After the Pain: Reflexive Practice, Emotion Work and Learning

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Abstract
We consider how reflexive practices can enable learning from negative emotional experiences. We study these experiences in academic organizations through a relationally reflexive autoethnographic method. Our findings contribute to theory in three ways. First, we show how learning involves practices with different modalities of emotion work and reflexive orientations that internalize or externalize the effects of this work. Second, the subsequent characterization of emotionally responsive reflexive practices shows how isolation and a sense of inadequacy can be avoided and, third, leads to a process model that shows how learning is potentiated in a supportive social context that accommodates emotional vulnerability.

Our interest is in negative, intense emotional experiences and how learning from these experiences is obstructed or enabled. Research on the management of emotion has helped to explain how people make sense of and cope with difficult organizational episodes (Croft, Currie, & Lockett, 2015; Mirchandani, 2003; Nguyen & Janssens, 2019; Patient, Lawrence, & Maitlis, 2003; Sims, 2005; Sloan & Oliver, 2013) and make use of emotion as a tool of control or action in such situations (Crawford & Dacin, 2021; Fineman, 1996; Lefsrud, Graves, & Phillips, 2020; Lindebaum, 2017; Lingo & Elmes, 2019; Ruebottom & Auster, 2018; Stein, 2005; Wijaya & Heugens, 2017).

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In times of crisis, there is usually an expectation that those who find themselves in leadership or management situations are expected to contain their emotions to reassure (as manager or leader) or respond (as subordinate or follower) (Dasborough, Ashkanasy, Tee, & Tse, 2009; Hay, 2014; Tee, 2015; Troth, Lawrence, Jordan, & Ashkanasy, 2018). The dynamics in these situations are complex. Emotional containment in intense situations may involve giving the impression of coping through 'surface acting' or 'putting on a game face' (Fein & Isaacson, 2009). However, difficult organizational experiences can provoke different types of emotions (Boudens, 2005) that include positive and negative feelings for oneself and others (Fineman, 2006; Tee, 2015). Moreover, the impact of negative emotions such as contempt (Pelzer, 2005), shame (Pouthier & Sondak, 2021), jealousy and envy (Stein, 2005), or guilt and anger (Wijaya & Heugens, 2017) reveals the danger of treating such experiences as if they ought not to happen (Vince & Mazen, 2014).

Since research has largely focused on why and how negative emotions are hidden or used as control devices, the potential for responsive learning and change has received less attention. However, Fein and Isaacson's (2009) study of the emotional trauma of leaders dealing with violent incidents and their aftermath suggests that experiential learning involves emotional work alongside cognitive processing, in response to traumatic incidents in which negative feelings persist for long periods (see also Stein, 2005). Two factors can hinder learning from such negative emotional experiences: the stigma against those experiences (Vince & Mazen, 2014) and the hidden and long-term damaging effects that arise *before* they are perceived as traumatic (van der Kolk, 2015). These obstructions are exacerbated by the expectation that individuals – especially managers and leaders – will self-regulate and contain their emotions to maintain organizational effectiveness (Dasborough et al., 2009; Lindebaum, 2017; Troth et al., 2018), rather than engage in emotion work that supports self-reflexive change and authenticity (Heaphy, 2017; Hochschild, 1979) and allows them to 'move on'. There is a missed opportunity for the learning, enabled when emotion work is supported, which would support an ability to act differently – to move on – and to 'be oneself' more authentically (Hay, 2014). This kind of learning is an important self-reflexive adaptation to our ways of *being* and *doing*. It changes our assumptions about, and engagement with, both our self and our world (Hibbert, Callagher, Siedlok, Windhal, & Kim, 2019).

Thus, moving on in recovery from trauma involves rebuilding assumptions about both the self and the world (Haynie & Shepherd, 2011; Janoff-Bulman, 1992) and developing further through 'post-traumatic growth' (Joseph & Linley, 2006). Post-traumatic growth may be founded in a person beginning to change their self-view and appreciate their strength, wisdom and resilience, while also accepting their vulnerability and limitations (Ryff & Singer, 1996), in order to understand who they can be and what they can do in their post-traumatic context (Greenberg & Hibbert, 2020). While vulnerability has traditionally been regarded as a 'weakness', Corlett, Mavin and Beech (2019) argue for a reconceptualization in which vulnerability is instead thought of as providing the potential for generative learning in the right context. This context includes both supportive dyadic relations, often with others who can empathize effectively (Beech, 2017) and in (micro)community settings such as those noted by Greenberg and Hibbert (2020) where there is a sufficiently shared form of experience. Such processes are intrinsically concerned with self-reflexive learning (Cunliffe, 2003; Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2015) in a supportive context, where others enable generative learning from the expression and exploration of vulnerability and traumatic feelings.

In this study, we consider how reflexive practice – defined as a process of self-change in response to contextual challenges (Hibbert et al., 2019) – can both explain and advance the potential for learning through engagement with negative emotional experiences. A reflexive practice approach recognizes the need for responsive self-change and growth in individuals, and/or a need to influence practice in their social context, allowing individuals to orient themselves differently

towards future experiences (Callahan & Elliott, 2020; Hibbert, Coupland, & MacIntosh, 2010; Hibbert et al., 2019).

Despite the potential of the approach, pathways to reflexive learning from emotional experiences are not necessarily straightforward. Emotional reactions to challenging events can result in immediate, unreflexive surface learning solely focused on recognizing and avoiding similar situations in the future (Fein & Isaacson, 2009; Ogden & Fisher, 2014). Stressful conditions in the future can then lead to the evocation of the original painful experience in memory, bodily responses that bring it to life, and a renewed drive for containment (van der Kolk, 2015). Such defensive reactions are understandable; but such emotional 'containing' can obstruct the deeper learning through self-reflexive practice that could allow us to be more 'at home in ourselves' and respond more effectively in future challenging situations (Callahan & Elliott, 2020; Hibbert et al., 2019). Moreover, individuals become isolated in their pain, and may not explore how relational support from others – who can provide a 'safe space' – can help them to engage with emotion work and support learning at such times (Mowles, 2017). Thus, our initial research focus is: *How do individuals move on from 'containing' negative emotional situations in organizations such that they can learn reflexively from them, so that they are subsequently able to respond differently – more effectively and authentically – to similar organizational experiences in the future?*

We situate our research in a context of our working lives in universities. This context provided us with direct access to negative emotional experiences, in situations where learning would be an expected and desirable outcome. The use of academic organizations as research contexts has proven fruitful for the examination of how individuals navigate complex and difficult organizational situations over time (Knights & Clarke, 2014; Symon, Buehring, Johnson, & Cassell, 2008).

