



Workshop on 'Organizational Death, Memory and Loss'

hosted by the

Culture, Organizations and Markets Group, Keele University, UK

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organised by

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Aims and description

The fact of human mortality and the need to live with constant awareness of it helps to account for many aspects of social and cultural organization (Bauman, 1992). The reluctance of modern societies to engage with the idea of death is suggested to be symptomatic of the sequestration of death from everyday life (Mellor and Schilling, 1993). However, more recently, there has been a shift away from a narrow, individualistic and Freudian framing of dying and bereavement, towards an understanding of cultures as based on the maintenance of continuing bonds between the dead and the living (Walter, 1999). While sociologists, philosophers, anthropologists and psychologists have long studied death, including its cultural effects, representations, societal functions and meanings, organizational death and loss has not been widely explored and theorising remains limited (Hazen, 2008).

In organization studies a few scholars have sought to understand the role of death in organizational life. Sievers (1994), suggests the fragmentation and meaninglessness of modern work can only be understood relative to the Western separation of life from death and the consequent denial of the latter within contemporary work organizations. Hence it is only by coming to terms with the inescapable nature of death as a universal parameter and a constituent part of life that we can discard mechanistic, reductionist theories in favour of a more meaningful working life. Willmott (2000) argues that death is an inevitable part of life and an essential feature of the human condition; therefore our ability to deal with it is significant in determining the fundamental structures of meaning. For Reedy and Learmonth (2011), death raises questions about the ethics of organization, forcing us to consider how we collectively construct organizations that support, rather than undermine meaning.

Issues of organizational mortality, discontinuity and decline are particularly prescient in the wake of the global financial crisis. Corporate failure, organizational downsizing, plant closure, industrial and economic downturn, have material, social and psychological effects on societies and individuals. Although we know why organizations die, we know less about

how death processes unfold (Sutton, 1987; Hansson, 2008). Organizational death can constitute a profound source of loss and suffering (Driver, 2007) through the removal of fundamental structures of work-related meaning (Marris, 1974). Its significance is derived from the relationship between the past and the present and the role of the deceased in the ongoing lives of the living. The ritual practices that surround death, including mourning and memorialisation, provide a symbolic focus through which historical connections, including collective memories and shared histories, are constructed and maintained.

There is thus a need for new perspectives that take account of theoretical and societal shifts that have fundamentally reshaped lived experience of death and loss in late modern society (Bell and Taylor, 2011). Workshop contributors are invited to explore how death is managed in contemporary societies, both within organizations (Charles-Edwards, 2005; Thompson, 2009), and in the death care industry (Barley, 1983). We also welcome submissions that consider the ethics of death, by building on the idea that modernity enables murderous atrocities (Bauman, 1999) or that capitalism depends on death in order to flourish (Banerjee, 2008). Papers may also focus on the death of organizational leaders in shaping organizational cultures (Hyde and Thomas, 2003). Alternatively, they may contribute towards understandings of the role of death in constructing consumer identities (O'Donohoe and Turley, 2006). Papers could encompass analysis of the bodily and spiritual aspects of organizational death, such as rebirth or reincarnation. Finally, contributors might consider how death processes unfold and the practices that surround this.

Other topics of potential interest include:

- Responses to organizational downsizing, site closure, business failure, mergers and acquisitions, redundancy and unemployment;
- Death at work, including employee suicides, organizational accidents and disasters;
- Material cultures of organizational death and memorialisation in the construction of collective memory and history;
- Storytelling and sensemaking in relation to organizational death and loss;
- Emotional responses to organizational loss, including grief, mourning and resilience;
- Discourses of death and loss in organizations.

Papers presented at the workshop will be considered for a forthcoming Special Issue of the journal *Culture & Organization*, to be guest edited by the workshop organizers and published in 2014 (iFirst end of 2013).

Timescale and process:

Abstracts (750 words including references) should be submitted electronically to *all three* organizers: Emma Bell e.bell@mngt.keele.ac.uk, Magnus Hansson magnus.hansson@oru.se and Janne Tienari janne.tienari@aalto.fi by **30th July 2012**. Contributors will be notified of acceptance by **31st August 2012**. All submissions to the Special Issue will go through a double-blind review process.

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