Doing compassion or doing discipline?

Power relations and the Magdalene Laundries

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Abstract

We address the Magdalene Laundries. On the one hand this institution was constituted as a compassionate response to managing troubled young women; on the other hand it was seen as a disciplinary apparatus imposing total institutional life on its inmates. The antinomy of views about the institution is evident in the analysis we make of 116 comments by 66 commenters on an online newspaper article about the Magdalene Laundries. We analyse these comments in the context of broader concerns about contemporary approaches to the topic of organizational compassion. We argue that organizational compassion is a complex social process embedded within power relations that can be disciplinary in nature and create ambivalent rather than wholly positive outcomes.

Keywords: compassion; organization studies; power; Magdalene Laundries.

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You must serve both as guides and mothers to the children of the classes; they should find, in you,

comfort in trials and help in their troubles. The greater the spiritual maladies of our penitents, the

greater should be our interest in them. The more inclined they are to evil, the greater should be our

compassion for them…

(Mother St. Euphrasia Pelletier 1898, p. 98)[†]

Introduction

The Magdalene Laundries have come into popular cultural focus in recent years as the result of a film (Mullan 2002) as well as being a topic for organization analysis (Clegg et al. 2006, Clegg 2006, Makarushka 2012). The present study critically analyses commentary on the compassion and power involved in the specific practices constituting these laundries, which operated as 'shelters' for girls and women in Ireland and other parts of the world between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries. Mother St Mary Euphrasia Pelletetier's positioning of the role of the Sisters of Mercy in these laundries saw the Sisters' role as being an instrument of compassion in an organization dedicated to helping those in need of redemption. Clegg, Courpasson and Phillips (2006) criticize the claims of these laundries to be founded on compassion, seeing them instead as an instance of Goffman's (1961) 'total institution'. Not only have the laundries been subject to academic critique: in recent times public criticism has also become evident.

[†] Mother St Mary Euphrasia Pelletetier was the Founder of the Congregation of the Good Shepherd Sisters, which established many Magdalene Laundries.

It is from the public sphere that we draw the data for this paper. We analyse 116 comments on an online article about the Magdalene Laundries that were made by members of civil society at large, responding to a defence of their role in the laundries by two of the nuns who were involved in them. The focus of our analysis is on the ways in which public discourse constituted these 'compassionate' organizations (we use the inverted commas because it was precisely the statues of these organizations that was at issue).

The paper is structured in four sections. First, referring to the work of researchers such as Frost et al. (2006, 2000), Dutton et al. (2006, 2007, 2002), Kanov et al. (2004) and Lilius et al. (2008), we consider the influence of idealism present in organizational compassion theory and research. Second, we present our research context including our case study and methodology. Third, we discuss our findings considering the socially constructed, mutually constituted, and dynamically (non)dualistic nature of compassion as a relational process. We conclude by acknowledging the need to reframe organizational compassion as a social phenomenon that is experienced and interpreted as complex, contested, contingent, multiple and emergent.

Compassion as embedded in power relations

Mother St. Euphrasia Pelletier, with whose words we began this paper, preaches that compassion should be the essence of care for penitent children of 'the classes', the peasant and working classes. The term 'compassion' has its roots in two Latin words: *passion,* meaning 'to suffer' and the prefix *com,* meaning 'together'; hence, *compassion* means 'suffering together'. As an individual characteristic, compassion is considered to be a character strength inasmuch as it is a psychological ingredient

(process or mechanism) or a distinguishable route through which the virtue of humanity is expressed (Peterson and Seligman 2004).

Mother St. Euphrasia Pelletier is hardly alone in conceptualizing compassion as a positive practice or as an object lesson for the broader community to follow without giving due thought to power implications and potential negative outcomes (Lancione forthcoming). The compassionate giver assumes (s)he is acting positively (i.e., 'piously') towards the receiver even without 'listening', establishing a direct dialogue, or taking into account the perspective of the receiver and what (s)he desires (Bradley 2005). In some cases, compassionate actions may become 'a form of patronage and a means of control' (Stirrat and Henkel 1997, p. 72) through which one is patronized.

Being compassionate has been seen as a good thing not just by 19th century Sisters of Mercy and other orders but also for many modern organization theorists. In organization studies compassion is usually defined as a three-fold *process*: 1) of noticing another's suffering; 2) of feeling empathy (through taking the perspective of the receiver) and 3) of responding in some way to alleviate the pain (Kanov et al. 2004). The process can be both an individual as well as a collective phenomenon of (collective recognizing, feeling, and responding to suffering; Lilius et al. 2012). Described as the synthesis of 'a long historical tradition in philosophy and theology' that 'set up the rich possibilities for inquiry' into organizational compassion (Rynes et al. 2012, p. 505), this three-fold process has been cited extensively in publications related to management and organizational studies (see Dutton et al. 2006, Dutton et al. 2007, Lilius et al. 2012, Lilius et al. 2011, Lilius et al. 2008, Frost et al. 2006).

Simpson et al. (2013a, 2013b, 2014b, 2014a) have critiqued this definition as limited in that it only describes compassion from the giver's perspective and disregards the

experiences of the receiver. The definition thereby fails to account for compassion as a social relational process. Relational practices of compassion entail assessments by both parties: by the giver of the receiver's qualifications as a worthy recipient (e.g. are they responsible for their own suffering? Do they have the agency to overcome the suffering themselves?) and of a giver's motivations in providing support (is the giver motivated by genuine care or are they seeking to engender a sense of obligation in the receiver; or to create a positive image in society?) (Simpson et al. 2014b). Such assessments indicate that compassion is steeped in power relations – the legitimate giver and the legitimate receiver can command certain rights, privileges and authority within society (Clark 1997). Finally, the fact that such assessments are required indicates that givers and receivers experience both positive and negative outcomes of compassion relations with many shades of grey in between (Nussbaum 2003).

