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Expressing compassion in the face of crisis:

Organizational practices in the aftermath of the Brisbane floods of 2011

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Abstract

Compassion is almost universally acknowledged as an important issue in the crisis management literature. The dominant perspective, however, approaches compassion instrumentally as a practical tool for conveying messages to achieve goals of protecting organizational assets. The findings of this study on the compassionate support offered (or not) to employees during and after the Brisbane flood crisis of January 2011 provide insight into crisis management as continuous process rather than a reactionary response to disaster when it arises. Three significant policy implications are generated in relation to organizational response and processes of compassion in times of crisis: First, compassionate discourses and categorization schemas should be clearly articulated within the organization before crisis (i.e. compassionate organizations express compassion as quotidian practice). Second, compassionate policies and practices need to be embedded in ongoing organizational routines and policies. Third, initiatives framed as compassion responses should not be assumed to necessarily create positive outcomes; rather, outcomes should be assessed on an ongoing basis.

Keywords

Compassion; crisis; organization studies; practice theory; social theory; Brisbane floods.

1. Introduction

Compassion is an overt underlying principle of all crisis management communication strategies (Coombs 1999). Organizational crises can be grouped in three clusters with varying degrees of culpability: the *victim* cluster, involving crises such as natural disasters, the *accidental* cluster, involving events such as technological breakdowns, and the *preventable* cluster which includes events such as organizational misdeeds and injuries (Coombs 2006). Various management strategies are recommended for different types of crisis (Coombs 1995). Theorists such as Siomkos and Shrivastava (1993), Benoit (1997) and Coombs (1998, 2006) have arrayed these strategies as a continuum ranging from accommodation to defensiveness. According to Coombs' (1999: 129) analysis of this range of strategies "accommodation reflects compassion and concern for victims, whereas [the] defensive lacks compassion by denying victims' needs". Compassion needs to be contingently contextualized as compassionate accommodation through apologies and offers of compensation can have ramifications with legal liabilities due to admissions of wrongdoing (Tyler 1997). In cases of grievous organizational wrongdoing Coombs (2006) nevertheless recommends that the organization adopt a compassionate and apologetic approach in order to minimize legal losses because an apology has the potential of lessening the damage. Coombs (2006) demonstrates a major limitation of the crisis management literature: understanding of compassion is merely a practical tool for conveying messages and achieving goals of crisis management, while protecting organizational profits, ensuring good legal standing and stock positions.

The empirical findings in this paper are based upon case data collected from organizational employees affected by the Brisbane Floods of 2011 that challenges the effectiveness of instrumentalist positions. We conceptualize compassion not merely as a psychological state or trait but also as a complex social relational practice wherein compassion is (re)constituted through modes of knowing, dynamic power relations and ongoing emergence. Our perspective is informed practice theory which views all phenomena as socially constructed, mutually constituted and dynamically (non)dualistic (Feldman & Orlikowski 2011).

The paper is organized in four sections. We begin with a review of the literature on compassion in response to crisis both within crisis management theory and organizational theory. Next we introduce our research methods, the context of inquiry, and the central research question: What characterizes the social relational practices of organizing compassion responses in a time of crisis? The question is addressed through analysis of data on organizational responses of support (or not) provided to employees during the Brisbane floods. Our findings are introduced as three practical insights that will be of interest to managers and researchers seeking to create compassionate organizational environment, and preparing their organizations for crisis. We conclude that compassion cannot be manufactured in a moment of crisis but needs to be cultivated. By this we mean that it is a feature of everyday practices, an ongoing accomplishment characterizing times and occasions of relative normalcy.

