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Organizations and Death – A View from Death Studies

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Abstract

This article reflects on two indirect ways in which death arguably intersects with organisations. Some analysts use the term ‘organisational death’ as a metaphor that, unlike euphemism, serves to highlight rather than hide the human suffering entailed in organisational change. Some analysts have applied to organisations Becker’s idea that repression of death awareness/anxiety drives human – and thus organisational - behaviour; whether or not one accepts the Freudian concept of repression, it is certainly possible to argue that a desire for personal immortality can influence organisational behaviour, while in certain circumstances employees may assume their organisation is immortal.

Keywords: Denial, metaphor, euphemism, death studies, death awareness.

Death impacts on organisations in a number of ways, as reflected in the variety of articles in this special issue. In these first few paragraphs, I sketch five such ways. First, and most obviously, individual members of organisations die and suffer personal bereavements; a member of the organisation or someone close to a member dies – with consequences not only for several individuals but also for the organisation or part thereof (Charles-Edwards 2000). Second, organisations may cause, or at least contribute to, people’s deaths, for example through medical intervention, poor communication, harmful products, incompetent service, industrial accident, or (as discussed in this special issue by Cullen), suicide. Work under contemporary capitalism has also been analysed metaphorically as killing its workers’ souls (Banerjee 2008), even while claiming to nourish them (Fleming and Cederstrom 2012). Third, the food industry relies on the rearing of animals for slaughter and the subsequent processing of their remains (Wilkie 2010).

Fourth, some managers, workers and academics (Arman 2014) have spoken, or thought, of the ending of an organisation, or part of it, as organisational ‘death’, possibly followed by some kind of resurrection or reanimation (Kelly and Riach 2014). This is a conceptually more problematic metaphorical use of the word ‘death’; and like all metaphors, may be useful for certain purposes if used appropriately, but misleading if taken too far.

Fifth, there is the question of whether, and if so how, awareness and/or denial of our mortal human condition affects the way people behave in organisations and what they expect from organisations, a question discussed in this special issue by Kahn and Liefoghe (2014). Demonstrating a causal link between something as general as death awareness and something as specific as organisational behaviour is also difficult, though this is the kind of connection that terror management theory attempts to demonstrate (Solomon et al 1991); even just postulating a link may seem plausible to someone steeped in Becker’s (1973) post-Freudianism, but hopelessly speculative or even metaphysical to some other analysts.

In this brief article, I reflect on the fourth and fifth ways death relates to organisations, that is, the tricky concepts of ‘organisational death’ as metaphor, and death denial. My own background is that of a sociologist who over the past twenty five years has perhaps had some modest influence in adding sociological approaches to the psychological and psychoanalytic approaches that had previously dominated scholarly understandings of dying and mourning (Walter 2008, 1994, 1999). Death studies (or thanatology as it is often called in North America) comprises the interdisciplinary study of dying, death and mourning, and work in this field has extended from death of the physical organism to the death of social identity (‘social death’), while research on mourning examines responses not only to the loss of a loved person via death or separation, but also to the loss of other cherished providers of value and identity, not least paid work.

Organisational death: metaphor or reality?

Humans, like other creatures, sooner or later die. Although we typically use direct language to describe the deaths of other creatures and of humans in times past, there is a wide range of symbolism, metaphor and euphemism to describe the deaths of contemporary members of groups to which we belong. People pass on, pass, go to heaven, kick the bucket, drop off their twig, etc. Physical death is a reality which is often spoken of symbolically or metaphorically. However, the word ‘death’ is also used the other way round: not as a physiological reality described metaphorically, but as itself a metaphor to describe other realities, such as various kinds of group or social ending and/or the resultant personal loss. Thus we may speak of the death of a community (Erikson 1976; Jahoda, Lazarsfeld, and Zeisel 1933), or social death (Kralova 2012) – referring to the loss of social identity accompanying a potentially rather wide range of phenomena including advanced dementia (Sweeting and Gilhooly 1997), widowhood (Mulkay and Ernst 1991), genocide (Card 2007), or slavery (Patterson 1982). Similarly, when we speak of organisational death, we are using a metaphor to describe the ending of an organisation, or part thereof.

Clearly not all endings and losses within organisations can be described as organisational death. When a talented individual leaves an academic department, this may constitute a considerable loss to the department, but by itself would not be described as organisational death. The closing of the entire department may well be seen as organisational death by its members, though senior management may picture this more as a necessary amputation.