A recent publication by leading organizational compassion theorist(s) and researcher(s) Dutton et al. (2014, p. 277) has partially addressed these critiques by redefining organizational compassion as 'an interpersonal process involving noticing, feeling, sensemaking, and acting that alleviates the suffering of another person'. It is encouraging to see that organizational compassion is being redefined as an interpersonal process that involves sensemaking or assessments by both givers and receivers within the compassion processes. We suggest, however, that this redefinition is still incomplete as it continues to assume that the process will lead to positive outcomes that alleviate suffering. Although Dutton et al. acknowledge some negative outcomes for the giver of compassion such as compassion fatigue (Figley 1995, 2002b, 2002a) and moral distress (Halifax 2011), they do not consider the potential negative outcomes for the receiver of compassionate support.

Compassion has been seen by organization studies to have buffering effects that absorb system shocks; (Bright et al. 2006); it has also been seen a) as enabling healing and learning to adapt after trauma (Powley and Cameron 2006); b) facilitating enhanced organizational performance (Cameron et al. 2004); c) speeding recovery from suffering (Lilius et al. 2011, Dutton et al. 2002); d) strengthening positive emotions and employee commitment to the organization as well as co-workers (Lilius et al. 2008, Frost et al. 2000); e) building resources of pride, trust, connection, and motivation (Dutton et al. 2007); f) fortifying values and beliefs such as dignity, respect, and common good; g) cultivating critical relational skills through enhanced emotional sensitivity; h) fostering followers' self-efficacy and productivity (Grant (2008), as well as; i) making leaders more effective (Dutton et al. 2002) and better able to take ethical decisions (Crossan et al. 2013, Sutton 2010, 2009, Cameron et al. 2011). Overall, the research indicated by this alphabet of accomplishments strongly suggests that compassion in organizations offers important positive outcomes for individual members, customers, and the organization as a whole (Lilius et al. 2012). Compassion is seen as a thing-in-itself rather than as a relational phenomenon saturated with power relations (Simpson et al. 2013b, 2014b, 2014a).

Indeed, Dutton et al.'s (2014) most recent paper attempts to address this imbalance by including consideration of power, addressing it in terms of power-distance, described as 'social power', that can restrict the flow of compassion relations. While we welcome this attempt, a limited understanding of power is evident Conceptualising power only as organizational position or status rather than as endemic to all social relation (Haugaard 1997, 2012b, 2012a, Clegg 1989, Clegg et al. 2006), is a conceptual shortcoming. Oganizational compassion cannot be understood without giving attention to the context of power/knowledge relations within which

compassion is embedded; as power is neither positive nor negative but can be potentially either or both, organizational compassion can be both positive and negative in its effects as a mode of power.

In what follows, we provide a case study highlighting both defence and attack on practice of compassion in a significant organizational example that has been widely criticized, despite its compassionate commitments.

Research context and method

Case justification

We start from the premise developed by Flyvbjerg (2006) that atypical cases can reveal more than can the randomly sampled average. Cases are selected in case study research for theoretical reasons as opposed to statistical representativeness (Eisenhardt 1989). What matters is less the number of units observed and more the common attributes within the sample case and between the case and the population of interest. The Magdalene Laundries provide a case of a 'total institution'. Goffman (1961, p. xiii) emphasized the value of studying total institutions ('a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life') as extreme cases that make evident normal practices of domination (Clegg 2006). The total institution of the Magdalene Laundries provides opportunity for spirited debate on the distinction between the ideal of compassion and its actuality in practice.

The case of the Magdalene Laundries

The Magdalene Laundries initially operated in Ireland from the eighteenth century and spread globally, closing as recently as 1996. Founded by various religious orders as well as lay committees, the Magdalene Laundries were named after Mary Magdalene, categorized in 1591 as having been a prostitute by Pope Gregory. The Magdalene Asylums were originally established to 'rescue' women and girls in danger of becoming prostitutes, as well as rehabilitating those already 'fallen' (Luddy 1995) and Mary Magdalene was adopted as the patron saint of the institution because of her example: even the fallen could be saved.

Religiously, as Mother St. Euphrasia Pelletier outlines, compassion is required of the righteous for those who have 'strayed' or 'fallen'. An eighteenth century report published by the 'Magdalene Charity' makes the case for the asylums on the grounds of their benevolent compassion (Dodd 1765, pp. 2-5):

> Noble and extensive are the charities already established in the metropolis; unfortunate females seem the only objects who have not yet catched [sic] the attention of public benevolence: but we doubt not, it will appear on reflection, a talk of great compassion and consequence, necessity and advantage, to provide a place of reception for them… there cannot be greater objects of compassion than poor, young, thoughtless females, plunged into ruin by those temptations to which their youth and personal advantage exposes them... What act of benevolence, then can be greater than to give these real objects of compassion, the opportunity to reclaim and recover themselves from their otherwise lost state, an opportunity to become, of pests, useful members of society, as it is not doubted many of them may and will?

In part, the institutions were a response to the 'moral panic' (Cohen 2002) associated by religious orders and reforming bourgeois society with the large number of prostitutes evident in an urbanizing society such as 19th century Dublin, in which prostitution was unregulated by the state, and in which little religious discrimination was made between those pursuing this trade and those who were unmarried mothers, or even 'girls' defined as being sexually at 'risk'. Initially, the Laundries were established as refuges as well as places of penance, in which a variety of activities (including laundry, needlework, lace-making, habit-making, shroud-making, farming and so on) supported the inmates and, in some cases, provided training for the women.