Academic contexts are also organizational and institutional settings in which individuals experience structural and ideological pressures (Brown, Lewis, & Oliver, 2021; Callagher, El Sahn, Hibbert, Korber, & Siedlok, 2021; Callahan & Elliott, 2020; Smith & Ulus, 2019) that call for emotion work; that is, self-reflexive engagement with or adaptation of emotions that aims at authenticity (Heaphy, 2017; Hochschild, 1979; Saam, 2018; Zapf, 2002). However, emotion work, despite academic freedom of expression, is still subject to implicit emotion regulation (Lindebaum, 2017; Troth et al., 2018). The emotions deemed acceptable in these contexts are restricted to those which are sufficiently held at bay so as not to inhibit learning (Gilmore & Anderson, 2012), or those that can be 'smooth[ed] over with humour, shared vocabulary, and self-effacing language' (Patrick, 2018, p. 559). As Corlett et al. (2019) show, in professions where expressing vulnerability can lead to exploitation of the situation by others, it is almost impossible for people to be honest about their experiences and feelings. Yet feelings of struggle, vulnerability, disruption and confusion about academic work are persistent (Knights & Clarke, 2014) and linked to structural pressures (Callahan & Elliott, 2020; Smith & Ulus, 2019) that make 'smoothing over' ineffective. In any case, emotion work aims at authenticity in the context of, and in resistance to, such 'feeling rules' (Hochschild, 1979). Thus, academic contexts provide organizational settings that can reveal the dynamics of emotion work, in the face of pressures that challenge authentic engagement and self-reflexive learning (Hibbert et al., 2019; Smith & Ulus, 2019).

Employing an autoethnographic and relationally reflexive method for developing theory, based on deep engagement with our own experiences of situations marked by negative emotion, allowed us to build our contribution in three ways through characterizing the dynamics involved. First, our finding that reflexive practices are key to understanding these dynamics, and show how these practices involve different modalities of emotion work (oriented towards expression or adaptation) in reflexive orientations that internalize or externalize the effects of this work. This builds on the work of Hibbert et al. (2019) to show how these dynamics influence the possibilities for self-change in response to challenging situations. Second, the characterization of the reflexive practices

adds to the work of Fein and Isaacson (2009) by showing how isolation and a sense of inadequacy in response to powerful negative emotions can be avoided. Third, the process model we build from our characterization of reflexive practices and the elucidation of contextual factors builds on earlier studies (Beech, 2017; Corlett et al., 2019; Gilmore & Kenny, 2015) to show how a supportive social context, that allows for the expression of vulnerability, enables learning.

To develop the contribution outlined above, the rest of this paper is presented in five parts. First, we discuss our theoretical approach, focusing on reflexive practice. Second, we present our autoethnographic, relationally reflexive methodology. We then outline our findings, before presenting a discussion of the theoretical contribution. The study concludes with a consideration of the practical implications of our work.

Theoretical Background: Negative Emotions, Reflexive Practices and Reflexive Learning

Struggles with traumatic incidents and a lack of resolution can mean that learning is obstructed by a focus on containing the pain of the experience. Memories of difficult events become 'implicit' and deeply embedded in a person's life script through ongoing emotional work (Ogden & Fisher, 2014). Overcoming such obstructions requires building resilience and psychological resources to enable emotional experiences to be engaged with, rather than avoided (Beech, 2017), such that people can question their deeply held (Ramsey, 2008) but implicit (Ogden & Fisher, 2014) emotional beliefs and establish a basis for trustful exchange with others to enable learning (Beets & Goodman, 2012; Hibbert, Beech, & Siedlok, 2017; Ramsey, 2008).

When self-adaptive learning is achieved, this leads to changes in how the experience is understood and how future practice proceeds (Hibbert et al., 2010; Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2015), through changing how we understand ourselves and how we relate to our world; it impacts on our being and doing (Hibbert et al., 2019). Thus, emotion work is increasingly seen to be important in reflexive (engagement with) practice, even to the extent that attention to emotions is seen to be a key facilitator of reflexivity (Burkitt, 2012; Holmes 2010; King, 2006). Emotions underpin and facilitate sensitivity to what is going on in one's practice contexts, opening up the flow of experience to reflexive inquiry (Davies, 2012; Gilmore & Kenny, 2015), so that we are aware that something is happening before we can express the experience in words.

If we become aware of how the signal that something is happening arises, then the pivotal role of emotion can be explored. The subsequent potential for learning and reflexive change is strengthened when dialogue and interaction with others are possible (Cunliffe, 2009; Hibbert, Siedlok, & Beech, 2016). Others have experiences, vocabularies and expressions that can help us to give a richer framing or account of our own experiences, revealing new aspects of our emotions, practices and understandings (Burkitt, 2012; Gilmore & Kenny, 2015; Holmes, 2010). However, in traumatic circumstances of the kind related by Fein and Isaacson (2009) agency is lost, and the framework of social norms is shattered, making relational work more difficult. Also, the emotions that might be perceived as 'normal' reactions to such trauma can feel inappropriate or inadequate at such times (Goss, Jones, Betta, & Latham, 2011). This sense of inappropriateness limits emotion work and engagement with others, locking individuals into containing practices that avoid change and resolution, undermining confidence in being the kind of person they wish to be and shattering belief in their ability to act differently (Fein & Isaacson, 2009; Hibbert et al., 2019).

Developing the ability to engage with negative emotions, yet still to be able to adapt in positive ways, is therefore a learning challenge that questions how we can 'be at home in ourselves' and act differently in the future when faced with emotional trauma. Insights from recent studies of reflexive practice have begun to address this problem. The most powerful example is offered in Brown

Table 1. Reflexive practices following negative emotions.

Practice	Summary characterization
Containing	Suppression of traumatic painful experiences associated with negative emotions
Attending	Attention to emotions as part of reflexive practice and responding to the signal that *'something is going on'*
Dialoguing	Relational reflexive engagement to explore aspects of emotional experience and emotion work that we cannot fully recognize alone
Realigning	Responding to traumatic circumstances through self-reflexive personal emotion work to develop a new, positive self-orientation

and de Graaf's (2013) work with terminal cancer patients. They found that despite severe suffering and uncertainty for all of the patients, there was significant and varied emotion work in many patients' reflexive coping and crafting, rather than a simple release of emotion. For some of their participants, reflexive practice and emotion work centred on the ability to craft a narrative of hope and meaningful prospects (see also Pradies & DeJordy, 2016), however limited that future might be. Similarly, but on a less extreme part of the spectrum, Hibbert et al. (2019) found that individuals facing difficult career challenges were most likely to adapt through developing a positive emotional outlook – again, hope was critical. Such studies show that developing hope can be complex and slow; awareness and recognition of the traumatic nature of the experience grows (Brown & de Graaf, 2013) and leads to arresting moments (Greig, Gilmore, Patrick, & Beech, 2013) in which new possibilities for the realignment of practice suddenly become apparent.

