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## “IT’S ALL IN THE PLOT” – NARRATIVE EXPLORATIONS OF WORK-RELATED EMOTIONS

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This contribution examines how researchers may study work-related emotions in the field by listening carefully and emotionally engaging with stories and narratives. The chapter starts from a recognition that emotion (pathos) is a crucial element of story (mythos), something noted a long time ago by Aristotle. Emotions may seem to surface and subside irregularly in the course of a story, a drama or a conversation, but they have an inner logic that ties them to various plotlines, such as **tragic, comic or epic**. In particular, we examine how researchers can re-create the emotions of their respondents as well as their own emotions in the field by recollecting and re-engaging with significant stories as well as metaphors that punctuate their research material.

**‘EMERGENCE’ OR ‘SURFACING’ OF EMOTIONS SPONTANEOUSLY IN THE FIELD**  
Emotions, it seems to us, can be observed (as opposed to personally experienced) in three ways - when a person declares that he/she feels a certain way (“I am angry with my boss”), when they act in a certain way (she throws a glass of wine at the boss at the Christmas party when he tells a sexist joke) or when they tell a story which gives clues on how they may feel (“Guess what I did to my boss’s car ...”). In the course of fieldwork, researchers have ample opportunities to observe emotions in situ as and when they surface in words and actions. At times, people expressly state their feelings or display emotions through bodily expressions or indirectly through narratives that they spontaneously relate.

Reflecting across numerous interviews or observational sessions certain recurring emotional patterns may be identified – for instance, anger or resentment towards particular groups or individuals, compassion and sympathy for others, enthusiasm for certain projects and cynicism for others. Sometimes a particular emotion (anger, bitterness, cynicism, depression, disappointment and so forth) can suffuse an entire interview or sometimes an amalgam of emotions (for example, nurses displaying commitment to patients, mistrust of managers and respect for clinicians) may surface repeatedly. By reflecting on such patterns in our own research, we came to appreciate the importance of nostalgia in organizations, an emotion that can profoundly influence current experiences and sensemaking of longer-serving employees (Gabriel, 1993). Nostalgia was not part of the research agenda, but something ‘thrown up’ by the field work. Having noticed and named this emotion, it was then possible to identify how it surfaced in particular narratives, attaching itself, for instance to old colleagues or old leaders.

There are times in the course of an interview, a focus group or an observational session, when a particular emotion surges forward unexpectedly and dramatically taking control

of a situation. The first author had ample opportunity to observe this during recent interviews with unemployed senior professionals in their 50s. During long interviews, many of these professionals maintained an appearance of calm self-assurance in the face of adversity. Then, a seemingly innocent question would throw them off course, opening the floodgates for painful self-expression. To the question “So what advice would you give somebody who’s lost his job and made redundant?” one of the respondents was overwhelmed with rage and became virtually incoherent:

*I would just, oh gosh you wouldn't really want you to hear my words! [laughs exuberantly] you know, I was tempted to say, I'd say to them, forgive me for this, but I'd say to them, f\*\*k the system, f\*\*k them all, get on with it yourself, you know because [breaks down in tears and is quiet for several seconds] I'd say the system doesn't care – people do, so that's what I'd say, you know, whatever is holding you back from getting on just forget it, just get on with it [.....] [long pause] just – yes, I don't know what more you can say to somebody because you can empathise and sympathise with them but unless you can actually give them re-employment ... sometimes you have .. to say no don't know haven't you, you know and er, you know you can put your arm around an unemployed person and give them lots of cups of tea but it doesn't necessarily solve the problem .... you know, I don't know how, you know, I haven't thought it out or thought it through, I've just responded emotionally to it I guess and that,- that's it and just say, you know, system's a system it doesn't care about you, you know [becomes virtually incoherent]. (Peter)*

In this narrative, emotion emerges not by being explicitly articulated (“I am desperate”), nor by being tied to the experience of a protagonist. Instead, it is expressed in the collapse of the narrative itself, the narrative struggle that leaves the researcher in no doubt that an emotional crisis unfolding in front of his/her eyes.