The early penitential practices of the Laundries allowed for remission (Luddy 1995) but by the twentieth century had become increasingly total as institutions. Herein one might find a motley cast of 'sinners', such as petty thieves, those who were pregnant but unwed, abused girls who refused to remain silent about their rape, orphans and those considered overly flirtatious and promiscuous, or even too beautiful (Finnegan 2001). These young women were committed either by their families or the state (McAleese 2013). Sin was to be washed away through penitence and by laundering – washing, scrubbing and ironing clothes brought in from contracts with the military, monasteries, orphanages, schools and local businesses.

The women worked without wages for six days each week under a strict regimen from early morning until late at night (Justice for Magdalenes 2011). Additionally, they were humiliated, beaten, underfed and, in some instances, subject to sexual assault. Release from the asylum could be secured if a family member vouched for those who were incarcerated which, in sexually conservative Ireland, meant that many

(especially those who were orphans without family) remained within the asylums for their lifetime.

Mik-Meyer and Villadsen (2013, p. 18) note that Christian charity in the late 19th century was paradoxically driven by 'compassion-driven care of the needy, but at the same time the practices were deeply influenced by disciplinary rehabilitation' thereby 'seeking to take particular care of the individual while operating with disciplinary techniques for the correction and normalization of the very same individual'. Viewed from the organizational perspective one would constitute the Laundries as a specific instance of a disciplinary total institution, premised on involuntary membership, total confinement and control, in which the loss of markers of identity, such as proper names and the use of uniforms for clothing, were normal (Clegg et al. 2006, Clegg 2006, Makarushka 2012). When these elements of membership are put together with the workflow of the laundries, one sees that these laundries were premised on a double disciplining of the inmates: first, a discipline of arduous physical labour, involving much manual exertion, also entailing adverse bodily reactions, such as eczema from the frequent immersion and chemicals in use, all under the watchful eye of the nuns, gazing through the discipline of their order. There was a further discipline at work, however: disciplining not only the body but also the soul because it was through the penitential elements of the young women's' labour that they might find spiritual absolution for whatever 'sins' might have landed them there. Hence, in one walled compound elements of panoptical surveillance, through the eyes of the nuns, combined with a persistent cultural positioning and inculcation of the self as flawed, as bad, yet fortunate to be given the opportunity to wash away sin, in a discipline of arduous labour, compulsory Catholicism, and total surveillance. In a classical Foucauldian way the inmates of the institution were not only governed but also learnt

to govern themselves through protestations of faith, religious discipline and bodily exhaustion. In addition, tidy profits were made by the order running the Laundries from the trade in soiled linen and cotton (McAleese 2013, Titley 2007). Spoiled souls and soiled material combined in a production of cleansed laundry, the by-product of which was a slow and unremitting cleansing of sin. Depending on whether the emphasis was on the nature of the work or the nature of the sin the Laundries could be seen as either total institutions akin to concentration camps at one extreme or a charitable form of compassion aimed at remediating fallen women at another extreme (Mik-Meyer and Villadsen 2013). As we shall see, the full range of variance was reflected in public comment on the shelters, which located them in various and different contexts from being spiritual, educational and healthy havens in a welfareless world to seeing them as devices for drudgery akin to gulags, camps, or slavery.

Questioning and defending the faith

For decades the laundries were an unremarked aspect of the landscape of Irish everyday life. It was only in the 1990s that they became a major case of public concern. Intense lobbying against the institution of the laundries followed the emergence of harrowing press accounts (O'Kane 1996, Culliton 1996) of life within the laundries, some of it subsequent to the impact of a film (Mullan 2002), *The Magdalene Sisters* (see Agnew 2002, Gibbons 2003, Dunne 2002-3, Gordon 2003, Harold 2003, Humphreys 2003, McGarry 2004, 2002b, 2002a, O'Kane 2003). In addition, there were academic accounts addressed to the conditions in the Laundries (Finnegan 2001, Conrad 2004, O'Malley 2011, Smith 2007). The Eire Government commissioned an inquiry. On 5 February 2013, an Irish Government Committee

published its findings of state collusion in admitting thousands of women within the asylums (McAleese 2013), with Taoiseach Enda Keany (2013) issuing an unreserved state apology to the women of the Magdalene Laundries on 19 February 2013.

Less than three weeks after the issue of the state apology, two nuns who had administered the laundries were interviewed anonymously on the radio, defending the role of the Church. An article based upon the radio interview was subsequently published by the interviewee in the online version of *The Irish Times* on March 8th 2013*, entitled *Magdalene nuns hit back at critics and defend their role* (McGarry 2013). The article attracted 116 unsolicited comments by 66 readers arguing diverging positions indicating the complexity of the issues. At issue was precisely the status of the laundries as caring or penitential organizations.

The reader comments on the online article constitute a rich source of naturally occurring textual data as opposed to data generated through formal processes that require actors to respond to preconceived questions designed to generate specific responses (Watson 2011, Whittle et al. 2008). The approach thereby eliminates the problem of the participant responses being contaminated by the preconceptions of the researcher.

Analytic strategy

Online media are competitively displacing traditional media (Dimmick et al. 2004) due to advantages of delivery speed, low delivery cost, delivery to digital devices in various formats, limited censorship, global reach and interactivity (Reese et al. 2007, Coombs 1999, Goldberg and Harzog 1996, Devitt and Borodzicz 2008, Veil et al. 2011). In relation to interactivity, with internet technologies users are empowered to

generate, develop and disseminate content as opposed to their traditional role as passive consumers (Hermida and Thurman 2008). In this study, we focus on user generated 'comments on stories', which allow users to express opinions in a form beneath the content of an article. In order to submit such comments, users generally register with the news site, so the news organization can moderate content (Thurman 2008).