2. Constituting compassion in Crisis Management and Organization Studies

Crisis management scholars working from the perspective of public relations advocate the instrumental advantages of communicating compassion (Coombs 1999; Siomkos & Shrivastava 1993). Acknowledgment of the needs of victims during a crisis indicates the trustworthiness of the organization, which enhances the organization's credibility and facilitates the favorable development of a positive organizational reputation (Coombs 1999). The instrumental approach to compassion, while doubtless a good guide to better actions, is somewhat limited for the following reasons: First, it is one sided as it only takes the perspective of the organizational giver of compassion, ignoring the experience of the receiver; hence, its "definition of the situation" (McHugh 1968) is unduly restricted. Second, it largely downplays the social dynamics inherent in compassion responding – compassion is mutually constituted through the actions of a giver and a receiver – the definition of the situation is negotiated not imposed. Third, it generally assumes positive outcomes from compassion relations – when the reality is much more complex because situations are not always constituted as being in accord with the organizational givers' definitions.

Awareness of the significance of compassion has grown over the past decade within crisis management theory as it has within the field of organizational studies (Cameron & Gaza 2004; Cameron & Spreitzer 2012). In the latter, in particular, the development of a concern with positive organization studies has seen the issue of compassion become a centerpiece for research and theory. Compassion is represented as a dimension of critical importance for organizations, especially those aware of the always-present possibility of crisis and disaster (Devitt & Borodzicz 2008; 2002; Dutton

et al. 2006; Goldberg & Harzog 1996; Veil, Buehner & Palenchar 2011). The mostly widely used definition of compassion within the organizational literature is as a tripartite process of collectively recognizing, feeling and responding to others' suffering (Dutton, Glynn & Spreitzer 2006; 2007; Frost et al. 2006; 2012; 2011; Lilius et al. 2008). The definition only considers the perspective of the giver, thereby ignoring compassion as a mutually constituted social relational process, and it assumes positive outcomes of compassion relations; hence it shares much in common with the crisis management literature.

The organizational compassion literature stresses the many benefits of dealing compassionately with staff, particularly in times of crisis. For example, studies have found that compassionate leadership facilitates healing and growth after trauma, whereas neglect can invoke negative emotions of anger and resentment (Dutton et al. 2002). Organizational compassion consequently not only facilitates speedier recovery from suffering (Lilius et al. 2011), it also nurtures positive emotions and enhances the commitment levels towards fellow employees and the organization as a whole. Studies further indicate that organizational compassion strengthens values of dignity, respect and the common good. Organizational compassion further cultivates critical relational skills by enhancing emotional sensitivity and builds organizational resources of pride, trust, motivation and connection (Dutton, Lilius & Kanov 2007). In summary, the research on organizational compassion indicates that it fosters important outcomes both for individual members and the entire organization (Lilius et al. 2012).

Research has focused on mechanisms for organizational compassion responding which include the establishment of a harm notification network (Dutton et al. 2002; Dutton et al. 2006). A network of this sort systematizes organizational awareness of individual employee needs and the provision of support that, depending upon the nature and causes of suffering, varies in scope, scale, speed, and specialization. Organizational compassion responses are legitimized, propagated, and coordinated through the cultivation of compassionate policies, routines (Kanov et al. 2004) and values reflecting respect for humanity and individual personality (Dutton, Lilius & Kanov 2007; Dutton et al. 2006). Examples of such practices include establishing formal employee assistance programs such as facilitating employees in donating unused vacation time towards helping other employees in need (Lilius et al. 2008) or the provision of a formal ombudsperson (Lilius et al. 2012).

We observe that the research findings above are largely sociological in nature, attending more to practices than to individual psyches. Drawing on the social “practice turn” (Schatzki 2001) in organizational studies leads us to question the *a priori* construct of compassion in favor of a more empirically grounded account of the ways in which members of organizations ordinarily go about doing (or not doing) compassion in times of crisis. The practice perspective is rooted in the idea that phenomena such as knowledge and meaning, power and organized activity, are constituted in everyday social practices (Nicolini 2012). Social interactions mutually constitute, negotiate, and legitimize social orders. Interactions have been seen to be constantly in flux as they build dynamic collective capabilities for activities as diverse

as managing (Feldman 2010), learning (Antonacopoulou 2006, 2009), knowing (Orlikowski 2002), collaborating (Bjørkeng, Clegg & Pitsis 2009), and cultivating business ethics (Clegg, Kornberger & Rhodes 2007). We suggest that conceiving of compassion as a complex of social relational practices can enhance knowledge of organizational compassionate crisis responding. Consequently, we employ social practice theory to illuminate our empirical research on organizational compassion in the sections that follow.

