation this month? The main problem was customer service. I want everyone to make sure you smile at the customers and greet them cheerfully!

Contrary to conflicting interpretations among local managers, there was more consensus among Japanese store managers on how to smile. These store managers were sent to Hong Kong to re-educate the locals about the Japanese practice; however, they were unaware that how to smile is something that requires training because for them it was simply common sense. The store managers noted:

I haven't thought about why smiling is needed. Do we need to teach them this? Why not smiling? Everyone likes a person with a smile, right? Hmm, it is an interesting question since we have never been told why at headquarters but took it for granted.

Conflicting interpretations by the local managers show that what the Japanese expatriates thought of as common sense is not necessarily the case for the local employees, which implies the need to train managers on the meaning of the corporate messages. This

also implies the lack of awareness of cultural diversity in the Japanese global headquarters that created the global manuals. This finding shows that it is important to examine the political intentions embedded in the policies created and delivered by the sensegivers. Such an approach is lacking in the mainstream sensegiving literature, which has thus far focused largely on how to deliver policies.

The second key factor of the customer service manual is customers should be talked to. There are clear instructions in the manual for cashiers and fitting room staff, who more frequently interact with the customers. In the manual, there are steps cashiers and fitting room staff need to follow and phrases to use when talking to customers. The aim is for employees to serve customers formally as employees would in Japan. Employees are expected to closely follow each step in these two locations in the store. Hong Kong employees do understand the importance of ensuring a comfortable shopping environment for customers; however, they found it awkward to serve customers formally in Ichi, where the overall shopping experience is conventional and unpretentious. A top local manager once remarked:

You see, our company is like a supermarket because customers will put clothing in a shopping basket, which looks like the type people use in the supermarket. Who uses a shopping basket in a clothing store?

The local employees also felt that there were numerous rules for them to learn and follow in practice. This is particularly challenging for employees who just joined. Despite memorizing which products were placed where, they also needed to know how they should present themselves and talk to the customers. Lacking an understanding of the cultural codes and guidance from colleagues, they tended to enter an unequal power relationship (Shenoy-Packer, 2014).

It is clear from the examination of the formative rules and employee sensemaking that the dominant discourse – valuing Japanese practice over others – was not fully supported due to the understanding of the Japanese way of serving customers conflicting with the one promoted by the Japanese global headquarters. This confused employees and delayed the realization of the dominant discourse. Whilst most of the managers were able to understand and deliver the message aligning with the corporate goal, they could have better facilitated the discourse realization, which was shown during new employee training at the headquarters. This shows that the formal rules are not only the product of dominant discourse as suggested in previous literature (Thurlow, 2010) but also a driving force in delaying or facilitating the dominant discourse depending on the practice of sensegiving. The next section discusses how the formative contexts, using the example of the power structure, impacted the dissemination of discourse.

Formative contexts: Asymmetric power structure between the HQ and HK subsidiary

This section uses the practice of individual and collective customer service evaluation (the informal rule of ‘how things are done’) to illustrate the formative context, an asymmetric power structure between the Japanese headquarters and Hong Kong subsidiary. The role of the power structure becomes more apparent in an internationalizing organization because the more overseas businesses a company has, the greater the distance between the executives and frontline as well as between the headquarters and local subsidiaries, indicating a higher risk of corporate messages being ‘lost in translation’ and policies decoupling from practice (Gondo and Amis, 2013).

Positioning customer service evaluation as one of the mandatory criteria to receive a promotion is a way the company expects to facilitate the dissemination of ideology to

build 'mental models that constitute the frameworks of organizational rationalities and belief systems' (Hill and Levenhagen, 1995, p. 1059). Everyone at Ichi needs to pass an evaluation of their customer service performance to develop their career, which often involves the transfer to a new store or a store with higher sales and positioning in the company as well as pursuing promotion to reach a higher position in the hierarchy. The evaluation was conducted monthly, and the store managers made a final decision on who the promotional candidates could be. In the individual customer service evaluation sheet, each item was awarded using a points system, whereby employees needed to achieve a certain number of points to be selected as promotional candidates. The same evaluation sheet is used for collective evaluation such as assessing stores on the level of customer service performance, which influences the promotion of higher managers such as store managers and area managers who supervise several stores.