#### ELICITING EMOTIONS IN THE FIELD

Such expressions of powerful emotion come, quite unprompted, from patient interviewing, empathetic listening and careful rephrasing of questions over prolonged periods. Alternatively, researchers may ask more direct questions about their respondents’ emotional experiences at work. “Was there ever a time at work, where you had some strong emotions but couldn’t show them?” Such questions invite the respondent to share significant experiences without placing limits on the kinds of events that may be revealed. They can, however, be seen as intrusive and may result in perfunctory or defensive answers. A different way of inviting emotion is by asking respondents to think of an incident that sums up their experience in some way. Consider how the question “Can you describe a story or an incident that sums up your experience of being unemployed?” triggered off an overwhelming emotional response in another unemployed professional:

*It's a bit like walking on ice when the water's frozen and you know at some stage that ice could melt and the thing about that is that you know you can swim but don't know where the land is, so it's like a sense of drowning really and because everything is white you lose signs of detail as well but you have to get up everyday you have to stay afloat so there is a sense there of trying to do little things each day. (Robert)*

Researchers can seek to draw out emotions more directly, for instance, by tying an emotion to a particular incident. Thus, questions like the following can generate powerful insights:

- Can you think of an incident in this organization that made you feel proud/happy/satisfied/etc. of being a member?

- Did anything ever happen to you in this organization that made you feel disappointed/upset/angry?
- Can you think of something that happened to someone else that made you feel afraid/concerned/anxious?
- Can you think of an incident in this organization that made you feel embarrassed/stressed?

Such questions are somewhat different from conventional critical incident research (Chell, 2004; Gremler, 2004); instead of looking for objective departures from routine, they invite respondents to relate experiential landmarks, moments of emotional significance that have left a mark on them. Instead of probing the causes and consequences of the incident, researchers would explore its symbolism and the emotions it stirred.

Attaching an emotion to an incident is especially useful in a focus group, when the researcher has an opportunity to witness the response of other participants to an emotion-triggering story. In a classroom of graduate students in India, the second author's questions about emotions at the workplace work prompted a variety of powerful stories about struggles against bosses and occasional triumphs over them. One male respondent told how he openly disobeyed his boss in order to spend more time with his sick hospitalized baby. His story not only underscored important emotion rules for his organization and its culture, but also elicited strong sympathetic reactions from his classmates about his defiance. These group dynamics facilitated the analysis of the meanings of emotion at individual and organizational levels.

Another example of the power of storytelling with a wider audience occurred during a focus group with other junior doctors in a Gynecology department conducted by the first author. When asked "Can you think of an incident that made you feel good about your work as a doctor in this hospital?" a junior doctor told the following story:

*A pregnant woman came in through A&E [Accident and Emergency]. She was having problems with her pregnancy. I asked the registrar [senior doctor] what to do. They decided that the best thing to do was get the woman scanned to find the problem. However, being a night shift there were no porters to be seen and the scanning units were closed. I felt that the anxious woman could not stay in A&E surrounded by drunks and druggies as it was inappropriate. Instead of calling for porters, which would have taken time, I and the registrar moved the pregnant lady to the maternity ward ourselves where we opened up a scanning unit to find out what was wrong with the lady's pregnancy. I was proud of the leadership that I had received from my registrar; not every registrar would have done this but he solved the problem and delivered good patient care in the process. The problems were resolved within an hour with only skeletal night staff.*

This rescue narrative centres on a helpless character saved through the dedication of others. Like most such narratives, it is framed in the emotion of pride ("I was proud of the leadership ..."), though it surveys other emotions ('anxious woman', [desperate] 'drunks and druggies') and delivers moral judgements ("it was inappropriate", "Delivered good patient care"). It also suggests some nascent emotions – respect for the registrar, disapproval for the absent porters and at least indifference for the plight of the 'drunks and druggies'. The other participants in the focus group, enthusiastically endorsed the story as a good example of patient care and also of the kind of leadership they expected from their seniors.

A story, like the one above, may be further interrogated in the field by asking follow-up questions like:

- Is this a common occurrence in this organization?
- How does this type of incident make other people in this organization feel?
- Who, in your view, should take the credit/blame for this type of incident?
- Is this the type of story that does the rounds in the organization? Why?

It will be noticed that in asking follow-up questions, researchers should generally refrain from questioning the factual accuracy of the story. Such questioning may be appropriate when investigating an accident or a failure, but is entirely inappropriate if establishing the meaning and emotional tone of a narrative. To achieve this, researchers must become 'fellow travellers' of the narrative, engaging with the story emotionally and symbolically while displaying interest, empathy and pleasure in the storytelling process (Gabriel, 2000). Researchers risk alienating the storyteller by questioning the narrative and by placing him/her under cross-examination; instead they can conspire to detach the narrative from the discourse of facts, guiding it towards free-association and fantasy. Contradictions and ambiguities in the narrative are accepted with no embarrassment. Ambiguity lies at the heart of many stories, displaying an individual's ambivalent feelings or partial knowledge or understanding. While the researcher may ask for clarification of particular aspects of the story, the storyteller should feel that such clarification is asked in the interest of increased understanding, communication and empathy rather than in the form of pedantic inquiry.