The findings of research about online newspaper comments suggest it is generally residents from the local community who populate them (Rosenberry 2010). A positive correlation has also been found between levels of active online newspaper forum participation and community awareness of local issues. The information generated in online forums has also been found to be of a high quality, involving debate providing supporting rationales and considering alternatives (Manosevitch and Walker 2009).

The research context of online media imposes certain limitations on the findings (Hermida and Thurman 2008, Thurman 2008). The online context provides a research advantage through access to candid opinions that commenters might not reveal in another context. It is also likely, however, that some comments are written by 'trolls' (Bowman 2011) with the intent of disturbing others and consequently do not represent actual perspectives. As the publisher removed offensive comments, they could not be analyzed. There is a possibility that some offensive comments may have been posts of very angry and upset people, or it could be simply that 'trolls' were being active. The editors who posted the following notice were monitoring the site: 'We reserve the right to remove any content at any time from this Community, including without limitation if it violates the Community Standards'. Research indicates that when online behavior is moderated, commenters usually follow the norms established by

earlier commenters, regardless of whether or not the comments are anonymous with regard to the commenters name and location (see Moor et al. 2010).

It is possible that factors such as commenters' religious beliefs may account for the patterns in the responses coded. Practicing members of the Roman Catholic Church may have authored the more supportive comments while non-believers or non-practicing Catholics may have authored the critical comments. From a research perspective, we hold that even deliberately provocative comments or those informed by political or religious affiliation are nonetheless valuable for the dataset as they contribute with additional perspectives to the discussion.

We downloaded the data that was posted from the Internet in July 2013 and analyzed it to identify key themes and subthemes taking direction from the analytic strategy of *membership categorization device* (MCD) (Sacks 1989, 1995). The process of analyzing MCDs involves analyzing descriptive information in accordance with categories of membership (Silverman 2006), where for example, words such as *support, care, concern,* and *philanthropy* might be coded as relating to the category of *compassion.* What we initially coded were comments that were later aggregated into themes. The combined categorical information was finally brought together as three primary categories of responses, each with major sub themes.

Findings

Three categories of comments: the critical, the supportive and the mixed

The comments were organised according to three general categories: (1) those critical of the nuns and the church (contributed by 39 people, or 59%), (2) those supportive of

the nuns and church (by 20 people, or 30%), as well as (3) mixed comments that were both critical and supportive (by 7 people, or 11%).

Critical comments comprised five major themes (from a total of 39 commenters or 59%: Table 1). The majority concerned the Church's historical power within Irish society and its abuse and corruption (30 commenters, or 76%). The theme was that Irish society could not be blamed for the tragedy of the Magdalene shelters because the Church had made both the state and society dogmatically weak and obedient and hence unable to question the Church's authority and powerful role in guiding state affairs (20 commenters, or 51%). Many expressed specific indignation at the abuses suffered by the women and girls (11 commenters, 28%). Also criticised was the anonymity and general attitude of superiority and lack of remorse on the part of the two nuns (10 commenters, 26%). Some compared the Magdalene shelters to camps, and the nuns to guards who claimed innocence because they were just 'following orders' (6 commenters or 15%).

Table 1 about here

Comments supportive of the nuns and the church comprised six major themes (from 20 commenters, or 30%: Table 2). The majority of commenters placed responsibility on an Irish society that failed to provide for and support vulnerable girls and women (12 commenters of 20, or 60%). They were also insistent that it was inappropriate to judge the Church retrospectively according to the situation and values of today, without properly understanding and giving consideration to the social context of previous times in Irish society (9 commenters, 45%). Commenters also spoke of social inequality in Irish society which still persisted, something about which most people seemed unconcerned and that it had always been left to the Church to care for

those most vulnerable and least equal (8 commenters, 40%). Some comments referred

to the nuns as heroic and noted that the Church, which cared for the destitute, was

now being blamed for the failings of the whole of Irish society (7 commenters, 35%).

Commenters also suggested that the Irish media showed bias against the Church,

using it as a scapegoat for Ireland's failings (4 commenters, 20%). Finally, some also

emphasized all of the good provided by the nuns and the Church more generally,

through the provision of education, health and other forms of social support (3

commenters or 15%).

Table 2 about here

Comments both critical and supportive of the nuns and the church involved five major

themes (from 7 commenters, or 11%: Table 3). In this much smaller group, the

majority held both the clergy and Irish society responsible for failing society's most

vulnerable members, particularly girls and women (6 commenters of 7, or 86%). Most

of these commenters argued that it was important for the women abused in the

Magdalene shelters to receive compensation (6 commenters, 86%). Nonetheless,

commenters in this group also acknowledged that the Church had provided much

social good through various educational, health and other programs. They also held

that comparisons with the Holocaust were inappropriate (3 commenters, 43%), citing

Godwin's law which is 'the theory that as an online discussion progresses, it becomes

inevitable that someone or something will eventually be compared to Adolf Hitler or

the Nazis, regardless of the original topic' (Oxford Dictionaries 2013). Finally, a

couple of commenters were also opposed to retrospective judgement of the Church's

actions. Context was all-important, they suggested: the Church should not be judged

without properly understanding the social and historical treatment of the vulnerable in

society, which left only the Church, without support from the state, to provide for them. Hence, one should not condemn the Church. In the following sections, we expand upon these themes with examples of quotes from the commenters.

Table 3 about here

Critical (i.e., anti-church) comments

The nuns positioned themselves in the radio broadcast as undertaking caring work fuelled by a sense of need, with an implied religious concern for the weak, the vulnerable and others for whom no other institution cared. Many commenters disagreed.

