Balancing Mysterium and Onus: Doing Spiritual Work within an Emotion-Laden Organizational Context

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Abstract. This study uses the neo-Durkheimian conceptual framework of Mysterium and Onus to illustrate how spiritual work is used to accomplish emotional balance within emotion-laden organizational contexts. The constant emotional oscillations experienced by paramedics within an emergency services organization show how spiritual work is accomplished at the level of paramedic–patient interaction, emotional equilibrium within the self, and degrees of connectedness to the organization itself. We contend that in highly emotion-laden organizational contexts where life-changing events are occurring, spiritual work is an important part of the emotional labor process. In turn, balancing emotions is a major part of ‘balancing’ Mysterium (the sacred) and Onus (the profane). We conclude that emotion-laden organizations need to approach the practice of spirituality as an extremely sophisticated and complex phenomenon. While current trends towards ‘spiritualizing’ the workplace through the legitimizing of corporate spiritualities may result in a more controlled and less enchanted workplace, spirituality may well remain as one of the few ways in which workers can practice resistance in a controlled work environment. Key words. emotional labour; emotions in organizational life; neo-Durkheimian theory; organizational spirituality
'Saving someone’s life is like falling in love. It's the best drug in the world. Once, for a few weeks, I couldn’t feel the earth. Everything I touched became lighter. You wonder if you've become immortal, as if you’ve saved your own life as well . . . for a moment, God was you.'

(Paramedic Frank Pierce from the movie Bringing out the Dead)

Spiritual practice at work is seen by some as the ultimate panacea for what ails the modern workplace (Neal et al., 1999; Milliman et al., 1999; Dehler and Welsh, 1994, Mitroff and Denton, 1999). Spirituality is also highlighted as a human resources (HR) ‘cure all’ and balancer for tired, downsized organizations, as well as a vehicle for organizational transformation (Cash, 2000; Laabs 1995; Wagner-Marsh and Conley, 1999). Much of this nascent literature on spirituality fits well into an existing framework of traditional HR and strategy discourses (Townley, 1998) and, as such, can be seen from a critical perspective as more prescriptions for increasing control of the labor process through the achievement of normative control (Etzioni, 1988; Kunda, 1992). Spirituality is now viewed in an organizational context as the ultimate transformational fixative both at the individual and organizational level (McCormick, 1994; Neal et al., 1999).

Implicitly much of this literature addresses the dominance of the Gesellschaft type orientation within corporations (Durkheim, 1915/1965; Tischler, 1999). Yet, as Casey (2002) argues, the Durkheimian legacy for 21st-century organizations may well involve a ‘reenchantment’ with the emotional and the metaphysical aspects of organizational life. Part of this reenchantment process includes a desire for reestablishing a Gemeinschaft quality in the workplace which has also been described as a ‘connectedness’, a ‘wholeness’ or a refocusing on the relational as opposed to the rational (Mitroff and Denton, 1999). This paper further highlights this Durkheimian legacy by focusing on micro-manifestations of the desire to move towards a Gemeinschaft orientation (Durkheim, 1915/1965).

Specifically, the experience of ‘doing’ spirituality in the workplace is not a uniform one for individuals and organizations. At present, the literature on spirituality in organizations does not assist us in understanding how spirituality is experienced by individuals in different kinds of organizations, or how organizations either explicitly use or deny the existence of spirituality. For example, in some industries spirituality is not just another fad or way of achieving cultural compliance, but a significant part of managing the labor process. In many health service organizations, where workers are faced on a daily basis with issues of life and death, spiritual issues come to the fore much more than in organizations that do not face such metaphysical extremes on a regular basis (Le Tourneau, 2000). We propose that to understand the nature of spirituality in organizations, we need to closely examine the context where the
expression of spirituality and the doing of spiritual work are considered crucial within an otherwise secular and rational work routine.

The Mysterium/Onus (M/O) framework outlined by Schervish, Hanlon and Bettery guides us in this task. Schervish et al. (1996) draw upon the challenge made by Durkheim to social scientists, where he stated that conventional social science is constrained in its ability to provide adequate understanding of cultural and emotional life because it does not fully explain or even use ideas that stem from spiritual life. The crux of the challenge lay in social scientists’ ability to use religious ideas and knowledge, because many of these ideas provided the foundation of western secular and humanist thinking. Schervish et al. describe Mysterium and Onus as ‘elementary contradictions’, which are defined as the ‘co-existence of mutually constitutive and radically opposed realms of reality’ (1996: 161). As they explain, the category of contradiction is socially specified within a Durkheimian context as the sacred (Mysterium) and the profane (Onus).

In defining spiritual work, we draw upon West and Zimmerman’s (1987) concept of ‘doing’, which describes how a social category is constructed and reproduced. We contend that people ‘do’ spiritual work in their social interactions, and that the doing of spiritual work is fundamentally about social interaction and relationships. Because spiritual work has to be continually accomplished through performance or ritual, what constitutes spiritual work is continually open to contestation. The emphasis on ‘doing’ spirituality can be appreciated in Dale’s work, which describes spiritual work as ‘human striving for the transforming power present in life: it is the attraction and movement towards the divine’ (1991: 5). Similarly, Dehler and Welsh’s (1994) description is also instructive, for they consider spiritual work as creating ‘flow’ through emotional action, a way of ‘doing’ emotion that is critical to the creation of shared meaning and reproduction of culture.

We further propose that spiritual work is parallel to and a consequence of emotional process work, which we consider to be a crucial element of emotional labor performance (Thoits, 1985). We contend that workers can engage in spiritual work as an extension of emotional labor when they find that they are unable to process deviant or ‘outlaw’ emotions through conventional means (Jaggar, 1989). Hence, workers will draw upon their spiritual selves and experiences in order to renegotiate and rebalance their emotional selves when they have been placed out of kilter by the emotional demands of the workplace.

