Virtuality and emotion

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In this special section we seek to explore the relationship between emotions and virtuality. In particular, we are interested in understanding how emotions are constructed, modified or suppressed within the virtual environment.

In the last few years there has been an overwhelming increase in the number of studies on virtual organizations and virtual teams (e.g. Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999; Lipnack & Stamps, 1997). Running parallel has been a vigorous interest in emotion in organizations (e.g. Domagalski, 1999; Fineman, 2006, 2007). Rarely, however, have these streams of research met. This seems strange given the commonplace experience that working in a virtual environment is far from emotionally void. Virtual workplaces are sites where people bond, trust, love, get angry, frustrated, make friends, create enemies, shape their identities, confront their loneliness, feel oppressed or liberated.

These are, of course, everyday happenings in the non-virtual organization. Virtual working, however, removes most, if not all, of the corporeal cues that have underpinned much of our understanding of the social construction of emotion, axiomatic to organizing and meaning making. Yet the rhetoric of virtuality is upbeat, a vision of a brave new world of organizational efficiency. The popular literature describes it as a communication intensive form of organizing that collapses conventional boundaries of space and time. It promises flexibility and responsiveness by shifting the work and expertise to as-needed bases through ever-evolving technologies. So organizations are increasingly investing in information tools with collaborative potentials, enabling them not only to take advantage of globally dispersed business partners and competent workforces, but also to transform themselves into virtual organizations. E-mail, mobile phones, video-conferencing, teleconferencing, as well as group support systems, web-based discussion
forms and instant messaging, to name but a few, enable people based in different locations to communicate and co-ordinate their actions with great speed and efficiency.

It is within this context that we seek to understand emotions: emotion as experienced, produced, mediated, and transformed, by virtual encounters. The research agenda is an exciting one, stretching from the micro-psychological to the critical and sociological. We may ask, for instance:

- How are differently toned emotions represented and expressed through virtual media?
- How are emotional identities constructed and challenged?
- What are the emotional labours of virtual working?
- How are culturally defined emotions rules imported into, and mediated by, virtual communication?
- How is trust negotiated in the virtual environment?
- How are power and status exercised ‘down the line’? What are the affective contours of exploitation, resistance and liberation in virtual organizations?

Having said this, there is a tension facing researchers entering this territory, marked by the heavy legacy of emotion research in ‘non-virtual’ organizations. Should we regard the emotions of virtuality as poor substitutes for the ‘real’, face-to-face, thing, or as products in their own right (Fineman, 2003; Handy, 1995)? Our own view is towards the latter. While recognizing many organizations are likely to be a mix of the virtual and non-virtual, virtual settings are best regarded as different and analysable in their own right – a new social production. Comparing the virtual with the non-virtual is ontologically questionable while also romanticizing of the nature of ‘real’ feelings. In other words, virtual settings offer creative opportunities for individuals to experiment with the construction and expression of feeling and to negotiate novel emotion protocols, some of which will become institutionalized for the medium. Indeed, it is a process that we have already seen with the letter and the telephone, both virtual media of their time, now taken-for-granted means for expressing feelings – when desired.

The computer, however, has created a remarkable shift in the capacity for virtual communication – and emotion. Take, for example, the prosaic ‘emoticon’. The use of emoticons is seemingly unique to email use (Yellen et al., 1995). Smiley faces, graphic icons built out of punctuation marks, for example, ;-),:-), as well as typographical characters are some of the expressive innovations that have been used in e-mail discourse. Such humorous patterns have not previously existed in paper-based messages but
are considered to be characteristics of technology-mediated communication which enable users to reveal something of their emotions. Uses of asterisks or capital letters for emphasis are additional ways for the codification of language expressions (Baym, 1995).

We see this inventiveness in other ways too, such as substituting the non-verbal signals that convey face-to-face feeling and presence with the need for prompt, even instant, virtual messaging – and the ensuing anxiety should this not occur (Barnes & Greller, 1994; Meyerson et al., 1996; Shockley-Zalabak, 2002). Indeed, the meaning of silence during virtual exchanges appears to have its own experiential and cultural architecture. For example, while studies in the US and the UK have shown that silence in virtual communication leads to frustration and has negative effects on team bonding (Cramton, 2001; Panteli, 2004; Panteli & Fineman, 2005), there is evidence that East Asian participants are likely to regard silence as a desirable and more respectful first-response when receiving an e-mail from an organizational superior (Lee, 2002; Straub, 1994). It seems that, in the increasingly global virtual environment, members will confront cultural understandings about how virtual communications should be framed and understood.