3. Research context and method

When a crisis begins, peaks, or concludes, it involves an element of intersubjective experience even where the triggering event itself is objectively verifiable (Pearson & Clair 1998; Rosenthal, Boin & Comfort 2001). It is the responses to the crisis event that interest us: hence, an interpretivist qualitative research approach is appropriate.

Deeming organizational support as compassionate or otherwise is a matter of individual and collectively negotiated perceptions and experiences. External influences upon the respondent's perceptions could include company history, production, size, and the extent to which the organization was devastated. Using qualitative methodology facilitates observing organizational compassion as a social process rather than merely as a psychological trait or disposition, as it is frequently researched in quantitative approaches using psychological scales. In contrast, we focus on the situated, immediate, and contextualized nature of specific empirical practices of providing compassionate support during a time of crisis. As interpretive researchers

we have sought “to describe and understand members’ meanings and the implications that divergent meanings hold for social interaction” (Gephart 2004: 457).

The context for the research was the crisis contingent on the Brisbane Flood of January 2011, which provided a naturally occurring experimental environment wherein a divergence of organizational responses could be observed (Garfinkel 1967). Regions of Australia were devastated by summer flooding in December 2010, leaving the sub-tropical State of Queensland as the worst affected area. As the Brisbane River broke its banks at 2:30 pm, due to release of substantial volumes of water threatening the integrity of the Wivenhoe Dam upstream, the City Council ordered the evacuation of workers and residents from 2,100 streets in the Central Business District and other suburbs. Of Brisbane’s 150 suburbs, 67 sustained significant damage.

Data included in this study was collected nine months after the floods had receded. Using a snowball sampling method established social networks were accessed to make contact with people whose work had been affected by the floods. Potential participants were approached for interview focusing on how their employing organization had addressed employment relations during the extraordinary circumstances of this substantial flooding. Eventually, a snowball sample of twenty-five people from eighteen organizations was accessed, including two wholesale travel agencies, a bank, two university departments, a fashion wholesale company, a restaurant, an office supplies delivery business, and an IT company. All of the people interviewed work in the central Brisbane region that was affected by the floods. Most reported receiving orders to quickly evacuate their places of work on January 11, 2011.

The interviews lasted between twenty minutes and one hour. Interviewees were assured of anonymity both individually and organizationally. The interview process involved collecting stories or narratives of the interviewees' experiences of organizational care or neglect during the Brisbane floods. A loosely structured interview script was used to request participants to recount their experience on the day of the flood; how their work was affected; what support was provided by their work organization: whether this type of response was normal, and if they could think of other examples. Comparison between compassion narratives in different organizations, across different industries, allowed us to analyze the dynamics of compassion as organizational practice. The interviewees descriptions of characters and plots provided access to organizational support systems, values and beliefs (Czarniawska 2000; Czarniawska-Joerges 2004), manifest as varying organizational flood responses. Full transcriptions were made of each of the interviews and the transcriptions were imported into software (NVivo 9) used specifically for qualitative analyses. "Nodes" comprising key themes and subthemes were highlighted and categorized using the software. In the process of coding, utterances (rather than respondents) were used as the unit of analysis; hence, more utterances were coded than the actual number of respondents.