However, if the emotional transmutation is complete (see Hochschild, 1983), workers can also find themselves being expected to rely on this personal and individual resource to manage and reproduce organizational subjectivities and identities. That is, by encouraging workers to be more ‘spiritual’ and engage in individual spiritual work as an extension of emotional labor, an organization may disown its responsibility to provide adequate support systems for emotionally exhausted workers.
The doing of individual spiritual work can thus become a substitute for formal organizational support. For all these reasons, we argue, it is necessary to unpack the process of spiritual work using a conceptual framework that can cope with the coexistence and intertwining of organizational spirituality and emotionality.

For this purpose we describe and analyze an ethnographic study of the DPS, an emergency service organization in Australia. The study illustrates how organizational actors within an emotion-laden organizational context ‘balance’ the stresses and strains indicative of the Mysterium and Onus contradictions. We propose that balance is achieved through the accomplishment of spiritual work when the emotional demands of the job no longer can be assuaged through conventional emotion management techniques (Hochschild, 1979, 1983; Lively, 2002).

In summary, our paper proceeds as follows. First, we discuss how Schervish et al.’s (1996) work on Mysterium and Onus is important for studying spirituality in organizations. Second, we describe how emotional balancing occurs as a way of managing both the invigorating and debilitating aspects of Mysterium and Onus. Third, we use the ethnographic study of the DPS to illustrate how paramedics manage Mysterium and Onus through the use of spiritual work as a balancing strategy within an otherwise secular and rational work routine in three contexts—the other, the self and the organization. We conclude that current trends towards ‘spiritualizing’ the workplace through the legitimizing of corporate spiritualities may result in a more controlled and less enchanted workplace. However, we contend that emotion-laden organizations need to approach the practice of spirituality as an extremely sophisticated and complex phenomenon, and to recognize that it may well remain as one of the few ways in which workers can practice resistance in a controlled work environment.

Mysterium and Onus: A Durkheimian Legacy for 21st-century Organizational Life

The origin of philosophical analysis about Mysterium and Onus stems from the work of Rudolph Otto (1923/1958) on numinous consciousness, which is constituted by an awareness of the sacred and the holy in life. Otto’s term ‘numinous’ is influenced by Kant’s (1929) division between the noumenon (the thing itself) and the phenomenon (the way we perceive the thing). In turn, Schervish et al.’s (1996) theory of spirituality is based on the assumption that an adequate understanding of cultural and emotional life can only occur if it involves addressing forms of spiritual life. They define Mysterium as ‘represented by the chain of signification, life-blessing-virtue-sacred-good-consolation-joy-union-forgiveness while Onus is represented by death-curse-vice-profane-evil-desolation-sorrow-estrangement-retribution’ (1996: 147). As
categories, Mysterium and Onus are ‘fundamental, experiential categories’, not just one of relating to formal religious experience. They are mutually constitutive of one another and are always in direct contrast as something that people continually navigate between.

In the classic Durkheimian tradition, Schervish et al. (1996: 148) cite the elementary forms of spiritual life as ‘units of intellectual, emotional and kinetic knowledge that are consoling and attractive or disconcerting and repressive’. Mysterium is therefore defined specifically as growing ideas, sentiments and behaviors that are enhancing. Conversely, Onus is defined as debilitating ideas, sentiments and behaviors that move away from life enhancement: ‘Mysterium is wisdom, compassion and care. Onus is deception, disregard and negligence’ (1996: 148).

Based on their empirical work of culture and emotion at Christmas, Schervish et al. describe the spiritual strategies people use to manage the contradictory emotions often experienced at this time of the year by creating a balance between Mysterium and Onus through engaging in emotional vigilance. They developed a theoretical framework for the study of spirituality based on three ‘realities’. First, one should always assume that people make choices between ultimate principles of life and death, blessing and curse for reasons other than what they consider morally appropriate. Second, metaphysical order is something that humans experience both in an embodied and material sense. Third, human agency is characterized by how individuals move towards blessing and deter curse.

To help explain how Schervish et al.’s framework is applicable to organizational contexts, we also draw from the work of Neal et al. (1999). They documented a process through which an individual journeys in order to experience spiritual transformation within an organizational context. They explain that an individual when presented with a spiritual crisis (‘the dark night of the soul’) will undertake a search process to look for understanding as to why the event occurred—in other words, seeking explanation. If an explanation is found, then the individual experiences spiritual integration, where satisfactory meaning explanation is found and integrated into the individual’s current system of meaning. However, spiritual integration is not always inevitable, and in situations where an individual remains confused, the process described by Neal et al. (1999) starts over once more until the individual is satisfied with the outcome.

While Neal et al. (1999) contend that an individual engages in spiritual work as a way of balancing the seeming incongruence of daily work/life, or of their relationships within the organization in which they work, we argue, further, that the recognition of Mysterium and Onus is particularly important within emotion-laden contexts. Looking at spiritual work in the context of emotionality helps us to understand better how balancing occurs.
Emotional Balancing in Emotion-Laden Organizational Contexts

The process of organizing is emotional and organizations are ostensibly emotional arenas (Fineman, 2000; Albrow, 1992). The emotionalizing of organizations is a complex process that involves the participation of all individuals, groups and external influences within a particular organizational context (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1995; Van Maanen and Kunda, 1989). However, while all organizations can be considered emotional entities, not all organizations are totally emotion laden.