Being a fellow-traveller on a story is neither emotionally nor ethically easy, most notably when the story one encounters is upsetting or offensive. Researchers who genuinely wish to explore and understand phenomena distasteful to them, ranging from bullying at work and paedophilia to racism and group violence, must frequently swallow up their own convictions, allowing the voice of the respondents to be heard, no matter how repugnant their views and emotions may be.

#### ELICITING STORIES THROUGH METAPHORS OR PROJECTIVE TECHNIQUES

In organizational research, questions like those above frequently fail to lead to stories, for a variety of reasons – respondents may be guarded, they may wish to 'stick to the facts' or may simply be poor storytellers, finding it hard to articulate their emotions or views in narrative forms.

One line of investigation that we have found helpful in such situations is to elicit emotion by inviting respondents to think of their organization in terms of a metaphor.

Respondents may be told "People sometimes think of their workplace through an image or a metaphor - here are some examples on a card. Does your organization feel like any of these on the card?" Metaphors on the card can be carefully compiled to reflect culturally significant themes or issues thrown up by earlier research. They may include:

- a machine
- a family
- a football team
- an episode from a soap opera

- a nest of vipers
- a castle under siege
- a dinosaur
- a conveyor belt
- a prison
- an orchestra
- a pressure cooker
- a rose garden

The researcher reads slowly each line, noticing how respondents react to each metaphor, perplexed about some, amused by others, strongly rejecting some, instantly alighting on others. It then becomes possible to explore the meanings and emotions raised by the appropriate metaphor, through follow-up questions like:

- a machine: Is it a well-oiled one? Is it a creaky creaky one? How often does it break down?
- a family: What kind? A happy one? Who is the father/mother? How do they treat their children?
- a football team: Who are the stars? Who are the opponents?
- a pressure cooker: “Where does the pressure come from?” “How do people let off steam?”

A follow-up question may then be asked that frequently elicits a story, revealing the emotional associations of the metaphor: “Can you think of an incident that illustrates how this organization works as a family/pressure cooker/prison etc.?”

Such lines of investigation draw the respondent into sharing with the investigator more private and intimate emotions than the more direct approaches described earlier. Even these, however, may not be very effective in surfacing emotions that are socially censured or ‘dangerous’, such as envy, schadenfreude, shame, resentment and contempt. For inquiries into such emotions even less direct approaches may be used. Such approaches still rely on narratives but seek to detach narratives further from what is falsifiable or factual. In such situations, projective and scenario techniques may be used.

In projective techniques we may invite a respondent to reflect, not on whether they have had a particular emotion (such as envy, vanity or schadenfreude) but rather if they have ever been the target or victim of such an emotion. Alternatively, they may be invited to reflect on a particular scenario (or even a story related by another participant), seeking to draw them into a discussion of how such proscribed emotions may surface in organizational contexts. (See chapter by Ishan Jalan in this volume).

## EMOTIONAL DISCLOSURES

Using a storytelling approach in research interviews relies on the creation of a safe space where a respondent feels comfortable to share experiences, sometimes in a free-

associating, unstructured manner that allows the disclosure of emotionally charged fantasies. This space supports the sharing of specific stories that unveil further important emotions. Sharing involves mutuality, something that cannot be achieved so long as the relation between researcher and researched is deeply asymmetrical, the former asking questions, the latter disclosing personal and even intimate emotional experiences. One of the most fruitful approaches that we have found for eliciting emotional disclosure is by levelling the field, the researcher willing to share some of his/her own emotional experiences with his/her respondents.

This is especially effective in settings where there may be enhanced resistance due to cultural, class or occupational differences between interviewer and interviewee. During an interview conducted in India, the second author shared a dream, in which she is about to lecture a class but has forgotten important materials and the students are staring. This disclosure prompted the respondent to share many similar dreams about her working life by creating a shared space where fantasy and dream, topics which are sensitive and may be inaccessible through more objective means, can be legitimately discussed. As a result of disclosing this dream, the respondent felt secure enough to share a vivid story about a difficult subordinate whose insolence had caused her sleepless nights by breaching the boundary between personal and work experiences. Emotions shared through this exchange generated crucial insights about the emotion rules of her organization as well as the emotional effects when such rules are transgressed. Sharing the researcher's experiences through self-disclosure, in this instance, also helped to bridge cultural divides and minimise the feeling that the researcher is an outsider, an intruder or even a colonizer.