The process of coding involved some 350 hours of deliberation, discussion and decision-making. Descriptive coding was initially used to identify recurring themes and subthemes in the narratives. With further interrogation and re-examination of the data, these categories and themes were further refined as coding progressed (Strauss

& Corbin, 1998). By setting different narratives against each other, we discovered patterns and contingencies, which we collated using theoretical dimensions drawn from practice theory. The insights derived are thereby a combination of interpretive analysis and use of a well-accepted framework for analysis of practices. We followed phenomenological method by inductively constructing “social science concepts using concepts of social actors as the foundations for analytic induction” (Gephart 2004). The evidence was consolidated into narrations demonstrating different emergent themes that were grouped within the practice framework (Langley 1999), stressing social construction, mutual constitution, and dualistic outcomes. The overall effect was the retelling and interpreting of individual narratives as a grand narrative of organizational compassion practices. The main themes that emerged from the interviews demonstrate that the flood was, indeed, an extreme event that made compassion relations visible (Eisenhardt 1989) and provided a privileged window on our topic of interest.

Table 1 about here

4. Findings: Complexities of Compassion

Our findings may be summarized in terms of three insights.

Insight 1: Articulate compassionate discourses and categorization schemas

The first insight relates to the important role organizational discourse plays in framing organizational practices. Much of crisis management concerns managing knowledge through communications strategies (Coombs 1999). Knowledge constructs are a powerful mechanism in the constitution of order. Socially constructed knowledge provides scripts with which people make sense of and act upon the world in terms of notions such as compassion (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992). Individuals and organizations use discourse to shape and legitimize organizational practices (Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips 2006). Knowledge thus intermingles with power in constituting and ordering the political structures of organizations and society more generally. In this study the influence of organizational knowledge on organizational responses to the flood situation occurred in two ways.

First, differences between organizational modes of responding were reflected in the different organizational modes of defining the relation between the organization and the employee. Second, organizational compassion responses were also reflected in different organizational modes of classifying the flood event as either *normal*, or *exceptional*, or in classifying it *ambiguously*. Such classification, as we will discuss, results not only from reactions to crisis but also from interpretations prevailing before the crisis: organizations notice crises with the sensemaking tools already in place (Weick 2003, Forthcoming; Weick & Sutcliffe 2007). In the following sections we will look more closely at both of these sets of classifications beginning with classification of the employee.

4.1.1. *Classification of employees*

Organizations that demonstrated high compassion capabilities in their responses to the flood situation were, on the whole, either small organizations that viewed their employees “as family” or they were larger organizations that articulated a codified philosophy of care, communicating that people were more important than money. Claims of prioritizing people in organizational decision-making is a cliché often viewed with suspicion: however, employees in some of these organizations said it actually applied.

In those organizations that demonstrated least compassion capabilities in their responses to the floods employees were viewed as workers paid to do a job as long as the business was operating—regardless of the situation at the employees’ homes. If employees had personal situations, responsibilities, and duties keeping them from work, the organization would apply normal sanctions for non-attendance such as chastisement, deducting pay, or deducting days from paid leave. If the floods meant that they could not get to work, these conditions applied.

Powerful elites define dominant categorizations of superiority and inferiority to discriminate and distinguish, to stratify, rank, and evaluate people (Bourdieu 1984; Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips 2006). One way of doing this is through defining circles of compassion. Potentially, these can be more or less restricted in their ability to identify with another’s suffering and pain (Nussbaum 2003).

4.1.2. Classification of the flood situation

We now turn to considering the relationship between organizational compassion responses with organizational modes of classifying the flood event as exceptional, normal, or ambiguous. In organizations in which the floods were classified as exceptional, the organization went out of its way to make the event as trouble-free as possible. Arrangements included providing paid leave of absence during and after the event, and suspension of 'business as usual' rules. The overall tendency under this classification was for the organization to demonstrate a collective capability for compassion.