Defining characteristics of emotion-laden organizations includes the centrality of emotional labor, whether or not an organization is awash with emotion on a daily basis, and the degree to which service delivery is about dealing with or processing life-changing events such as birth, death or divorce. Examples of such emotion-laden organizations include those working directly on the body, such as health services and beauty salons, and organizations providing services for people experiencing life-changing events, such as funeral parlors, police departments, maternity wards, and law firms specializing in divorce or deceased estates.

Similarly, many organizations require their employees to perform emotional labor, but not all organizations where emotional labor is performed are emotion laden. Nor is the study of emotions in organizations just a simple overview of the practice of emotional labor within a given organizational context (Hochschild, 1983; Fineman, 2000; James, 1989). The nature of emotion work as part of emotional labor is such that the achievement of emotional balance through emotional control is a key measure of whether such work has been effective.

For example, Meyerson’s (1998) study of social workers indicates that the theme of emotional control is central to dominant medical discourse that has permeated most health-related professions and para-professions. This is particularly the case in relation to stress and burnout. Meyerson contends that a disciplinary reliance on science and technology as the basis for professional authenticity means that the ensuing norm of rationality and objectivity is ‘translated into the norm of emotional detachment and control’ (1998: 105). A professional needs to achieve the norm twofold—control over individual emotions and control over and suppression of patients’ emotions.

Moreover, as Mumby and Putnam (1992) indicate, achieving this norm occurs through the colonizing of individual emotional processes to meet the outcome-oriented needs of the technocratic-rationalist process. If the demands of bounded rationality become too intense, then workers may find themselves examining their own ability to be emotionally ‘normal’. Workers who find it difficult to maintain such norms may begin to label themselves as deviant. Interestingly, Thoits (1985) explains that emotion management techniques allow people to transform deviant feelings into normative ones. When such a transformation fails, a person is forced to confront the meaning of the deviant or outlaw emotions. Thoits cites two
conditions central to the prediction of emotion work failure—the persistence or reoccurrence of ‘outlaw’ emotions, and lack of social support.

Emotional process work therefore can be defined as both an individual and group phenomenon, which generally occurs after an event has placed a premium on a person’s ability to engage in individual emotion work. In such contexts, all employees ‘do’ emotional process work, and the degree to which they successfully accomplish emotional normativity varies according to level of experience, degree of social support and ability to cope with the demands that the emotional norms of the organization place upon them.

It is in light of this critical literature on organizations and emotions that we propose Schervish et al.’s M/O framework as an important window through which to observe spiritual work as a balancing strategy in the accomplishment of emotional labor and emotion work in emotion-laden organizational contexts. Our analysis of the DPS case study to which we now turn offers a concrete illustration of these processes.

**Doing Spiritual Work within an Emotion-Laden Organization Context: The Case of the DPS**

The DPS is a male-dominated public sector provider of pre-hospital emergency care in Australia. Within the DPS most of these men perform a considerable amount of emotional labor publicly on a daily basis. Officers perform emotional labor as a crucial part of their work, and this performance is integral to delivery of services to patients.

As part of their duties as paramedics, DPS staff are expected to perform as emotionally complex individuals while simultaneously adhering to a rigidly hegemonically masculine and militaristic code of conduct. On the one hand, officers are expected to display the softer emotions of compassion, empathy and cheerfulness in public regions while on the other hand refraining from public expressions of grief, remorse or sadness. This study indicates that the DPS expends a considerable amount of energy denying the existence of ‘feminine’ forms of emotionality while at the same time being highly dependent upon the expression of non-masculinist forms of emotionality (see Boyle, 2002). Also, the DPS has experienced large amounts of organizational upheaval, which may have caused further ambivalent and confused work feelings among officers.

We conducted an ethnographic study over a period of 18 months, traveling as civilian observers on ambulance ‘runs’ or cases. In all, we attended 110 cases and conducted approximately 500 hours of participant observation in ambulance vehicles, emergency rooms, nursing homes, private houses and public spaces such as parks, shopping malls and sidewalks. We conducted observations during all kinds of shifts, including ‘graveyard’ shifts in inner urban locations close to entertainment and nightclub precincts. This meant that we observed a diverse range of interactions between patients and paramedics. We also spent
time observing one month of paramedic training school. In addition to conventional participant observation, we conducted 35 qualitative interviews with DPS paramedics, and collected official documentation such as training manuals, policy guidelines, official publications such as newsletters, and memos.

In contrast to what we expected, conducting this kind of study within a militaristic and masculinist organization was not difficult. The first author was successful in gaining access to at least 20 paramedic stations, and, for the most part, was able to move freely in and out of ambulances as an observer. The main reason for this ease of movement was due to the DPS being an observer culture, where officers would regularly have fellow travelers such as medical students as observers. Officers are also socialized early into accepting a high level of surveillance on the road. Although we were able to travel in ambulances with women who were paramedics, and chat with them informally in lunchrooms, it proved extremely difficult to recruit women for taped interviews. When we asked why this was the case, the consensus was that women were more wary about how their superiors perceived their involvement in such a study.

Another surprise for us was that officers were more willing to talk about spiritual matters than how they performed emotional labor and how the job affected them emotionally. When we originally introduced the topic of emotion, the overwhelming reaction was ‘oh, you want to talk about stress?’ Most interviewees took at least ten minutes of interview time talking about how stressful the job was, and it was there that we were able to ask further questions about coping strategies, opinions about how the organization responded to individual stress, and issues relating to work–family balance.

For the most part, officers were very willing to share their experiences and feelings, especially about the emotional culture of the organization, which the officers labeled as ‘harsh’. Officers felt that there were times when the overriding consideration for the organization was to ‘objectify’ both patients and staff through denying or ignoring emotion and burnout as an integral part of the organizational culture. Therefore, officers spoke about performing emotional labor in the context of coping with the ravages of the organization as well in the context of patient–paramedic interaction.