Self-disclosure should be implemented at appropriate times and with suitable sensitivity to an unfolding interview interaction. Not all settings are conducive to the sharing of emotional experiences, and there are other methods that can encourage the respondent to relate powerful and personal stories. The interviewer can encourage such narratives with extensive emotional investment in the exchange demonstrated with empathic responding, mirroring statements and supportive comments. Attempting to put one's self in the place of the interviewee, for example by reflecting on how it might feel to be threatened by redundancy by a bullying boss or challenged by an unruly subordinate, helps to shape a genuine encounter, opening up the possibility of entering the employee's emotional world.

In the same study,, an Indian employee shared a story about her friend's sudden dismissal from work and its devastating emotional effect on her, notably the terror that she would be next in line. When she first started to relate this story, the narrative would have easily broken or even killed through insensitive questioning. To show empathy for this employee's trauma of learning of her friend's dismissal, the second author responded spontaneously with comments like "Oh my goodness", thus becoming a fellow traveller on the narrative. When the interviewee disclosed powerful words like "terrified", the interviewer offered "I can imagine" in response, to demonstrate further an appreciation of the intensity of her experience. Such explicit emotional responses may appear to breach the convention of interviewer objectivity or non-interference. However, when the research interest lies on emotion, it is precisely objectivity and non-interference that the research purpose.

Some approaches to studying emotions display similarities with therapeutic approaches. It is critical, however, to underline their differences. In therapeutic interactions, therapists frequently offer interpretations as part of the treatment. Interpretations during a research encounter would be inappropriate. In this context, deploying a storytelling approach entails listening carefully and encouraging the sharing of

meanings, but not challenging the experience or offering alternative interpretations. The research space is one of curiosity and interest in learning about emotions, with interpretations by the researcher commencing later during analysis of audio files and transcripts (Clarke, 2006; Kvale, 1999).

## COUNTER-TRANSFERENCE

Therapeutic consultations and research encounters have fundamentally different aims and require quite different skills on the part of the professional guiding the conversation. Neither set of skills can be formalized and routinized, being highly contingent on situational factors, timing being of the essence in both. The suitability of a particular approach may change over the course of spontaneous interview exchanges, and it may vary according to the emotional dynamics of the dyad, shaped by cultural and historical factors that individuals bring into the conversation.

One feature that both the therapeutic and the research conversation have in common is transference and counter-transference. Meeting somebody in the contrived environment of a guided conversation can re-awaken in a respondent emotions and fantasies associated with significant figures from her past. This is known as transference and can be positive (warm and supportive feelings) or negative (fearful, envious, suspicious etc). Counter-transference represents the response of the person guiding the conversation, the therapist or the researcher, to the transference of the other. Reflecting on our own emotions during and following an interview, i.e. seeking to analyse our counter-transference can offer powerful insights into elusive unconscious emotions and help us make sense of the emotional dynamics of the interview situation itself.

Working with our countertransference may involve taking notes of our immediate reflections after an interview has finished. For example, we may write about feeling claustrophobic, puzzled or unsettled at specific points, and such emotions can serve as additional resources for interpreting the stories we have heard. We can also revisit audio files or interview transcripts at multiple points after a period of time has passed and compare our responses to them. Doing so can assist in re-engaging with the emotions of an interview, while maintaining a critical distance to analyse the different layers of meaning that emerge from the stories. As noted by Howard F. Stein who has written extensively on the issue (Stein, 1999, 2001), we may also “write a poem or paint a picture now and then as a way of better understanding the organizations... Far from distracting you from keen observation, interpretation, and explanation, it will serve as a valuable instrument for all three of these virtues” (Personal Communication).

## A NOTE ON ETHICAL AWARENESS AND CONCLUSION

Research on emotions inevitably raises thorny ethical issues. Interesting research tends to focus on individuals who are going through difficult times, transitions, traumas, tribulations. Respect for a person’s anguish, grief and despondency may inhibit researchers from asking direct questions that may unsettle them, unleash irreversible and potentially damaging feelings that lead to a breakdown of the research relation. At the same time, researchers seeking to understand the experiences of such people must often penetrate a façade made of rehearsed and ‘safe’ answers, wishful thinking and evasions. During field research, an invisible barrier can come down between respondents in trouble and researchers perceived by interviewees as having comfortable and safe jobs and drawing secure salaries. This can be offset through extensive familiarization, informal conversations, a genuine desire to learn from the respondents’ experiences and, as noted above, self-disclosures which confirm that researchers themselves are not immune from troubles.

Researching organizational emotions in the field is certainly not easy; all the same, we are of the opinion that it is a craft that can be acquired and developed. It is a craft that may not come naturally to researchers accustomed to highly abstract academic reasoning who may feel an inherent aversion to emotion as something that contaminates the data or the analysis. As scholars of organization, however, we believe that the time has come to view emotions (including the researcher's own) not as contaminants but as resources.

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