The crisis response of an Internet Technology company is an example of an organization that exhibited a high compassion capability. Prior to evacuation orders even being issued by the City Council, the organization had anticipated the concerns of employees regarding the impending flood. Each employee received a phone call from their direct supervisor who instructed them not to come in for work but to "take care of their families as a number one priority" with an option to work from home as much as was possible given the circumstances. They were further assured that they would be fully paid regardless of their capacity to work during the flood. Throughout the week of the flood, enquiries were made of the employees' wellbeing and possible need for help. They were also provided with updates on the situation at their workplace.

In organizations where the definition of the situation during the floods was classified as *normal*, organizationally there was no distinction made from business as usual. Here the ongoing organizational capability of concern for the members' potential individual and collective suffering, as well as assessment of legitimacy, decision making, and

responding, was minimal. Under such circumstances, if employees could not make it to work or their personal responsibilities and duties kept them from work, the organization applied normal sanctions for non-attendance.

In between these *normal* and *exceptional* responses were organizations in which the event was dealt with ambiguously, albeit primarily from the perspective of the organization rather than from a compassionate concern for the individual employees struggling with disaster. Overall the tendency within these ambiguous organizations was a general lack of consistency in providing care.

4.2. Insight 2: Embed compassionate practices within the ongoing organizational routines and policies

The second policy implication relates to the significant relationship uncovered between organizational responses in times of crisis and the daily practices of the organization. The emphasis of practice theory is on the mutual interconnectedness, interdependence, and constitution of all phenomenological artifacts, technologies, bodies and material arrangements (Bradbury & Lichtenstein 2000; Giddens 1984), a conceptualization expanded to indicate interconnectedness within and between organizations (Feldman 2010). Within the context of the variable compassion practices of organizations during the Brisbane flood we found that the most responsive organizations already had compassionate policies and routines in place as an ongoing mode of practice. Relevant here is the argument that crisis-prepared organizations minimize the inherent damage caused by crises through formal crisis management

planning and policy implementation involving flexible information and resource sharing and work role allocation (Mitroff, Shrivastava & Udwadia 1987; Pearson & Mitroff 1993). Below we will in turn consider each of the practices supportive of an ongoing practice of compassion.

4.2.1. *A philosophy of care*

The organizations quickest to communicate care and assurance to their employees during the floods had an established philosophy and culture of care codified in their daily practices. In contrast, negligence was the general response of organizations that did not have a codified philosophy of care in their daily practices. In some cases these organizations even added to the weight of employee concerns during the crisis.

4.2.2. *Empowerment and trust*

One way the philosophy of care was manifested in everyday organizational life was by empowering employees, providing them with the tools and the trust to do their jobs well, rewarding them for getting the job done, and allocating responsibility not on the basis of age or gender but on merit. In such caring organizations, empowerment and trust were invested openly and abundantly, embedded in the fabric of their everyday organization.

4.2.3. *Support in times of need*

It was no coincidence that those organizations that demonstrated the most outstanding examples of collective care to their employees before, during, and after

the floods were organizations with a culture of care: they provided such care even in times of personal difficulty in their employees' individual lives. Instances of these special circumstances include illness, increased responsibilities as a caregiver, paternity leave, and robbery.

A small organization, which provides office supplies to businesses in the Brisbane region, was an example of an organization that did its best to support its people in times of need. When one employee recently experienced a period of depression she was told to take care of herself as her number one priority and come in to work when she could. She remained on her regular salary.

4.2.4. *Role models*

The recruitment and promotion of managers who are role models of care and emotionally sensitive leadership is another key factor in nurturing a compassionate organizational environment. Important characteristics of such leaders are integrity, people skills, a preparedness to exceed prescriptions about roles, as well as empathy towards the concerns of those managed, even when unstated but manifest in physical symptoms of distress. Such role models have time for people, supporting them through mentoring and coaching. And they sponsor training development programs to enable themselves and others to become better-equipped managers and leaders. When employees are supported by leaders of this caliber they are likely to model the behaviors and provide similar mentoring and care to the teams assigned to their

leadership. Role models that are exemplary in normal times are credible in times of crisis.