Our interpretation of the data focused on how the art of emotional balancing occurred through the emotion action of both emotional labor and spiritual work. We found that paramedic work involves extensive ‘balancing’ within an M/O framework, and this is manifest initially through managing anxiety caused by ambiguity, confusion, and blurring of moral boundaries. This part of paramedic work involves emotional labor of the most sophisticated kind, incorporating all aspects of suppression and exhortation of emotion in the workplace (Steinberg and Figart, 1999). It occurs at three levels: at the level of patient–paramedic inter-
action; creating emotional equilibrium within oneself, either through individual emotional process work or from informal and formal emotional support; and maintaining an adequate level of interconnectedness with organizational goals and values.

We distinguish between spiritual work done within the context of patient–paramedic interactions, and that conducted as part of working on the emotional self. In both contexts, the acknowledgement of Mysterium and Onus can occur and the ensuing balancing achieved through a combination of emotional and spiritual work. We make this distinction because spiritual work can be explicit and transparent, as well as hidden. It can be used as part of conventional emotional labor or it can be a way of assuaging the ‘dark night of the soul’ caused by an extremely emotionally debilitating case. Further, at the time of the study, the level of internal environmental turbulence within the organization was extremely high, and this also impacted how officers felt about the organization in which they worked.

We will now discuss each of these levels in turn.

**Patient–Paramedic Interaction**

A major part of patient–paramedic interaction is dramaturgical in nature, and involves management of patients’ specific emotions such as anxiety, fear and anger. To achieve the correct emotional performance, paramedics need to display high levels of emotional flexibility, and to be able to engage in surface and deep acting at short notice. As paramedic work often involves moving quickly from one scene to another, the management of one’s own emotions occurs through emotional ‘switching’, ‘numbing’ one’s feelings, and dissociation from what one is feeling. This switching involves all the skills required to perform emotional labor, but also demands the ability to sustain a prolonged outward demeanor or surface acting, which includes the suppression of possible leakage of ‘true feelings’. It also demands that officers suspend the expression or even acknowledgement of certain emotions for the duration of the case, and sometimes for the duration of the shift. Emotions such as anger, fear and even happiness are put in abeyance, and then (ideally) ‘processed’ at an appropriate time and place after the event.

The nature of anxiety management within paramedic work is such that there needs to be a high level of vigilance exercised in relation to maintaining the ‘right’ level of emotional support to patients through a ‘balanced’ performance. Anxiety management is a delicate transaction in that too much reassurance given to the patient can be just as damaging as too little. The process of anxiety management places paramedics in a challenging position, for they often have a fervent desire to create Mysterium in situations where the level of Onus is so great or intense that any attempt to create the former will inevitably be exposed as artificial.

For instance, work within the patient–bystander context involves taking into account the patients’ and bystanders’ experience of the
Mysterium/Onus oscillation, and its impact on how the interaction is accomplished. Thus, all parties ‘perform’ to construct an ongoing sense of reality and normality. A significant component of creating this involves managing often difficult and emotional events in a way that creates a sense of equilibrium and order. The initial chaos of a motor vehicle accident, for example, and the consequences of that chaos have to be managed so that the paramedics are seen to be performing their role skillfully and competently (Palmer, 1983, 1989). A paramedic may know that a seriously injured patient has little chance of survival, but must perform in such a way that this ‘reality’ does not become the dominant reality at the scene of the accident.

This is a similar process described by Emerson (1971) where reality is constructed through expert performance of both medical practitioner and patient. A major part of accomplishing this performance is being able to balancing seemingly incongruent feelings. In the case of the road accident, the patient and bystanders are both filled with dread and desolation when they contemplate the possible outcomes, but at the same time are experiencing feelings of hope induced by the very presence of the paramedics. If either of these feelings escalates beyond what is considered normal, this can get in the way of the reality that the paramedics need to achieve so that they can be seen to be performing successfully.

Therefore, a crucial part of the performance is the ability to ‘balance’ the incongruence and the ambiguity inherent in the patient–paramedic interaction. In many cases, particularly those that involve death, paramedics need to engage in spiritual work as an addendum or in place of conventional emotional labor as a balancing mechanism if conventional anxiety management techniques do not work.

Officers may engage in spiritual work in the following ways: displaying respect for patients’ spiritual beliefs, such as administering a lay version of the last rites; avoidance of false hope as an anxiety management strategy in the presence of dying patients and their relatives; alternative healing practices, such as talking to unconscious patients or practicing spiritual healing; counseling grieving relatives when no other help is available. While these lists are not exhaustive they give some indication of the array of activities that come under the rubric of spiritual work in this context.

On the scene, officers may also do spiritual work to help make sense of their own personal experience of the oscillation of Mysterium and Onus. Most officers expressed the view that they are able to maintain emotional balance by using conventional strategies such as suppression or cognitive appraisal of wayward or errant emotions. However, spiritual work becomes part of that process with cases that either need more time to process what has occurred, or because the nature of that case conflicts with an officer’s moral evaluation of what occurred.

Officers are continually confronted with social situations, lifestyles and social practices that are in direct contrast with their own. In many
cases, officers make decisions based upon moral judgments, and this is manifested in the labeling of cases as either deserving or undeserving. Therefore, difficulty arises when an officer is confronted with a situation that appears, to that officer, as morally reprehensible, because it is often difficult to process one’s feeling when successful emotional process work requires a degree of moral circumspection. The following quote from an officer of 10 years’ standing illustrates in part how individual officers struggle with the moral dimensions of Onus-inducing events:

They are jobs where they conflict with what is your own sense of what should be right in our society. So you get into a situation where a young child has been killed and the whole situation could have been avoided . . . just a pointless waste of a human being, and you sometimes think that all the rules and laws are wrong.