Church power and abuse. The most prominent critical comment concerned the Church's power within Irish society associated with allegations of its abuse and corruption: rather than providing support, it sought more power through actions it deemed compassionate. A commenter stated: 'These religious orders were not doing any of this to help Irish society or help the state in its early years, they were doing it because it was an opportunity to consolidate their power and influence'. Another commenter, abbreviating the Church as RCC (Roman Catholic Church) wrote: 'The RCC had one thing only in mind. Power, and absolute power at that!' Another highlighted that, previously, the Church was the only powerful institution with resources in Irish society: 'They got the money from society due to the position of power they held within that society…. the fact that they were the only ones in society with the resources to help these people does not give them an amoral-free-reign to treat the people under their care as animals'. Finally, another commenter demanded

that the Church be made accountable: 'It is about time that people who use their power and influence are also held accountable for their actions'.

Church made society weak. An argument for holding the Church responsible for the abuse within the Magdalene shelters was that the Church had made society weak, too weak to question or oppose its actions. The imagery was of a Church that ideologically dominated Irish people through its dogma. 'We need to shake these charlatans off of us people...', wrote one commenter. Another commenter stated: 'The religious orders must carry the responsibility for what happened, there is no doubt about that. The people were totally brainwashed by the church in this country'. The allegation of one commenter was that the Church had purposefully undermined the Government's efforts to create a social welfare system for the people of Ireland:

> …in 1948 one Dr Noel Brownee, Minister for Health by then, had tried to establish a free health care for women and children. The system was so successful that it made the church a tad jealous. In the effect, the whole Costello's government was brought down with very active help of the Church. No wonder there wasn't any public healthcare in Ireland, no government was willing to take that risk again.

Abuse of women. The alleged abuse meted out to women and girls made some commenters indignant. In response to the nun's claim that they were providing a service to society, one commenter wrote: 'What part of the *service* that they supplied required them to humiliate and degrade women in a vulnerable position?' Another wrote: 'The Magdalene women were not only exploited as slaves long after a Welfare system was put in place in Ireland, but many were raped and sexually abused while jailed in these orders'. A commenter described the mistreatment of women and girls

as a generational problem rooted in Church teaching: 'The multi-generational bodily and sexual shaming of girls and women, and to a lesser degree boys, resulted in physical and emotional abuse of pregnant girls. The Magdalene Laundry scandal is the tip of the iceberg of church degradation of women'. Another commenter, herself a victim of Church abuse, made a call for other women to raise their voices and be heard: 'Forgive if you can, but we women must speak our own truth about what happened to us. Love is the answer, but love doesn't mean acquiescence or silence'.

Nun anonymity and attitude. The anonymity and attitude of the nuns who gave the interview was also a cause for concern with some commenters. 'If these so called *Brides of Christ* feel no shame, why are they afraid to be named?', wrote one commenter. Another stated: 'The unapologetic comments by these *unnamed nuns* is pathetic. The only people that kept this country in the dark ages were the nuns, brothers and priests'. Finally, another wrote: 'The attitude of these nuns is galling. Disgusting'.

Camp guards. Comparison between the Magdalene shelters with concentration camps and the nuns with Nazi guards appeared in some comments. One commenter wrote: 'They are right in when they state that they were providing a service; albeit in the role of camp guard'. Another stated: 'Like Hitler's agents, they followed orders, but they had a choice'. Finally, another stated that the way the shelters were run was at odds with true Christian values: 'The nuns participated in running a Concentration Campesque regime amongst the *ugly part of society*, which was deeply at odds with the Catholic values of compassion, forgiveness, love, peace and hope'. In the following section, we consider the comments supportive of the nuns and the Church.

Supportive (i.e., pro-Church) comments

The Church remains a central institution in Irish public life, albeit that the society has become markedly more secular in the past half century. As such, the Church has its detractors and supporters; and many of the supporters agreed with the two nuns that they were being 'scapegoated'.

Societal failure. In contrast to the arguments holding the Church fully responsible for the tragedy of Magdalene Laundries, many comments were supportive of the Church and placed the blame on an indifferent Irish society – both past and present. One commentator wrote: 'The poor were treated with disdain and exploited at every opportunity. I heard stories of children going hungry and eating *bread and dripping.* This was urban Ireland in the 30s and 40s and 50s'. Another commenter stated: 'When one views the slums of Dublin in the 30s, 40s and 50s – no outcry there from the liberal left or right'. Writing from the personal experience of growing up in a poor family, another commenter wrote that 'the tyrants were not the priests but some lay teachers and guards and the better off who made life hard for us and looked down on us… did any of you so self-righteous (or your parents) help my family or take in any poor person'.

Retrospective judgement. Many of the supportive commenters considered it inappropriate and unfair to judge the Church retrospectively according to the values of today without giving consideration to social context of a bygone era. 'It is easy to engage now in historical revisionism and judge them more harshly than they deserve. It was hard times for all in the Ireland of the 30s, 40s and 50s', wrote one commenter. Another stated: 'The past is a different country – it seems to me that most of the people involved, nuns, state, Garda, families – most thought that they were doing the right thing'. Another remarked, 'To try and apply the standards and criteria of this

century to things which happened in times past is nonsense'. The general idea of these comments is that the critics 'have no appreciation of the social and economic conditions of the time'.