Summarizing the literature outlined above, we argue that there are four key types of reflexive practice involved in constraining and enabling learning (Table 1).

Containing the pain of intensely negative emotions is a common and expected response in challenging organizational circumstances. Containing is either stimulated through regulative pressures (Lindebaum, 2017; Troth et al., 2018) or occurs as a protective response to circumstances that are experienced as traumatic (Fein & Isaacson, 2009; Van der Kolk, 2015; Wijaya & Heugens, 2017). *Attending* to emotions through deliberate engagement in reflexive practice, or emotion acting as a trigger for such practice, is a means by which we become more aware of what is going on in our experience (Davies, 2012; Gilmore & Kenny, 2015; Holmes, 2010). In this way, it is an invitation to learning perceived alongside the experience of emotional pain. *Dialoguing* with others in relational, reflexive engagement allows us to open up our emotions to re-description in others' vocabularies and conceptual repertoires. This provides different ways to understand and process our emotions and their relationships to context and circumstances (Burkitt, 2012; Cunliffe, 2009; Gilmore & Kenny, 2015; Hibbert et al., 2016). *Realigning* is possible when reflexive practice and emotion work are directed towards orienting the self towards possibilities for meaning and hope, in the face of negative emotions and associated personal trauma (Brown & de Graaf, 2013; Hibbert et al., 2019; Pradies & DeJordy, 2016). This process of realignment accepts the painful emotions and the difficulties that caused them and motivates learning in establishing salient possibilities for the future self.

There is a need to extend, integrate and develop theory, from this initial outline, towards a fuller understanding of how emotion work and self-reflexive practices may support learning in response to organizational situations involving negative emotional experiences. Having developed a foundation from the literature, we tighten our focus and refine the research question introduced earlier, to now ask: *How do individuals in organizations move on from* containing *negative emotions to learning, through the use of the reflexive practices of* attending, dialoguing

and realigning *and associated emotion work, to respond differently – more effectively and authentically – to similar organizational situations in the future?*

Methodology

We adopted a relationally reflexive (Hibbert, Sillince, Diefenbach, & Cunliffe, 2014) autoethnographic (Boncori & Smith, 2019; Davies, McGregor, & Horan, 2019) approach to this study. We develop theory through an intense focus on our own experiences, elaborated through cycles of conversation and interpretation. This approach does not lead to a structured exposition of data, but instead to an authentic narrative, the writing of which is part of the analysis.

In building an authentic narrative, we conducted research as individuals seeking to develop our organizational lives at a variety of higher education institutions. Beginning with a mutual exploration of emotion in the course of key incidents in our working lives, we developed our initial project through exchanging draft ideas. The core of our approach was 'a dialogue between practitioners of theory with different foci' (MacIntosh, Beech, Antonacopoulou, & Sims, 2012, p. 375). Through this exchange, our focus became learning in the context of *negative* emotional experiences that we realized were a common feature or our organizational lives.

The first phase of our research focused on eliciting our different understandings of emotional experiences in conversation and sharing representations in text form. We moved between these texts in rounds of challenge and debate, iteratively developing a framework that captured our understandings. We then re-engaged with the established literature to develop the focus of our study. These discussions and writing processes led to the organization of the initial framework of four reflexive practices. Although in hindsight these practices can be inferred from the literature, iterating between experience and theory helped us to identify the possibilities. This process of meaning-making and change (Ripamonti, Galuppo, Gorli, Scaratti, & Cunliffe, 2016) helped to shape our focused research question.

In the second phase of our research, we individually sought to organize more detailed accounts of incidents, issues, or processes from our careers, which involved negative emotional experiences that were significant for us, from which we sought to elicit learning that had been obscured by the emotional burden. We selected and narrated incidents important to us as individuals, which were also common organizational concerns (as examples rather than specific foci). Our material is summarized in Table 2.

We use alternative names in Table 2 (and in our later Findings section) to enable the different voices to be represented without making authorship obvious.

The focus on our life stories allowed for rich conversations in which detailed, small-scale recollections and plausible meanings could be related to other discourses and meanings (Hibbert et al., 2014; Ripamonti et al., 2016), particularly those outlined in our initial conceptual framework. Still within phase two of the research, each member offered their written account for interpretation within the team, and one of the other authors undertook an initial interpretation of the material.

Consistent with our overall approach (Hibbert et al., 2014) and the insights offered by Ripamonti et al. (2016), a collective discussion followed this process of interpretation. We offered interpretations and used them to trigger 'open dialogue and alternative interpretations to surface different voices and perspectives and to question what may be taken for granted' (p. 58). We then added two further layers to this research phase. The authors of each account offered a reaction to the interpretation of their story. We collated the interpretations and reactions and used these to flesh out the dynamics of emotion work and the self-reflexive orientation of the four practices as we experienced them. This supported the characterization of the practices developed in the findings.

Table 2. Summary of autoethnographic material.

Participant (pseudonym)	The organizational context of the issue	Emotions experienced by participant
Peter	**Organizational inertia**	'frustrated with the inaction'
	Peter was part of a departmental PhD committee. An option of introducing PhD coursework was on the agenda, but never progressed beyond arguments between factions. A strategic funding call was followed by work across the factions to put a proposal that was rejected due to internal politics; efforts never progressed the agenda.	'increasingly becoming indifferent'
		'anger and apathy'
	A committee reshuffle came with an agenda change. The work became bureaucratic; long meetings; reading and approving pointless reports. Peter lost motivation. Implementing changes or getting new ideas off the ground were constantly deferred for more discussion.	
	After one particularly bad meeting, he busted into the office shouting 'the meetings are a waste of time'. Soon, Peter would make sure something else was in his diary when committee meetings were scheduled. When colleagues asked about progress on the PhD front Peter's response was 'I really don't care anymore'.	
Hugh	**Leadership development in a non-inclusive environment**	'a bit wary about the content'
	While handling his day job, Hugh attended a residential leadership development training for academic leaders. The evenings turned into drinking sessions, which made Hugh uncomfortable, so he worked in his room. Opting out started impacting how other participants perceived him.	'An evening/night drinking culture emerged quite quickly, and I felt very uncomfortable with this'
	Hugh also became weary of the normative and exclusionary tools used during the programme. One exercise, which categorized participants as extrovert/introverts, increased divisions and tensions within groups, leaving Hugh feeling 'deeply uncomfortable and when we were asked to explain what we thought about it, I found it difficult, because what I really thought and felt was that this was completely inappropriate'.	'deeply uncomfortable'
		'made me feel more isolated, unhappy and less like trying to integrate with others'
	Hugh became more withdrawn from the rest of the group at that time and 'could hardly bring myself to participate. In truth, I just wanted to get away from them.'	'out of place, but wanting to be part of the group'
	At the same time, Hugh built a rapport with some participants on a one-to-one basis but felt that the process in the workshop reinforced divisions rather than building inclusive learning.	
	After some early reflection, Hugh chose to change some of his behaviour; offering constructive points during discussions even where he disagreed with the leadership training that was being conducted, and socializing more with the group.	