In contrast to other health professionals, ambulance officers do a significant amount of their work within the patient’s environment. This means that officers have to develop the skill of emotional circumspection (Parkinson, 1991), one that is difficult to put into practice when there is often, outside of a sophisticated sociological analysis, no explanation for the circumstances in which some people find themselves. This quote from a younger officer illustrates the need for such circumspection when one’s daily working life is replete with cultural and socio-economic extremes:

We see a lot of the seedy side. Many sad, lonely, grumpy people. We go into houses and it’s just a complete culture shock. If you’ve lived all of your life in a controlled middle class upbringing and then all of a sudden you’re thrust into a situation where there is poverty, down and out people, outcasts . . . then someone’s had a pointless death. Then you have to come home and take the family shopping. It’s a bit hard to do those mundane things after something like that.

Paramedic work is a constant oscillation between the Mysterium of life and the Onus of death. What this means is that on any given day, a paramedic can expect to be a lifesaver and a death worker, sometimes within an hour of each other. For some officers, the emotional pendulum swings widely, particularly early in their careers. Officers quickly learn to ‘switch off’ or ‘put on a veneer’ to hide sometimes overwhelming anxiety both from patients as well as their colleagues. Similar to Hochschild’s flight attendants, some officers become so skilled at masking their emotions in the public sphere that they lose the ability to distinguish between what is authentic and what is fake. Many officers believed that the most useful survival strategy is to develop emotional hardness in order to cope with the sheer variety and intensity of cases an officer encounters during his or her career.

However, many officers expressed disquiet at how this affects them both emotionally and spiritually. For instance, one officer complained about the harshness of the expectation that one should always consider a
deceased person as only ‘dead’. This compartmentalization of feeling about death and dead bodies meant that officers had to engage in an enormous amount of emotional process work in order to develop the attitude that ‘dead is dead’, no matter what the circumstances, as one officer recalled being taught at his first fatality:

The first day I started I went to my first job where there were three dead people. It was the first time out by myself in charge of a vehicle. That upset me for quite some time. When I got back, somebody said to me, did you get your first lot of dead ones? I said, oh, yeah. Then we sat down and talked about it. He told me that if you can get it out of your mind and think of them as a carcass of meat lying there with no life, the same as a dead animal lying on the road. Don’t try to think of them as human beings. It was hard but it worked.

In cases where a patient has died, officers are frequently called upon to manage the grief of relatives and sometimes bystanders. Managing others’ grief on scene requires that officers be mindful of the spiritual and well as emotional needs of the grieving. The following quote from an officer who lives and works in a remote but close knit community illustrates that, in some cases, the management of grief is a communitarian as well as a spiritual concern:

You have to show empathy and that’s hard for a lot of people because if an officer hasn’t had a family member die or hasn’t had anything to do with death before, you don’t really know what these people are going through . . . We can remove the deceased person from the house, but you’re leaving them there alone in the house . . . If you can get someone in for them as well, maybe the minister or priest, if there’s nobody else there already.

Some officers even admitted to acknowledging their beliefs in an afterlife in situations where the death of a patient appeared imminent. In some cases, officers described how they ‘talked’ to patients regardless of their state of consciousness, and regardless of their spiritual orientation. This practice is similar to what is acknowledged as the ‘golden hour’, which is the period between when trauma occurs and when treatment commences. There is a belief among some officers that they have the power to influence the outcome of ‘near death’ experiences through autosuggestion techniques.

**Emotional Equilibrium Within the Self**

Within most emotion-laden organizational contexts such as the DPS, the ‘doing’ of spiritual work occurs as an extension of or as an addition to emotional labor. Mastery over the ability to maintain emotional equilibrium is seen as crucial to the successful accomplishment of emotional labor, therefore when officers struggle to ‘balance’ their emotions after Onus-inducing events they will engage in a whole range of spiritual activities to help achieve equilibrium.

These include conventional belief in a higher power and observance of related religious rituals such as attending church, praying, receiving
counseling from religious ministers; practicing New Age beliefs and practices such as meditation, visualization or reiki; through environmental/ecological practices such as developing close relationships with native animals, belonging to environmental groups and acknowledging these as spiritual experiences; and through paranormal/occult practices, such as belief in the existence of ghosts, belief in the ability to influence whether someone lives or dies soon after a major accident or trauma when bringing people back to life from clinical death through administering of drugs, defibrillation, etc.

In relation to reliance on traditional religion to maintain emotional balance, officers described at length how they preferred to be 'counseled' by religious ministers when they feel they need assistance to manage their emotions. Relationships with ministers were described by several officers as closer, more intimate and longer lasting than those with mental health professional such as psychologists.

One of the reasons cited for this was that mental health professionals were seen as 'limited' in their range of understanding issues and beliefs outside the standard service provider–client relationship. For many officers confidentiality was also an issue with counselors, because they felt that they didn't have the freedom to explore spiritual issues for fear of this information being fed back to management. Therefore, many drew upon conventional spiritual resources as a means of engaging in formal emotional process work because of issues of trust and intimacy. The following quote illustrates how one DPS operational manager describes the role conventional spiritual supports play within his community in preference to services provided by the DPS organizational psychologists:

We have four ministers of different denominations that come here and you get to know them. They know everybody and they know you and I find it's easier to talk to them as a friend. It's a closer form of counseling. Say we had a death here and I didn't know you. I would find it difficult to open up fully whereas if we were friends, I feel as though I would be able to say, oh! that really irked me. If it were a stranger, I would put up a front.