Mystery shopper and unbalanced power structure

To promote and monitor the process of ideology dissemination, Ichi started to introduce a mystery shopper system in Hong Kong. The mystery shopper system has been widely used in assessing customer service management because of its positive outcomes (Wilson, 1998; Porter and Heyman, 2018), although some claim that little empirical evidence supports the notion that the system reflects what customers want (Blessing and Natter 2019). Mystery shoppers were sent by the corporate headquarters, and the frequency of sending mystery shoppers depended on customer service evaluations. This implies that subsidiaries with lower-scoring evaluations would receive a higher frequency of mystery shopper visits, such as once a month or more. Mystery shoppers collect hard evidence on the shop floor by taking photos of good and bad examples of customer service at stores – such as whether employees had friendly smiles on their faces, or whether they talked to the customers impolitely.

The absolute power given to the mystery shopper on their report has largely impacted the way store employees interpret the policy. Mystery shoppers were to report the results to a senior manager at the store after the assessment to make sure every issue raised in the report was acknowledged by the manager. During this process, store employees were not allowed to question any of the reports outlined by the mystery shopper or try to provide any explanations for them. After communicating with the store employees, the mystery shopper report was sent directly to both the local headquarters and the Japanese global headquarters. The results of the mystery shoppers are generally an important agenda in regular store manager meetings. When the reports were discussed during the meeting, as in other circumstances, no store employee was allowed to question the legitimacy of the reports. Due to the power given to mystery shoppers and the hard evidence they obtained, many store employees felt a strong need to perform well in front of mystery shoppers to receive a better store evaluation, as this often resulted in better career development and opportunities at the company.

The store manager I worked with once raised concerns about the potential of the mystery shopper manipulating the results of their report. The store manager and I were photographed 'chatting' on the shop floor, which resulted in a negative store evaluation report. The mystery shopper reported us 'chatting' because we were laughing without any indication that we were talking about work. Despite the persistence of the store manager asking local headquarters to look into this issue because the mystery shopper misunderstood us, the voice of the store manager was silenced. I recall the night the local store manager phoned me to say she felt sorry about this since she was not able to help me 'clear my name', which could influence my future fieldwork plans at the organization. The local headquarters emphasized that there was no explanation allowed in any situation,

which implies the strong determination of the company to recreate Japanese practices in Hong Kong by imposing a ‘zero-tolerance policy’ on the employees who did not follow the rules.

The silenced local store manager was the tip of the iceberg; there were other local store managers and Japanese expatriates who felt that their voices were silenced. On one occasion, a local store manager expected to become the first female area manager confessed:

Like many other local store managers, I have decided not to speak about my thoughts anymore to the top management. You know, one of the executives visited us the other day and was surprised by how Hong Kong people are so quiet. They said that they want us to raise more issues, but I am not sure if they actually want us to do so.

The silencing of voices not only happens to local employees but also to Japanese expatriates. Many of the expatriates were enthusiastic about sharing their thoughts in the first few months with the top management in Japan. They found that there were some customer service policies that could be localized, such as smiling. However, they later turned silent. They explained the reason as follows:

We don’t want to say anything anymore because the top management will say we are finding excuses. They will just order us to achieve the target, and nothing unique here is going to be considered.

When I asked the Japanese expatriate who was managing the local headquarters about the opinions raised by the Japanese store managers, he said

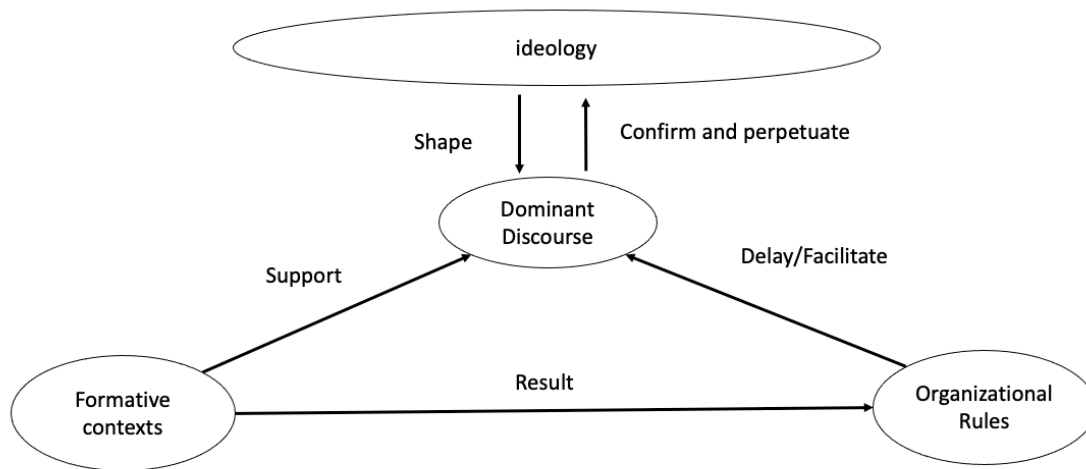
They don’t know anything. I have been here for so long and I understand their enthusiasm, but not everything needs to be changed.