Present social neglect. The issue of Ireland's present social inequality was raised to point out that blaming the Church for past social failings is playing politics more than showing concern for those who suffered. One commenter stated: 'Where are these champions for human decency in the battle against slavery in Ireland's flourishing sex industry? It would be reassuring to hear their concern for these abuses and many more in Ireland today'. The seeming objective of these comments was to shift blame from the nuns and the Church and turn it towards society. One commenter referred: 'Please reflect if you dare on what is happening in our society today and not a nun in sight. The poor and disadvantaged are being exploited just as they have always been'.

Church heroes blamed. Some commenters sought to recast the relational roles in the portrayal of the Magdalene affair, in which they saw the nuns being cast as the villain and society as the victim. In contrast one commenter wrote: 'These Nuns are Heroes who helped people when non-religious just looked the other way and before the secular authorities provided the multi Billion Social Welfare protection'. Another sympathizer was careful to point out that, while having no affiliation with the Church, 'The church is now conveniently blamed for everything. I personally am not religious, but I see the real villains getting off'. Another commenter issued a warning to those who might endeavor to support others in need: 'If anybody out there now wishes to help any poor misfortunate in whatever circumstances, they might find themselves in right now, my advice to you is be very careful before you help, you may well get sued in 20 years' time'.

Media bias. Media bias against the Church was the basis for what some commenters described as sensationalist and inaccurate reporting of the case of the Magdalene Laundries. A commenter wrote: 'This harsh criticism of the Magdalene nuns is not warranted and is driven by a media frenzy of hatred for the church and the desire for cash payouts'. Another commenter turned the allegation that the church abused women back on the media: 'Why no criticism of the inaccuracies and damage the media have done to these women for their inaccurate and hurtful reporting?' Media bias, the commenters claimed, had caused the wrongful blaming of those who sought to help: 'The media have blackened these nuns in the most unscrupulous way… The treatment of the *Magdalenes* was probably no different from any other part of Irish society'.

Other support provided. The social support that the Church provides society through educational, medical and other initiatives was also presented as evidence of the Church as a force for good in society: 'The religious orders gave us an education, provided health care, took in wayward teenagers abandoned by their families and the state'. Some commenters spoke from personal experience of the benefits they had received. For example, a commenter stated that 'Nuns were my first teachers, they were superb. Christian Brothers taught me. They made education a joy and my memories of them are good'. Another acknowledged receiving severe punishment in school but accepting that as the general mode in all schools: 'I went to the Christian Brothers and I am very grateful for the education I got. Yes, they were brutal compared to now, but that was the way things were then in every country'. In the following section, we consider comments that were both critical and supportive of the nuns and the Church.

Mixed (both critical and supportive) comments

The Church today plays an ambiguous role in public perceptions of Irish society, an ambiguity that was mirrored in some of the comments. Its moral worth is well recognized as an institutional value but the corruption and moral failings of some of its clergy and practices were also acknowledged as a dark stain on the Church's character.

Clergy and societal failure. The comments categorised as mixed were in many instances similar to the positive arguments presented above in that they acknowledged Church contributions, questioned Holocaust comparisons and challenged the revisionist retrospective judgement of a different era. Consequently, we will not discuss these same themes again here. The key difference is that the mixed comments emphasised the mistakes of *both* Irish society *and* the Church in failing society's vulnerable, arguing that recompense must be provided to the women who were victims of the Magdalene Laundries. Nonetheless, some felt the Church was being made to carry an undue burden of responsibility for the mistakes of society in a bygone era. A commenter wrote: 'I have to agree that the religious orders have been the scapegoat in all this. They are guilty, but just as much/little as the rest of society'. Another commenter held that the main guilt of the Church was covering up the abuse: 'The big difference with clerical abuse, as opposed to that which took place in society in general, is the cover up that took place'. Another argued that, despite all of the good the Church did for society, its members should have acted with more compassion:

> While I believe that the majority of religious have done a tremendous amount of
> good for people in Ireland, and that there is perhaps a certain amount of unjust

finger-pointing going on in terms of people judging previous generations with 'today's eyes', I believe that the religious should have acted better and with more compassion.

Recompense appropriate. Individuals expressing what were coded as mixed comments were, nonetheless, universal in acknowledging the abuse and supported recompense, if not by financial compensation, at least by the way of apology. One commenter wrote: 'I hope the state and the religious orders recompense them insofar as the Magdalene women themselves deem it justified'. Another stated that 'anyone who was abused, maltreated, etc. should be financially recompensed by the institutional Church'. With regard to the nun who questioned why the Church should apologize, one commenter wrote: 'An apology for this from the nuns is way overdue and is the very least they can do'. Another stated: 'Religious orders were correct to apologize for failing to live up to the ideals of Jesus Christ, something that all those who claim to be Christian need to do on a regular basis'. For this commentator, as for many others, the ethos of the Holy Spirit was absent from the laundries, signified by the lack of Christian *caritas* and compassion, which might have made the laundries less degrading and rationalized.

Discussion

The comments made about the Magdalene Laundries in response to the nun's defence indicate the ethically complex constitution of debates about whether or not and in what possible ways these laundries were or were not a compassionate institution. The original interview and the responses to it provide a point and counterpoint, an emergent discourse, about the situated and contingent nature of organized compassion. Below we analyse these arguments with application to the organizational

context giving consideration to contested social definitions of compassion, their power implications and the positive, negative and mixed outcomes.

Organizational compassion as socially constructed practices

Clark (1987) and Schmitt and Clark (2006) describe compassion as being practiced on the basis of socially constructed norms and rules. Knowledge and scripts guiding social estimation of what is considered a plight worthy of a compassionate response evolve through time, indicating the social construction of compassion relations. Historically, the powerful have appropriated humanistic discourse: for example, the history of the British and Irish Poor Laws is testament to the entanglement of issues of compassion with questions of power, discipline, and order (Ryan 2007). The Poor Laws were introduced to address the issue of vagabondage between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, when 'the commons', from which the poor eked out an existence, were privatised (Lees 1998, Clegg et al. 2006). While the Poor Laws may be seen as steps in the evolution of a more compassionate society, and the reforms and repeals of these Poor Laws over the following centuries often centred on humanitarian concerns, their disciplinary intent was, however, to get the poor into work (Poovey 1995).