This then leaves the question as to what non-metaphorical word accurately describes what is metaphorically termed organisational death. So far, I have used the word organisational ‘ending’, but there are many other contenders, for example: closure, merger, downsizing, redundancy, liquidation, insolvency, administration (Kahn and Liefoghe 2014). Are these words literal or metaphorical? Some arguably are literal: organisations close, one organisation merges with another, a reduction in the workforce does indeed reduce its size. Some analysts, though, consider organisational ‘closure’ to be a metaphor for organisational death (Sutton 1987, 543) and ‘downsizing’ to be one of a number of euphemisms deliberately used to sanitise the personal pain of those affected (Stein 1998). Whether or not these other words are metaphors and/or euphemisms, organisational ‘death’ is not euphemism, but a metaphor highlighting pain. In his analysis of how euphemism and spin mask organisational violence, Stein (1998, 29-30) argues that ‘If hyperbole exaggerates, euphemism understates’. Euphemism redirects attention from deeds and feelings to a ‘sanitised, anaesthetised, intellectualised’ version of these deeds and feelings. If euphemisms erode events of meaning, symbols and metaphors infuse them with meaning and richness.

Causes of death

Metaphors are replete with imagery, so what kind of imagery is associated with the term organisational death? Well, physical death in the modern world is characteristically spoken of in medical terms, but it is striking how rarely organisational death is described in medical language. In academic work on organisational death, there is little talk about sick or cancerous organisations, or organisations suffering sclerosis, or organisations dying of old age. Whereas after physical death the death certificate has to identify a medical cause (Prior and Bloor 1992), organisations do not die from medically defined conditions. Nor is there any legal requirement that a cause of organisational death be ascertained, even though employees find it helpful to know who or what to blame (Sutton 1983).

Research on the life cycle and ageing of organisations (Hannan 1998) posits that organisations die of ‘natural’ causes, while the population ecology perspective on organisational change and organisational mortality (Hannan and Freeman 1977) shows how industries and ecological niches can die naturally. In social Darwinism, the natural consequence of competition is that some species, that is, whole industries die. In much of the literature on organisational death, however, organisations are not described as dying from natural causes. Rather, organisational death is ascribed to external blows: murder, ritual sacrifice, execution, assisted death (Arman 2014).

Studies of organisational death thus typically portray the death of the organisation as caused by human agency. In the UK, physical death certificates itemise primary, secondary and sometimes tertiary causes of death; primary causes are always medical, while causation by social conditions or direct human agency are typically relegated to tertiary status. The organisational ‘death certificates’ implicitly described in the literature on organisational death, however, typically portray the primary cause as some kind of human agency; the board or a committee has decided that the organisation must die, and then various members of the organisation must carry out the execution. There may well be impersonal secondary or tertiary causes such as a global recession, increased competition from the Far East, and so forth, but organisations are not left to linger on like a frail old person to eventually die in their sleep from pneumonia, i.e. until the last employee finds a job elsewhere, or there are no more customers entering the shop, or the last shareholder sells her share. Whether there is palliative care (Arman 2014), or assisted suicide (Sutton 1983), one way or another it is human actions that sustain and then pull the plug on the organisation. Sutton’s work is particularly informative because he shows how, pending organisational death, employees do not necessarily become uncooperative and unproductive, but often actually cooperate to make the death as peaceful as possible – for themselves and their reputations, for customers, and for suppliers. Collectively, they co-operate in killing their own group. Although Sutton does not use the terms palliative care, assisted death or assisted suicide, these would indeed seem appropriate metaphors.

In the present economic crisis, banks, other financial companies, and even entire economies stagger on long after they should have succumbed to market forces. How might this be conceptualised in terms of death imagery? Kane (1989) was the first to apply the adjective ‘zombie’ to financial institutions with negative net worth but propped up by government support. In this image, a financial organisation has died but is re-animated (Kelly and Riach 2014), somewhat though not strictly like Dracula, by feeding off the blood of the living, that is, taxpayers. Perhaps a more appropriate metaphor, however, would be of an organisation that would otherwise die but is kept alive through life-support, at great expense to the

taxpayer. In either image, the organisation does not die of its own accord, but is kept alive, or allowed to die, by human (including governmental) agency.

It is not surprising, therefore, that those with the power to initiate the decision to kill an organisation rarely use the metaphor of organisational death. They use euphemisms such as downsizing, administration, or merger that cover up (at least to themselves) the human pain entailed. Again following Stein (1998, 149), 'If in using euphemism, workplace organisations, ethnic groups, nations and religions inflict pain upon others, its purpose is to avoid feeling the pain oneself.'