Officers also expressed the view that religious ministers had a much more sophisticated understanding of the metaphysics of the M/O oscillation than those in the 'helping' professions. The following example illustrates how this officer utilized the conventional spiritual resources available to him to 'work through' his grief and thus achieve emotional balance once more:

The worst case was when one of my staff's children died. I knew the kid and it was difficult. It took about five sessions with the ministers and the mother. I found the best way to work through my grief was to sit down and talk to the parents and the other children. Being part of their grieving process.
The quality of the emotional process work on the self during a shift can often be dependent upon the quality of the relationship an officer has with his or her work partner. Partners are the first people to recognize that an officer may not be coping emotionally both at work and at home. However, reliance on conventional spiritual resources such as traditional religious practice and beliefs can often be problematic when one partner has an explicit spiritual orientation and the other one doesn’t. Officers who are open about their specific spiritual orientations described how they had been ridiculed on occasions for being a ‘holy Joe’ or a ‘whacko hippie’. Some officers even viewed any kind of interest in spirituality as a ‘crutch’ to be avoided, as is illustrated by this officer below:

There are many disgruntled people out there and they must be doing something for it. There are a lot who are into religion. I’m not a Christian. My personal belief is that it’s just a crutch. Like alcohol.

Although ambivalence existed about some officers regarding the capacity for conventional spiritual means as a way of sustaining emotional equilibrium, many officers also described how they were beginning to rely on ‘new age’ practices to help them ‘calm down’, ‘chill’ and ‘to get some perspective on life’ outside of the DPS. Several officers enthusiastically recounted the benefits of meditation, while other had ventured into trying reiki and visualization as balancing techniques. At one training school session we attended, the psychologist ran a session on stress management techniques such as breathing, meditative techniques and Hindu body types. These sessions were favorably received, but it is not known if officers continued to use these techniques after the session had finished.

Many officers described how they used the ‘environment’ as a spiritual respite. This included bushwalking, birdwatching and spending time alone in remote wilderness areas such as deserted beaches. These officers also remarked that they were careful to frame these practices in ways that made them seem to be like a normal ‘hobby’. For example, one officer described how spending time with the native animals on his property after each shift was ‘good for the soul. The thing that keeps me sane.’ Other officers belonged to environmental groups and talked at length about their ‘connections’ with the natural world as a way of ‘calming the spirit’.

At the level of self, the individual experience of Mysterium is most characterized in this context through saving lives. Many officers described the feeling after having successfully defibrillated a clinically dead patient after a heart attack as ‘being on a high’ or ‘feeling special—like you’re here on earth for a real reason’. For many officers successful defibrillation or a ‘save’ is what keeps them motivated. One senior officer describes the Mysterium-inducing sense of accomplishment he gained from saving lives through the use of defibrillation machines on patients who were clinically dead:
To defib a patient successfully is a big thing. My first defib job was a save and I’ve never forgotten it. I get a lot of personal satisfaction knowing that at the end of the day I’ve put 9000 volts through someone’s chest where they been clinically dead and would have progressed to biological death without my intervention. I’ve averted that and now they’re sitting up talking to me. I like getting that out of my job. Very much so.

Conversely, failing to ‘defib’ brings into stark relief the metaphysical nature of ambulance work, especially if the patient is a child. In these situations, officers reported when they had the opportunity, they continually asked themselves and others, ‘Why this person? Why now?’ or ‘Why am I doing this job?’ Indeed, the contradiction between having to expunge an idea that there is life after death in order to cope emotionally with death work, and being able to counsel the grieving in a way that recognizes or respects the idea that there may be life after death is at the core of how spiritual experience works within the DPS.

**Connectedness with Organization**

Officers continually talked about their anger and frustration about how the organization dealt with aspects of paramedic work. Therefore, the third context in which spiritual work occurs is focused on how connected officers feel with the DPS and what officers do to maintain this connectedness. Officers spoke at length about how they resort to spiritual work in order to ‘cope’ with the harshness of DPS culture. Because DPS officers are expected by management, patients and the general community to perform emotional labor well, this ‘harshness’ manifested itself through unrealistic expectations imposed by DPS managers about how officers should cope with emotional burnout, which is exacerbated by the absence of legitimacy afforded emotionality within the DPS.

At the time of this study, the organization provided little support to enable officers to do this part of their job. In order to maintain some kind of emotional health and equilibrium in their lives, officers were expected to ‘privatize’ the emotional process work they needed. While it is evident from the data that officers do receive a considerable amount of support from each other in terms of processing emotions on the job, most of this processing occurs ‘off-stage’ with family, friends, and spiritual contacts such as pastors and priests.

In terms of emotional culture, the DPS is therefore what Meyerson (1991) refers to as a culturally ambiguous entity. On the one hand, the DPS is willing to recognize the importance of emotional labor through citing ‘caring’ skills as a crucial component of ambulance work. On the other hand, emotionality and the ability to perform emotional labor are seen as an innate quality, something that officers are ‘hardwired’ to do.

Officers need to be able to ‘care’ to perform ‘caring’ work, but this ability is expected to stem from an officer’s innate nature, and not as a result of occupational socialization. This biological view of caring and
emotionality is also at odds with the prevailing masculinities that constitute part of the emotional culture. For example, a normative emotional state for most workers mirrors what could be described as a typically 'masculine' one (Hearn, 1993). Officers are expected to maintain a high level of emotional restraint with patients, while male and increasingly female officers expect one another to adhere to a hegemonically masculine emotionality. The normative state in this instance is a highly gendered version of emotional equilibrium. Because this hegemonic ideal is difficult to achieve continually, it could be safely assumed that many officers may be constantly questioning their inability to meet this emotional norm.