The above shows that the asymmetric power structure has strongly supported the realization of the dominant discourse, which places Japanese practices over others. Silenced Japanese store managers showed their power-sensitive understanding of culture (Ybema and Byun, 2009) after attempting to communicate with the headquarters. This interaction demonstrates that they were also placed in the periphery compared to their colleagues at the Japanese global headquarters. This offers a more complex picture than the mainstream literature claiming that ethnocentrism places all Japanese expatriates in a higher position than locals (Conrad and Meyer-Ohle, 2017; Legewie 2002). This indicates that the dominant discourse and ethnocentric ideology privilege employees who know ways to service customers in the Japanese way and work in the Japanese global headquarters. It also shows that the factors creating an asymmetric power structure in an organization not only come from operational and financial concerns (Dörrenbächer and Gammelgaard, 2011; Piotti, 2012) but also from corporate ideology.

Discussion

This paper used a critical sensemaking approach (Mills, Thurlow, and Mills, 2010) to discuss the politics of ideology in the process of sensegiving–sensemaking. Based on an ethnographic case study of an internationalizing Japanese retailer in Hong Kong, this paper aims to identify the three dimensions that shaped the sensegiving and sensemaking and analyze the relationship between corporate ideology and the three dimensions. The answers to these research questions will be explored further and are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Relationship map of ideology and three dimensions



The first research question asked what three dimensions shaped the sensegiving and sensemaking of the employees at Ichi. The first dimension, dominant discourse, was examined through the sensegiving by the management’s interpretation of its successful business experience in Hong Kong. This shows that the company promotes Japanese customer service as the standard and undervalues local practices. This discourse represents the company’s preferred definition of reality (Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007), which has embedded ethnocentric sentiment. Thus, this paper argues that an ethnocentric ideology shapes the dominant discourse in the process of sensegiving. The second dimension, organizational rules, was explored by discussing employees’ sensemaking of the written customer service policy, which shows their collective understanding of the world. This indicates that hidden cultural codes embedded in the customer service policy and different interpretations by managers confused employees, resulting in conflicting interpretations. Many studies have underlined the importance of having consensus when disseminating corporate messages (Putnam, Fiarhurst, and Banghart, 2016; Shin and Konrad, 2017); this paper shows that cultural differences in understanding policy could become a barrier to establishing consensus. The final dimension, formative contexts, was investigated through the lens of the asymmetric power structure between the Japanese global headquarters and local subsidiaries putting the former at the core and the latter at the periphery. The examples of silenced voices of local employees and Japanese expatriates in Hong Kong illustrate that even with an ethnocentric corporate ideology, this does not result in one particular ethnic group being placed over others.

The second research question aimed to elucidate the relationship between corporate ideology and the three dimensions. The global headquarters’ sensegiving created an ethnocentric ideology that recognized Japanese customer service practice as the standard. Ideology was used by the management to enhance the dissemination of Japan-centric policy, which was administered through sensegiving and sensemaking by managers. The three dimensions are closely linked to ideology and are interrelated. Ideology shapes dominant discourse and is confirmed and perpetuated through discourse (Van Dijk, 2006). This has an especially strong influence compared to other interrelations due to the taken-for-granted nature of ideology. From the discussion on the practice of organizational rules, this paper demonstrates that employees’ conflicting interpretations have delayed the realization of discourse. Besides formative contexts and rules being the

product of dominant discourse and formative contexts restricting rules as discussed previously (Thurlow, 2010), there are other relationships that need to be explored. First, formative contexts support dominant discourse because the asymmetric power structure silencing local resistance voices can drive the legitimization of the discourse that values Japan-centric customer service. Second, rules can delay or facilitate the realization of dominant discourse due to mediating factors such as how sensegivers and sensemakers interpret policies. A shared interpretation can facilitate discourse dissemination while conflicting interpretations delay the process. Third, organizational rules were not only restricted by the formative contexts but were also the product of them. Without an asymmetric power structure, it would be challenging for the Ichi management to impose the rules and use mystery shoppers as a way to control customer service behaviors. This shows that the three dimensions are closely related to the maintenance and legitimization of ideology.