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued)

Participant (pseudonym)	The organizational context of the issue	Emotions experienced by participant
Jane	**Communication management during institutional cuts** Staff in a recently established department received an email from the Dean about an organizational restructure and a request to consult via a staff meeting. The announcement was unexpected and led to mixed emotions among staff; smiles replaced with frowns, quiet corridor gossip, and a sense of uncertainty. The department head, relatively new to the university, was abroad at the time. Unease and anxiety grew in the lead up to the meeting. Unionized staff suggested staff should come with one voice and Jane was 'selected' to speak during the meeting. The meeting started with a brief welcome by the Dean who quickly stated that 'the past week had been one of the toughest weeks in her professional life' and 'she was very stressed about it'. Finding it inappropriate to tell a room of 20+ staff that just spent an anxious week, Jane 'sat back and rolled her eyes', to which the Dean responded saying 'she did not appreciate my rolling eyes at her'. Things escalated quickly: 'I sat forward in my seat and advised the Dean that I was speaking on behalf of the department and that if she was feeling stressed then she should stop and be more considerate of the people who just learned they might lose their jobs.' The rest of the meeting was lacklustre and short, but ten-plus years on, Jane described 'an almost physiological feeling in the gut' when remembering the event.	'feeling in the gut' 'frustrated with the ambiguity to being defensive about the uncertainty, through to philosophical about the potential options – and back again' 'that floored me' 'offence showed on my face; I sat back and rolled my eyes' 'I was angry'
Charlie	**In-class exclusion and conflict management** Facilitating an intensive three-day MBA capstone project, where teams worked on company projects, Charlie noticed instances of exclusion of individuals in two teams. He intervened occasionally, suggesting the teams adopt specific collaborative processes. He also decided to bring the matter up during the debriefing session. That session first turned into a confrontation between a 'pushy' student (L) and her team, with Charlie finding himself raising his voice to bring the discussion back to the learning aspects of the session. When asking another team how they performed in terms of including all members in the process, one student (K) suddenly shouted that the team 'stopped my learning all year'. Further confrontation among members followed, quickly getting out of control. At this point Charlie's throat was dry and 'I felt out on a limb. Not quite afraid, but completely uncertain and anxious about how to get the discussion back on track.' Charlie hastily closed the session asking (rather weakly) for students to reflect on these points privately and offering to meet later in his office. Both L and K came to see Charlie and thanked him for trying to bring the issue up during the discussion as they had often felt excluded during the programme. The short discussion made them realize that they both struggled with the same issues and offered some immediate support. But it made Charlie feel 'hollow and sick'. He called on a colleague to talk about the situation but burst into tears before he could finish the story.	'feeling a bit on edge' 'completely uncertain and anxious' 'I felt hollow and sick' 'I suddenly broke into ragged, sobbing tears'

The third phase of our research process is a collective interpretation that remains ongoing. Here we sought to address the 'how and why' of our focused research question. We probed each other's interpretations at length and over multiple interactions, using mutual questioning of our assumptions to put forward alternative interpretations (Thomas, Tienari, Davies, & Meriläinen, 2009). We included further rounds of conversation within the team and beyond, encompassing feedback from colleagues, seminar and conference debates, and recommendations from formal review processes. The last of these led to a significant reanalysis of our material. These interactions with external peers enabled us to refine our ideas through continued rounds of conversation, writing, reflecting and reviewing in which we engaged diverse views and sought to integrate our understandings (Hibbert et al., 2014). This included collective reflection on the accounts and their interpretations and multiple rounds of development of alternative models of learning pathways, leading to the final model presented later in the theoretical development section.

Findings: Characterizing our Experience of Reflexive Practices

In this section, we show how the reflexive practices outlined earlier – namely, containing, attending, discussing and realigning – were enacted. Our analysis identified the different modalities of emotion work and reflexive orientations that characterize each practice, and the dynamics between them, as a preliminary step for later theoretical development.

We focus on one of the four narratives to provide a clear but concise account of the practices. 'Charlie', with the support of the other authors, attended to what was 'going on' in his experience when debriefing MBA capstone project teams, who had focused on an industrial client's business challenge. His story centres on the (unexpected) conflict within teams, how he tried to manage this, and the negative emotions he experienced. Empirical engagement around one narrative affords us the space to explore in detail the different modalities and orientations of reflective practices that were revealed through our analytical process. We use examples from our other narratives selectively to illustrate commonalities and nuances.

Containing practices

In Charlie's story, his containing practices came about as he sought to distance himself from his negative feelings in response to students voicing their experiences in an MBA team project. The context of the experience was a debrief activity, which is common for capstone project courses that are client-focused and time-sensitive since these can be challenging for students. Charlie, who was an experienced MBA teacher, was aware of group dynamics in two teams:

> As we got started with the wash-up meeting at the end of the class it was L and K (who I felt had been excluded) that were most on my mind [. . .] The issues raised by the groups were mostly [. . .] suggestions for how to manage the workshop differently. None of that was troublesome. I steered the discussion on to my issues by asking if the groups felt that everyone was able to participate equally. The response was mostly nods, with a few stiffened backs visible in the room. I mentioned a difficult client question in response to the presentation from group 1 and commented that I had seen some suggestions from L that would have helped the group to avoid this difficulty, and I wondered why they had not taken up this suggestion. One of the other group members commented that she was pushy and had lots of opinions, and most of them were not useful at all. L was furious and listed off a number of other ideas she had had that were also rejected, and how their work could have been much better if she had been listened to. It. . . degenerated from there, and I had to raise my voice to break up what was quickly an angry confrontation between L and two other members of her group.

