Abstract of paper: Guilt and Responsibility in public management

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Abstract:
This paper presents an analysis of 12 interviews with managers from the public sector. The managers work within various areas of the public sector such as education, health, social care, cultural life, and law.

The interviews took place in Spring 2012. In the interviews I asked the managers how they handle accusations of guilt, or being guilty, when an incident within the organization, or on the basis of the organization’s decisions, shows to be doing a citizen wrong. I also asked them on their understanding of responsibility versus guilt and blame.

Two of the findings of the interviews were the following:

1) Managers avoid discussions of guilt, since this is “a too strong word”.
2) Managers have several examples of how guilt and blame are being negotiated in the organization.

This led to a third finding:

3) Guilt is the negative flipside of responsibility.

The first two findings show an intriguing contradiction, since managers do not deliberately talk of guilt. However, the interviews showed how discussions on guilt are around in the organization. This means, that the managers contradict themselves: They say it is not a concept they themselves use. However, they have lot of examples of have it is used by others.

An example from the interview is the following: When the organization has made a mistake or not taken action in time, e.g. in the case of child abuse going on for several years while civil servants are well aware of the abuse taking place, the question of “guilt” enters the hall room. And often as a discussion on who is to blame.

Having presented quotes from the interviews, I investigate the historical understanding of blame, shame, and guilt, looking into Norbert Elias’ analysis of guilt as part of the civilizing process. The process of educating to feeling guilty is long, and has taken place since the 16.th century. Interesting, the 16.th
century is also the century where we find the reformation’s discussion on responsibility and guilt, e.g. Erasmus of Rotterdam and Martin Luther’s discussion on free will. Here, I particularly look at how Erasmus and Luther discuss responsibility and guilt. I do this to drill into Elias’ concept of guilt as socializing process.

I then relate these Protestant concepts of responsibility and guilt to Goffman’s idea of facework, since the loss of face seems not only to be main reason why managers refuse to apologize. Also the strong theological connotations on the concept of responsibility and judgment seems to be playing along, when refusal of faults, and thus blame, take place. Guilt is a strong word, and there is a historical process behind that.

The process of socializing to feel guilt is historically long, and apparently, I claim, still at play in contemporary organizations. I argue that though organizations within a Protestant shaped culture is proud of the concept of responsibility, and say that they try to avoid blame, guilt is not that easy to get rid of.