Questionable framing of compassion is not merely a historical curiosity. Discursively, in contemporary times, within organization studies, scholars have also warned that compassionate discourse can be used to promote exploitative practices, limiting the aims of positive humanistic management theories (Alvesson 1982, Fineman 2006a, Caza and Carroll 2012, Simpson et al. 2013a, Fineman 2006b, Simpson et al. 2014b). Management and organizational practices that are (instrumentally) conveyed as fostering 'citizenship' may, in fact, be manipulative and 'neo-feudalist' tools

promoting employees' 'vassalage' (Hancock 1997, p. 104), capturing their minds and hearts (Parker 1997), transforming them into 'contented cows' that produce 'more milk' (Scott 1992, p. 65).

Organizational compassion will always be socially constituted through prevailing categorization devices, interpretations, scripts, values, rules, and expectations of compassionate behaviour. Different types of member, or subject, will be associated with specific categories. For instance, in a traditionally Catholic society, compassion may be expected of the religious for those who have 'strayed' or 'fallen', while at other times the less righteous and more liberally inclined might 'blame the victim', while still others might blame 'society'. In our case data, a prominent argument made by those supportive of the Church was that the practice of compassion was socially constructed in Irish society and thus it changed through time. Seeing compassion as a social enactment in these terms means it cannot be separated from the social values, conventions and knowledge of a particular cultural context. Hence, the comment suggested that it is unfair to judge actions from the past according to the values of today. From this perspective, lobbying by 'sympathy entrepreneurs' (Clarke 1997: 24) changes socially accepted knowledge through time, as it is influenced recursively by contextual factors. Such lobbying and negotiation unfolds through relations of mutual (re)constitution, which is the focus of the next section.

Compassion relations as mutual (re)constitution

We now consider the mutual constitution of (un)compassionate practices in terms of the interconnectedness, interdependence and mutual constitution of all phenomena (Bradbury and Lichtenstein 2000, Giddens 1984). Mutual constitution of phenomena transpires through socio-material configurations that refer to both the immediate

social relational context in which practices are performed as well as non-human

material settings (Suchman 2007, Orlikowski 2007). People and their practices are

embedded, defined, emergent and inseparable from socio-material processes and

structures (Orlikowski 2010, 2007, Wagner et al. 2010, Clegg et al. 2013).

All organizational relations are premised on power: bringing people together to work

in common orientation to specific goals cannot be accomplished without invoking the

capacity of people to work in collaboration with others (power with), for these people

to exercise their capacities to get things done (power to), and who exercise power over

others by disciplining them, as well as being disciplined themselves (power over)

(Clegg & Haugaard 2009). Power, as a social relation (Clegg 2013 [1975], 1989,

Haugaard 1997, 2002), must enter into all other organizational relations, including

those of compassion (Frost et al. 2006, Bamford 2007, Cartwright 1984, Frazer 2006,

Cartwright 1988).

Once compassion becomes an organizational mission, as in the rationales of the

Laundries, it raises the question of how power relations play out. In our case study, the

compassion giver, the religious authorities, acted in a way that the Church construed

as compassionate through the provision of education, health and shelter. Some

commenters chose to recognise the Church action as a positive, compassionate and

legitimate action for the Church to initiate. Other commenters, however, focused on

the Church's political motives in providing support. These commenters saw

compassion being used to manipulate others into positions of intimacy or indebtedness

(Clark 1987, 1997, Schmitt and Clark 2006). Such indebtedness is imposed rather than

freely entered into. Additionally, the giving of compassion can patronize and belittle

the receivers by neglecting their real needs (Bradley, 2005) or paternalistically

highlight their problems and deficiencies – as many commenters argued was the case with the Magdalene women.

Commenters (particularly those presenting supportive and the mixed comments) frequently referred to the social context as important for understanding what transpired in the Magdalene Laundries. From their perspective, abuse could not be properly understood by looking at the Church in isolation from the wider society. They described collusion between the Church and society that sent women and girls into the Magdalene shelters, where Church authorities exploited and abused them while society turned a blind eye. A critical response to this argument was that the Church had made society weak through education and 'brainwashing' over many generations, and therefore all the blame should rest with the Church. Whichever perspective one takes, the principle of mutual constitution of the Laundries' practices as compassion, power, or abuse becomes apparent. The principle of mutual constitution of social phenomena by enmeshed and intertwined human configurations does not imply relations of equality. The Laundries, seen as power relations, had asymmetric action-taking capabilities and resource access, structures of domination and control, along with other conflicts of interest (Feldman and Orlikowski 2011).

Some critical commenters refused to accept the Church's role as compassionate. A relevant consideration here is Clark's (1987, 1997) comments that refusal by a receiver can diminish a giver's social status, as well as reinforce the status of the person who rejects such support. The receivers, should they take on the mantle of victims worthy of compassionate support as defined by the Church's dominant discourse, were (dis)empowered. Any other claims to identity were diminished.

The status of 'victim' proved to be contested: both supporters and critics of the Church vied to cast themselves in the role of the victim and the other as oppressor. The critics blamed the Church and made society the victim; conversely, supporters blamed society and made the Church the victim. Power in compassion relations is recursively constituted through interactions between agents, society, categorical knowledge and other socio-material configurations.