Apart from the communication nuances of virtual work, there are important questions about the way that virtual arrangements add to, or subtract from, the sum of human welfare in organizations. The evidence on the alienative climate of call centre work, the loneliness of the teleworker, cyber-bullying and harassment, and the ways virtual technologies can be employed for covert surveillance of worker behaviour, suggest that all is not entirely well on the virtual front (e.g. Holman et al., 2002; Korczynski, 2003; Mulholland, 2002; Sczesny & Stahlberg, 2000). Here emotion is intimately connected with the way power relations at work are exploited or reconfigured in the virtual environment – to the benefit of some, but not others (Lyon, 2006; Mirchandani, 2007). Accordingly, virtuality (e.g. web, e-mail, fax) reveals its Janus face: freedom and flexibility for some, while others can feel imprisoned by their wired-in world (Fraser, 2001).

It was against this backcloth that this special section of Human Relations was conceived. We initially trialled our ideas in the 21st Colloquium of the European Group for Organization Studies (EGOS) in 2005. This brought together researchers of emotion and researchers of virtuality who together began to sketch out a joint agenda. The present themed section results from a more general call for papers and captures some of these interests.

We begin with Barbara Sieben’s article, ‘Doing research on emotion and virtual work: A compass to assist orientation’, which provides a ‘compass’ to help navigate the paradigmatic and methodological terrain of research into virtuality and emotion. Building on a discussion of different
kinds of virtual work and the recursive relationship between emotion and virtuality, Sieben adapts Deetz’s (1996) discursive framework of research orientations to develop her compass – a way of sensitizing researchers to the different constructions of emotion and virtual work that shape and are shaped by the research process. Intersecting researchers’ goals with their methods, she identifies four perspectives on virtuality and emotion research: functionalist, interpretive, post-structural and critical. Sieben then uses this sensitizing compass to consider the kinds of research questions provoked by each, and raises the possibility of working across multiple perspectives to address important issues in the area.

In the second article, ‘Emotion online: Experiences of teaching in a virtual learning environment’, Sarah Gilmore and Samantha Warren take virtuality into the higher education setting. Situated broadly in Sieben’s post-structural orientation, this study draws on discursive conceptualizations of emotion and virtuality to examine how a virtual classroom impacts on the way the instructors express their feelings and how they renegotiate feeling rules, vis-à-vis their students. Gilmore and Warren do this by analysing the transcripts of the chatroom messages typed during 24 online seminars they conducted, as well as by reflecting on their own reactions to these exchanges. Finding much emotion in their data, including feelings of intimacy, playfulness and pride, the authors consider how the virtual teaching environment reconfigures the bodily cues and hierarchical prompts that typically shape our emotional reactions and, as a result, impacts the expression of emotion by both teachers and learners.

In the final article, ‘Sexed up intelligence or irresponsible reporting? The interplay of virtual communication and emotion in dispute sensemaking’, an interpretive study by Piers Myers, we see interorganizational sensemaking – as it occurs through a variety of virtual media – significantly emotionalized and politicized. Scrutinizing the virtual exchanges of a crucial, and very public, dispute between the British Broadcasting Corporation and the British Government in the lead up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003, Myers reveals how emotions can play a complementary role in sensemaking processes, enabling the construction of plausible accounts in difficult circumstances. He also argues that virtual forms of communication, through their reviewability and replicability, may enhance rather than inhibit sensemaking, especially in emotional situations. Discussing how virtuality thus frames emotional dynamics and ‘fixes’ meanings, Myers offers a dynamic model of virtuality and emotion in disputes. The model identifies three kinds of sensemaking accounts produced in the context of contentious communication.

Each of these articles makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of virtuality and emotion in organizations, and each raises further
questions for enquiry. Through our EGOS symposium, and while editing this themed issue, we have become aware of the fast-growing interest in this area, and the considerable excitement and passion it evokes as people learn about it. At the same time, it is clear that much more remains to be done – empirically and conceptually – to increase our understanding of the relationship between virtuality and emotion. Evidently, because of the complex ways in which these dynamic entities interact, the relationship may be challenging to study. Nevertheless, virtual work appears certain to become more prevalent and its impact on our working lives increasingly widespread. While the field of organizational studies has in recent years come to appreciate the significance of emotion at work (Fineman, 2003, 2006; Fisher & Ashkanasy, 2000), it is already in danger of being left behind by the changes taking place through the virtual revolution as it shapes, not only our ways of working, but also our ways of feeling.

References

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