Sutton, who interviewed leaders who had to implement closure in eight organisations, argues that organisational death is not the same as physical death and is therefore metaphorical; however 'the death metaphor best expresses how individuals experience this transition' (1987, 543). Thus organisational death, though a metaphor, actually expresses better than the literal term 'organisational ending' the reality as experienced by those who have to live through it, since it entails losses akin to bereavement. Likewise (Arman 2014) states that the concept of organisational death is implied by members in the Swedish packaging factory whose closure they studied. Actually in neither publication can I find actual quotations from employees using the term 'organisational death', so it seems that organisational death is not a members' term but, these authors would argue, a members' concept.

To what ends is the metaphor used?

If organisational death is a concept describing the experience of organisational members, for what purpose is it used? When used by academics, the purpose can be to humanise. Rather than using clinical HR terms such as 'change management' or 'restructuring' that hide the suffering entailed, 'assisted suicide' directly points to suffering. When used or implied by members themselves, organisational death would seem to imply blame, for, as noted above, organisational death is not natural but the result of somebody's decision. Unlike euphemism, the metaphor of organisational death therefore creates a very human frame within which to see the closure of an organisation. This is rather like how, in their classic study, Jahoda et al (1933) framed factory closure as multi-faceted loss for its employees and their families, thus offering a more humane understanding of the consequences of closing the factory in a one-industry village.

How far can the metaphor of organisational death be taken? Different psychological theories of dying or of bereavement have different political implications for dying or bereaved people. Kübler-Ross's (1970) classic but much abused stage theory in which the dying person progresses from initial denial of his or her terminal prognosis through anger and other stages to acceptance has been used to deflect justifiable anger at poor medical or nursing practice back onto the dying person, casting anger as a natural stage in a psychological process of coming to terms with death. Stage theories that propose a process at the end of which the bereaved person is no longer bereft but able to get on with life without the deceased (Worden 1983) implicitly promote grief therapy as a means of reducing the disruption that grief causes for society and economy (Foote and Frank 1999). More recent theories that point to a continuing bond between the living and the dead (Klass, Silverman, and Nickman 1996) have rather different political implications.

What has this got to do with organisational death? Well, some have pushed the metaphor of organisational death to draw on theories from death studies. Emma Bell has pointed to how Kübler-Ross has been used in management theory to indicate that workers will come to

accept organisational closure if they are skilfully helped through the natural stages of coming to terms with death, at the end which there is a clean break and the organisation no longer exists for either individual workers or the surrounding community (Bell and Taylor 2011). By contrast, the idea of continuing bonds points to a very different kind of non-ending, in which the deceased organisation may continue as a mnemonic community with implications both for the inner life of ex-employees and the outer life of the community; the question then is not how to get employees to arrive at acceptance, but whether and in what ways individuals and communities might act to extend the organisation's post-mortem existence (Bell 2012). Just as humans can have a social existence after physical death (Unruh 1983), so too can organisations.

Death awareness, death denial, and organisational behaviour

Whether mortality is so anxiety-provoking to humans that they inevitably repress awareness of it is a question on which scholars disagree. Some, such as Heidegger (Reedy and Learmonth 2011) and Becker (1973) argue that denial of death awareness is a major driving force in human behaviour. This raises questions for organisations: 1) Does a person's denial of personal mortality drive his or her behaviour in organisations, and if so, how and with what consequences? 2) In the search for symbolic immortality (Lifton 1979), do we deny not only our own personal mortality but also the mortality of the organisations and groups to which we belong? If so, what are the consequences? ¹

These questions, some argue, are linked. According to Becker, humans deal with their repressed death anxiety by engaging in heroic action, and human cultures provide hero systems that enable such action. Thus death anxiety drives not only individual behaviour but also culture. I find the argument unconvincing that death awareness/anxiety is inevitably repressed (Kahn and Liefoghe 2014), but there certainly is evidence that many people are anxious about non-existence; and it is possible to argue that culture and society provide ways in which individuals can create a modest immortality for themselves (Walter 1979, Lifton 1979) - through production or reproduction via family, achievement at work, reputation, or other kinds of 'postself' (Unruh 1983, Kears 2010).

Arguably such anxieties are particularly likely in historical epochs characterised by concern with my own death (what will happen to me and my achievements, on this earth, when I die?) rather than by spiritual anxieties about whether I will get to heaven, or concern with how I will cope when my loved ones die (Ariès 1981). Burckhardt (1960) argued that this concern with 'my' death became a major force with Renaissance humanism's privileging of human achievement over divine providence; if I am what I achieve, then my death poses a particular personal threat, for what will happen to my achievements when I die? The challenge therefore is how to ensure my achievements live on after me.