Yet, this acultural and gender-neutral view of emotionality gives the DPS a basis for absolving itself from the responsibility of addressing the problems of emotionality within the service. Through contact with employee assistance programs, officers are encouraged to immerse themselves in a stress discourse that both individualizes and compartmentalizes emotion. The 'psychology' of stress is given primacy over other ways of perceiving stress, and this results in the pathologizing of emotion. Contrary to the belief that employee assistance programs assist officers to acknowledge and confront the intricacies of emotion in their workplace, these programs promote a discourse of emotion that elevates individualistic and acultural stress management practices (Newton, 1995).

The DPS, thus, is what could best be described as a 'harsh' emotional culture and there is a long history of officers being discouraged to publicly talk about their fears and anxieties regarding their emotional states. This has also extended to spiritual matters. While most officers adhere to this feeling rule, a few officers openly talked about how they had adopted 'new age' approaches to emotion management as a way of counteracting the deleterious health effects of a harsh emotional culture. An officer of 10 years' standing describes how he began to rely on meditation and visualization in order to cope with what he perceived as the emotional harshness of the DPS:

It used to affect me when I worked at another station, and I began to wonder why I couldn't be demobilized for a time, because it felt quite cold . . . that they could be so callous as to give three more geriatric cases after you've finished a cot death or something like that. I started doing things to protect myself, to overcome the emotional states. So it doesn't worry me anymore.

Several officers described extreme examples of emotional harshness where very few would cope with the difficulties of managing the extremes of Onus-inducing events. In the following quote, a senior station manager describes how the rationalistic and technocratic imperative of the DPS clashes with the immediate emotional needs of road officers:

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We had a recent case where a girl was drowned in a bathtub. It was quite tragic. But the bitterness we felt about that was after the case was finished, the only thing they would allow was, go back and have a quick cup of tea. We have more jobs for you and we have to get the clinic work out of the way. We worked on her all the way to the hospital. The whole staff at the emergency room was devastated. The nurse manager was in tears. But as far as the DPS goes it was, hurry up. We’ve got more geriatrics for you to move.

As this quotes illustrates, successfully reestablishing emotional balance is not something that the DPS formally supports, for it would require an acknowledgement of the existence and importance of emotionality. It is not surprising then to find that people in organizations such as the DPS use whatever resources are available to them, including spiritual resources, to balance the extreme oscillations between Mysterium and Onus.

Despite this cultural harshness, the majority of officers appeared very creative in finding ways to effectively carve out emotional and spiritual space for themselves on the job. Whether that be taking extra time out to complete paperwork from the previous case, delaying a returning to base, or taking extra time with a non-emergency case, the relatively autonomous nature of their on-road work meant that paramedics can find ways of resisting the pressure to be emotionally ‘on stage’ at all times.

**The DPS and the M/O Framework: The Three Realities Revisited**

As the DPS case study illustrates, the ‘doing’ of spiritual work is either part of or parallel to emotional labor in particular kinds of organizational contexts. In highly emotion-laden contexts, the oscillation between the extremes of emotionality can be a constant occurrence. These extremes of oscillation may also be characterized by high-end emotional events that need to be understood and made sense of using conceptual schema other than a rational approach. Swinging or switching between such extremes have considerable consequences for the occupational health and safety for organizational members. Therefore, ‘balancing’ needs to occur on a continual basis to produce a consistent and ‘rational’ reality. The ‘doing’ of spiritual work then assists in maintaining a balance of often opposing and dissimilar interpretations of significant life events such as birth, death or major trauma.

The contradictory nature of Mysterium and Onus can be easily observed here. For instance, it is possible for a paramedic, in the course of one day, to have to cope with the Mysterium-inducing goodness of childbirth and the Onus-inducing evil of brutal murder. In this context, the three ‘realities’ of Mysterium and Onus (Schervish et al., 1996) can be identified as part of the balancing required for the appropriate performance of the job: recognition of the metaphysical through viewing spiritual work as ‘normal’, spiritual work as an embodied manifestation of the
metaphysical order, and a constant move towards lifesaving or Mysterium-inducing feelings as part of occupational socialization.

The socialization of a paramedic involves the development of a fervent belief that a paramedic’s primary role is that of saving lives, the belief that one is intervening and assisting the divine, or as Frank Pierce indicates in the epigraph, ‘playing God’, which is literally saturated with a sense of Mysterium. However, the reality of paramedics’ careers is also constituted by many Onus experiences as they become exposed regularly to what could be best described as horror, whether it is grotesque murder scenes, child torture, or the impossibility of intervening in the death of a patient. In the case of these experiences, officers find themselves asking questions such as ‘What is life about anyway?’ or ‘Why these people?’ These questions cannot be answered or feelings that these events evoke be ‘balanced’ by just an intellectual understanding of the contradictory nature of life.

Further, officers who experience an overload of Onus may find that their conventional or regular balancing strategies fail, and it is then that spiritual work comes to the fore. Drawing upon a spiritual framework or set of practices then becomes part of the repertoire of mechanisms that the individual officer relies upon to either accomplish a good paramedic performance in terms of service provider–patient relationships, or as a way of making sense of and assuaging the emotional debilitation of Onus.

