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Title:

Towards a relational theory of organisational care: the gentle crafting and embedding of care in employment relations

A response to stream o*rganizing and social relationships in non-traditional contexts*

AI Image generated by Dall-E "banking care"

Despite the significant effort, over a sustained period of time in exploring the concept and practice of care in organisations, little has been agreed on other than its importance. Care, as practice crafted and delivered by organisations, is a cornerstone of building social relations that promise ontological security to workers. Care- as a concept (Gilligan, 1982; Fisher & Tronto, 1990; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017; Tronto, 2013), an ethical dilemma (Kittay, 1999; Mol, 2008; Noddings, 2003; Tronto, 1993) or indeed a practice (Lamprou, 2017; Tronto, 2015; Lawrence & Maitlis, 2012; Saks, 2021; Driver, 2021) has been parsed in various ways as a responsibility and obligation of leaders and managers (Mumford, Holman et al 2022; Tomkins & Simpson, 2015; Kroth & Keeler, 2009; Gabriel, 2015; Johansson & Edwards, 2021; Rhodes, 2012; Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011). The benefits to organisations and those who work in caring environments is well documented (Victor & Cullen, 1988; Issel & Kahn,1998; Borucki & Burke, 1999; Takeuchi et al., 2009; Chuang & Liao, 2010). Despite this interest in care and organisations, there is little in the way of field-based theories of organisational care. As a result, in this paper we seek to problematise care as a diffused practice of organising, that, over time, can be embedded and dis-embedded in the social relations within an organisation.

To explore organisational care anew, we draw on our narrative study of the lived-experiences of working in a traditional commercial bank between 1960-2000. Over this span, bank work changed from staid, conservative traditional jobs-for-life, into a sales-orientated high-performance professional service, from teller to seller transforms the professional identity of bankers, and their sensemaking around the care provided by their organisation. Through the lens of care, their stories show the transformation in the professional identity of bankers. In particular, they relay how banks offered a profound and solemn ontological security, a lifelong promise of care, which was gently withdrawn and in turn led to a gentle withdrawal of reciprocal care for the organisation.

In rich detail, the stories relay the stifling and controlling barracks like culture where workers understood that they were to act, dress and behave in certain ways in exchange for a job-for-life, a comfortable (if often movable) life and a place of respect in the community. Despite this seemingly regimented life, the workers were also encouraged to build social relations with other bankers around music, theatre and sport and to look after each other when they inevitable moved to an unfamiliar location. This form of traditional patriarchal and familial care was carefully crafted and cultivated to ensure that the bank and its workers presented a conservative, honest and stable set of practices. This form of care went beyond functional pursuit of efficiency or productivity, rather it was hewn in prior banking crises as a necessary social structure to address the nature of banking— where binds of lifelong trust are essential. Against a background of broader social and economic changes, the traditions of banking worker care were broken, through new employment contracts, arrangements and prolonged strikes. The transition, considered as a modernisation in lockstep with a changing society led to the professionalisation and eventual individualisation of bank work. Reciprocal and profound familial care gave way to contractual practices of care. In this way, the relational, reciprocal, circuits of care between employee and employer, the flow forward and back of organisational dynamics can be theorised as an existential issue for organisations, understood for the functional rationalities of why we should care, and why organisations should care.

In this way, we generate a field-based theory of organisational care, by exploring the longform social relations that can gently embed and dis-embed care in organisational life. The work surfaces the powerful role that care plays in creating social relations, particular how care offers ontological security in organisations, that flows forward and back from employer to employee.

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