4.2.5. *Work/Life balance*

Supporting employees' work/life balance is another characteristic of a compassionate organizational environment. Organizations can support their employees' work/life balance by investing in their health, recreation, and family, and providing flexible work options. Flexible work arrangements may also take the form of a "compacted working week," wherein employees' work fewer days but longer hours per week so they can take a day off. It may also involve telecommuting wherein employees complete part of their workload at home. In some organizations, flexible work arrangements are "reason blind," which means employees are not required to provide an explanation for their desired flexible work arrangement. The reason might just as well be to support family needs as to support a hobby such as surfing or sailing. Companies that care about families in normal times are credible when they express care in exceptional times.

4.2.6. *A priori contingency plans and systems*

Contingency planning to support employees during crises is another characteristic of organizations with a high capability for compassion. During the floods organizations that best exemplified compassionate concern rolled out contingency plans as the floods unfolded. Provisions of this sort ensure that the organization is not dependent

on getting employees into work during a crisis situation. Rather employees can be sent home to take care of their families.

An example of contingency planning for times of crisis was described by an interviewee who works for one of the leading Australian universities in the Brisbane region.

University representatives travel extensively to international destinations, including the world's crisis "hot spots." To protect employees from harm while on overseas travel the university subscribes to a service that offers emergency support to employees who find themselves in a crisis situation anywhere in the world. Preparing for crisis, in this organization, was part of the cultural fabric, not a reaction to critical episodes.

4.2.7. Corporate social responsibility

A commitment to corporate social responsibility is another characteristic of organizations that offered the best support to their employees during the Brisbane floods. Employees we spoke to were proud both of the way their organization had supported them during the flood as well as their organization's greater commitment towards the needs of the community. These employees connected doing the right thing by employees with doing the right thing by customers and general society. They further argued that when employees are more enthusiastic and confident about promoting products to clients they are confident that the products offer fair value. Some of the ways organizations can engage employees in corporate social

responsibility include matching donations, supporting local businesses, and microfinance.

Bringing this section to a conclusion, the most significant finding from the above data is the relationship between crisis support offered and ongoing daily organizational practices. The study suggests that ongoing compassionate organizational policies and practices lead to greater compassion responding in crisis. Another possible factor, which can often be an intervening variable between policies and practices, is that of organizational scale. Larger scale leads to increased formalization. Organizations with greater resource availability might have a greater opportunity to enact formal people-centered policies that inform the extent to which an organization can institute compassion routines, especially those that are people-centered bureaucracies, such as a university.

4.3. Insight 3: Assume mixed experiences in compassion relations and therefore assess outcomes on an ongoing basis

The third insight is that the outcomes of compassion relations will always be mixed, ongoing, constantly revised, and therefore indeterminate. Practice theory is suspicious of the dichotomous treatment of apparently antithetical concepts such as mind and body, behavior and cognition, subjective and objective, as well as positive and negative. (Reckwitz 2002). Practice theory theorizes constructs such as compassion as an emergent social process that is dynamically dualistic and always emergent (Taylor 1993). Social processes are constantly revised on the basis of contingencies of time,

location and circumstance as well as the relevancies of a given moment. Situations that may appear negative at one point in time can appear positive viewed from a different perspective or at a different point in time (Carroll 1998). Even where genuinely compassionate motives are present, the outcomes may nevertheless be experienced as negative. It is consequently advisable to cultivate multifaceted, ongoing, and indeterminate assumptions about the experiences of givers and receivers in compassion relations. By paying mindful and headful attention to the various outcomes of compassion relations, researchers and practitioners can seek to ensure that harmful effects are quickly mitigated as they arise.