Whatever one's views on philosophy or history, in so far as meaning and even a degree of immortality are sought through paid work for an organisation, then organisational death becomes something that may be frightening to countenance. Anxiety about my own personal death, when linked to my colleagues' similar anxiety, can generate a collective anxiety about death of the organisation to which we belong and which each of us uses to reduce personal death anxiety. Even if I know that I myself am mortal, I may refuse to believe that the organisation for which I work is. Awareness of personal mortality could, conceivably, create denial of organisational mortality.

I think it likely that as individuals we both psychologically repress, and are aware of, our personal mortality. At the very least, continuous awareness of mortality is likely to disable us from everyday action; a working assumption that tomorrow and the day after tomorrow and the year after next year I will still be alive is functional for making plans both for ourselves and with our colleagues and families. At the same time we need a realistic awareness of our vulnerability and indeed our mortality if we are not to engage in risky behaviour such as putting our hands in the fire or driving the wrong way along the highway. Survival requires a degree of everyday denial of mortality *and* everyday awareness of mortality (Dumont and Foss 1972). There is also evidence that some individuals are more death denying than others, and that there is variation through a person's life.

I suspect that variation also characterises acceptance and denial of the mortality of the organisations for which we work. 'Company men', especially in a culture such as pre-1990s Japan in which loyalty to the corporation was reasonably assumed to be reciprocated, invest a huge amount of their labour and their identity in the organisation for which they work, and find it inconceivable to consider the organisation could ever die – as witnessed by the sense of shock when in the 1990s Japanese companies started laying off loyal lifelong employees. By contrast, many academics in the UK and the USA invest in their own transportable research, and display rather little loyalty to their current university, suffering little loss of social identity should their department be closed down.

Within an organisation, different levels of staff may exhibit different levels of denial about organisational mortality. Low-level staff with little reason to be loyal to the organisation may assume that an employer offering poor working conditions will show no compunction in laying workers off. Managers, however, may feel it their duty to keep their part of the organisation intact; should their unit be closed, they may fear a damaged reputation, they may feel loyalty to the staff under them and a paternalistic desire to protect them, and/or they may have invested much of themselves in the organisation as a whole. Though those under them may be economically more disadvantaged by closure, the manager may feel a failure and ashamed for not having done more to protect his or her staff (Sievers 1990).

Death rates, physical or organisational, also provide a context for people's mortality awareness. In peacetime in modern societies, people may for all practical purposes reasonably assume their longevity, and feel it an insult should the Grim Reaper come for them before their time. In times of war, however, people may become death accepting and fatalistic about 'whether the next bullet has my name on it', while being more agentful and taking more responsibility than in peacetime (Jalland 2010). Likewise in times of economic recession, especially in volatile industries such as – at the present time – finance, employees may be all too aware that this month's award-winning company may be next month's bankruptcy; they too may combine fatalism concerning the fate of their organisation, while proactively engaging to safeguard their own future within the industry (Kelly and Riach 2014; Kahn and Liefoghe 2014).

Conclusion

Both the metaphor of organisational death and arguments that death awareness/anxiety influence organisational behaviour can be useful in bringing humanity back into analysis of organisational change. Both, however, entail assumptions (for example about the normal psychology of dying, or the inevitability of repression of death anxiety) which this article has sketched and which need interrogating further.

As well as illuminating organisations, the perspectives found in this special issue have potential to illuminate – and be illumined by – ‘death studies’. For example, analysis of metaphorical use of the term ‘organisational death’ could usefully intersect with work within death studies on how narratives of death and mourning are constructed; it is not just organisations whose endings are replete with metaphorical and symbolic imagery that have meaning at both individual and cultural levels (Berman 2012, Hawkins 1990, Seale 2002, Sontag 1978). Likewise, organisations provide excellent research sites in which to ground and test theories of symbolic immortality emanating from psychoanalytically-oriented authors such as Becker (1973) and Lifton (1979). For example, in what circumstances does the desire for personal immortality influence organisational behaviour? In what circumstances might employees assume their organisation is immortal. Death studies is not a discipline, but an interdisciplinary field, which stays fertile only by providing a place where diverse disciplines encounter and engage with one another; there is also scope for creativity on its boundaries with other fields (Dogan and Pahre 1990). Organisation studies is another such interdisciplinary field and, as this special issue demonstrates, itself contains a range of perspectives to bring to the encounter with death studies.

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ⁱ In somewhat different ways, Berger (1969), Bauman (1992) and Willmott (2000) have also argued that death awareness/anxiety underlies much social action.