The role of individual and collective affect in fire incident management

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Fire and emergency management in Australia

Emergency management addresses the potential occurrence of major emergency situations requiring a whole-of-government approach: events such as floods, bushfires, cyclones, the consequences of acts of terrorism or the release of hazardous materials. These situations are usually characterised by the scope of their impact being community-wide, with medium-to long-term effects.

(Commonwealth of Australia, 2004, p. 1)

(photo: http://bushfirefront.com.au/)

ABSTRACT

This thesis proposes to make a contribution to the literature concerned with affect and teamwork in complex work domains. It presents a detailed analysis of people's affective experiences in fire incident management teamwork. This particular work activity was chosen because it represents numerous aspects of increasingly important features of high-consequence work environments. In such environments the work is characterised by high interdependency, time pressure and a sense of urgency. People working in such domains are susceptible to being emotionally charged, particularly when the potential consequences are high. Given the complexity and duration of events, it is also likely that they may be influenced by emotional exhaustion. Understanding the role of affect is, therefore, particularly important in this work domain and others like it.

The position taken in this thesis is a sociocultural one and is based on the assumption that people and their contexts cannot be separated. Hence, the experiences of the work context (e.g., as represented by organisational structures and organisational cultures) influences the affective states of incident management personnel.

In addition, there is a relationship between individual affect and collective affect as it plays out in teamwork. Fire incident management teamwork provides an excellent example of the way in which the affective states of incident management team members are interpreted collectively and feed into prevailing norms and values of certain groups that then become positive or negative group stereotypes.

This thesis is based on a qualitative study. Semi-structured interviews (n=70) were conducted across four states in Australia with experienced incident management team personnel. Participants were asked to talk

about their experiences when engaged in incident management teamwork. Using a qualitative theory building approach, the data was examined for people's affective experiences whilst engaged in work activity. The way in which organisational cultures are socially constructed within people's affective experiences and work activity were also examined in the data.

The study seeks to extend existing literature and understanding in the following ways. First, by elaborating the linkages between affect (manifested in descriptors of moods and emotions) to constructs such as collective efficacy and team cohesion which are typically cognitively framed. Second, by examining the intersection between individual and collective experiences and the way in which these are mediated by individual and collective affect. Finally, the thesis makes a contribution to the emerging body of literature about the role of affect in the workplace. In the domain under study, for example, the role of affect in emergency incident management teamwork is very present but not readily discussed.

The research concludes by highlighting the importance of the interconnections between affect and culture and the roles both play in teamwork. The thesis presents a model illustrating the ways in which individual and collective experience of affect may be built into models of teamwork. Many models of teamwork in the literature pay lip service to the affective domain but do not systematically examine how affect contributes to enabling and constraining teamwork.

Through the conceptual models of team differentiation, team fragmentation and team integration, the thesis shows how collective affect can either enable or constrain teamwork performance. The thesis concludes with a discussion about the implications from the findings

for practitioners, leaders, trainers, professional developers, policy developers and future research.

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