As the event unfolded Charlie had some awareness of his feelings as the 'feeling a bit on edge as this point' phrase in the following excerpt indicates. But, as the rest of the excerpt shows, Charlie's feelings were directed outwards to the context of managing interpersonal dynamics among the students:

> I was feeling a bit on edge at this point, but it wasn't the first time I had needed to intervene in confrontations between MBA students and I still felt generally in control of the situation [. . .] I turned to group 2 and said that I wondered if they felt that everyone had been able to participate. Mostly nods. . . but at this point, K found her voice and shouted: 'NO! you stopped my learning! You have been stopping my learning all year!' Another member of the group, E, turning red with rage, shouted back: 'There are some people I just won't work with!' and several of her group members voiced agreement.

> It was getting ugly. At this point my throat was dry and I felt out on a limb. Not quite afraid, but completely uncertain and anxious about how to get the discussion back on track. I realized I had no idea, and just closed it down, asking (rather weakly) for students to reflect on these points privately, and offering to meet later in my office, with any students who wanted to follow these issues up. Everyone left, pretty much all were either upset or angry at that point.

What Charlie was less prepared for were the negative emotions he felt as the students shared their feelings. A dry throat, feeling 'out on a limb' and off-track and 'completely uncertain and anxious' pinpoint the negative emotions that came into play for Charlie as the interaction between the students unfolded. His emotion work in the enactment of the practice involved *adapting* as he sought to suppress his authentic feelings, associated with a reflexive orientation that was *externalizing.* Ending the session earlier than planned and offering to speak with students privately showed that containing involved moving emotion work away from the immediate situation where he did not feel able to be authentic and towards the office, an organizational site where academic matters of unhappy or upset students and general student team issues are typically addressed.

Containing practices were illustrated in all the narratives. Peter contained his feelings by saying he did not care and withdrawing his involvement in further committee discussions. By withholding his involvement, he sought to make what he saw as the problem something for others on the committee, again showing emotion work that adapted his authentic position and a reflexive orientation that externalized the issue as being about others. Jane adapted her emotion work by focusing on containing feelings of anger at the Dean's violation of organizational norms and directing them at the Dean as blame for some ten-plus years after the experience. In the process of writing this paper, Jane realized the containing practices that allowed her to harness and direct her anger at the moment, was also what made remembering the experience so painful – pushing the experience away from self-reflexive attention had not been helpful. In Hugh's case, containing was associated with cumulative experiences of others' micro-aggressive behaviours in a leadership programme that built up over time to generate an emotionally painful environment. Hugh's emotion work was adaptive, as he sought to develop a more assertive position in the collective group, but the negative emotions of the experience still felt 'raw' on later reflection, especially since they resonated with similar encounters in his everyday work environment. Moreover, Hugh only explicated the learning from his intuitive adaptation later, thereby adding behavioural interventions to maintain position and influence in uncomfortable contexts to his organizational repertoire. Thus, all of our experiences of containing practices involved, in subtly different ways, *adapting* emotion work in situations where authentic expression was difficult and reflexively *externalizing* the difficult emotions by orienting responsibility towards others rather than the self.

Dialoguing practices

For Charlie, dialoguing followed much later after the emotions he felt during his difficult experience. His initial attempt at discussing his feelings came at the time of the event, following the students, L and K, speaking privately with him after class. In his office, they thanked Charlie for trying to raise the issues and for caring and shared more details about the team dynamics and their backgrounds, and the hurt they experienced. Charlie intended to discuss the experience with a trusted colleague, but was overrun by his feelings:

> I felt hollow and sick. Immediately after L and K had left, I called a trusted colleague, J, into my office. I wanted the support of a friend after an experience I had found tough – and to talk through the whole process while I was close to it, to understand how I could have handled it better and maybe intervened sooner or in different ways. I had a lot of questions buzzing in my head. J stepped into my office and I closed the door. I started to explain my experience, but I only got a few words out before I suddenly broke into ragged, sobbing tears, which surprised me – and shocked J.

The importance of trusted others in dialogue came through the interpretations of another author, who drew attention to the primed or charged nature of the context. Charlie was working in a high-intensity capstone class with students who were working professionals consulting for real companies at the end of a demanding MBA course. Drawing attention to these resonant features led Charlie to understand that the emotions experienced by him had detached from the proximate cause and highlighted a need to find space and time when they can be released or reviewed in safety. This intervention allowed Charlie to be authentic in *expressing* emotion work while the dialogical process supported an *externalizing* reflexive orientation, giving him a critical perspective on his experience. Charlie's comment below shows how dialoguing helped him to understand the emotional temperature of a difficult context and how the 'traumatic imprint' of experience could prevent learning from it:

> [An] important gain in understanding for me, through the interpretive process, was the way in which one of my interpreters was able to highlight all the contextual factors that had already ratcheted up stress and tension for students before the transgressive incident. For example, Jane noticed that: 'the students' feelings of competition and anxiety that come from the structure of the intensive three-day experience and the multiple tensions built-in (no pre-work, client grading, random teams, last part of the MBA experience) . . .' She helped me to see that in some ways the situation was primed [. . .]. That ought to have been obvious to me, but I was too focused on the traumatic imprint of the incident and not enough on the factors underlying it. This has helped me to think about how the nature of processes can lead to extreme 'emotional priming' and how approaches to leading through that can be developed. I have also been stimulated to learn from what was happening before emotions become obvious and devote more time to managing the tone and 'temperature' of processes and focusing less on outcomes.

Evidence for the role of dialoguing in all the narratives was most clear in the process of sharing our interpretations of each other's experiences. For all of us, the role of trusted others was integral to this practice and clarified through later rounds of interpretation and response. Dialoguing was an under-developed practice in the stories that we narrated for each other, but the process of interpretive engagement allowed it to flourish. Developing insights through this practice, therefore, took (often extensive periods of) time. In our cases, it took some years to fully explore our experiences and potentiate changes in management practice, through later engagement with others. We concluded that a significant driver of delay in dialoguing was the traumatic imprint of the negative emotions that were common to our experiences, which locked us into a loop of containment rather than exploring learning pathways.

Attending practices

Charlie's story (presented above) shows that the emotions can catch us off guard, as evidenced in Charlie's bursting into tears before he can share his experience with his colleague. We generally found these experiences were associated with a curtailment of attending practices. Charlie's account shows he was aware of a range of negative emotions before breaking down, but he did not focus on them. Attending involves 'staying with' uncomfortable sensations for longer than one would normally when experiencing them and allowing *expressing* emotion work to inhabit them authentically.

When analysing our stories, we noted that all pertained to situations that we perceived as unfair or ineffective, where attempts to intervene through formal roles or influence seemed to be failing. Whether the unfairness affected us directly or others in the context, these moments of realizing that 'something is going on' created discomfort and arresting moments (Greig et al., 2013). We noted conscious awareness in Peter's and Hugh's accounts who, at some point, both decided to withdraw as they became aware of the emotional drivers through (re)analysing their respective situations. While attending had been truncated in both cases, the experiences were strongly retained for later re-engagement through their traumatic imprint.