Theoretical contribution

This paper makes a theoretical contribution to the sensegiving–sensemaking literature and provides insight into ethnocentric management studies. Many studies have used a critical sensemaking approach in examining the politics and power within an organization (such as Aromaa *et al.*, 2019; Moilanen *et al.*, 2018; Thurlow, 2010); this paper tried to attend more closely to the politics of ideology through how three dimensions are interrelated and worked towards disseminating ideology. This paper adds to this literature by developing the sensegiving–sensemaking perspective to consider the complex mechanism involving the emotional aspects of organization, which became an arena for political activities. This research has shown one company’s attempt to use ethnocentric ideology and enhance cultural assimilation in management. We should not regard business organization as a purely rational entity but as an organism with the potential to create and disseminate ideology. The findings of this paper also provide a more complicated picture of ethnocentric management because even with an ethnocentric ideology, an organization may marginalize the dominant ethnic group because of their work location being placed at the periphery.

Practical implication

This paper warns of the risk of ethnocentric ideology preventing us from embracing local culture, thus silencing locals. Ichi is renowned for operating numerous overseas subsidiaries and aiming to be a global company. However, there is a gap between what the company expects from the employees – practicing Japanese customer service – and actual experiences of local employees as well as Japanese expatriates. The hidden political intention of the company could be deliberately or accidentally designed. However, silenced voices have uncovered the company’s authoritarian style of management, which has stifled local voices and culture. The global headquarters should be aware of these concerns and address them carefully. Rather than blindly following global policy, the local subsidiary could have voiced its own best practices to illustrate the value of their practices without compromising on the globalization mission. In short, both the headquarters and local subsidiary should communicate and evaluate whether their management activities are ethical and inclusive as well as whether such a style can be sustainable in attracting and retaining talent. It reveals that we need to explore the political arena of the interplay between sensegiving and sensemaking to ascertain what is going on in an organization, to avoid allowing it to become a ‘totalitarian’ organization that limits organization members in defining what happiness is to them (Schwartz, 1987). This paper has clarified and illustrated the relationship among the three dimensions

(dominant discourse, organizational rules, and formative contexts) by adding the factor of ideology; however, to better understand the interplay between sensegiving and sensemaking, further research needs to be carried out to establish the relative importance of the three dimensions' internal relationships as well as the strategic agencies who legitimate or oppose the process (Ybema and Byun, 2009).

Conclusion

This paper discussed the politics of ideology in the process of meaning construction by management (sensegiving) and meaning interpretation by employees (sensemaking). Using a critical sensemaking approach (Mills, Thurlow and Mills, 2010), this paper looked at the politics of ideology at a Hong Kong subsidiary of the Japanese fashion retailer Ichi. To do so, this paper examined three dimensions – dominant discourse, organizational rules, and formative contexts – and how these dimensions interact and relate to ideology. At Ichi, Japan-centric customer service was considered standard in its global strategy, and this dominant discourse demonstrated ethnocentric sentiment in policy making. Organizational rules such as customer service policies and employees' sensemaking show that hidden cultural codes in the policy and different interpretations by the sensegiver can result in conflicting interpretations by the employees. The asymmetric power structure, a type of formative context, has positioned the Japanese global headquarters at the core and the Hong Kong subsidiary at the periphery. Employees' voices were silenced, even those who were ethnic Japanese, which offers a more complex picture than ethnocentric management studies that claim that one ethnic group is prioritized over others. The analysis of the relationship between the three dimensions and ideology added to the previous literature the driving force of formative contexts in disseminating dominant discourse and the influence of employee sensemaking on deciding the impact of the organizational rules on the level of dominant discourse realization. Ideology, as a macro level of discourse, has been perpetuated by discourse and shaped the discourse. This paper illustrates the wider implications of using a critical approach in examining political aspects in organization studies and demonstrates the danger of ethnocentric ideology preventing us from embracing local culture, thus silencing locals. It is important for us not to underestimate the political nature that could be the root of creating difference, thus silencing others.

Disclosure statement

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