Not all compassion relations are positive. Examples of the negative outcomes of compassion relations are documented in research findings of *toxic handling* (Frost & Robinson 1999), and *compassion labor* (Ashforth & Humphreys 1993; Morris & Feldman 1996), which can lead to burnout due to *compassion fatigue* (Cordes & Dougherty 1993). Employees such as flight attendants for whom sometimes explicit attention is paid in their training to their facility to smile and maintain a pleasant demeanor frequently suffer from compassion fatigue as do occupations frequently exposed to suffering in others, such as nurses. Toxic handlers are leaders and managers in organizations, who “contagiously” absorb the hurtful emotions of co-workers or employees (Anandakumar, Pitsis & Clegg 2007; Frost 2003; Hatfield, Cacioppo & Rapson 1993). Consequently, they vicariously share the pain of the people towards whom they extend their sympathy. The data from this study show that

compassion relations are neither just positive nor negative but dynamic with ongoing recursive implications.

4.3.1. Positive outcomes

In this study, the *positive* outcomes of compassion were demonstrated as the building of organizational commitment, loyalty, and compassion towards other colleagues, providing opportunities for healing, bonding, and sensemaking. One interviewee stated that receiving exceptional organizational support in times of need made him feel “closer to the business” and “fiercely loyal” to the company. It also makes him want to “pay it forward” and “more inclined to go the extra mile for the employer when they need the help” (quotes from respondent). In this way, compassion may help companies to turn a “poison” into “medicine” (Clair & Dufresne 2004).

4.3.2. Negative outcomes

In addition to the positive benefits of providing compassionate support described above, there were also *negative* outcomes experienced by employees, which should not be ignored. These include perceptions of organizations simply fulfilling obligations, perceptions of support as patronizing, and employees taking advantage of their position as a victim and demanding more support than they may be entitled to.

Sometimes employees experience organizational compassion as insincere. Here “caring” organizational practices are experienced by employees as being not about compassion but rather about “ticking boxes” to fulfill an obligation, legal or otherwise. This “care” is received as “impersonal general support” rather than “personal support

according to the individuals needs". Providing "compassion" of this sort was seen as more about protecting the organization from negative public perceptions, or protection from legal challenges of employee neglect, rather than about actually protecting the employees.

It is acknowledged that the benefits of compassionate practices extend not only to the receiver but also to the giver. For example Boyatzis et al (2006) argue that when offering compassion towards employees managers are replenished hormonally and neurologically and the effects of chronic stress are ameliorated. Nonetheless, employees can view organizational practices of compassion with cynicism when the organization stands to gain instrumentally from such practices.

An example of cynicism is the case of an employee who works for an IT organization that conducts monthly teleconferences to maintain unity between its distributed employees who are maintaining computer systems for several government departments and international organizations at various locations across the city. When the frequency of these meetings was increased to a daily basis during the course of the floods this employee was grateful. Nonetheless, he also harbored an attitude of cynicism. He couldn't help but consider that the support was provided less out of genuine care for the employees, and more out of an organizational concern to maintain relations with a valuable workforce during a period when the organization could not provide work. This employee and his work colleagues were not paid during the period of the flood.

A traditional objection against compassion is that it can appear *patronizing*—undermining the receiver’s humanity by treating them as a passive victim or subordinate rather than as a dignified independent human agent (Berlant 2004; Nussbaum 2003). Organizational compassion can also patronize employees, something that was a concern for a respondent who received exceptional support from her organization during the floods, with extended paid leave and cash donations to clean and refurbish her flooded home. She knew that her boss was genuinely supportive but was not certain how her co-workers would react to the extra load at work while she was away.

The negative outcomes of compassion described by the respondents have thus far considered only the employees perspectives. There are potentially negative outcomes of compassionate relations for the organization as well. Several employees, who praised the high level of trust and compassionate practices in their organizations, described that sometimes this compassion is misplaced, because employees take advantage of it. One interviewee described a case where exceptional arrangements were made to support a colleague with a difficult home situation by creating extremely flexible work arrangements. According to the interviewee, however, the recipient took advantage and didn’t even attempt to fulfill her commitments to the organization and later took the organization to court for not providing the support she had been offered. In spite of the potential for abuse, these organizations adopt a general policy of trusting employees and restricting only when required.