Our data suggest that the potential for attending to emotions is marked by *expressing* emotion work in response to physical actions and sensations, such as feeling uncomfortable and eye-rolling (See Table 2 for additional examples). A focus on emotions also seemed to be associated with a realization that something is wrong, such as the impression that a situation is unjust or unfair. That is, emotions that trigger attending practices are associated with the impression that there is something 'going on' in our context that we must address.

Interestingly, not all triggering experiences were 'major' incidents. Charlie's and Jane's experiences came about from incidents where acute interactions involving them and others occurred in a short period of minutes. In Charlie's experience the intensity of the interaction between the students led to him raise his voice, and then seeking to re-tell the experience to J led him to tears. In Jane's experience, her interaction with the Dean led her to roll her eyes and reply with terse and defensive words. In these experiences, the physiological and verbal responses were closely intertwined and unfolded relatively quickly. In contrast, Hugh's and Peter's interactions involved a slow build-up of small-scale experiences that led to significant negative emotions. In Hugh's experience, multiple interactions around formal and informal activities over a week of leadership development training left him with multiple instances of feeling uncomfortable and seeking to reduce the discomfort. Peter's experience of committee work also unfolded through multiple interactions over many months. The interactions left him with feelings of frustration and apathy.

What was common, however, was how in the (often truncated) practice of attending, emotional experiences were felt (and later re-felt) in bodily ways, with a strong *internalizing* reflexive orientation. Interoception – an awareness of one's bodily state – seems to be heightened in such experiences. We expected containing practices to be an immediate response, but some attending practices were instinctively engaged 'en route'; the containing practices allowed each of us to cope, but the traumatic imprint already captured through attending remained. However, as we worked together on this project our practices of attending became more developed; *expressing* emotion work and a reflexive orientation *internalizing* – that is, owning – our emotional experiences became the norm. This underlined the possibility of a more direct route to realigning practices.

Realigning practices

To construct a positive emotional outlook, a degree of self-reframing in relation to the world is involved, which can include both accepting vulnerability as a strength in providing the opportunity

for generative learning when the emotional context is supportive and safe (Corlett et al., 2019), as well as appreciating other abilities and strengths of the self in coping. This practice, of realigning, followed one of two other practices in the framework.

Similarly to the practice of attending, the practice of realigning can sometimes be truncated. For Charlie, his emotional reaction as the MBA students voiced their frustrations in the classroom caught him off guard and his initial response was to close down the discussion as he had not predicted the feelings that he surfaced. Cutting off the de-briefing and wrapping up the class allowed him to distance himself from the students and hold back his feelings about the confrontation and blaming situation. It was only once he was in the relationally safe space of a private office with a trusted colleague that Charlie intended to engage deeply with the experience to understand how he might change his future approach. In this he was bringing the practice of realigning into a lively relationship with the practice of dialoguing, shifting the emotion work focus from *expressing* to *adapting*, as he sought to be authentic in the context of self-reflexive, internally oriented change – that is, to

> talk through the whole process while I was close to it, to understand how I could have handled it better and maybe intervened sooner or in different ways."

However, Charlie's crying revealed the extent to which the students' experiences were affecting him, and dialoguing and aligning practices were abandoned in favour of containing practices, to cope with a situation that was still too raw. It was only after many years, and as part of this current study, that Charlie was able to fully engage with realigning; an intervention from Jane, through dialoguing, helped him to reframe the situation and his role in it.

In the other three stories, realigning took place in response to a recognition of the lack of awareness shown by others. For example, in Hugh's situation, this concerned the inappropriateness of the exercises on the first day of a workshop, which was potentially humiliating for introverts. Hugh's response began when the facilitators and participants on the programme did not share his concerns about the programme activities. He distanced himself from the facilitators and participants and focused on silently critiquing the exercises in which he felt uncomfortable. This served to heighten Hugh's belief that the facilitators were unconcerned by the effects of the exercises. However, the response did not stop there, and his focus shifted towards realigning by looking inwards to question his response to the situation and adapting his emotion work to support authenticity differently. From his self-assessment, his response changed towards re-engaging to shape the discourse and raise awareness. By confronting the situation and working with his emotions to find a different response, Hugh was able to re-open lines of communication and learn to engage differently. This underlines a necessary degree of reframing of the self in relation to the context involved in learning to manage organizational problems, which can include accepting both the vulnerabilities and strengths of the self in coping.

However, others' lack of awareness did not always stimulate constructive new approaches. Peter's realization that the committee's response to increasing centralization would be to passively accept the status quo came after multiple unsuccessful attempts to shape their agenda. This led to feelings of irritation and deliberate disengagement from organizational interventions. Similarly, Jane's response towards the Dean's behaviour set out a confrontational dynamic that was difficult for either party to back away from. Both of these responses, while they did not support harmony or organizational progress, still represent self-reflexive realignment towards an authentic stance, worked out adaptively through disinterested or confrontational presentations. For organizations, it may be the case that the individual learning that occurs in these situations enables their members to learn to resist or reorient their energies in undesired ways. Neither Peter nor Jane engaged in further self-reflection to re-engage with the other actors involved in the experiences at the time, but further learning about alternative strategies for managing organizational inertia and confrontation
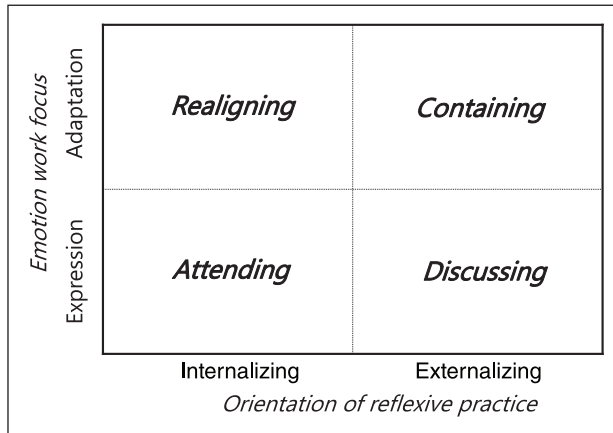
Figure 1. Dimensions of emotional self-reflexive practices.

were explored as part of the analysis for this study. In the later rounds of our research conversations and reflections, comparing and contrasting our experiences helped to identify the importance of the helpful attention of others in continuing the process of *internalizing* self-reflexive learning.