These situations could be further understood by revisiting the three ‘realities’ of spiritual life in Schervish et al.’s (1996) framework. First, the ‘reality’ that people make choices to move towards Mysterium or the blessing and avoid Onus or the curse on the basis of things other than moral rectitude is evident in the accounts of how officers describe their reasons for engaging in spiritual work. DPS officers are no more or less religious than most people. Officers use spiritual work to accomplish a sense of emotional reality that conventional cognitive schemas such as emotional intelligence or corporeal processes such as relaxation techniques cannot fully achieve. This is especially the case when extreme Onus-inducing events such as the sudden death of a child or adult engaged in mundane activities. These situations often demand that the individual stem the flow of Onus to one that is closer to Mysterium. Their move towards spiritual work is not driven by a desire for the sacred per se, but rather as a way of validating emotional knowledge and feelings in addition to more cognitive processes.

Second, as Schervish et al. (1996: 147) indicate, DPS officers experienced ‘metaphysical order’ in an embodied and metaphysical way. Spiritual work is a combination of embodied and metaphysical practices, as illustrated by officers’ descriptions. Officers were more likely to provide rich descriptions about the corporeal dimensions of spiritual practice. These ranged from dietary restrictions right through to yoga exercises. Officers commonly used active words such as ‘putting’ feelings in their
place, ‘processing’ confused ideas and feelings, and ‘acting’ upon beliefs. Conversely, as illustrated in an earlier quote, officers also emphasized the corporeal aspects of their job, especially in cases where corpses were handled, so as to deemphasize the spiritual. As spiritual work is something that is accomplished and ‘done’, it has a basis that is grounded in materiality.

Third, human agency is characterized by a move towards the blessing or Mysterium experiences. This is evident if one sees that the socialization of DPS officers is heavily weighted in favor of the Mysterium-seeking opportunities to save lives. As the quote from the paramedic character Frank Pierce at the beginning of this paper indicates, saving lives can become somewhat of a Mysterium-inducing obsession. Frank’s addiction to being at the center of Mysterium-inducing events can only be fed by always being the savior of patients’ lives, and never the witness to their deaths. Previous studies of professional life indicate that the sirens call of heroism and valor are common in the early years of a paramedic’s career (Palmer 1983). However, along with the Mysterium-inducing highs of becoming an ‘trauma junkie’ comes the debilitation of Onus-inducing lows. In the case of the DPS, an extreme focus on lifesaving often comes at the cost of ignoring the more frequently occurring reality of Onus-inducing death work. Focusing on one to the exclusion of the other can lead to the kinds of emotional imbalances that result in psychological and metaphysical distress.

In sum, spiritual work occurs at the level of the patient–paramedic interaction, within the self, and in maintaining a degree of connectedness with the organization. However, like much of the emotional labor performed as part of a paramedic’s job, spiritual work is not acknowledged formally within the DPS as a legitimate form of work. While at first glance this appeared to be problematic, a deeper analysis indicates that a lack of organizational imperative regarding the practice and experience of spirituality may help workers maintain the ‘reenchantment’ aspect of doing spiritual work. For instance, officers can be seen to be bypassing or resisting official or conventional stress management programs through engaging in a metaphysical or ‘other’ stress discourse. In this way, the ‘doing’ of spiritual work can be viewed as resistance to official denial of the non-rational and intangible aspects of organizational life.

We conclude, nonetheless, that while spiritual work can be categorized as the spiritual element of emotional labor, over-identification with the notion of organizational spirituality as a panacea for all organizational ills is also problematic. We argue that there are problems with letting the discourse of corporate spiritualism (Nadesan, 1999) or the notion of reenchantment (Casey, 2002) take hold within organizations similar to the DPS, because these discourses and practices are still based on the supremacy of individualism, which will ultimately lead to an organization absolving or denying its legal and moral responsibilities for workers’
emotional health and safety. Emotion-laden organizations are particularly at risk from the ill effects of corporate spiritualism because of the possible connections between organizational emotionality and spiritual practice. Any attempts to use organizational emotionality as a conduit through which managerial control is achieved may also involve the use of corporate spirituality. This is especially poignant in organizations where managerial control is highly complex, ephemeral and resistant to codification, and therefore it is difficult to track the processes of normative control.

We contend that there are several unintended consequences for organizations that explicitly or unconsciously rely on either individual or corporate-level spiritual practice to solve traditional organizational development dilemmas such as problems with organizational commitment or the quality of organizational citizenship. On the one hand, heavy reliance on individual spiritual work reduces certain kinds of transactions costs for the organization. Health insurance and employee assistance costs may be reduced for stress-related occupational illnesses. On the other hand, the individualizing of spiritual work means that the organization can never really control or ‘catch’ the actual process or the outcome of spiritual practice, especially if employees start to question the validity of organizational values and ethics. In turn, this can lead to significant levels of individual resistance that conventional means of organizational domination and oppression fail to readily control. Thus, employees can develop agency beyond the managed aspects of the workplace. Attempting to manage spirituality can become another illusion for those who hope to gain further managerial control over employees.

Schervish et al.’s framework has provided a fresh analytical perspective on workplace emotionality and spirituality. While this perspective has been appropriate for analyzing an emotion-laden organizational context, neo-Durkheimian analyses of other kinds of organizations may be problematic. A move towards a Gemeinschaft orientation within an organization may sound like reenchantment, but such an orientation may also involve more intensive forms of managerial control such as increased vigilance under the guise of community building and holistic practice. Addressing organizational practices such as this through a neo-Durkheimian approach may obscure rather than expose the intensification of managerial control.

In sum, we propose that future research in this area needs to be cautious of adopting theoretical approaches that limit conceptualization of spirituality and spiritual practice in organizational contexts. In organizations like the DPS it is possible for employees to experience spirituality in both a Gemeinschaft and Geschellschaft sense simultaneously. We suggest there is a need to move beyond the dualist nature of much of the conceptual and theoretical schemas used to analyze spirituality, to ones

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that are capable of forcing organizational theorists to become Janus-like, looking in both directions concurrently.

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References


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