Crisis management literature would benefit from acknowledgement that compassion

relations are not inherently positive. Even in organizations that seem to offer the best support to their employees, some employees experienced that support as negative rather than positive, for various reasons. Combining practice theory, with its agnosticism towards dualism, with empirical data, we can state that organizations wishing to cultivate compassionate practices should not assume that positive outcomes accrue to what is construed as good intent; therefore, the outcomes of compassion responding should be assessed on an ongoing basis.

5. Conclusion

In contrast to conceiving of compassionate crisis responding as one-sided instrumental episodic action with certain positive outcomes, our research indicates that it is an ongoing social relational process best cultivated in times of normality, rather than in moments of disaster. More specifically, our research generated three significant insights that we suggest will be of use to researchers and managers seeking to nurture effective crisis responding. First, organizations wishing to cultivate compassion should articulate compassionate organizational discourses or categorization schemas. Second, it is not possible to fake compassionate practices in the moment of crisis; compassion needs to be embedded in the ongoing routines and policies of the organization. Third, while organizations should strive for positive outcomes in compassion relations both in times of normalcy and crisis, such outcomes should not be assumed. Rather dualistic outcomes should be assumed and hence, the outcomes of compassion relations should be assessed on an ongoing basis.

The insights suggested in this research will be valuable for researchers and managers interested in effectively managing organizational crises. These are not infallible prescriptions applicable to all contexts, but guiding principles that researchers and managers might reflexively engage with, drawing their own conclusions on their applicability in other situated contexts.

Table 1. Research findings on compassion relations during the Brisbane floods

| Non-supportive Relations (Number of utterances) | Ambiguous Relations (Number of utterances) | Compassion Relations (Number of utterances) |
|---|---|--|
| Categorization Schemas | | |
| <i>Employee Defined</i> | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> As “resource”, a worker doing a job (8) | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> As family (3) As person more important than money (7) |
| <i>Flood Situation Defined</i> | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> As a normal situation – expectations of business as usual (2) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> As an ambiguous situation – late responses, mixed messages (3) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> As exceptional – where normal relations are put on hold & exceptional relations established (10) |
| Embedded Ongoing Organizational Practices | | |
| <i>Ongoing Practices</i> | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Valuing profits & productivity (9) Organizational control (3) Rigid work arrangements (6) People hired to do a job (2) Overwork with low pay (5) No routine support in crisis (5) Demanding managers (4) Distant managers (4) No concern for community issues | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ambiguous priorities (2) Limited empowerment (3) People to work hard & win commissions, bonuses & competitions (2) High work load with high pay (3) Clever arrangements to avoid responsibility in crises (2) Managers with conflicting directions of care & control (2) Limited role models CSR valuable for public relations (5) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Valuing people over profits (31) High empowerment, autonomy, respect & trust (21) Flexible work options to suit individual needs (21) People hired to fulfill their passions (intrinsic rewards) (2) Emphasis on work/life balance (5) Special arrangements to support employees in crisis (14) Emotionally intelligent leaders (30) Close & caring role models (15) A priori contingency planning and systems (3) Strong commitment to community (CSR) (9) |
| Dualistic Outcomes | | |
| <i>Emotional responses to support received</i> | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Panic (4), anxiety (10), anger (9), distancing (7), no-expectations or disappointment (5) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cynicism (4), anger (1), appreciation (3), gratitude (2) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Positive – commitment (3), loyalty (8), altruism (4), trust (4), gratitude (8), peace (4), pride in organization (2) Mixed - Cynicism (4 – see middle row) Negative - disappointment – not enough care (6), taking advantage (5), “government throwing cash” |

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