Theoretical Development: Authenticity and Effectiveness through Self-Reflexive Learning

Our analysis established that the four self-reflexive practices can be arranged on two key dimensions, according to the focus of emotion work (on either expressing or adapting) and reflexive orientation (either externalizing or internalizing) as shown in Figure 1.

This characterization, in particular the elucidation of externalizing or internalizing orientations, adds to the work of Hibbert et al. (2019) by providing additional insight into the relationship between emotions and addressing the self or others when facing a situation that requires change. We also showed some of the key dynamic relationships between the practices that enable or constrain possibilities for learning. This allows us to answer our focused research question, namely: *How do individuals in organizations move on from* containing *negative emotions to learning, through the use of the reflexive practices of* attending, dialoguing *and* realigning *and associated emotion work, to respond differently – more effectively and authentically – to similar organizational situations in the future?*

Initial engagement with the negative emotional experience

First, a negative emotional experience triggers *attending*, combining instinctive, expressive emotion work to cope with the experience and an internalizing reflexive orientation which captures the contextual, emotional and even visceral detail of the experience. However, this will lead swiftly to the practice of *containing* if the emotions are painful (Fein & Isaacson, 2009). Nevertheless, the heightened awareness creates a *traumatic imprint* that helps individuals to retain their strong impression of the detail of events. They re-experience such events in response to stressful conditions that lead to similar bodily sensations (van der Kolk, 2015). This serves to re-inscribe the *traumatic imprint*, preserving its details, but does not lead to learning. Exit from circling the traumatic imprint is enabled by the practice of *dialoguing*, but this requires certain conditions to progress: the legitimization of emotions and a supportive context.

Enabling dialogue

We confirmed that learning how to 'go on' from traumatic situations involves emotion work (Fein & Isaacson, 2009; Hochschild, 1979; Saam, 2018; Zapf, 2002). However, we also found that the actions of (self)-inattentive individuals in influential positions who did not invest in the necessary emotion work, legitimated more instinctive interventions to grasp temporary control of the situation. Our stories highlighted 'righteous anger', either in relation to one's situation or in response to harmful effects on others, although we felt overwhelmed or undermined by our reactions. We felt the need to 'contain' our own emotions to influence others (Tee, 2015) to avoid a damaging contagion of negative emotions in our organizational context (Dasborough et al., 2009). Thus, despite an initial emotional reaction, containment was still the proximal outcome. When this study provided *legitimation* for acknowledging rather than regretting our emotional responses, deeper and more authentically expressive emotion work was enabled. This adds to Fein and Isaacson's (2009) insights, by showing the practices and processes through which the isolation and a sense of inadequacy they highlighted can be avoided.

Acknowledging emotions in this way may entail more statements about what people experience themselves and less about what they believe others are 'making' them feel. As we questioned and probed the contexts in which we saw the potential for learning unfold and explored the possibilities for alternative responses, we experienced some uncomfortable realizations. Phase three of our analysis, in which we had fully established a supportive context with open and trusting relationships, enabled us to reanalyse and reinterpret stories in this way. *Helpful attention of others* was therefore found to be useful in developing learning from emotional experiences. Relating our stories to each other, having them interpreted as data, and then having our assumptions interrogated (Cunliffe, 2003) and reinterpreted in a type of collective reflection (Gilmore & Kenny, 2015), still evoked difficult feelings. However, we add to the work of Gilmore and Kenny (2015) and Fein and Isaacson (2009) by identifying specific conditions for moving on from such difficult feelings, in a way that allowed for self-reflexive learning. Our open and trusting relationships – and the compassionate awareness of each other's concerns – enabled us, in time, to move beyond the emotional difficulty of the stories (Ramsey, 2008) and to develop learning insights that could be useful for the 'owner' of the story and others (Beets & Goodman 2012; Hibbert et al., 2019) faced with similar organizational situations. Thus, accompanying the person who has experienced the trauma enables them to reframe the situation and come to a more appreciative stance of themselves in it. This is important, not least, for dealing with feelings of guilt (Fein & Isaacson, 2009; Wijaya & Heugens, 2017) in having caused or contributed to the situation.

Thus, these two conditions – the helpful attention of others and legitimating emotions – enabled the practice of dialoguing, providing a shift back to expressive emotion work and authenticity (Heaphy, 2017; Hochschild, 1979) while an externalizing reflexive orientation holds the story of the difficult experience in a (temporary) safe space for exploration. This may lead to learning directly, or it may be entangled with realigning in which the route to learning involves adapting emotion work with an internalizing reflexive orientation, as the individual accepts the need for personal change and seeks a reconfigured authentic position (Hibbert et al., 2019).

Realigning in the learning pathway

Once the externally oriented practice of dialoguing was enabled, we found that the internally oriented, self-reflexive practice of *realigning* was also potentiated. Learning and reflexive change can still be unexplored and latent long after the events in question – until emotions are remembered and 're-felt' and related, when the possibility of open dialogue and interaction with others becomes possible (Cunliffe, 2009; Hibbert et al., 2016).

Our experiences also showed that the emotion work to enable self-reflexive learning could be oriented towards a new idea of the self, and that the desired authenticity could be changed in the process of learning. Revisiting our emotions and re-questioning them at different periods of the development of this study provided a way for us bear the pain of our emotions in order to learn and theorize, but this required a self-reflexive response. This need was more likely to be identified in the practice of dialoguing – as we have related above – but as we developed our experience and habits of self-reflexive practice through our work together, we found that we were likely to bring new situations into the conversation having already recognized a latent need for learning and self-change. Thus, the relationship between dialoguing and realigning practices is not necessarily one-way but represents a rich set of possibilities.

A process model for learning from negative emotional experiences

Summing up the theoretical points elaborated above leads to the process model presented in Figure 2. Our experience of developing and working through this full process highlighted the possibility that experience of self-reflexive practice of this kind may lead to the possibility of a 'short-cut' to learning. Individuals can come to recognize what is going on in the practice of attending and quickly direct their engagement towards the realigning-dialoguing dynamic, provided a supportive context is available. We see this processual understanding as adding to previous theorizing on how learning can occur in challenging situations. For example, while supportive dyadic relationships had previously been identified as important in how people could recover and move on in organizational settings (Beech, 2017; Gilmore & Kenny, 2015) and with the right social support from groups who shared similar experiences, we show how the expression of vulnerability could be enabled and could play a role in initiating generative learning for the group (Corlett et al., 2019). The process model we propose adds an explanation of how such learning can occur and adds insights into the personal and social routes through which change at the personal level can occur.