Social practices are always complex, contingent, and context specific, and always involve power relations that are generally asymmetric (Østerlund and Carlile 2005). At one extreme, recipients may feel uncomfortable in receiving support, considering it to be a subtle form of manipulation, or obligation, while at another they are grateful for organizational inclusion in what are defined for them as charitable acts in the best interests of their welfare. As with all power relations, the outcomes of compassion relations are dynamically (non)dualistic, which introduces our next topic.

Compassion relations dynamically (re)constitute (non)dualities

The comments that took a mixed perspective (i.e., acknowledging the good of the Church but also that abuse took place and recompense must be made), indicate that constructs such as compassion ought to be viewed as neither positive nor negative, but as a social process involving the dynamic constitution of (non)dualism. From this perspective, social processes are indeterminate, ongoing, and constantly subject to revisions based upon time, place, circumstances, relevancies, and priorities in any given moment (Taylor 1993). A situation that appears positive from one point of view, or at one time, often appears as negative from another perspective, or at another time (Carroll 1998). Seemingly compassionate 'intentions' may contain seeds of manipulation and disrespect for the receivers' dignity. Discussing compassionate

actions performed by an NGO in the developing world, Bradley (2005, pp. 341-342) argued that compassion symbolically projects an objectified image of suffering by creating an object of pity.

Rather than assuming compassion's effects to be positive and beneficial, the experiences of givers and receivers in compassion relations are likely to be multifaceted and ongoing. Further, the indeterminate, ongoing, and constantly revised nature of social processes suggests that a situation that appears positive at one time often appears as negative at another. Our case study suggests that ignoring the power implications of compassion and assuming that outcomes that will be positive demonstrate an incomplete conceptualization of the phenomenon. What organization theory has found difficult to represent Hollywood has captured in a recent film (Scorsese 2013), based upon a memoir by Belfort (2007). In *The Wolf of Wall Street*, Jordan Belfort (2007), the *wolf*, hands a check of $25.000 to 'help' an employee with a $5.000 debt and other personal/familiar problems. Having done so this leads the receiver to experience huge gratitude to the *wolf*, telling him she 'loves' him as a generous employer. In fact, he was simply manipulating his 'prey', neglecting the consequences for those, such as this employee, who were caught in the meshes of the crimes they were inducted into committing through being inspired by the *Wolf*.

Even where the motive of compassion is present the results may be disastrous for those who are the subjects and objects of such compassion; a point clearly demonstrated by Clegg et al.'s (2006) account of the policies that produced the 'stolen generation' of half-caste Australian aboriginal children taken from their mothers and institutionalized elsewhere. In the case of the Magdalene Laundries, the effects were similar. Young girls and women were removed from their families, albeit not as

babies, in a political struggle over female identity by the custodians of the Catholic Church. Just as the struggle over identity of those children that were defined as 'half caste' by various Australian authorities left many of the children culturally adrift and abandoned in terms of lineage and knowledge so the Catholic Church's struggles over sexuality had traumatic effects on the young women whose identity was in question.

Conclusion

In this paper, we analysed 116 comments by 66 individuals from an online *Irish Times* article about the Magdalene Laundries. Our analysis of this data suggests that theorising and researching on the topic of organizational compassion requires a degree of tolerance of ambiguity and complexity and less commitment to the idea that compassion, per se, as seen through the eyes of the beholder, is an unequivocally good thing. In everyday discourse, as represented by the debate analysed, compassion's many nuances become perceptible and it can be seen to shade into disciplinary depiction.

Managerial appropriation of the complex concept of compassion as a source of positivity is undercut by discourse such as that reviewed and analyzed. While positive organization studies may see organizational compassion largely in positive terms people embroiled in everyday, rather than academic, life see it as more complex. While researchers of organizational compassion have been active in exploring the virtuous consequences of a compassionate approach to work, we have argued that such research has idealistic assumptions that limit positive aspirational value. A tempered approach is required to the topic of organizational compassion, as we have indicated by problematizing the effects of compassionate action in this case and drawing out the ways that compassion disciplines.

In our analysis of theorising and researching on compassion in organizations, we have revealed several gaps in the current literature. These relate to an under-acknowledgement of the power implications of compassion relations in the mutual (re)constitution of social hierarchies and a lack of recognition of compassion's dynamic constitution of positive *and* negative effects. We have sought to address these gaps through analysing public discourse about the Magdalene Laundries. Our theorising of organizational compassion demonstrates it to be a social process experienced and interpreted in a manner that is complex, contested, contingent, multiple and emergent. Rather than being an antidote to the effects of power over others in organizations, compassion can be an unwitting tool of domination: unwitting by reason that, in the eyes of the compassionate, as they seek to inscribe truth as conceived by faith on the persons in their institutional remit, they practice not domination but the love of Christ and deliver a vital service to the community through the disciplines of faith.

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Table 1. Anti-church or critical themes and numbers of commenters

Themes	#	%
Church power/abuse	30	76
Church made society weak	20	51
Abused women	11	28
Nun anonymity/attitude	10	26
Nun camp guards	6	15
People commenting	**39 of 66**	**59**

Table 2. Pro-church or supportive themes and numbers of commenters

Themes	#	%
Societal failure	12	60
Retrospective judgment	9	45
Present social neglect	8	40
Church heroes blamed	7	35
Media bias	4	20
Other support provided	3	15
People commenting	**20 of 66**	**30**

Table 3. Mixed (i.e., both critical and supportive) themes and numbers of

commenters

Themes	#	%
Clergy/Societal failure	6	86
Women recompense	6	86
Acknowledge good	4	57
Godwin's law	3	43
Retrospective judgment	2	29
People commenting	**7 of 66**	**11**