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Hybridity, sociomateriality and compassion: What happens when a river floods and a city's organizations respond?



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Summary In this study we analyze the ethics of compassionate support provided by organizations to their employees during and after the Brisbane flood crisis of January 2011. The relationship between the social and the material is often taken for granted in discussions of compassion, which has largely been conceived as an emotion or an ethical virtue. By contrast, we see it as a variable state that is contingent on phenomenal events, social relations, organizational routines, technology and corporeality. These are entangled in temporal processes in which the ethics of organizing compassion are constituted. When traumatic events occur processes of sociomateriality can substantiate or negate organizational compassion.

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Introduction

Scholarly appreciation of the value of virtue ethics in organizations has grown rapidly in the past decade (Cameron & Winn, 2012; Davis et al., 2013; Rego, Cunha, & Clegg, 2012) with

particular emphasis being given to the ethics of organizational compassion (Kanov et al., 2004; Lilius, Kanov, Dutton, Worline, & Maitlis, 2012; White, 1999). These scholars argue that compassion entails more than merely an internal psychological disposition or social ethical imperative. A giver and a receiver are necessary for the unfolding of compassion relations but these always occur in a social context. It is the context that provides cues for compassion or for interpretation of its absence, deviance or decline (Berlant, 2004; Nussbaum, 2003; Simpson et al., 2014a; Simpson, Clegg, & Pitsis, 2014c).

In this paper we further develop theorizing on organizational compassion by arguing from a sociomaterial perspective

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that ethical agency in organizational compassion relations resides not just in human actors. Rather, natural phenomena, physical resources, organizational processes and routines, technology and inter-corporeality also have an ethical materiality: “Sociomaterial perspectives not only question the acceptance of differential categories such as individual/organization and binaries of subject/object, knower/known etc., but also challenge the givenness of fundamental distinctions between human and non-human” (Fenwick, 2010, p. 107). We discuss organizational compassion relations within the context of a recent tradition of analysis in which the human is not privileged. Significant scholars in this tradition, such as Pickering (1995, 2008), draw upon Deleuze (1990, 1994), Deleuze and Guattari (1988), to argue that no innate dualism resides in the relation between people and other entities in the world. Agency is attributable to non-human phenomena just as much to those species-beings that speak and act: it also inheres in material objects. In a similar tradition Curtis’s (2008, p. 113), analysis of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans as a sociomaterial phenomenon, is also critical of dominant perspectives that invoke a “restrictive dualism between ‘man’ (organization) and ‘nature’ (disorganization)”. He further critiques the “anthropocentric moral framework” in which human action is viewed in terms of good or evil and natural phenomenon is seen as morally neutral. We build upon these ideas to argue that compassion relations are mutually constituted through human–material configurations (van der Velden, 2009) and materialized through “temporally emergent constitutive entanglement” (Orlikowski & Scott, 2009, p. 547).

Events comprise many phenomenal types: hurricanes, such as Hurricane Katrina that wrought devastation on New Orleans (Curtis, 2008; Frickel & Vincent, 2007; Piotrowski, 2006); tsunamis, such as that which devastated much of Asia in 2004 (Perry, 2007); terrorists flying high-jacked planes into some of the world’s highest and most famous buildings in New York in 2001 (Beunza & Stark, 2004, 2005). The setting for our study is a specific event: a flood that inundated the City of Brisbane (27°30’S, 153°1’E), the state capital of Queensland, Australia, in January 2011, which caused the evacuation of the Central Business District (CBD) and surrounding suburbs in the City of Brisbane (Bohensky & Leitch, 2014; Holmes, 2011; van den Honert & McAneney, 2011).

We argue that events such as floods possess agency and temporality: they punctuate the ordering of elapsed time¹. Linstead and Thanem (2007, p. 1493) describe events as sticking out from the mundane as “a discontinuity in history” that opens up future possibility “promising further differentiation”. Deroy and Clegg (2011, p. 637) further develop these ideas arguing that events, construed as phenomena that “are non-routine”, by definition “remain outside the application of a pre-existing rule and this is why they challenge ethics.” Events offer potential spaces for action in the study of ethical agency and compassion relations within organizations; they breach the normalcy of routines by providing opportunities for re-imagining what has become tacit and taken-for-granted, not even contemplated in everyday

organizational life and thought. Human agents engage in a collective struggle for survival, reassurance and meaning making the framing of which is always threatened by events. Events have material consequences. While there are many kinds of events that one might focus on, catastrophic events have a particular potency because of the destruction and havoc that they can wreak on complex organizational networks, operations and the lives of employees. Complex organizational networks are sociomaterial (Jarzabkowski, Spee, & Smets, 2013). When people act in organizational roles they do so with the aid of materials, such as the copper wire on which systems of voice and data communication depend, reliant on materialities that lace together social relations, physical structures, and organizational processes.

Events form one coordinate of our account while organizations and their networks provide another. What connects them is the sociomaterial infrastructure. The “sociomaterial approach challenges the deeply taken-for-granted assumption that technology, work, and organizations should be conceptualized separately and advances the view that there is an inherent inseparability between the technical and the social” (Orlikowski & Scott, 2009, p. 434). Various material media of communication vary in speed and tone when processing exchanges, constituting inter-corporeal, inter-organizational and organizational relations. The entanglement of the social with the material ensures that sociomateriality is experienced as an undifferentiated phenomenological continuum where all beings/things are interconnected through overlapping processes. Our focus is on what happens to the human capacity to exert ethical choice when the materiality that ties events, organizations and networks together is severely disrupted. These threads are connected in dynamic sociomaterial interactions that constitute, enable and constrain modes of being not only of human actors but also of events and things. When faced with traumatic and extraordinary events any organizational response, as well as responses to these by individuals, are instances of ethical agency. Following van der Velden (2009, p. 38) we define ethical agency as “the capability to act responsibly toward the ‘other’, in particular to do no harm.” During times of crisis a growing body of literature suggests that organizational recognition and responses to employee suffering are important. Responding with care and compassion helps facilitate employee healing and wellbeing (Dutton, Frost, Worline, Lilius, & Kanov, 2002) as well as job satisfaction, organizational commitment and bonding with fellow employees (Lilius et al., 2008). On the other hand, perceived neglect of employee suffering at times of crisis can lead to feelings of resentment and anger (Dutton et al., 2002). Current theorizing, however, tends towards a methodological individualism, limiting ethical agency to human actors.

We structure this article by first providing a review of the literature on compassionate organizational crisis responding. Second, we introduce our research methods and context: the Brisbane Floods of January 2011. Our central research question is: What are the sociomaterial processes that constitute organizational compassion relations in times of crisis? We address this question through data on organizational responses provided to employees as support during the Brisbane floods. We organize our findings in terms of the unfolding processes of compassion responding to an event and its material consequences, involving communication technologies, media

¹ Think, for example, of the ways in which people divide time into ‘before’ and ‘after’ the GFC, 9/11, or the birth of Christ.

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