The learning that is developed in the dynamic of realigning and dialoguing leads to new possibilities for being and doing. Individuals will likely be able to be more authentic – more 'at home' in themselves – through engaging in self-reflexive emotion work. They will also likely be more effective in their personal projects through overcoming the isolation and sense of inadequacy that may otherwise result when negative emotions are contained (Fein & Isaacson, 2009). Ultimately, we speculate that individuals will be able to simulate a supportive context internally in some circumstances, and proceed even more directly to self-reflexive learning. There are opportunities for future research to build on this speculation.

One line of future inquiry could be to trace interaction over time; for example, researching how events and learning are remembered and forgotten, and how this enters the stories of individuals and organizations. Future research could explore the potential of interaction with peers and in hierarchies to enable and stimulate reflexive learning from these stories. In addition, our study suggests that each of the practices might be experienced at various levels of intensity and combination. There may be different qualities of reflexive learning where, for example, there is a relatively high intensity of attending and lower intensity of realigning as opposed to the inverse proportions, and future studies to illuminate these possibilities would be valuable. Overall, future research focused on the development of advanced self-reflexive ability over time and in various patterns would add to our understanding and be of value to those whose organizational contexts can involve negative emotional experiences – which applies to most of us – although we are already able to set out some practical implications of our work.
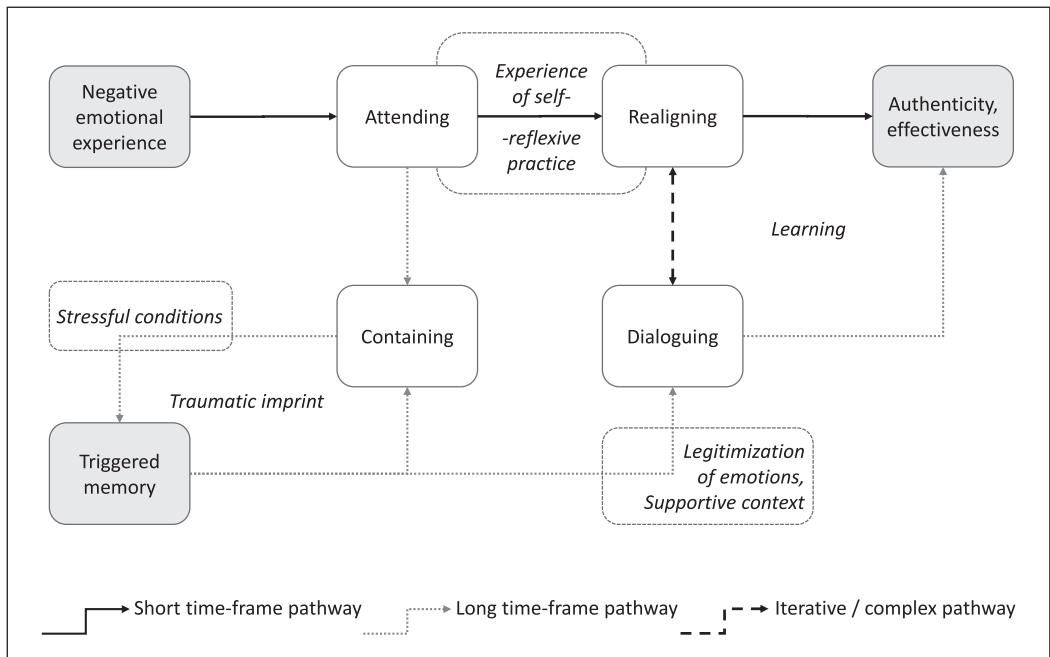
Figure 2. A process model for self-reflexive learning from negative emotional experiences.

Conclusion: Implications for Organizations, Including Academic Contexts

Through an autoethnographic and relationally reflexive approach, we have characterized the reflexive practices that are enacted in response to negative emotional experiences and described how they can lead to pathways for learning. In sum, our model provides insight into the potential for reflexive learning in response to negative emotional experiences.

As we have elaborated earlier, a self-reflexive approach enables the person to notice and 'stay with' the experience (Greig et al., 2013) for a different quality of learning. Through attention to the possibilities, managers may use their experiences to develop a repertoire of emotion work, which has orienting effects for themselves and influencing effects on others, in contexts where negative emotions arise. In doing so they will also develop an awareness of how their 'emotional capital' is established or exhausted (Saam, 2018). A manager's developed repertoire might include options beyond control and containment in contexts where, for example, the expression of anger or grief might be recognized as legitimate (Saam, 2018). This kind of repertoire of emotion work is intrinsically entangled with reflexive practices (Figure 1) through which emotionality, rationality and relationality are connected (Hibbert et al., 2019) in the processes that support learning (Figure 2). Managers that deliberately engage with the process will enhance both their repertoires and their ability to connect with emotional experience. The development of this ability is also important in academic contexts, where all educators face situations laden with emotions in the classroom and in field research (Callagher et al., 2021), as well as anxiety arising from feelings of lost identity when transitioning to academic management (Brown et al., 2021). We believe that enhancing repertoires of emotion work leads to an enhanced ability to deal with situations that give rise to powerful negative emotions, while also avoiding a traumatic burden associated with long-term emotional containment.

Developing repertoires of reflexive practice and emotion work can, therefore, involve both acceptance of the self – that an emotional reaction was justified – and a willingness to realign the self towards future encounters. From an organizational perspective, it also includes setting the *context* for reflexive learning (Beech, 2017) and emotion work. An organizational context that is conducive to such emotion work does not mean managers taking responsibility for regulating emotion (Dasborough et al., 2009) but for acting on, and potentially shaping, the context of interaction in general and in the manager–employee relationship in particular. Academic contexts provide settings in which there is a particular degree of struggle, disruption and confusion about the nature of work (Callagher et al., 2021; Knights & Clarke, 2014), in which the role of the manager is also contested. This means that managers in academic settings need to shape the context indirectly, through supporting peer development of collegial and community structures.

The general context of interaction in organizational settings needs to be one which appreciates and accepts that emotion and emotional expression are normal in organizational life. This includes the need for those in collegial academic structures to accept and accommodate these aspects of organizational life too, creating a shared responsibility across the community. However, the normalizing of emotion in any organizational setting places particular responsibilities on managers. Those in managerial roles may identify a need to 'recalibrate their sense of alarm' when either emotion work is triggered in an organizational context, or the presence of earlier trauma becomes apparent. The manager–employee relationship needs to be one that can accept both an authentic expression of emotions and traumatic narratives (Haynie & Shepherd, 2011), and help with reframing and realigning these narratives through dialogue. We recognize that there will be cases and circumstances where managers and/or employees should seek professional support. We hope that the learning process we have identified, which builds repertoires of emotion work and reflexive practice, will nevertheless be helpful in many other circumstances.

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